

Another Winter's Tale

There is in Cape Town a season when people awake to cold and a hunger that cannot be assuaged by crusts and coffee.

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Cape Town in the winter. The mountain sulks under grey cloud. The ocean pounds empty beaches. Streets swim in rain. The mother city is silent, a resentful silence. She pays now for seven months of decadent, hedonistic living, seven months of sunsoaked Saturdays and coconut oil, seven months of mango-grape fruit salad in glass bowls. She pays now for that time of indulgence. The elements were tamed. Then they were bored. Now they run rampant; school is out for the winter. The wind shrieks as it rips the green shutter from the white walls in the grey late afternoon. It rushes through the oak-lined avenues. The next morning, the victim lies, branches broken, a weeping gash in its side, leaves wisping in the breeze.

Such destruction always brought a sadness into our lives, for a while. For a while we traveled back to the springs, the summers, the autumns of those great oaks. It was their first green leaves, bursting boldly onto the grey palette of winter, that heralded the coming world of color. It was on those thick, dependable limbs that we sat: barefoot, sucking sourballs two for a cent, devouring the daring and audacity of Nancy Drew. It was their acorns we threw at the pale bare legs of the Preparatory School boys walking beneath us in their grey shorts. It was beneath their fallen finery that I played Tutankhamen and Laura searched for hidden treasure.

Now it is winter, that wet, dismal time of retribution. No longer do the engineers and architects, the managing directors and the corporate heads crawl home in shirt sleeves, sweaty brow, and air-conditioned Mercedes. In the background, the melody of summer sprinklers played on green lawn. But that tune is over; another has begun. The windscreen wipers work furiously in the winter deluge

while behind the screen sits a 100-percent cashmere sweater and a pale face.

The Mercedes turns left into Canigou Avenue, rounds the corner, past the grey slate-roof house where the dachshund lives, and pulls into the double garage next to the white Audi 5000. The architect gathers the evening newspaper from the seat behind him. He shoves the plans for the casino on the West Coast under his arm and glances through the rain towards the house, gleaming white against the petulant winter sky. The gutters spew their contents into the drain. The windows smile a smug domestic warmth. The slam of the car door carries through the rain. He runs towards the light of the brass lamp glowing gold in the glass. Head down he runs, past the pink hydrangeas, past the lemon tree, past Laura's bike forgotten on the grass, over the clover patch, through the French doors to stop, balancing raindrops on the end of his nose.

From the lounge comes the sound of Stravinsky in torture. Laura stumbles on the fifth bar of his concerto. Her blue eyes squint above the freckles. The firelight is throwing shadows on the white page. Twilight has gone. The night descends in a deeper grey. Laura rises to turn on another brass lamp, stepping over Arthur, who lies comatose, bathed in the heat of the fire. His fur glows golden in the orange light. His long legs stretch across a rainbow of carpet, Afghan and Persian in a blaze of winter color. Arthur whimpers. He dreams. He is chasing bitches across open plains. Laura smiles and returns to her masters. She curses softly.

In the dining room, the silver collected over thirty years reflects in the dark of the polished mahogany table. Teapots and punchbowls struggle to survive amongst Paul's books and boots; he was on his way to the fridge. He sits at the table now, chewing loudly on cold turkey, examining Charlie Brown and "Office Space to Rent." Across the table, the light shines on a lighter brown head, bowed in fierce concentration. Long young fingers bend the book into submission, forcing the pages to surrender their message. She sees nothing, only the bewildering world of adulthood and consummate knowledge. She breathes heavily, "j-a-n-e." In a rush and a smile, Dick and Jane run across the page, Alexandra in hot pursuit. Upstairs I lie immersed in the heat of Vaseline Bath Oil and the exploits of Hercules Poirot. Outside the rain falls.

In the rain they come. From the Flats where the sand always blows, from across the highway and under the railway, over the common where the pine trees shiver, they come. Sons of kings and warriors, children of the shanty towns, they come. I do not know what brought them to our door, perhaps the rain. Perhaps the cold and the empty stomachs. Or the cries of the children. Maybe it was the orange ceramic sun Dad bought at the Annual Pottery Fair. It hung next to the door above the potted mandarin orange tree Paul gave Mom for Christmas. Perhaps it was the sun. Whatever the reason, they came. A bizarre winter tradition, they stand on the doorstep, cap in hand, barefoot, the rain beating on their heads. Have you ever looked into the eyes of a dog, just beaten? Still, brown, deep, trusting, unfathomable eyes.

I reach for the orange tray, R1.98 at the supermarket. I flick on the kettle. The breadbin squeaks as I reach for the wholewheat loaf. On the bottom of the bin lie the shriveled kernels of loaves, winters and orange trays gone by. The peanut butter jar is greasy in my hand. I reach into the fridge. My arm brushes the cold turkey, the flesh hacked by an impatient hand. I draw out the sweetmilk cheese and the apricot jam. The edges of the jam tin glisten with droplets of summer's fruits. The kettle's hiss changes to a scream, and I reach for the elephant mug, the elephant caught in eternal flight behind the golden glaze. (We bought the mug on one of our trips to the northern game reserves last spring. The mug is used only in winter when the rain starts to fall and the brown eyes plead; nobody else is that hungry.) Steam curls from the muddy brown brew and over the rim hangs the tag: Five Roses Top Quality Tea.

In the same room where the brass lamp shone through the rain, there is a man, one of them. His feet rub the braided coils of the grass mat. Does it make him remember? (I don't know and I probably didn't care.) He sits tentatively on the floral couch as a small pool of water forms beneath his feet. He stumbles slowly to his feet as I enter. Then for one brief moment, black and white meet over three slices of bread and a charging elephant. I leave him, his dignity too quiet for my young white eyes. He eats with the brass lamps and the art books, perched on the edge of a marigold. Upstairs I look for that sweater that Gran made me one Christmas. It glows in the dark. And after the elephant is empty and the bread is gone, head bowed

and feet bare, he walks down the garden path in the rain in my sweater that glows in the dark. Behind his back, the sun smiles.

So it went all winter, every winter. We lived our lives as we always had lived them until the doorbell chimed. Then the dark, unfathomable eyes would see what we had and what we did. And after the peanut butter and the jam and the cheese were gone, their bare feet would walk down the garden path, the warmth of a white wealth in their stomachs, glowing sweaters on their backs. I cannot remember the faces or the names. I was busy with life. All I can remember is the bread and the elephant and the rain. And the eyes.

It rained again that winter and from across the Flats they came. Across the highway and under the railway, through the rain they came, to the white suburbs. The feet were bare and the eyes were dark. They remembered the brass lamps and the piano, the Persian carpets and the art books. And they were cold. And they were hungry. And they were black in a white land on a grey winter day.

Winter came early that year. The sound of cricket practice was still in the air when the rain started to fall. The cloud came again to claim the mountain in its yearly occupancy, and the shutters were battened down in a futile attempt to thwart the wind. I had just returned from a year in Australia. It was a year in which I thought I had learnt the intricacies and delicacies of the human existence. Weathering a year away from the nest at the tender age of seventeen can make you overly confident of your own abilities and powers of understanding. I had experienced a culture far removed from the pulsebeat of a confused Africa. It had been difficult to adjust to the lackadaisical attitude of acceptance of that unique breed—the Australian. It had been a lesson, a growing experience, as my mother would have sagely said. And I thought I had graduated with my sanity still intact, my powers of understanding heightened, and my awareness honed to the desired edge. It was this edge that allowed me to boast of knowledge, of life. So I thought.

I opened the door on yet another of those dull days that makes Cape Town such a wet place in the winter. What greeted me was not new. I had seen it before, although the actual sight had been missing from my life for a year. It was a sight that made my mother guilty and my father mad. It was the sight that told me it was time to get out the

trusty old orange tray, ferret out the elephant mug, and put on the kettle. The ritual had begun.

But this one wasn't a ritual. She was black, she was cold, she was hungry. She looked like any one of the hundreds who had been there before. So what was the difference? Or more frightening still, was there any difference? Had they all been through what she had? I do not want to know the answer.

She told me her house had been burned down in a fire the week before. We had read about these fires every winter week: "Oil Lamp Causes Shanty Death of 5." I was not shocked; I did not understand. And I had heard so many stories before. She told me again that her house had burned down the week before. I know she could see disbelief in my eyes.

"I got no food for my children, madam. My house burn down when my husband sleeping, madam. I live in the bush for three days now. I got nothing to give my children, madam. No, I live in the bush now, madam. They drink water, madam, they's only young, madam. Madam, all my money is burnt in the fire, madam. No, I no got work, madam, because my old madam fired me. But how could I be to work, madam, when my husband was dead?"

I had heard it all before. Either the husband was dead or the grandmother had cancer or the wife had left him (this one to the odor of Liquortown Special of the Week). Did they really expect me to believe? Couldn't they just say they wanted food and get it over with?

"Madam I have nothing. Only this." The skin had been burnt white. The scars twisted their way down her thighs, white snakes against a black log. They curled around her knees, licking the flesh. There she stood. In the rain, lifting up her dress to show the madam that she did not lie. "Madam. I have nothing. Only this." She stood waiting on madam's eighteen-year-old generosity. And it was only then that I caught a glimpse of the other side.

I invited her in, habit compelling me to give her the orange tray and elephant mug. But this time she sat in the dining room where we had sat laughing only the afternoon before. Before her she had three slices of bread and a mug of tea; behind her, the silver of thirty years; and inside her, I don't know. Mom and I were laughing in the kitchen over family trivia. The radio was proclaiming the latest trends on the Johannesburg stock exchange, and in the dining room, this wet, scarred, strong woman bowed her head to thank her God for three

slices of bread, a mug of tea, and a fire. I can still hear the rain falling as I looked through the door onto the other side.

But I could not think for too long; I had another part of the ritual to fulfill. I had to go and find that glowing sweater or the undesirable equivalent. I had not taken the full wardrobe to Australia, and some of the forgotten clothes were out of date. I found my glowing sweaters on the top shelf, the dust of last season in their folds.

"You don't have a petticoat, madam?" The woman sat in her wet dress, the scars showing through the bare cotton, making patterns where the material had none. Of course I had petticoats—did she want a half, full, beige, black, or becomingly sultry? I found myself retreating into the mental sarcasm I employ to protect the emotions. If I started now, I'd be a mental wreck by the time winter was over. Better to give, not share. She pulled the petticoat over her knees, inched it past her thighs, the scars disappearing behind the white sheath. "Now the skollies won't follow me home now, madam." Ten lusty black men flashed through my mind as they charged over the dunes in the dusk of the dusty township after a frantic white petticoat.

The clothes disappeared into the shopping bags, folded with meticulous care and exclaimed over like a gift on Christmas morning. The shoes she refused to wear even though her sandals were scant protection against the cold because "they going to be so jealous, madam, when I wear the shoes to church, yes." The grey jacket was shrugged over the shoulders, the red skirt was pulled on over the petticoat and wet dress, only to be taken off again because jealousy was what she was after. I stood by watching in silent amusement, half doubting the sincerity and half wishing I was back in the days of sourballs, acorns, and Nancy Drew. Head back against the wall, arms folded in smug satisfaction, I watched her performing her delight in guttural *baai*'s and *hooo*'s, her black eyes dancing across the patterns her fingers drew on the softness. She turned towards me with the infectious grin that turned her black face into light. She slipped slowly off the chair onto the cold floor and came on her knees towards me. Her hands groped for mine. I was held fast as she bowed her head and prayed for me. She thanked me for my goodness, for my kindness, for my love for her. She knew the Lord was in me because she had seen his light. She knew this madam was a good person who cared for her people. Her black forehead pressed

against my hand as she told her God, "Bless the white madam, Father, bless her." She kissed me, and her face was wet.

I felt a sadness, a hollowness. Life was ebbing as I watched her through the window and the rain climb on the train that took her back to the bush.

Epilogue. We are sitting in the living room: not the one with the brass lamps and the Persian carpets; but my living room, with borrowed brown couches and African prints on a Provo wall—an attempt to bring home what seems so far away sometimes. It is seven years later, and Mom and I wait for the birth of my first child as April rains beyond the windows. Mom told me the end of the story.

Sheila, of the scarred legs and the wet face, also had a child. Matthews was his name—a sickly little black body that would lie coughing on the couch in the study as his mother cleaned my mother's house. My mother had given her a job when she visited us. I didn't know that until I returned home three years later before my mission. Sheila cleaned for five years, every Tuesday and Friday morning. She came through the carport gate at 8:00, ready to face kitchen floors, unmade beds, dining room windows, and her own foil-wrapped plate from Sunday lunch on the second shelf in the fridge.

After Matthews was born, she brought him to work on her back, wrapped tight against her spine. Then he took his place in the study while his mother cleaned house. At lunch time, she slipped through the back gate to the chemist to buy cough medicine for her child. He didn't really have a chance in the small shanty made of corrugated iron which Sheila called home. My mother tried to make it more livable by giving her a gas stove (they had no electricity), blankets, and gas heaters. But they were always stolen while Sheila was away at work. So it didn't really help to give her anything.

My older sister, Gillian, had a son during the same week: Luke. In fact, Gillian and Sheila would compare bellies during the pregnancy. I'm sure there was no laughing and giggling between friends, rather a smile and a knowing glance between two women who, although separated by life and law, were participants in a sacred ceremony that knows no legally defined boundaries or morally responsible ages. In fact they probably never even touched each other as they grew bigger and bigger and more clumsy. I'm sure

their conversations were more exchanges than conversations. Gillian wouldn't know what to say to a black woman; Sheila wouldn't know how to reply if she did. Once the babies were born, Gillian gave Sheila Luke's old clothes when he had outgrown them. Matthews was so much smaller than Luke. Not surprising, really. Matthews coughed a lot but they all thought it was because of the rain and the damp. One night he coughed so much that Sheila tried to take him to the clinic the next morning. She wrapped him in a blanket, tied him to her back, and walked through the rain. He was dead when she arrived. The hospital couldn't do anything for her, so she wrapped up her baby, put him on her back again and walked to the police station. There she waited for the coroner to tell her her son was dead. She waited four hours with her dead child on her back. Pneumonia was the official verdict. He had lived eight months, five of them in the rain. She went home to the Transkei to bury him.

A couple of weeks later, my mother and Gillian were sitting in the afternoon watching Luke crawl on the grass beneath the lemon tree. The sun was warm on their legs as they hoisted their skirts up over their knees to get a tan. The smell of lemon leaves and faint rose petals wafted through the garden. The talk had been of Sheila and Matthews and why things are the way they are—weighty matters for a summer afternoon on the patio. Slowly the carport gate opened, and Sheila walked in with a friend. I wasn't there, but my mother's voice filled with tears as she told me the two women, one black, one white, one her daughter, one her maid, one still a mother, one not, took each other in their arms on that summer afternoon and cried together. I wonder if Luke knew that his mother had touched a black woman for the first time in her life. I wonder if he even stopped to look as his mother ran past him to gather that tall, scarred woman in her arms. I wonder if Matthews knew that his life wasn't just a slipping away, wasn't just another case of pneumonia on the Cape Flats. I won't say that Gillian has changed forever or that Sheila will never lack again. That's not possible to promise. All I can say is that if Gillian and Sheila can meet and touch in a side garden in South Africa, and that neither knows that the other is black or white, nor cares, that perhaps solutions and answers are possible.