

The List, and Young Voices: The Construction of Childhood and Adolescent Voices in South African Literature

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A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Creative Writing.

Johannesburg, 2005

Abstract

The List a work of short fiction, and *Young Voices: The Construction of Childhood and Adolescent Voices in South African Literature* is a theoretical introduction to *The List* that discusses the role and construction of the young voice in literature. *The List* works as an alternative to the 'coming-of-age' story, and engages with white, South African, youth culture. *Young Voices: The Construction of Childhood and Adolescent Voices in South African Literature* discusses the challenges involved in constructing a young voice in fiction, with reference to *The List* and other South African works of fiction.

Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Masters of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

Signature:  _____

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Lesley Cowling for her advice and supervision during the writing of this research report.

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Young Voices: The Construction of Childhood and Adolescent Voices in South African Literature

In the short story *The List* I have attempted to reconstruct the world and voice of adolescence, and to use this reconstruction to explore the experience of adolescence and its relationship to the experience of adulthood. The story operates in a vast tradition of South African stories that make use of the child or adolescent voice. In writing *The List*, and in surveying several South African novels in which young voices have been constructed, I became aware of the challenges that face writers wishing to construct a young voice in fiction and memoir. In this essay I shall start with a general discussion of these issues, and then look at specific examples as they arise in South African fiction. Finally I shall engage with my own piece of fiction, *The List*, in light of the discussion of the construction of young voices in South African literature.

In my reading of both South African and international childhood stories I have noticed that writers who are drawn to use the childhood voice often see in it one that is untainted by adult politics and ideology, and thus an effective lens through which to examine the adult world. Later in this essay, I shall elaborate on this proposition with reference to the work of authors such as Mark Behr and Christopher Hope. Writers have used childhood and adolescent voices as subversive narrative techniques, which cut through adult hypocrisy with their face value appreciation of the world, as well as supportive ones, which suggest that childhood consists of a series of lessons that lead towards and explain the writer or narrator's current, adult understanding of the world. Here a distinction between childhood and adolescent voices must be made: The child protagonist is often used to contrast innocence with corruption, whereas the adolescent protagonist is often used to reflect an unfolding awareness of the protagonist's context. When the childhood voice is used for subversion, childhood is often cast not as a precursor to adulthood or as a phase in the life's development, but rather as a foreign culture, which is at odds with the culture of adulthood. Subversive childhood classics, such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain; 1884) and *The Catcher in the Rye*, (Salinger; 1951) depict a gulf between the worlds of childhood and adulthood, over which there are few bridges.

When the bridge between adolescence and adulthood is explored, however, the result often conforms to the ‘coming-of-age’ genre, which generally works as follows: The protagonist emerges from a state of innocence into a state of awareness, and with this newfound awareness comes understanding, and possibly some disillusion. With a greater understanding of the adult world and with less naivety, the protagonist is ready to become a part of that world. It is this tradition that my short story *The List* attempts to undermine, by not conforming to the notion that adolescence is a bridge to adulthood. Rather it suggests that the culture of ‘non-adulthood’ is fundamentally different to the culture of adulthood, and that both view each other as cultures that are lost or foreign. As such, I attempted to construct a voice in the story that reflected this divide, by referring to the priorities and nature of adolescence, and expressing these through its diction. However, in attempting to access the world and voice of an adolescent, I encountered several challenges that inevitably face the writer wishing to construct a young voice.

Many of these challenges stem from the sense that the construction of a young voice is more contrived than any other, and more susceptible to sentimentality and artificiality than any other. Stories of childhood and adolescence are most poignantly reflected on from the perspective of adulthood, but most powerfully told in the voice of the protagonist, and the writer’s challenge is to create a seam between the childhood voice and adult consciousness, without compromising the authenticity of either. Stories of childhood that are written for adults often seem to rely on the presence, in some form, of an adult narrator. The adult narrator may exist in an explicit form, as an alternative voice to that of the young protagonist, or in the form of what I shall refer to as a ‘super-narrator’ or ‘ghost narrator’, who lurks behind the voice of the child protagonist. This presence can give to the text its maturity and meaning, as the adult voice is able to interpret the events of the child protagonist’s narrative with the benefit of context, insight, and hindsight, which the young protagonist does not have.

Engagement with the natures of hindsight and memory is important when reconstructing a young voice, because even in fiction childhood stories often read as if they are part of a memory - either of the author, the narrator, or the characters. The writer must engage with the question of whether or not a child’s memory of an event

should be portrayed as an accurate memory of the event or a memory of a childish interpretation of that event. For the purposes of the narrative a child's telling of a story should be seamless, coherent, and contextualised, but this does not reflect the nature and limits of a child's consciousness. Childhood stories are usually characterised by a sense of autobiography – at least formally. A sense of progression and growth is important to childhood novels and there is often the suggestion that the narrative is being reconstructed from the end point of that progression, as if the events of childhood always lead to epiphany and reflection. The danger with this structure is that it allows for sentimentality and a contrived vision of childhood, and for a representation that portrays memory as a seamless narrative. Memory is not completely reliable, and children, especially, seldom recount memories perfectly – a fact that undermines representations of childhood stories told through a child's voice. This often gives the childhood novel a more contrived feel than an adult novel, unless the author creates an element of doubt or uncertainty around the reliability of the child's narration, or unless there is a strong presence of an adult 'super-narrator', which can be used to counter the inherent artificiality of a seamless reconstruction of a childhood memory.

These issues suggest that there is a complicated relationship between an adult writer and a child or adolescent protagonist. To interpret the meaning of the events of childhood from an adult's point of view is certainly a valid project, but in many cases the events of childhood may have no meaning to the child. When describing the events of his or her adult life, the narrator has memories of emotions to draw from, whereas when writing about the events of one's childhood, there might, realistically, be no memory of meaning, or simply no meaning at all (from the child's point of view). Thus the writer faces the danger of creating a narrator who imposes false meaning on the events of childhood, or gives meaning to something that may not have been meaningful at all. There is often a tension in childhood novels over ownership of the story; if it is the narrator's story that is being told, interpretation and reflection seems appropriate, but if it is the child protagonist's story that is being told, excessive interpretation can be awkward. Usually, however, it is both stories that are being told.

All of these questions manifest themselves in different ways, depending on the point of view used in the text. In the third person the presence of the adult voice is more

distinct; in the first person it is often more insidious. The use of the third person point of view allows for a more explicit distance between the narrator and the protagonist, and depending on the degree of attachment between the narrator and protagonist the writer can use two voices; that of the child protagonist, and that of a 'super narrator' or adult voice. Using a first person point of view is a more immediate way of representing a child, and is perhaps more problematic. The construction of the child's voice in the first person can be artificial or sentimental. The 'adult' events of the narrative must be implied, or they must be accessed through the voice of the omniscient, adult narrator who supports the child narrator's voice.

Another possibility is to use a first person narrator who looks back on events and recalls his or her childhood. Here the child's voice would appear to be constructed in the words of the narrator and not in the words of the author, and it would be the narrator's role in constructing the childhood or adolescent experience that is foregrounded. The immediacy of the child's relationship to reality and the adult's ability to reflect can be used together in a narrative to good effect, but it also allows for sentimentality. A narrator who looks back and recalls the events of childhood from a position of maturity and 'wisdom' must place the childhood experience in the context of the whole life, which may allow the current life position of the narrator to distort his or her memories of childhood so that it fits into the narrative of the entire life.

In the South African fiction I surveyed there was a tendency towards the first person for depictions of adolescence and childhood. The preference for the first person narrator can perhaps be attributed to the intensity that it creates, and also the sense that a first person portrayal of childhood can be used for more subversive and ironic ends. In the first person the world of adulthood is examined through the child's eyes, whereas in the third person the world of adulthood and the world of childhood are set alongside each other, making the judgment of adulthood more explicit. In the third person the writer has more freedom to comment on the character, which perhaps makes it more appropriate for explorations of the child's role in society, as opposed to the child's view of society (which would be better rendered in the first person). The lack of narrative distance from the events that are being described in the first person means that first person representations appear to be more subjective. The privacy and

intimacy of a first person account also gives it a confessional quality that is largely absent from third person accounts.

In Shirley, Goodness & Mercy Chris Van Wyk writes in the first person, present tense, moving between the voice of the protagonist and the voice of the narrator. As the text is a memoir, the narrator and protagonist is the same person, but at different stages of his life. The use of the first person, present tense means that the voice of the protagonist changes as he grows up, but the narrator's voice remains the same throughout; situated in the real present, and reflecting on the past. In the pre-adolescent stages of the protagonist's development, the gulf between the consciousness of the protagonist and the consciousness of the narrator is stated:

We're living in Newclare, Johannesburg. It's 1961 and I'm four years old. There are dramas unfolding in the country, which are putting black faces on the front pages of newspapers on a daily basis. The Sharpeville massacre, the banning of the ANC and the PAC. The beginning of long prison terms for many.

But I know nothing of any of this. My world is a slum called Tomato Yard, which got its name from the blotches of rotting tomatoes and vegetable peels around the over-full dustbins. (Van Wyk, 2004, Pg. 1)

At some times the author reconstructs the mindset of a child in the words of an adult, and at other times he creates context with the benefit of hindsight. The use of the first person may seem natural in the case of Shirley, Goodness and Mercy, given that it is autobiographical, but it is unusual in that it is rendered in the present tense, as the story is characterised by a sense of hindsight and reflection. Van Wyk balances immediacy with reflection in his description of his childhood, and although the result is fictional in its structure, its voice retains its authenticity throughout the early childhood stages of the narrative. Later, however, when the protagonist is older, there is some disjunction between the narrator's voice and the impression of the protagonist's consciousness that is created. As the protagonist enters adolescence and experiences politics, disillusion, and a sense of his own sexuality for the first time, the first person point of view sometimes seems inadequate in its descriptions of the protagonist's exploits:

All I can truly claim is a brief encounter with Marina, a nurse from the Tygerberg hospital. She had allowed me to kiss her in the back seat of her cousin's car, but my beer breath had proved too much for her and after administering a violet flavoured Beechie, she bade me goodnight and told me to come and see her in the morning. (Van Wyk, 204, Pg. 271)

At moments like these the tone seems less appropriate than when Van Wyk writes about his early childhood. There is a lack of stability and a sense of confusion in his adolescent life that is not captured by the tone of the articulate, reflexive narrator. In first person representations such as this, the point of view relies more heavily on internal logic than the third person, and this internal logic seems to be more elusive when writing about adolescence than when writing about childhood.

This aspect of writing about adolescent life is particularly relevant when the mode of writing is realism, as in Shirley, Goodness and Mercy. In Michiel Heyns' The Children's Day, which is rooted in humour and satire, a more detached first person narrator is used. In this novel emotional realism is overshadowed by irony, and the protagonist's childhood and adolescence are reflected on in a series of memories that punctuate a narrative that unfolds in the present. By having the protagonist look back on his life Heyns is freed from the emotional realism and immediacy that often characterise novels that operate in the present. The distance that is created between the character's present and past allows for a certain amount of wry and ironic observation. By contrasting these times, he paints a picture for the reader of his life as one consisting of a series of humorous and didactic experiences.

In this Heyns risks sentimentality, but avoids it through his use of irony and his fidelity to the notion that adolescence is a self-absorbed time, and not one during which the ways of the world are ruminated on excessively. The lessons Heyns' protagonist learns are more about himself than the society in which he lives, and he thus avoids casting his protagonist as a social critic. Although, as I have mentioned, the young voice can be particularly effective when used for social commentary, Heyns' protagonist is not active in the process of offering social commentary, and the social satire is oblique to the unfolding events of his life. Whereas Van Wyk pairs

politics with the everyday events of his protagonist's life, Heyns' depicts the obliviousness typical of a child, and in particular a white child:

So a month later my mother packed Mary a picnic basket with a roast chicken and hard-boiled eggs, and put her on the train to Bloemfontein, with instructions on how to get to Elukhanyweni. My father had contacted the magistrate there and asked him to find Mary a place to stay. 'She'll be looked after,' my mother assured me. 'Black people always look after each other.'

'What does Elukhanyweni mean?' I asked, hoping to get some indication of the nature of the place from its name.

'Place of Enlightenment,' said my father. (Heyns, 2002, Pg. 107)

Heyns shows that the use of irony in a first person depiction of childhood can help the author avoid the pitfalls of sentimentality and artificiality. Despite the difficulties inherent in first person constructions of childhood, however, of the novels and memoirs I surveyed, only Boyhood and Frankie and Stankie made use of the third person narrator. In Frankie and Stankie the third person point of view allows the narrator to move between close focus on the protagonist, Dinah, and wide, historical, authorial musings:

Liver is a big favourite with Punch and, since this is a carnivorous era – an era of brisket and offal and innards; of tripe and trotters and stuffed hearts; an era before Anglo-Saxons have thought to fill red peppers with couscous, or to throw white wine over Arborio rice – Punch is often in luck. (Trapido, 2003, Pg. 43)

Trapido makes use of the third person narrator to contextualise her story in history. In Frankie and Stankie the timing of Dinah's life is important, and the omniscience of the third person narrator allows Trapido to express this. Trapido uses social context to layer her story, but does so at the expense of the sense of isolation that is often present in childhood stories. Many authors try to express the isolation and lack of awareness that often characterise childhood and adolescence in the way that their texts are structured, but in Frankie and Stankie the story of apartheid is as important as the story of the protagonist, Dinah.

In J.M Coetzee's Boyhood the third person narrator is used to articulate the feelings of a child in the words of an adult. Coetzee moves between the adult and child's consciousnesses in an attempt to balance the representation of childhood in its own right with the meaning that childhood holds for the adult. Throughout the novel there is a feeling that the articulacy of the description of the childhood experience emanates from a distanced, mature narrator, even though the tone and diction sometimes suggests a degree of childishness:

As long as he can remember he has had a sense of himself as prince of the house, and of his mother as his dubious promoter and anxious protector – anxious, dubious because, he knows, a child is not meant to rule the roost.
(Coetzee, 1997 Pg. 12)

Here there is sense of a child's voice, primarily due to some of the language used (to see oneself as 'prince of the house' seems a childish notion) but also of a voice that is able to identify and describe emotions in a way that a child wouldn't. It is in this way that Coetzee's novel proceeds; swaying between the voices of the child, and the omniscient narrator that contextualises and articulates events, in a manner that would be difficult to achieve through the use of a first person narrator. Christopher Hope's first person narrator in The Love Songs of Nathan J. Swirsky, for example, does not have such explicit recourse to omniscience, and meaning must therefore be gleaned from what is shown, not told:

Our fathers were always talking of the soldier's reward. No one remembered it was nine years since the War had ended and they had been demobbed and came home to Civvie Street. They missed the War and spoke of the battles in the western deserts 'Up North' as if everything had been good then. 'It was no picnic, Martin,' my father would say from time to time. But it seemed to have been a picnic. (Hope, 1993, Pg. 153)

Hope's protagonist's interpretations are expressed on the level of a child's, but there is an adult presence behind the child's telling of the story that directs his observations and gives the text its structure. There is also factual knowledge to the child's words

(‘No one remembered it was nine years since the War had ended...’) that suggests they are not spoken by a child, but rather by a construction of childhood, consisting of an amalgamation of a reflexive, adult consciousness, and a childlike way of expression. In Hope’s novels, The Love Songs of Nathan J. Swirsky and Heaven Forbid, the childishness of the boy’s observations is often used for ironic effect, but the possibilities for irony are identified and made possible by the insight and hindsight of the adult.

Some sense of isolation and detachment manifests itself in all of the novels I surveyed, both in the narrative details and in the mechanisms of the text itself, such as the tone, voice, and language. In Christopher Hope’s novels, Heaven Forbid and The Love Songs of Nathan J. Swirsky, the protagonist, Martin, is often isolated from adulthood through language. Hope distinguishes between adults and children by showing them to speak differently. In Heaven Forbid and The Love Songs of Nathan J. Swirsky the language of the adults is characterized by clichés and a particular idiom that Hope uses to represent white philistinism, but also to create a barrier of understanding and ideology between adults and children. Martin frequently expresses his bewilderment at the things that adults say. In Heaven Forbid his grandfather tries to break this barrier of language by teaching Martin some new words, but he is berated for his efforts by his daughter:

It’s a well known fact, Daddy. Ask anyone. You’re not supposed to learn anything when you’re small – not till you go to school. That’s when you’re allowed to learn. When the teacher tells you. It’s the rule. (Hope, 2001, Pg. 26)

In Heaven Forbid, Martin’s grandfather is portrayed as one adult who crosses the divide between adults and children, and he does this primarily through language. He teaches Martin ‘adult’ words and quite often uses children’s language, in the form of songs and rhymes. Georgie, the gardener, is another adult who is united with Martin and his grandfather in friendship, and in language:

My grandpa said: ‘You’re drowning that poor dahlia.’ And he’d start singing: *‘I’m a lonely little petunia in an on-ion patch...an on-ion patch...’*

Georgie would start waving the hose. '*And I cry-yi-yi all day...*' (Hope, 2001, Pg.30)

Later Martin tries to incorporate the clichés of the adults into his narration in an attempt to bridge the gap between the children and adults, as his grandfather and Georgie do by using childish rhymes:

I walked the way the tram went, the way we drove in my grandpa's Packard on our way to the races. Climbing the long hill towards Parktown Ridge and the mansions of the abysmally rich, who were worth an absolute mint. (Hope, 2002, Pg. 212)

Ultimately, however, he does not succeed, and his failure to enter the world of the adults is epitomized by Gordon's constant mispronunciation of Martin's name.

In the other novel in which Martin Donally is the protagonist, The Love Songs of Nathan J. Swirsky, there is a significant difference in tone in Martin's narration. In this novel he is less emotionally involved in the events in Badminton and plays the role of the observer to a greater degree than in Heaven Forbid. In The Love Songs of Nathan J. Swirsky the narration is more detached and Martin's role is to a larger degree a chronicler and to a lesser degree an interpreter or participant. Adulthood is cast as completely foreign in this novel, and there is almost no attempt by the child protagonist to engage with adults. Martin's lack of judgment in *Swirsky* allows for a greater degree of authorial judgment from Hope. He offers one view of the adults in the novel, and it is not a sympathetic one. Only Swirsky, himself an outsider, is redeemed, and his redemption from the world of adulthood comes from his impulsivity, free spiritedness, and ultimately, his childishness:

It was Eric who finally found him.

'I think there's someone in Heaven,' he said. 'Maybe it's Sammie, come back to life?'

It was Swirsky, in the branches of a giant tree where Eric had built the highest and most invisible of his secret places. He had pulled up the rope ladder behind him and we couldn't reach him.

‘I am the living God!’ he shouted from deep inside Eric’s treehouse.
(Hope, 1993, Pg. 188)

Hope contrasts the growing awareness and maturity of his protagonist, Martin, with the regression of Swirsky into a childish state. Progression and regression are natural structural themes of novels about growing up, and feature strongly in the novels I surveyed. In Mark Behr’s The Smell of Apples, however, Behr uses an absence of progression as a means of charting the path to adulthood. He does this by juxtaposing one person’s experience of childhood with the same person’s experience of adulthood, so that only the roots and results of the character’s story are shown. Behr invalidates the significance of the coming-of-age experience, and instead places the blame for the character’s outcome on the events and circumstances of his early childhood. In The Smell of Apples the childhood voice of the protagonist is set alongside his adult voice, both of which are rendered in the present. Thus the childhood voice is constructed by way of contrast. Youth and innocence are contrasted with age and corruption, and through this contrast youth is defined. This sort of definition can be overdetermined, however, especially if specific childhood events are shown to correlate with specific events later in life. The notion that childhood is adulthood’s opposite is simplistic, but in The Smell of Apples it reinforces Behr’s disillusion with white, adult South Africans, and, the view that South Africa’s redemption is in the hands of a new generation. Behr expresses his concerns about the indoctrination of one generation by another when Marnus comes across Chrisjan, the coloured man who used to work for his family, and whom he suspects of stealing his fishing rod:

We burst out laughing and I put my hands to my sides with the cream-soda bottle resting against my hip: ‘Not *your name*, baboon! Tell me what *my name* is, then I’ll give you the bottle.’ (Behr, 1995, Pg. 165)

This moment comes as a surprise to the reader because of the apparent contradiction between the interior and exterior voices of Behr’s protagonist and narrator.

Throughout the novel Behr constructs the child narrator’s voice as one that is inquisitive and childlike, but this outburst resembles that of an adult, in tone and language. Language is shown not to be a barrier between the separate worlds of children and adults, as it is in Hope’s novels, but rather as a tool that is passed on

from adults to children in order to facilitate their passage into adulthood. In The Smell of Apples, not only does the child's voice sometimes sound like the adult voice, but the adult voice sometimes sounds like the child's:

I feel Dad's face against my chest and my arms around his head, and I feel safe.
(Behr, 1995, Pg. 198)

This is spoken by the adult Marnus before he dies. There is less of a distinction between the two voices in Behr's novel than there is in Hope's, which indicates a vision of childhood as very early adulthood. For Behr the two phases of life are not fundamentally different, but rather integrally linked.

In Troy Blacklaws' Karoo Boy the narration is set alongside memories, juxtaposing the events of two different times with each other. In this it is somewhat similar to Behr's The Smell of Apples, although Karoo Boy contrasts present with past childhood. The novel does not have access to the protagonist's adult voice, as Behr's novel does, but in setting the past alongside the present the author creates a sense of lost innocence within the world of childhood. Blacklaws inserts the novel's most dramatic event - the death of Douglas's brother Marsden - at the beginning of the novel, when Douglas is still young. The narrative thus evolves according to the idea that childhood is an inherently difficult experience. Blacklaws forsakes the traditional coming-of-age structure that shows a series of challenging events leading to awareness and adulthood, and paints childhood as a time that is as challenging as adulthood, albeit in different ways. In Karoo Boy the protagonist's experience is framed by death and is characterised by growing disillusion, and the intensity of this experience, as well as the voice used to recount the experience, comes in the form of Douglas's memories that punctuate the novel. In these extracts the voice only describes, and is free of the presence of an adult 'super narrator':

Oom Jan's farm. Dirkie and I squeeze through a hole in a big steel vat to scrub it out for pocket money. Marsden is too scared and we taunt him, calling him moffie, moffie, our voices warping, echoing in the vat. (Blacklaws, 2004, Pg. 59)

The memories that Douglas describes are sentimental ones, and in contrasting these with his growing disillusion in the present Blacklaws risks a sentimentality of his own. His structure suggests that outside of the temporal realm of the events of the main narrative everything is fine; hardship, racism, and disillusion do not exist. This may be so from the child protagonist's point of view, but the persistent idea of a paradise lost infiltrates the text so strongly that the child's point of view starts to seem like the author's.

In *The List*, the protagonist is a seventeen year old, near the end of his adolescence and engaged with questions of authority, personal expectation, failure, and revenge. The issues that the protagonist faces are seemingly of the adult domain, in that they suggest a loss of innocence and some degree of cynicism, which is a common result of the coming-of-age story. *The List* subverts the coming-of-age structure, however, by suggesting that the final state in which the character finds himself is not one of readiness but rather one in which he is less ready for the world of adulthood than he was at the beginning of the story. Its ending suggests something of adulthood too; that there is a relationship of mutual envy between adults and non-adults. While children often want and try to be like adults, adults frequently live through their children. *The List* explores this aspect of the relationship between adults and non-adults by depicting adolescents engaging with adult roles, such as those of the authoritarian, the disciplinarian, the punisher, and the judge; and adults, in Kevin's father's case, clinging to a world of childhood and adolescence. In his mother's case, regret is expressed through her living vicariously through her son, and imploring him to be more successful than his father.

The List is told from the third person point of view, and although the narrator's voice is attached to the protagonist Kevin, it moves between his point of view and a wider, more omniscient point of view. While the third person narrator in *The List* is at times omniscient, it is an omniscience that is limited to the world of the protagonist. In contrast to other South African narratives that make use of the non-adult voice, however, *The List* does not use the protagonist's voice to give a view of the social and political environment at large, but rather of his more immediate environment.

Whereas many of the novels that I have commented on parallel the stories of their

protagonists with the story of apartheid South Africa, *The List* is largely free of politics and macro-social issues.

As a piece of fiction set in the late nineties, *The List* draws on memories of early post-apartheid South Africa. The social commentary in the story is restricted to domestic scenarios, and does not have recourse to a 'wide angle' point of view. Instead the story draws from the intensity of the insular world of the adolescent and does not allow for much exploration outside of that world, although the setting is in many ways a microcosm of the world of affluent white South African society. In this the story breaks from the tradition of South African fiction written in adolescent and childhood voices; where writers such as Trapido, Hope, and Behr have used the world of children and adolescents to highlight problems with the world of adults, *The List* is more concerned with the experience of adolescence in its own right, and this insularity contributes to the sense of the self-absorption of the adolescent experience. *The List* is not strongly historically contextualised, although there are some references to the time in which it is set. It is rather a somewhat isolated depiction of adolescence that aims to reflect the isolated nature of adolescence. The fact that the voice does not escape this isolation enhances this effect, and gives to the story a sense of claustrophobia that is not present in most South African texts written in the adolescent voice. The narrator's voice in *The List* is characterised by factual omniscience and adult eloquence, but seemingly does not possess insight far beyond that of its protagonist.

The decision to write in the third person in *The List* was motivated by a desire for a tone of detached irony. I felt that the use of the third person point of view would give the reader the sense of observation rather than close engagement that is required for achieving irony. The third person point of view is also less prescriptive about the emotional input that is required from the reader. Given that I have attempted to portray the foreignness in the adolescent sub-culture, in terms of its relationship to the culture of adulthood, I wanted to write a story in which the narrator observed events instead of engaging with them. The mind of the adolescent is not a stable or predictable one, and often representations of adolescents rely too heavily on easily boxed categories of adolescent interest. In truth, adolescents are affected by a multitude of changing and irregular pressures, and the workings of an adolescent's

mind are particularly capricious. The third person point of view allows the writer to signpost the emotions that affect the adolescent protagonist, without being forced to replicate them in the very complicated, first person, terms in which the protagonist understands them.

In *The List* I attempt to address matters pertaining to the world external to that of the protagonist's own, self-absorbed world, in ways similar to Heyns' The Children's Day. As *The List* is set in post-apartheid South Africa there is less of an obligation to deal with South African politics as there is for South African novels set during apartheid, but there several social and political issues that the piece touches on, in ways that are oblique to the main events of the narrative. Although I feel that the narrative in its own right is of primary importance, I have tried to capture the mood in South Africa in the late nineties. Ultimately, however, *The List* puts the adolescent world at the forefront.

I have chosen to let adults and children speak for themselves in the story, with the possible exception of the protagonist, Kevin, who is sometimes spoken for by the narrator. Any interpretation of the events described in the story, however, is done by the narrator and not by the characters. My approach was not to filter the world through the eyes of a particularly cynical and savvy child protagonist, as Trapido does in Frankie and Stankie, and as several novels about childhood and adolescence do, but rather to let the characters escape judgment by the protagonist, if not always the narrator. Kevin does not offer opinions of his own on the institution and society in which he finds himself, although he does have emotional reactions to events that occur there. Instead, the opinions that I, as the author, wish to express (on elitist institutions, authority, power, and adolescent relationships) manifest themselves in the words of the characters and in the tone of the narration. Kevin is essentially an agent of the narrative, and not vice versa. His ultimate lack of agency suggests his failure to rise above the aspects of the high school institution that are described and satirised in the story. Unlike Trapido's protagonist, Dinah, whose path to greater awareness follows the structure of the typical coming-of-age story and who plays a strong role in directing her story, Kevin finds himself in a world that he cannot escape or control. Whereas Dinah's voice colours the narrative of Frankie and Stankie, it is the voices outside of that of the protagonist that drive *The List*.

By doing this I hope to contrast the adolescent culture with adult culture by showing the former to be one in which the individual is more at the mercy of his environment. By making this contrast the non-adult voice is established and the reader is able to identify it as one that is distinctly non-adult, despite its occasional moments of omniscience. The chasm between the worlds of adulthood and non-adulthood is shown to be characterised by power, but also by resentment, and Kevin's developing resentment signifies his progression from one world to the other. The adults in the story are the real decision makers, but their decisions are affected by the events of their past. Thus the world of adulthood and non-adulthood are shown to be mutually dependant for inspiration. While adults react against their past, adolescents react against their present.

Like Hope, I have used language to distinguish the adolescent protagonist from the adult narrator, as well as to reflect the interiority of the protagonist. Although the narrator does not express insight into the workings of the institution in which the story is set, his maturity lies in the way words are used to show the changing mindset of the protagonist. Kevin is seventeen years old and unable to understand or articulate his developing feelings of power and confusion. The narrator, however, can identify this, and expresses it through tone and diction. Early in the story the tone is playful, ironic, and innocent, like Kevin:

The problem with the spot at the back, however, was that you couldn't hear or see what the chaplain and the head boy and the headmaster were saying up at the front. This didn't bother Kevin too much though, because very little that chaplains, head boys, and headmasters ever said was worth a damn, and he was quite sure that the new principal would be no exception. (*The List*; Pg. 1)

But later, the tone becomes more sinister:

He had to start compiling a list. He would title it *Priorities*. Then he would write the names of all of the offenders, and their offences, and put each of them into a category. Next to their offence he would write their punishment, and code letters that would signify the severity of their crimes. (*The List*; Pg. 19)

As the story progresses and Kevin moves from innocence to corruption (and from adolescence to adulthood) the narrator's voice becomes more closely attached to the character, and more intensely interwoven with the character's psyche. Only towards the end of the story, when Kevin starts to fantasise about revenge, does his voice start to direct the narrative. The strengthened agency of his voice and the depletion of space between it and the narrator's voice indicate his passage from adolescence to adulthood, and the bridge between these worlds is shown to be language.

There is much value to be found in childhood and adolescent stories, given the fresh perspective a young person has on society. Before attempting to write in this voice, however, the writer must take into account questions of representation that extend far beyond the immediate challenge of reconstructing the language, tone, and diction of a young person. The young voice in literature can be used as a tool of perspective, or as a representation of a culture, both of which are functions that require important choices to be made by the writer. If these decisions are carefully considered a balance between the concerns of the adult author and the voice of the young person can be found.

The List

On the day the new headmaster was going to introduce himself, Kevin Riley managed to find a seat at the back. He'd had enough of having his ears flicked and his hair pulled and had started making a concerted effort to get to the chapel early and squeeze in somewhere safe. Today his early burst from his geography class had paid off. He had claimed the most prized spot in the chapel, and was able to slouch and doze without fear of being assaulted.

The problem with the spot at the back, however, was that you couldn't hear or see what the chaplain and the head boy and the headmaster were saying up at the front. This didn't bother Kevin too much though, because very little that chaplains, head boys, and headmasters ever said was worth a damn, and he was quite sure that the new principal would be no exception. It might have been interesting to get a good, close look at the new head, but not so interesting that it would have been worth getting chewing gum in his hair or a piece of paper saying 'cunt' stuck to his back. All things considered, this was the place to be, where one could rest one's weary head against a brick wall and daydream in peace.

Kevin scratched his knee and watched the rest of the pupils shuffle in to the chapel. There was an undeniable buzz in the air that betrayed their curiosity as to the identity of the new principal. Although most of the boys wore a mask of nonchalance (the new guy would have to earn respect here) Kevin could tell that beneath it all Mr. Gouws' replacement was the subject of much speculation. There was even a rumour he would be a black, in keeping with the recent national trend of replacing Afrikaans leaders with Xhosa ones. But whoever it was, black or white, young or old, bald or wigged, it was important that he resolved the crisis that Gouws had caused with his 'modern leadership' speech just five weeks ago. The school had been in turmoil ever since, when Gouws had first wielded some of his newfangled ideas about the nature of leadership, and teachers and parents alike had complained so bitterly about the new ideas that it seemed the very foundations of the proud institution of St. James High School for boys would crumble and collapse, leaving only faint memories of the beacon of private school tradition and Methodist values that once was. In the end, the doddering Mr. Gouws had had no choice but to hand in his resignation and humbly acknowledge that thirty-two years of tradition were not to be taken lightly. Perhaps the Parents' Association was right, he conceded, and his ideas would find a warmer

reception at one of those 'less established' schools, where the kids didn't have to wear uniforms and could choose drama instead of sport.

Kevin remembered his own father's reaction when he had told him of Mr. Gouws' plans to abolish the 'antiquated' prefect system and replace it with something a little more progressive. It was a Wednesday, Kevin remembered, because his father had just played a squash match in the St. James old boys' league. Evidently his position on the ladder had been usurped, and as such he was in a foul mood already, but when Kevin mentioned what Gouws had said in chapel he hit the roof.

'Not on your bloody life!' he said. 'You'll have kids running around like bloody animals if there's no one to keep them in line.'

Kevin explained that there still would be prefects (although they would now be called 'peer guides') but that instead of selected people being prefects for the whole year, everyone would be able to fill the position for a short while. A roster system would be introduced and each matric student would be allowed to be a peer guide for a period of two weeks. That way, Kevin explained, each student would get a taste of the bitter-sweet fruits of authority and be able to appreciate more fully the challenges of leadership. Kevin said that Mr. Gouws had said that the new system would eliminate elitism and give everyone a chance to prove himself.

'In your dreams, Kev!' his father said, putting his feet up and opening up a bottle of Amstel.

'Not just any old Tom, Dick or Harry can be a leader. You think Francois Pienaar sat around waiting his turn on some frigging roster?'

Kevin said he supposed not, but that...

'And neither will you, young man. If you would only apply yourself a little you'd be a prefect at that school.'

Kevin said that that he was actually quite a low profile sort of character at St. James - not the prefect type as such - but to say that he didn't apply himself was unfair; he certainly wasn't in danger of failing anything and none of the teachers disliked him particularly. His father picked up his squash racquet and pointed at him.

'Listen here,' he said, 'someone once said, Kitch Christie, I think, that some people are born great, some people become great, and some people have greatness thrust upon them. Now you could still become great, boy, if only you'd stop mooching around and picking your nose all day.'

He waved the racquet around as if it were a fly swat. Kevin followed it with his eyes until he was convinced that his father's haphazard swipes were safely out of range, and then said:

'Dad, if you don't mind me saying, I think that my brand of greatness is...'

'Your brand of greatness is different to mine,' he retorted, 'I'll give you that.'

He thumped a cushion with his racquet.

'You're great at sleeping your life away and destroying your eardrums with that music of yours.'

He kicked off his shoes and pulled off his socks, exposing the bony ankles and sticky, black leg hairs beneath.

'I'll watch my son throw away his life if I have to, but there's not a chance I'll let some crazy old man drag my school through the mud.'

With that he drained his beer and went for a shower, leaving his socks and shoes on the carpet as a hint of the smelly, subversive campaign of defiance that was to come. In the weeks that followed he would mount a momentous effort to have Mr. Gouws replaced, spinning a web of alliances at PA meetings and mobilizing the troops in the old boys' pub every Thirsty Thursday, when all the stalwarts from St. James' heyday liked to gather for a drink. He would get someone in with a more robust sense of tradition and discipline if it killed him, he said, and he was still too darn handsome to die.

And now, Kevin noted, he had succeeded. The headmaster had been replaced by someone his father approved of - a Science teacher from Natal, who had been educated in Rhodesia and once played provincial cricket. There'd been some kind of cock-up at his old school, his father said, while wolfing down his cottage pie one evening; something to do with his wife, the head boy, and the back seat of the cricket team's minibus. Now the guy was looking for a new job in a new town, where people had more complicated notions of decency, and where he would ensure that he was treated with a modicum of respect. He seemed a strict bloke, his father said, but that was necessary these days, and who wouldn't be if his wife had fallen prey to the perilous charms of juvenile anarchy?

When all the teachers had arrived the chaplain asked everyone to stand and turn to the hymn, which they were to sing just as soon as Ms. Knight, the organist, could find the page. She sat hunched and jittery, flipping through her book of organ music and periodically repositioning her glasses, feeling for the first time the chilly winds of

change, and fearing a fate similar to that of Mr. Gouws if she did not find the page, and find it quick. Eventually she rested her veiny, grey hands on the keys and began squeezing out the notes to the morning psalm, which the congregation sang loudly and raucously, embracing its first opportunity of the day to make some noise. When the singing had finished the chaplain beckoned everyone to sit down, which Kevin obediently did. For the first time since he had been at the school, he wanted to hear what the chaplain had to say.

Reverend Davids was an absent minded but benign old man; neither feared nor flagrantly disrespected, and well-known for the incomprehensibility of his sermons. But Davids had been one of Mr. Gouws' strongest allies in the weeks leading to his resignation and now anyone could see that he, like Ms. Knight, would become another victim of the new mood if he did not do something about his far too scatterbrained manner. As such, he had his speech written on a piece of paper (for the first time since he had been at St. James), which he pulled from his pocket and started to read from, loudly, and with an unusual degree of purpose.

Kevin could only hear extracts of the speech from where he sat. He was far from the front, and the boy next to him was snoring lightly, his chin rocking against his chest and his legs stretched much wider than was strictly necessary. There was also the fact that the acoustics at the back were not very good. He leaned forward and cupped his hands behind his ears.

'A new day has dawned in the life of St. James High School for Boys,' the chaplain said, running his finger down the crinkled page of his speech. His words reached Kevin in fragmented bursts, like a suburban broom seller speaking over a badly wired intercom.

'...a new leader who will take this school to even greater heights...'

He could hardly hear a thing. If his mom ever met the chaplain she'd tell him to enunciate his words. 'Don't mumble at me,' she'd say, and pinch his cheeks. But then his mom would never sit all the way at the back, where the acoustics weren't very good, and where the boys with no sense of school spirit liked to sit, or *slouch*, more like, with their scuffed shoes and dirty minds.

'...I introduce to you, Mr. Guthrow...'

Everyone clapped and Kevin watched as the new principal arose from the staff seats. He wore a grey suit, and a *Snoopy* tie, and had thin black hair that looked a little wet. He rested his fat hands on the lectern and waited patiently for the applause to die.

‘Good morning boys,’ he eventually said. ‘How nice it is to finally meet you.’

Kevin didn’t hear what he said next, but it included the phrase ‘old regime’, and must have been a joke because everyone roared, especially the teachers, who whispered and winked at each other conspiratorially. He had the uncomfortable sense that Guthrow’s joke had been at Mr. Gouws’ expense.

‘But seriously...’ he said, and rested his eyes on the back corner of the chapel, ‘I’m here to instil what I like to call The Guthrow Ethic. The Guthrow Ethic is a code of behaviour, designed by me, of course, that if properly administered will facilitate your redemption from the ever swelling forces of chaos.’

Some murmuring from the forces of chaos soon smothered his voice again and Kevin had to try and lip-read the rest of what he was saying. Guthrow’s cavernous mouth seemed to form the words ‘tradition’ and ‘pride’, but that was all he could make out, until he started to wind down his speech in a voice that shook the stained glass windows in their frames.

‘But above all, The Guthrow Ethic will put you on a path of honour,’ he boomed, so that everyone sat up straight in their seats and stopped pulling threads out of their cotton socks. He could really raise the roof when he wanted, Kevin thought, unlike the softly spoken and genial Mr. Gouws.

‘A path that will ensure every graduate from St. James will leave this school with a sound moral base.’

He tapped the lectern with his chubby white knuckles, like Mrs. Howe, the English teacher, when she explained for the *thousandth* time, the difference between iambic and trochaic meter.

‘The Guthrow Ethic will re-instate an appreciation of the traditional values on which this school was founded. Values such as discipline and leadership.’

His words echoed in the chapel, bouncing between the walls and knocking the boys’ heads together. This was the crux of the speech and all that really mattered. Guthrow was surely about to elaborate on his plans for the reinstatement of the prefect system.

‘As you know, the tried and tested leadership structure of this proud school has been tampered with. The true leaders are now in a state of limbo ...’

His voice tapered off again and Kevin leaned closer.

‘...those with true leadership qualities!’

He sputtered his final phrase triumphantly and waited for the applause, which came loudly and generously. When the school had finished clapping the teachers stood up and clapped some more. They had found their man; the thickset Mr. Malcolm Guthrow would surely restore the order that once reigned, back in the admittedly flawed but stable eighties. He examined the faces in the chapel, almost one by one. When he finally started talking again Kevin had to lean so far forward that his cupped hand brushed the ear of the boy in front of him.

‘Stop touching me, queer,’ the boy said.

He leaned a little back, and waited for the list. There would be a list, as there always was with these things, which would start with those everyone expected to be on the list and end with a few surprises. Each boy patiently anticipated the group of prefects that would be chosen to lead the school out of the state of lawlessness into which it had fallen.

‘And so without further ado,’ Guthrow said, ‘the prefects for the rest of this interrupted and tumultuous year are...’

The new prefects would have to be the cream of the crop - tough guys who would take no shit from the youngsters, who were hell-bent on sending the school the same way that most of the schools were going; headfirst, kamikaze-like, into the New South Africa, where kids would run free and make their own rules. It was horrible to see, and although most of the older boys acknowledged that change was inevitable, they also felt that it was just happening too bloody fast for the good of the school. If the balance of power wasn’t put squarely back in the hands of those who deserved it - the standard tens who wore their badge with pride - some boys said they would even consider leaving the school to look for greener pastures, at a boarding school on a farm somewhere, where a young man who had done his time could still get a little bit of respect.

‘James Steenkamp...’ Guthrow said. Steenkamp stood up and acknowledged the applause with a small nod. He was a lanky boy who was hard to dislike, and who was a proven leader on the basketball court. He was also well known for having founded St. James’ very first Bible studies group, which he led every Friday evening after sport.

‘Peter Watson...’ Watson rose from his seat and discreetly tucked in a wayward shirttail. He would be the brawn of the enterprise, Kevin assumed. He was tall, broad-

shouldered, and the best flanker and rugby captain St. James had ever had. He also enjoyed snipping off the tails of lab rats.

‘Mpho Mokate...’ Mokate’s name was no bolt from the blue either. He was popular and sporty, and although he had once tripped Kevin up with his long hurdling legs, he had to concede that he was a good choice. He fitted in well for a black, and didn’t seem to mind too much being called a *coconut* or a *Chocolate Log* or an *Oreo*.

‘Andy Kerr...’ That was a stranger decision. Admittedly the boy had a certain roguish charm, and Kevin was pretty sure he was the wicketkeeper, if not the captain, of the cricket team.

‘And Kevin Riley,’ Guthrow said. Kevin paused to process Guthrow’s utterance, and as he failed to do so, he felt the heavy fist of fluke punch him in the guts. He looked around at the boys next to him, all of whom stared at him with the disbelieving, resentful expressions of runners up in a beauty contest.

‘How did you manage that?’ someone whispered. ‘Did your mother blow Guthrow?’

He recognised the voice, but was lost for a retort or any other means of defending his mother’s honour because what Mr. Guthrow said did not make sense nor was he completely sure that he had heard right. Guthrow must have meant Keith Barry, or Kevin Benson, or even that kid that everyone said looked like Kevin, Greg Hofmann.

‘And I am delighted to announce,’ Guthrow boomed, interrupting Kevin’s bewildered musings, ‘that the head boy of St. James High School will be John Jamieson!’

The congregation erupted into applause. No one was looking at Kevin anymore; they were looking at Jamieson, who had stood up and was leading the line of prefects to shake Mr. Guthrow’s hand. He rubbed his sticky palms together, unsure of what to do, rooted to his seat by the sense that there had been some kind of mistake and that if he were to stand up the congregation would buckle over and laugh until the chapel roof fell in.

‘Get your fat butt up there!’ someone said to him.

To the best of his knowledge, Kevin hadn’t done anything to deserve being made a prefect. He wasn’t exactly well known (Mr. Gouws was one of the few teachers who didn’t call him Kelvin), and he certainly wasn’t sporty, although he *was* the goalkeeper of the hockey team – a position he had been given because of his asthma, and his mother’s insistence that he not be made to run too much. He was also the

captain of the team, in keeping with coach Wilson's tradition that the goalkeeper was always its leader. That way, coach Wilson always said, the captain would never be out of breath or tired and his judgment would never be impaired. Admittedly there had been a minor uproar when he had been made captain, but it was soon quelled by coach Wilson, who believed that traditions (especially sporting ones) were sacred, and not to be tampered with.

'Would *all* of the new prefects come up to be inducted,' Guthrow said.

As the goalkeeper, Kevin got to stand still and observe the game and shout orders from behind the steel grate on his helmet. It was as good a deal as you could expect for your compulsory winter sport. Goalkeeper was a position that required little physical exertion, although it was occasionally a hazardous one. Sitting in the chapel, right at the back, where the acoustics were bad and he should have been safe, Kevin suddenly felt like a goalkeeper again - as if hard, white hockey balls were flying towards his face.

'Get up there, Riley!'

He stood up and pushed past all the knees between his seat and the aisle. He walked slowly to the front, where he slipped into line behind Peter Watson. Guthrow was shaking each boy's hand emphatically.

'I know you'll do a good job, boy,' he said to Andrew Van Zyl. Van Zyl thanked him, moved on, and smiled at the teachers as he passed them. The queue was getting shorter, quickly, and Kevin still wasn't convinced that this wasn't all a big joke, and that as soon as he extended his hands towards Mr. Guthrow he'd be laughed all the way back to his seat, where his face would burn silently. But there was no time to turn back - the tree trunk neck of Guthrow loomed in front of him, blocking out the light that seeped through the red and yellow stained glass windows.

'Congratulations, Riley,' he said.

Kevin nodded and joined the rest of the proud prefects of '98, at the front of the school. He slung his arm around James Steenkamp.

'What are we singing?' he asked him.

'Dynamite!' Steenkamp replied. 'You know the words, don't you, hey Riley?'

'Sure,' Kevin said, wishing he had spent more time at war cry practice, but before he could fully regret the laxity of his past The Prefects of '98 had burst into song.

'WE ARE RED...' they shouted in perfect unison and less than perfect harmony.
WE ARE WHITE...

WE ARE DYNAMITE!’

The school song ignited an explosion of adulation from the congregation, which The Prefects of ‘98 acknowledged with wristy waves, before filing out of the chapel in a neatly formed line. Outside, Jamieson called them together and said he wanted to say a few words, if they didn’t mind sticking around. They rallied around him and squeezed each other’s shoulders, predicting the rise of their potent empire, and loudly decrying all things naff and nerdy and gay.

‘Guys,’ he shouted, his voice hoarse from the war cry, ‘things are going to change around here. I’m going to be running a tight ship.’

They mumbled their support.

‘We are here because we are the true leaders of this school.’

He looked at Kevin.

‘Well, most of us, anyway. But I’m a fair man, and even if you got here by being captain of the bloody tiddlywinks team I’m prepared to accept that you can make a small contribution to our mission. And our mission is to make this a school a place that these kids would die for.’

‘Yeah!’ they all shouted.

‘St. James!’ they yelled, and someone slapped Kevin’s buttocks.

With that they dispersed for their morning break. Kevin found his best friend Gareth and asked him to help explain what had just happened. It was impossible to piece it all together; he’d become a prefect, despite being a little short of breath and a little overweight. Eventually Gareth explained it all to him, filling in the details that hadn’t reached the corner at the back of the chapel.

‘You’re not a prefect because you’re good,’ he said, ‘it’s because you’re the captain of the *mofstok* team.’

Kevin still didn’t understand how that entitled him to his place in the hegemony.

‘Guthrow doesn’t know anyone here, so he made all the sports captains prefects. He said that if you can captain a sports team you’re a born leader, in his book.’

It was an unusual, but quite reasonable thought process, Kevin thought. Captaining the hockey team wasn’t easy, and would surely prepare him for what lay ahead. He walked slowly to his last class, his shoulders hunched under the unfamiliar burden of leadership and his mind full of exotic ideas. He was a role model now - a part of the elite. Things would never be the same. He’d have to drop his bad habits, for one thing.

He'd have to return library books on time and throw litter in the dustbin. He'd have to be punctual and orderly.

Later that night, he told his parents that he thought he had been made a prefect, but still wasn't completely sure because he had been sitting at the back of the chapel and could easily have misheard. His father dismissed his doubts with a backhanded wave and said: 'Now I have a son I can be proud of,' and his mom folded her arms and said: 'How did you do it honey?' Kevin blushed and said he was the captain of the hockey side and that's how he did it. His father roared with laughter and said it was a bloody miracle, and he shook him by the shoulders and said that some people had greatness thrust upon them.

At the first prefects' meeting of the year, Kevin sat on a locker in the prefects' room and thought about what his father had said. It was true, he thought; he was great now, although he was not quite sure why. The more he thought about it, the less he knew, and the less he knew, the more he felt that he was an integral part of some gigantic mistake. The other boys all seemed to know exactly what made them so deserving, like they'd expected this, planned it, and thought it all through. They even looked like they were born for it.

The prefects' room was an abandoned classroom that had been converted into a special place for the school's elite. It was strictly out of bounds for regular pupils, who called it 'The Dungeon', and who seldom crossed its threshold unless to be taught a lesson, a real lesson, with a bat or a cane or a shoe. Until now, Kevin had only caught glimpses of what it looked like in there, when he passed the room on the way to class and had seen the prefects playing darts and passing around pornographic magazines. But now fate had dumped him right in the heart of that foreign world, and here he was, laughing with the rest of them and scribbling his name on the wall of fame.

As he finished colouring in the 'y' in Riley, a rugby ball whizzed through the air and thumped him on the chest. He picked it up, spun it in his hands, and threw it back to Peter Watson. Watson eyed him suspiciously as it wobbled and fell short, bouncing into the wall.

'What, you've never thrown a rugby ball before, hey Riley?' he said.

Kevin shrugged and massaged his shoulder, blaming the poor pass on an old hockey injury.

‘Whatever, Riley,’ Watson said, ‘I bet you pulled a muscle jerking off.’

Fitting in wasn’t going to be easy. Authority was all about style, Kevin thought, observing Watson leaning on the wall and pushing his fingers through his hair. If he were to survive he’d have to look the part. He’d have to part his hair in the middle, like Watson did, but before he could do so, James Steenkamp was ruffling it affectionately.

‘Well done, Kev,’ he said, ‘I didn’t expect they’d pick you.’

‘Shot,’ Kevin said. ‘I didn’t expect it either.’

Steenkamp dropped his bag on the floor and eyed a vacant position on the lockers.

‘Can I sit next to you?’ he said.

Kevin cleared a space. The rest of the boys were trying to secure seats and he didn’t want to be left on his own, patting his knees, like he always did when his class was told to ‘form groups’ or ‘make teams’.

The rest of the prefects spread out on the couches tables and examined their wristwatches. Only they, the biggest and most important boys in the school were allowed to wear them, and Kevin would have to get one soon. Jamieson stood at the front of the room, next to an old, unused blackboard, and cracked his knuckles.

‘Morning ladies,’ he said, ‘and welcome to the first meeting of the prefects’ of ’98.’

He picked up a piece of chalk from the dusty tray at the bottom of the blackboard and blew excess powder of his fingers.

‘Guthrow and I have been chatting about the direction we want the school to move in, and we’ve agreed on a few things. Like we both have this idea that this is more than just a school; this is where boys become men.’

He turned around and wrote *Vision* on the blackboard.

‘We want a school that everyone is proud of. But before we can do that we need to get back some of the things we’ve lost.’

The prefects gazed at the buttons on their blazers and called to mind some of the things they had lost, shaking their heads at the way Gouws had left the place.

‘For one thing,’ Jamieson said, ‘as you know, there’s no discipline around here anymore. It’s like a bloody madhouse.’

He wrote *Discipline* under *Vision*, mouthing out each letter as he scratched it into the board.

‘Most of us are eighteen, or almost eighteen, and I don’t know about you, but I’m sick and tired of being disrespected.’

He drew an arced line from *Discipline* and labelled it *Punishment*.

‘Respect is fear, and fear is respect, and now that...that...*Gouws* is gone we don’t have to pretend that it’s any other way.’

He spat Gouws’ name out like a peanut, so disgusted was he with the man’s legacy of new age educational hogwash. He waved the piece of chalk around the way Kevin’s father waved his squash racquet. Kevin assumed that like his father, Jamieson too would not want to hear about how great it had been when Gouws had complimented him personally on his physics project.

Watson put up his hand.

‘How should we punish youngsters who are out of line?’ he asked. ‘Can we hit them, with a bat or something?’

‘No,’ Jamieson said, ‘their mommies will be on the phone quicker than you can say “Randburg High boys take it up the ass”’.

Watson started laughing again, and snorting so uncontrollably that Jamieson had to ask him to stop.

‘That was funny, Johnny,’ he said.

Jamieson glared at him, and continued:

‘Times have changed. Just like you can’t venture out into the street without having the shirt stolen off your back, and just like you can’t buy a dollar with a hundred Rand – you can’t beat a kid who causes *kak*.’

There was a silence, until Steenkamp coughed and raised his hand.

‘John,’ he said, and glanced at his fingernails, ‘I think your vision is very clever, but don’t you think we should rehabilitate the bad elements at this school?’

Jamieson twisted his neck until something clicked.

‘You know, instead of hurting them,’ he added.

He started pacing from one end of the blackboard to the other.

‘Well, well, well,’ he said, crushing chalk between his fingers and letting clouds of it fall to the ground.

‘Steenkamp wants to *understand* the little punks that are running this place into the ground.’

Steenkamp opened his mouth to speak but shut it quickly again.

‘What are you going to do when some scruffy little standard six bastard steals a sandwich from *your* lunchbox, huh, Steenkamp?’ he said. ‘Are you going to hug some sense in to him?’

Jamieson’s snapped the chalk in his fist. He looked around at the other boys and threw a piece of the chalk at Mokate.

‘Wake up, Mokate. Let’s have some ideas for punishment. Stuff that will work, stuff that will scare them.’

Kevin wracked his brains for something to say. Jamieson’s gaze was as weighty as Mr. De Wet’s, the maths teacher, when he drummed his fingers on his desk and waited for trigonometry solutions.

‘What do you say Riley?’

The punishment should fit the crime, Kevin thought. They couldn’t hit anyone - that much he knew - and besides, he wouldn’t have hit anyone for fear of being turned on. But Jamieson had made it clear that punishment should be harsh if the wild kids of St. James were to be reined in. If something weren’t done soon there’d be standard sixes burning and looting, from the science labs to the cricket pitches. Every boy at St. James knew someone who’d had something broken or stolen.

‘Hard labour,’ he said. ‘Painting the fences on the cricket pitch, mowing the lawn with nail clippers, that kind of thing.’

Jamieson wrote *Hard labour*.

‘You’re a bloody Genius, Riley,’ he said, looking around the room. Steenkamp was grinding his teeth next to Kevin, his face glowing and beads of sweat forming on his lip. Mokate was yawning, repeatedly. Andy Kerr rolled his eyes.

‘You got something to say, Kerr?’ Jamieson said.

‘Nah,’ Kerr said, ‘none of this going to work. We’re almost half way through the year anyway.’

Jamieson clenched his fists at his sides and raised himself to his most imposing height, but before he could scream ‘What the hell kind of crappy attitude is that?’ a tennis ball bounced into the room and came to rest against his foot. He picked it up, still fuming, and put it into his pocket. Outside two boys scampered down the corridor and slammed the bathroom door behind them, before anyone could tell them that their ball had been confiscated forever.

‘That’s what I’m talking about,’ Jamieson said, peering out the door. ‘That’s the kind of chaos we’ve got to eliminate. Now has anyone else got something to say, or is it just me and Kevin making all the decisions here?’

Watson crossed his arms indignantly.

‘I still think we should hit them,’ he said.

‘Kev?’ Jamieson said.

Kevin had never expected to be on first name terms with John Jamieson, but today he’d made the only useful suggestion of the meeting and Jamieson had liked it, and now he was asking him for his opinion on punishment. He was right, of course; if a punishment was to be effective it had to be feared. Kevin thought back on his school days, to the worst days - the days he’d been picked on and the days he’d been punished. He put up his hand.

‘Mild humiliation,’ he said, ‘works very well.’

He remembered the threat of having to swim naked that loomed large for any boy who forgot to bring his swimming costume to PE class. He remembered a prefect grabbing him by the hair and forcing him to lick the toe of his shoe back when he was in standard six.

‘We could stand them up in front of the rest of the school, during chapel service, so everyone can see who they are and what they’ve done.’

When Ms. Viljoen had asked him impossible questions because his Afrikaans speech had been too short he’d trembled and sweated and almost vomited, and never came unprepared ever again.

‘Or they could stand in the quad at lunchtime, and we could throw stuff at them, like salami from our sandwiches.’

Jamieson didn’t say anything for a few seconds. Kevin wished he had held his tongue.

‘I like it,’ Jamieson said, ‘especially the first one.’

He wrote *Mild humiliation* on the board, and beneath it, in smaller letters, he wrote *Ostrasise boys that don’t toe the line*.

‘Thank you, Kev,’ he said, ‘it seems like you’re not such a little fag after all.’

Kevin leaned back against the wall, satisfied. His work here was done. He’d looked like a prefect today, and to his own surprise, he was already starting to feel like one. Jamieson slapped the board with his giant hand.

‘So, there it is, ladies,’ he said, banging on the board. ‘Our disciplinary ethos, or mantra, if you will. *Hard labour and mild humiliation*. Go out and spread the word. Tell them there’ll be no mercy. Tell them that things are going to change around here. And tell them to report anyone who doesn’t wear this badge with pride to me.’

The boys got up from their seats and slung their satchels over their shoulders, but before Kevin could leave, while no-one was looking, Steenkamp squeezed his forearm and said there was no way *he* would be hurting or humiliating anyone.

‘And I don’t think you should either,’ he said. ‘Think about it, Kevin, think about what the *real* head boy would think.’

He rolled his eyes skywards.

‘You know, the head boy up there.’

He winked at him and left the room. Kevin pulled up his socks and stood up to go. Everyone was filing out the door, except for Jamieson who had stayed behind and was wiping the board clean.

‘Kev,’ he said, ‘Can I speak to you for a minute?’

Kevin paused at the door. He was already late for class, but he’d have sooner been made to sit in the corner than defy Jamieson and his huge water polo hands.

‘What’s on your mind, John?’ he said.

‘Now *you* know, as well as anyone, that the way Guthrow chose the prefects was random and idiotic.’

‘I guess so...’ he said warily.

‘Not me, of course,’ Jamieson said. ‘But you. When I heard *your* name I thought I was hearing things. I thought Guthrow was crazy. I didn’t think you were prefect material, if you know what I mean.’

The class would be finding their seats now and Mr. Anderson would be giving them page numbers in *Twentieth Century History for Standard Tens*.

‘But you’ve proved me wrong. It’s the others I’m worried about.’

He pulled out a folding mirror and comb set from his pocket and inspected his teeth.

‘They’re all morons,’ he said, rubbing his gums with his finger. ‘Steenkamp is a goddamn Bible basher, Kerr couldn’t care less, Mokate is narcoleptic or something, and just between you and me, I think Watson is slightly retarded.’

He put away the mirror and looked at Kevin.

‘That leaves you and me. I want you to be my right hand man. Together we can make things happen here. We won’t let this place go to shit now, will we buddy?’

Kevin edged towards the door.

‘No, John. We’ll sort them out.’

‘And one more thing,’ Jamieson said. ‘I should have been a prefect months ago – everyone knows that. But that senile old fairy, Mr. Gouws, had to screw everything up with his crazy ideas. I’ve got to make up for lost time, and I want you to help me.’

‘I’m your man,’ Kevin said, glancing at his watch.

‘Starting next week, Friday,’ he said. ‘I want you to be a tour guide for a family that’s wants to check out the school. Their kid is coming here and they want to make sure that everything is okay for their little baby. You can do that for me, can’t you Kev?’

Taking a family for a tour would be easy, Kevin thought, as he ran to class, but he would have to touch up on his knowledge of the school. He had forgotten the names of its founders, and he wasn’t even sure he would be able to find the boarding house, if pressed.

After a good week at school, Kevin was starting to feel that his new role quite suited him, actually. While he waited for the prospective pupil and his parents he thought about just how great it felt to be significant, and how much he would be able to achieve in his new life. He felt like a cat that had just discovered its claws – playful, and a little dangerous. He smiled to himself and picked specks of fluff off his blazer while he waited for the family to arrive.

The first thing he noticed when they arrived was the boy’s hair, which was buoyant and girly and would surely be a magnet for the sort of jibes that had plagued him since his very first day at the school. Such things, he reminisced - the sneers, the kicks to his shins, the wedgies - hadn’t been mentioned in the prospectus that his father had put on his pillow one night halfway through standard five, nor in the tour that he and his parents had taken with a then prefect at the school. The prefect that had been their guide had promised a comfortable and enriching environment for boys of all types - even those with more introverted inclinations, as he had put it - but had hardly spoken to Kevin at all during the tour, making him feel less than comfortable and not particularly enriched. Instead he had chatted cheerfully to Kevin’s father about the

way things were at the school back in his day, and how he would have liked to be around when men were men and initiation ceremonies were still in vogue.

But that was all over and the last Kevin heard the boy who had taken such a liking to his father back then hadn't quite fulfilled his vast potential, and was now establishing a reputation as a television evangelist in attempt to fund his burgeoning cocaine habit. It was sad, Kevin thought, for an old boy to go that route, but when one was deprived of the safety net that St. James provided these things could happen.

Perhaps Guthrow was right and Mr. Gouws had been too soft on boys like that, who could have turned out okay if they had just had the benefit of a little bit of firm guidance. Perhaps there was something to The Guthrow Ethic after all, Kevin thought; maybe it wasn't just an archaic doctrine scribbled down by Guthrow in a fit of bitterness at the recurring vision of his wife's legs wrapped around his favourite head boy's face. It was quite likely, in fact, that Guthrow, with his many years of teaching experience, really did know what was best for the pupils of St. James High School for boys and that The Guthrow Ethic had been carefully crafted to ensure that all school leavers became respectable and successful folk, immune to the temptations of cocaine and evangelism. If Kevin could contribute in some small way to that cause, he thought, then it would be the least he could do.

The first tenet of The Guthrow Ethic was: *Thou shalt respect God*. That was very important, Guthrow said. Religion may be going out of fashion, he said, but he, for one, was never one to be dictated to by the ebbs and flows of contemporary trends, and he had always felt that a child who had been conditioned by years of regular church attendance and hymn practice would turn out to be a good adult, and a pious one. As such, it had been agreed that all school tours should start in front of the school chapel, where the family now waited, so that St. James' sober face would be the first they saw and the one they remembered. It would be better that way, Guthrow had told Kevin earlier that day, because the last thing they wanted was for parents to think that they were pushing their children into some kind of irreligious abyss.

It looked a pleasant enough family, he thought, as he approached them next to their Volvo. The parents were well groomed and tidy (the least one would have expected from a family wishing to enrol their child in a school like St. James) but all their grooming and all their tidiness was for nothing, because their son's hair had a soulful verve that defied all normal notions of decorum. A few years ago, Kevin reflected, he might have worn his hair the same way, but now that he was a prefect there was The

Guthrow Ethic to remember, which said: *Thou shalt respect yourself*. This, he realised, was a cryptic way of saying: *Thou shalt cut your hair and pull up your socks*. If a kid like this wanted to be a St. James boy there were certain things he would have to submit to, and one of those was a look; a look that Guthrow said would project the inner order and obedience of a St. James boy. There was no use in fighting it, no point whatsoever, and he would have to tell the kid this. He would also have to tell him to get his hair cut or it would be cut for him. That was just the way it was, unfortunately, and if he didn't like it he could go to one of those 'less established' schools, where the kids didn't have to wear uniforms and could choose drama instead of sport.

While the family waited they looked out over the rugby fields, admiring the crisp, white lines and pointing at the guinea fowl that pecked sandwich crumbs from between the posts.

'Beautiful, isn't it?' Kevin said, as soon as he was within earshot. It was a sunny day, and a perfect one for showing around first timers.

'I'm Kevin Riley,' he said, feeling the muted pride of someone in the know, someone who this family needed, and someone who could make or break this boy.

'I'll be showing you around.'

The boy's father was a short, energetic looking man who introduced himself as Geoff Southern, and his wife, who said her name was Margie, had long, kinky hair. Their son, Kyle, desperately wanted to be a St. James boy.

'All of his friends are coming here and we've heard good things about the place,' Mr. Southern said.

'Yes we have,' Mrs. Southern said, 'so we thought we'd come and have a look for ourselves.'

Kevin said he hoped they wouldn't be disappointed. He pointed to the chapel and suggested that they take a peek inside, because it would be empty now, and they would surely be impressed by its quiet glory. He led the way, and Mr. and Mrs. Southern wondered dreamily behind, beaming at the intricate stained glass windows that towered above their heads.

In the large chapel doorway, Kevin began his tour. He had memorised manageable chunks of school history from an old school magazine that he thought soon-to-be pupils and their families might find interesting. He told the Southern, for example, that the school was founded by two roving Englishman, who had arrived, settled, and made their fortunes in the country, but when raising families had realised that there

were few schools that offered the standard of education that they had grown accustomed to back in England. He pointed to their names, which were etched into gold plaques on either side of the door.

‘They do have very good schools in England,’ Mrs. Southern said.

‘The best,’ Mr. Southern said.

One had to remember one’s predecessors, Kevin said. After all, one of the most intriguing tenets of The Guthrow Ethic was: *Thou shalt respect your history*. At first, he hadn’t really understood that one – there seemed little worth respecting in the history of this country – but now it made more sense. Guthrow had meant (he’d elaborated in one of his lunchtime briefs) that one should respect one’s roots, which were invariably to be found in nations like England and Holland and France, where real culture didn’t take a backseat like it did here, and where the foundations of all things great – rugby, cricket, opera – could be found. They walked on down the aisle in the musty silence of the chapel and Kevin mentioned to the attentive family that St. James was a Methodist school that had at its core traditional private school values that he was sure they would appreciate. He bowed slightly as he led the family past the crucifix on the wall and opened the back door onto the school quadrangle, which was empty except for a lunch box that rested defiantly on the lawn, its lid wide open and its stale contents spilling out.

‘The quadrangle is the hub of school activity,’ he said, and waited for them to take it all in. The quadrangle lawns spread out in front of them like green carpets, inviting the family to step on them. Kevin desperately hoped they would resist the temptation, because the fourth tenet of The Guthrow Ethic was: *Respect your school*, which would surely be contravened if the Southernns were to walk all over the grass that was reserved for the soles of prefects only. It was a silly little tradition, but one that was established way back in Kevin’s father’s day, when these things still meant something.

‘It is here that the best days of your life will be spent, relaxing with friends after class and enjoying the vibrant and warm atmosphere that only St. James can offer.’

Mr. Southern winked at his wife.

‘And it is here that you will engage in lively debates with your classmates, and of course, lots of harmless horsing around.’

Kyle pulled his arms further into his sleeves.

‘I don’t like horsing around,’ he said.

‘Of course you do,’ Mrs. Southern said.

He led the family into a nearby classroom. He pushed open the door and stood at the front of the class, exactly where he’d stood just a few weeks ago and stammered his way through an oral presentation on the symbolists. The Southern’s marvelled at the tidiness, and Kevin pointed out where he sat. Incidentally, this was where the dynamic Mrs. Howe taught, he said, remembering how she had waved a metal ruler at him when he had mispronounced ‘Yeats’. He spoke about the progressive teaching techniques that were used at St. James and the culture of acceptance. *Thou shalt respect your fellow students*, he almost said out aloud, but soon remembered that the boy would not yet be familiar with the central foundations of The Guthrow Ethic, nor would he be aware of its nuances. Like Guthrow said, respecting your fellow students meant more than just giving them the time of day, but also appreciating their idiosyncrasies. That meant giving the misfits, for want of a better word, something to do. They could have their little clubs, Guthrow said, where they could get together and put on plays.

‘You can ask anything you like in these classrooms, and you won’t be laughed at,’ he said to Kyle, who was stretching an elastic band between his fingers. The boy had pale white hands, which reddened at every pull of the elastic band and which would surely fall off the first time his wrist got twisted in a *Chinese bangle*.

‘Did you hear that, Kyle?’ Mrs. Southern said. She glanced at Kevin and mouthed the word ‘shy’.

Kyle placated her with a nod. He was a fragile young thing, to say the least. He’d have to learn to speak up, stand straight, and show a little pride in his school. *Thou shalt respect your school*, The Ethic said, which meant smiling and looking neat, but Kyle looked like he’d just been thrown into prison.

Next on the agenda was the library, down the corridor, with its ‘knowledge commons’ and impressive Internet facility. Mr. Southern’s eyes lit up when he saw the shiny white Pentiums and their blinking modems. He rubbed his fingers over the keyboards and turned to Kyle.

‘This is where you’ll be spending all your time, won’t you boy?’ he said.

‘Unfortunately,’ Kevin interjected, ‘these computers are reserved for senior students.’

‘What a pity,’ Mrs. Southern said, ‘because Kyle loves his computers.’

They walked on, out of the glass library doors and towards the science laboratory. Kevin listed all the clubs, societies, sports and activities that an energetic young man like Kyle would have at his disposal. There was chess, films, debating, and even a jazz band.

‘I wish they had fencing,’ Kyle said.

‘Well, they don’t,’ Mr. Southern said.

The corridors echoed with the sounds of the family’s steps and Kevin’s informative banter. The science labs, he told them, were the pride of the school; fully equipped with everything a young Einstein could need and decorated with interesting displays. There was even a pig’s brain in a jar, which Kyle could take a look at if he wanted.

‘Wow,’ said Mr. Southern, ‘they’ve really got it all here, haven’t they?’

‘I wish we had all of these nice things when we were your age,’ Mrs. Southern said.

The boy’s eyes were watery with disillusion already, as the consequences of his parents’ choice of high school were becoming apparent. There would be no fencing and no Internet. There would only be uniforms, pigs’ brains, and as the graffiti on the walls suggested, an abrupt loss of innocence. They walked on.

Kevin pushed open the door of the science laboratory and allowed the Southern to step inside. The room smelled vaguely of sulphur, and he saw Mr. and Mrs. Southern’s jaws drop in unison, partly so they wouldn’t have to breathe through their noses, and partly at the evidence that lay before them of a holistic and interactive learning experience. At the front of the classroom was a lustrous white board, which still had formulas scribbled across it in black ink. On the back wall hung a periodic table, and below it, on the counter and between gas outlets, were the remains of an experiment; a beaker of red fluid and flecks of ash that lifted into the air and floated to the ground as Kevin shut the door behind him.

‘This is just so exciting, isn’t it Kyle?’ Mrs. Southern said, picking up a jar from the display cabinet and squinting at a rat foetus in formaldehyde. Kyle held his hand over his mouth and frowned.

‘Come on, boy,’ she said, ‘don’t you think that’s interesting?’

‘I think I need some fresh air,’ he said, and ran out the room, bumping his elbow on a desk on the way out.

Mr. Southern shrugged.

‘He’s a skittish boy,’ he said.

‘Not very well adjusted,’ she said.

Kevin said that with the right guidance he had no doubt that Kyle would flourish at St. James, and become an impressive young man.

‘That’s very nice of you to say,’ Mr. Southern said. ‘But do you mind if my wife and I take a look around these labs? We didn’t have anything like this when we were at school.’

‘*Our* parents thought expensive education was for snobs,’ Mrs. Southern muttered. ‘If only they knew how they’d deprived us.’

‘That’s why we promised ourselves that our children would have the best education money could buy,’ Mr. Southern said, rubbing his wife’s back.

‘You really can’t skimp when it comes to your children’s education,’ she said.

The couple wandered around, touching everything that was not bottled and shaking everything that was. They giggled at the skeleton models and traced the shapes of the mounted butterflies with their fingers, oblivious to Kevin’s gaze and Kyle’s soft pacing outside. Eventually Mrs. Southern’s curiosity got the better of her and she started fiddling with the lock on a box of rat bones, and Kevin had to clear his throat and ask that she not open any of the displays or touch any of the exhibits. She dropped the rusty lock immediately, and offered him an embarrassed apology, which he brushed aside with good humour. They were an obedient and pleasant pair, despite their prurience. They surrendered themselves to Kevin’s stern words and appreciated his guidance. They listened attentively to everything he said and laughed at his anecdotes about school life. When they had completed their third round of the laboratory they thanked him for showing them around and Mr. Southern shook his hand vigorously and said that he thought he would make a fine role model for Kyle.

‘Between you and me,’ he said, ‘Kyle needs someone like you to look up to. He doesn’t really get on with us anymore.’

It was true - the boy would need a mentor. He could do that, Kevin thought. He could be a role model for the boy. He’d changed so much since he’d become a prefect, and although he was now immeasurably more mature, resolute, and plucky, it wasn’t that long ago that he was like Kyle - downtrodden and not fully appreciated.

‘My wife and I would really appreciate it if you could, well, take him under your wing for a while.’

Kevin imagined the helpless look on the Southern parents' faces the first time they bent their ears to Kyle's bedroom door after another bad day at school, while he seethed and sulked and turned his music up.

'Absolutely,' he said. 'I'll do whatever it takes to make sure that everything runs smoothly.'

'Thank you ever so much,' Mr. Southern said. 'You don't know how much that means to us.'

He put an arm around his wife, and together they gazed over the laboratory one last time.

'I suppose we should go and find the little *skelm*,' she sighed.

Kevin held the door open. It was nearing the end of the day, and the only people who would be around now would be the cleaners, who would be scrubbing graffiti off the lockers and throwing chocolate wrappers in the dustbins. He wondered if The Guthrow Ethic applied to staff, because the way some of the cleaners presented themselves was appalling. They could get them new uniforms, at least.

The Southern's stepped out into the corridor and looked around for Kyle. The boy was nowhere to be seen. The only other human presence in the quadrangle was that of an infamously cranky janitor, who was walking slowly across the lawn and poking pieces of rubbish with a long metal rod, and dropping them into a plastic bag that he carried by his side. As Mr. and Mrs. Southern called for their son a cloud of cigarette smoke floated languidly past their eyes, and caused Mrs. Southern to sneeze.

'Now where could he be?' she said, sniffing.

'And who would be smoking around all these flammable chemicals?' Mr. Southern said.

They looked around for the culprit. It wasn't the janitor; he was whistling a bluesy tune that was too intricate to co-exist with the rhythmic demands of cigarette smoking. It couldn't have been Kyle either. It was inconceivable that such a timid boy was hiding in the bushes somewhere, sucking on a cigarette. He had probably wandered off to peer through the windows of the music rooms and have a look at Ms. Knight's new Steinway, Kevin deduced, or was sitting on his own somewhere, contemplating his future.

'Kyle...' Mrs Southern shouted.

They all heard a muted cough and some scuffling from behind the wall of the science laboratory.

‘Kyle?’ she said.

‘I wonder who that is?’ Mr. Southern whispered.

Kevin stepped towards the noises.

‘Who’s there?’ he said.

‘Who’s asking?’ a voice answered.

The voice sounded gruff and assured. At this time of the day it could have been anyone; a burglar, a vandal, or even one of those perverts that were occasionally caught peering through the windows of the boarding house.

‘Kevin Riley,’ he said.

‘Prefect,’ he added.

There was more rustling from behind the wall and a boy came out, dusting leaves off his blazer.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m just going home now,’ the boy said.

Kevin knew the boy as a lunchtime tyrant. He had seen him pelting the younger kids with oranges and tipping the contents of school bags into gutters.

‘You were smoking, weren’t you?’

From somewhere in the corner of his vision Kevin saw Kyle stand up from his seat on a nearby flight of stairs and go to join his parents. The three of them watched in silence.

‘So what, Riley?’

Mrs. Southern gasped. The boy folded his hands in front of him and rocked on his heels.

‘I’ll have you in detention for the rest of the year, that’s so what,’ he replied. He had tried to imitate, to the best of his ability, the tone his father used after a bad squash match, but the way it came out was very different to the way his father did it, and the way Jamieson would do it. Outside his head, out in the world, Kevin’s voice sounded less like one of Guthrow’s prefects, and more like one of Gouws’ peer guides. The boy smiled and glanced at the Southern family. He had noticed the tremble in Kevin’s voice, which was so slight that a less attuned listener might not have immediately identified it as evidence of impotence.

‘Whatever,’ he said, pressing a pair of earphones into his ears. ‘You’re a real joke, Riley.’

The boy turned and walked away, leaving a wake of tinny beats behind him. There was a long silence before Kyle tapped his father on the shoulder and said that the *The Simpsons* was on, and he really wanted to watch.

‘Yes, Kyle,’ Mr. Southern replied, ‘Yes.’

Kevin watched the boy walk away, his hands in his pockets and his head swaying to the music. He had disregarded almost every tenet of The Guthrow Ethic, the little brat, and obviously thought he could get away with it. With every step he took towards the parking lot, where his brother or his buddy or his uncle would surely be waiting to give him a lift home, Kevin listed in his mind an aspect of Guthrow’s code of behaviour he had contravened. *Thou shalt respect your school*, the Guthrow Ethic stated, and which the boy had clearly failed to do. *Thou shalt respect yourself*, it also said, and which the boy also seemed to put no stock in, unless he thought that inhaling thousands of deadly carcinogenic substances was an act of self-respect. *Thou shalt respect your fellow students*, Kevin remembered it saying. That was a joke. The boy had treated Kevin like one of the empty soft drink cans that the janitor was squashing with his boots and throwing into the packet with the rest of the litter. And the list went on; he’d certainly disrespected the school, his self, and his fellow students, as well as God, tradition, and authority. When Jamieson heard about this the boy would wish he was dead.

Kevin assured the Southernns that the boy would be taken care of during school hours. Then he offered to accompany them to their car. The grounds were so big that one could get lost around here, he joked, but only Mrs. Southern laughed, and she did so weakly. Kyle, Kevin noticed, rolled his eyes. If he did that again, he thought, if he *dared* do that again, he would probably tear them out. Now this boy too had decided to disregard his authority, and it would be a cold day in hell before anyone got away with that. He would remember Kyle. He’d remember his pasty face and his ridiculous hair. He’d write his name down on a list of boys to remember, one place after that little cigarette-smoking weasel.

They walked slowly, trying to enjoy the dying afternoon and talking about everything but the boy and the floating smoke. Kevin pointed out the squash courts, down by the rugby fields, where his father played every Tuesday in the old boys’ league and inevitably lost. He told them about the boarding house and the swimming pool and the headmaster’s office. He mentioned to them that Mr. Guthrow, the new

headmaster, was a strict man, but, as he was sure they would agree, one had to be these days.

The Southerns listened politely and thanked Kevin again as they arrived at their Volvo. As soon as they were in range Mr. Southern popped open the central locking and glanced at the time on his watch. If they were going to catch the *Simpsons*, he said, they would have to hurry. The family bundled into the car and reversed out of the parking space. Then they sped towards the school gates, slowing only for speed bumps and guinea fowl.

Kevin turned around and headed back towards the school to fetch his bag and his books. It had been a long day, but it wasn't over. There were still so many things to do, like his chemistry homework and the more immediate matter of organizing a lift home. He kicked a stone all the way back to where he had left his bag, in a locker, near Mr. Guthrow's office. Guthrow's light was still on, and he could see his silhouette hunched over his desk, scribbling away, most probably touching up *The Guthrow Ethic*. He dropped a coin in the public telephone near the office and called Jamieson. He'd be able to give him a lift home. He'd got a new car just the other day.

'I hope that boy drove properly,' Kevin's mom said, when Jamieson dropped him off from school in his shiny red Toyota.

'Of course, mom,' he said, remembering Jamieson's sweaty hands fiddling with a box of cigarettes in between changing gears.

'So, how was your tour?' she said.

'Fine,' he said. 'Nice family. A lot like us, actually.'

His mom was humming and slicing a loaf of bread into thin slices.

'What did you show them?'

'The library, the chapel, the sports facilities. All the highlights.'

She slapped a piece of ham onto the bread and rinsed a tomato.

'Your father and I are so proud of you, you know. We never expected you to be chosen.'

She placed the sandwich in front of Kevin.

'That's a snack fit for a prefect,' she said, and went on humming.

Kevin bit into the sandwich and thought about his duties for the rest of the week. He had a full plate; he had to distribute *The Ethic* to all the boys at the school and get them to learn it, as well as the buses he had to organise to the swimming gala at

Fourways High. There would also be a Friday afternoon punishment session for those who didn't swim well enough.

'How does it feel to be a leader, darling?'

A leader. A boss. No one could tell him what to do anymore.

'Not too bad,' he said.

'Don't talk with your mouth full,' she said.

He shut his mouth.

'That's better,' she said. 'Now tell me, what do The Prefects of '98 have planned for this year?'

It was a good question. They planned to keep everyone on a tight leash, as Jamieson liked to say. They planned to rediscover St. James' past glory. It was a tantalising prospect – almost a year's worth of infinite power and wide influence – and with Jamieson on his side he felt like he'd be able to wield it. He'd certainly be able to settle a few scores.

'Just normal stuff, things we have to,' he said.

'Things?' she said.

'Stuff,' he said.

There were so many things to do it could drive one crazy. It was no small wonder Brandon Fourie ran away from home back in standard eight, only to be caught by a police officer in his mom's Volkswagen on the road to Durban. It wasn't even such a shock when they found Andrew Terblanche hanging by his necktie. There were just too many things to do. Things like passing school, making up your mind, trying not to die. And now, Kevin thought, he had even more to do, more to think about, and more to plan.

'School things,' he said.

One thing was he wanted to get back at that jerk Simon McFarland who had snatched away his chair in Zulu class in standard seven, leaving him rocking on the cold concrete floor in pain, and smiling weakly while his classmates roared with laughter. McFarland had to pay.

'Well, if I can add my two cents worth, I think something should be done about the manners of the boys at that school. You should hear some of the stories the tuck shop moms have to tell; boys flinging their change on the counter as if it were a bloody shebeen, demanding extra mustard, you name it...'

He could whisper something in Jamieson's ear about McFarland if he wanted to. He could easily turn Jamieson against him with a few well-chosen words.

'And that's not the worst of it. Jenny Dobson told me that her son, Michael, got punched in the stomach by that awful Taylor child, who, by the way, I have seen smoking cigarettes at the Randburg Waterfront.'

But vengeance on McFarland was not his first priority, although it may have been his oldest. There were others who he would sooner bring down, who had attacked him, stabbed him in the back, pushed and slapped him, lied to him, left him alone, not watched his back. There were boys who were friends before they let him down, and there were boys who he had always hated, and there were teachers, and strangers who looked at him funny, and there were even his own parents, who sometimes needed to be taught a lesson.

'Tell me you'll do something about those boys Kevin, those boys who run around like they own the place, like everyone owes them a favour.'

He'd do something about them alright, Kevin thought, swallowing another piece of sandwich. He'd do something to wipe the smiles off their smug little faces. He'd do something that would let everyone know that things had changed, as Jamieson promised they would, and that there had been a shake-up in the pecking order.

'There will be no more of that, I guarantee you. Jamieson and I are going to be running a tight ship,' he said.

She dried her hands on a dishtowel and looked at him, smiling proudly.

'You're sounding so assertive, Kev. If you don't mind me saying, your father and I were worried that you were turning out a little wishy-washy.'

He felt the tomato in his sandwich explode and bleed over his teeth. She was right. If he'd just punched the first kid that had given him trouble, way back in standard six, when everyone was fresh and wary, if he'd just broken someone's nose or at least loosened a tooth, he'd have saved himself a considerable amount of anguish over the years that followed. But it was too late to concern himself with what could have been. There was a fleeting opportunity now to ensure that no one ever fucked with Kevin Riley ever again.

'But I can't tell you how proud we are that you've taken this thing by the horns. To tell you the truth, deep down, I always believed you'd rise to the occasion.'

He had to start compiling a list. He would title it *Priorities*. Then he would write the names of all of the offenders, and their offences, and put each of them into a

category. Next to their offence he would write their punishment, and code letters that would signify the severity of their crimes. He could think of a few names already. There was Kyle, of course, and then there was McFarland, Fred Webster, Karl Potgieter, Darren Meyer, Ms. Viljoen, and the boy that drew all those gigantic penises on the covers of his books, although he wasn't sure who it was yet. There was also Mr. De Wet, with his stupid grin and big, red 'C's', not to mention the after-school smoker.

'Your father won't tell you this, but he wasn't always the tough guy that he likes to think he is today. When he was your age he had his fair share of problems, believe you me.'

Every time he tore off a piece of sandwich another name came to mind. Justin Manson, who'd pissed in his juice bottle and waited for him to drink it. Simon Waites, his so-called friend, who'd tried to kiss him, and then, when Kevin forced an urgent, embarrassed hand in front of his mouth, came to school and told everyone Kevin was gay. The list would be long, but time, and Jamieson, was on his side.

His mother walked over to him and absent-mindedly massaged his shoulders.

'In fact, you remind me so much of your father when he was this age.'

He tried to slide out from under his her grip, but she held him firmly.

'But you're better than him, Kev. He wasn't as successful as you are.'

She squeezed harder, kneading the knots in his neck.

'He's failed often, your father, although he won't tell you that. He wasn't chosen as a prefect, like you were, he never was a sportsman to speak of, and his academic results were, to put it kindly, disappointing. The way he goes on you'd swear he was a golden boy, but frankly he was a bit of a failure at school, and he's been a bit of a failure ever since.'

Kevin gently pushed her hands off his shoulders and stood up. She brushed a crumb off his cheek.

'And that's why it's up to you to do something with your life,' she said. 'I want you to be a success. I want you to show your father what he could have been. I want him to see you bringing home awards and coming top of your class. I want him to see you earning more money than him and staying slimmer than him. I want the words 'Cum Laude' to ring in his ears before he falls asleep every night.'

She picked up his sandwich plate and washed it at the sink. When every last crumb was taken care of she rinsed and dried it, and told Kevin to go and do his homework.

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