

ANITA SHIR-JACOB

## Maartiens, Glory and Me

“*Naand, Baas. Naand, Miesies. Naand, Klein Miesies.*”<sup>1</sup>

You didn't see him until you were right on top of him. He sat in the recess of the east doorway that led to Grocery and Hardware. In the window jutting out to his left was the ghostly silhouette of a whitish, wooden horse, life-size, with blinkers, harness and stirrups. Draped across its saddle was a grey-striped blanket. Its four horseshoes reflected the shards of light from a street lamp in the small market square across the road. An assortment of men's suits—blue, brown and black—hung from a brass rod fixed to the ceiling. In one corner *veldskoene*,<sup>2</sup> tied together in pairs, lay in a heap under the suits, and in the other, next to the curry combs and tacking brushes, was a triangular mound of fat round cheeses in waxy skins. Two tabby cats with glittering eyes sat on top of this cheesy pyramid watching the passers-by. They didn't eat the cheese because their staple diet was mice which lived under the floorboards and in the walls of our shop. Rats too—but we were forbidden to mention these, not even in a whisper. The rodents were an ongoing problem, their fear of the tabbies outweighed by the delectable flour, grains, peas and beans stacked in the aluminum bins at the rear of the shop. Besides, they bred furiously. Rounding off this window display was a miscellany of farm tools and coils of wire fencing.

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<sup>1</sup> Good Evening, Master. Good evening, Madam. Good evening, young madams.

<sup>2</sup> shoes, traditionally worn by farmers for rough work

We were the klein miesies, Glory and me. Glory was my sister. Her real name was Gloria but everyone called her Glory. She was fifteen years older than me and was supposed to have found herself a husband in the city where she'd gone to learn bookkeeping and shorthand-typing. But she'd come back home without a mate after she'd had a kind of breakdown. Back to our little farming community, hundreds of miles from the city. The Karoo was good for growing tobacco and breeding ostriches but not for finding your other half, not if you didn't want to marry out. After they matriculated, the girls, the Jewish girls, left our hot, dry valley. They crossed the mountains to the north and south, to Johannesburg and Cape Town. To further their education, to find suitable husbands—not necessarily in that order.

After a year or two they'd return home with their bridegrooms to do the social round and plan their weddings. We kept a sharp eye on the groom's side at the Saturday dinner-dance in the Old Drill Hall, noting every detail of his guests: what they wore and how they wore it, what they said and how they said it. *City slickers* my mother sniffed but we knew that later she'd get our local dressmaker, Cherry Maisel, to copy the finery of some out-of-town sophisticate. We felt self-conscious and brazen, wanting to be friendly, wanting to impress these awfully impressive people, but afraid they'd patronize us for our unknowing ways, call us *plaasjapies*, country bumpkins—which is what we were.

"As long as the mothers are Jewish, the children are Jewish," we'd overhear our parents murmuring about the city folk who had *integrated*, who spoke *a nice English*. And had *gentile* friends. What matter if they didn't observe the Sabbath, didn't run kosher homes. Enough to go to Synagogue on high holy days, fast on Yom Kippur and, once a year, come Pesach, recite the story of the Exodus.

Having a white skin, that's what mattered. These Jews from the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe were left in peace by the apartheid government and prospered. In a short time the *smouse*<sup>3</sup> put away their carts and opened small shops which mushroomed into large shops. As the century moved forward, their interests diversified: tobacco leaves and ostrich feathers, the latter much in demand in the fashion houses of Europe, made them rich—and then poor when the market was glutted. Our shop, which belonged to my

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<sup>3</sup> pedlars

father Reuben and uncle Isaac whom everyone called Yitzzie, was a modest one, one that had evolved from a tiny, grey corner-stall in Vaaldraai, the dusty location on the outskirts of Oudtshoorn where the Coloureds and some poor *Europeans* (we didn't use the term whites and blacks then) lived. Sturdy and unpretentious, the square brick building, the premises of *I & R. Lieberman Algemene Handelaars*,<sup>4</sup> was dignified by its proximity to the gargantuan stone *Nederlaandse Gereformeerde Kerk*<sup>5</sup> across the road.

"They hid my grandparents from the Cossacks and saved our lives. *All* our lives. You wouldn't be here without them. Remember that, Rosa," my mother told me as she lined baskets with leaves from the two intertwining grape vines that grew on a trellis along the back of our house. Every summer when she took down the roughly woven dark twig baskets from the top shelf in the pantry, she recounted how gentile neighbours had helped her family escape from Mogilev. We filled the baskets with fruit: the purple-black grapes with their thick skins and the frosty-green Perlettes which are seedless. "That's French for little pearls," my mother said, making sure the smaller bunches were piled at the top. I would trot to and fro, passing through the back gate to deliver the baskets to the Lambrechts, the Jouberts, the Coetzees, the De Jagers and the Roberts on Jubilee. Down the fourteen steps at the front of our house to the Van der Westhuizens, the Lategans, the Benns, the Gibsons and the DuToits on Church. A few weeks later I'd again be despatched; this time the baskets were brimful of apricots from the tree that soared over our highly polished red stoep. The neighbours offered me biscuits and a cool drink as I set down the heavy baskets on their kitchen tables, but I can't remember them ever coming into our kitchen for a cup of tea.

Later, surrounded by thick foliage and the smell of overripe apricots rotting on the tree and stewing in the kitchen, I'd spend hours, propped in the fork of two branches, reading my favourite Enid Blyton.

Most of the Jews lived in upscale West Bank, but my mother said we'd have more of a chance in East Bank. Our house, at the top of a hill, at the intersection of Church and Jubilee, had the added advantage of being opposite the local swimming bath where

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<sup>4</sup> I & R. Lieberman General Dealers

<sup>5</sup> Dutch Reformed Church

I cooled off after school. Two or three times a week, when I went to play with my best friend, Barb Lipsky, I got to cross the swinging bridge which connected the one side of our town with the other. Barb and I would stand mid-point on the bridge, making it swing violently over the river below. The Olifants River dividing the west and east banks was a listless stretch of stagnant puddles across which the road ran at a slightly higher elevation. But after one of our infrequent Karoo thunderstorms, the river became a torrent of water, and, until it subsided, cars couldn't cross.

Nella, our other sister, eleven months younger than Gloria, set her sights higher than bookkeeping. Her grades were good and she got herself accepted into the School of Pharmacy in Cape Town. While she was serving her apprenticeship in a chemist shop in the southern suburbs she announced her engagement to Alan Kirsch, the man Glory loved. Glory had said to her, "Nella, I love him, only him. You can have all the others. But leave that one for me." Six weeks later Nella told Glory *in confidence* that Alan had asked her to marry him.

At her Wednesday afternoon bridge game my mother spreadeagled her cards faceup on the green baize cloth, and sighed darkly to her three partners, "How many times did I not tell her to choose the one she didn't like. When they were children—dolls, books, crayons, dresses—whatever it was, Nella would say, 'Glory, you choose first. Which one do *you* want?' and whatever Glory wanted, why that was what Nella wanted. Nothing, nothing *else*, would satisfy Nella but that which Glory wanted. Glory never learned." And, looking at me sideways, "As one sows so one reaps."

We muttered, "Goeie naand, Maartiens," and hurried past, uneasy at the sight of him hunched up on a camp stool, a thin, grey blanket around his shoulders. We were on our way home from the Gaiety Bioscope to which we went every Friday night. I was still preoccupied with the low-life in *Asphalt Jungle* or, perhaps, with John Wayne in *The Quiet Man* in which Maureen O'Hara, her red hair flying every which way, is dragged across a field by the heartbreaking Wayne. Maartiens touched the brim of his felt hat that was pulled down to cover his ears against the frosty Karoo night. Shadows from the little charcoal fire in an aluminum pail flickered across his face. In the darkness one couldn't see the grey hairs that mottled his moustache and the stubble on his chin, but

one could smell the tobacco wad he was chewing. It was strong and bitter and made my nose water.

“Someone has to watch it,” said my mother when I still used to ask why Maartiens spent every night outside our shop and why he had to work during the day when he was up all night. My mother pursed her lips. “What if the shop burned down because no-one was watching it? And *Natives* are different from us: they don’t feel the cold like we do. They’re used to it. They don’t sleep on beds like ours. They sleep on the ground or sitting up. Sleeping or waking, it’s all the same to them. Besides, it’s not that cold, is it?”

He’d been our Night Watch Boy ever since I was born. Ever since I could remember. Ever since our shop was rebuilt after the fire.

Once a year during the summer, when I’m on vacation from the college where I teach, I visit my mother who is in her mid-nineties. She lives in Cape Town in an apartment on the Sea Point beachfront, and Glory, who is seventy and unmarried, lives in the same block. On my last visit I rented a car and drove three hundred miles along the coastal route to Oudtshoorn. In the C.P. Nel Museum in Baron Van Rheeде Straat, that used to be Queen’s Street, I found what I was looking for. It was in the archives of the *Oudtshoorn Courant* dated Thursday, December 30<sup>th</sup> 1943. I reproduce here what I read on page three:

*Two Fires: I & R Lieberman’s Shop Guttred*

Some excitement was caused at about 4:00 a.m. on Sunday morning when the fire alarm was sounded for a fire which had broken out in the shop of Messrs. Lieberman in Church Street opposite the market. The timely arrival of the Fire Brigade saved the adjoining buildings but the Lieberman’s shop was completely gutted. The damage is estimated at well over £2000.

Seven hours later the fire alarm was sounded again for a fire which had broken out in an out-building in a yard at the corner of Loop Street and the Drill Hall lane.

The fire was soon brought under control but not before much of the goods stored in the building had been destroyed.

I was a four-month-old fetus in my mother's inhospitable womb, when my father, hearing the blast of the fire hooter in the early hours of Boxing Day, hurried in his pyjamas and grey fedora—he never went out without his hat—to the public telephone booth across the road from our house. Which was handy because we didn't get a phone until after the War—the same week we got our first indoor toilet. "*Meneer Lieberman, vanaand is dit jou winkel,*"<sup>6</sup> said the operator on duty. Ours was the seventh Jewish-owned shop burned down that year and six more were to follow in the first half of 1944. Anti-semitism had caught up with the Jews, who, until the early 1930s, had been quietly tolerated. My mother experienced several crises of faith wondering which of our neighbours—"righteous souls"—would help us go into hiding.

On my return flight to Canada via England, I overnighted with Nella and Alan who had emigrated in the early sixties and settled in the northern suburbs of London. The next day Nella drove me from Hendon to Paddington Station from where I was taking the express to Heathrow. She told me the second fire was a red herring, that the outbuilding, belonging to a Mr. Luytens, was heavily insured with his cousin's company, that the goods stored in the building were damaged to begin with. Then she asked me as she always did, "Are you seeing anyone?"

"No," I said. I was, but these relationships are on-and-off things in my life, and I don't talk about them. Moreover, I've never shared confidences with Nella, who has yet to reveal herself to me. I waited for the next question.

"And financially? Are you all right?"

I sometimes wonder how Nella would respond if I asked for help.

"I get by," I said, as we pulled up at the drop-off point outside the station.

Her cream BMW purred away smoothly. Adjusting my backpack on my shoulders, I wiped off the dry, little peck she had planted on my cheek.

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<sup>6</sup> Mr. Lieberman, tonight it's your shop.

No charges were laid and there was no compensation. The insurance companies had stopped covering high risk property, which meant Jewish property. South Africa, under General Smuts, had entered the war on the side of the Allies but the Afrikaners in the *platteland* aligned themselves with the Germans, not the British, who had crushed them in the Boer Wars. Our local faction of the pro-Nazi Ossewa Brandwag was banking on Hitler to win the war and their plans were in place, ready for a take-over. All communication with our families in Europe had stopped: no more frantic letters for help, no more pleas for visas that were unobtainable. So, our parents, caught up with the horror of what was happening abroad, sat glued to their radios, praying for an Allied victory. And they waited for the Germans to come goose-stepping down the high street, the way they had in all the little *shtetls* in Europe.

There wasn't a family among the Oudtshoorn Jews who didn't have a relative in the armed forces. My mother's youngest brother, Shmuelik, an ardent Zionist, borrowed what money he could, and in 1939 made his way to England as a stoker on the *Llandaff Castle* to join the RAF. First to deal with Hitler and then to emigrate to Palestine.

"*Oranges and Lemons ring*—is it 'ring' or 'sing'? Or, 'say'? Is it 'say'?" my mother asked me as she intoned *Oranges and Lemons* for the third time—"say the Bells of St. Clements." Who would have thought that that nursery rhyme refers to the same church in which my brother's name's inscribed. "You will find it won't you, Rosie?" I kissed her goodbye for the last time, and she descended the ramp of the *Windsor Castle*, calling out to me not to lean over the rails of the ship and to wear warm underclothes because I knew what a bad chest I had and England was very damp.

London and teaching kept me busy. But one grey Sunday afternoon at the end of November, I found myself on a City Walk, the guide pointing out one church after another, and suddenly there it was: St. Clements on the corner of Eastcheap and Cannon Street. I slipped into the church and picked up a pamphlet in the vestibule. Sure enough, this was the church associated with the nursery rhyme but there was no connection with the RAF: no inscriptions, no memorabilia, no monuments. My mother didn't raise the subject again and I forgot about it, dismissing her request as some fanciful notion. It was only some years later when I was checking out a reference in 1984—an incorrect one—that I discovered there are two St. Clements: St. Clements-in-the-City and St.

Clement Danes in the Strand. George Orwell, like my mother, had conflated the two churches. I made my way to the other St. Clements, the one in the Strand, which is the Royal Air Force Church, and I easily found the inscription I was looking for in the second volume of the Memorial Books: "Pilot Officer Samuel Lazar killed in action on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1941." I photographed it and sent it to my mother, who had it enlarged and framed. She keeps it on her dressing-table next to a picture of her brother in his doughboy's hat.

Sometimes they had to dodge stones. *Dirty Jews! Boereverneukers!*<sup>7</sup> Still they said nothing to their already anxious parents, who had endured the same taunts in the villages and towns of Eastern Europe. They pretended not to mind the exuberant gang of small children, close on their heels, singing *Ikey Moses King of the Jews/Sold his Wife for a Pair of Shoes/When the Shoes Began to Smell/Ikey Moses went to Hell!*

The principal of the school, Mejuffrouw Heilbron, joined the fray. As my sisters were clattering out of assembly with the other girls, she hissed at them, "Gloria and Prunella Lieberman" (Nella's real name was Prunella and she hated it), "Don't push. Wait your turn. And don't think we don't know what *your father* sticks under the counter. The rations don't affect you people, do they? Why don't you tell *your father* to supply his customers with what he sticks away for you and your lot?"

Glory ruminates on the food shortages: "There was no rice so we had to eat samp flavoured with sugar and cinammon, which I found no hardship as I loved it. And no regular flour either. Only flour mixed with bran—more bran than flour. *Boeremeel*.<sup>8</sup> We poured this bran mixture into a sifter with a muslin lining. The sifter was made of wood and had a wooden handle at one end and, when it was turned, it separated the bran from the flour." She tells me how one afternoon our mother spent hours with the sifter dredging off the bran. With two cups of pure, but illicit flour, she baked a roly-poly, light in texture, free of the contaminating bran. Nella bore this contraband cake in triumph to the Jouberts, our new neighbours and recent arrivals in Oudtshoorn. They had moved three

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<sup>7</sup> cheaters of farmers

<sup>8</sup> farmers' flour



doors down from us on Jubilee Street. When our mother found out from Nella that Mr. Joubert was really *Captain* Joubert, the new Commissioner of Police, she took to her bed for several days, telling my sisters she was *indisposed* if anyone called.

From the time I was about five or six (this was after the war) I became great friends with Auntie Joubert and visited her daily. Every year on my birthday she presented me with a leather bound copy of a Louisa May Alcott book. "To my dear friend, Rosa Leah Lieberman, on the occasion of her birthday, With love from Auntie Joubert"—a neat inscription in black fountain pen on the flyleaf. Shortly after I turned nine, the Jouberts were transferred to Port Elizabeth. I believed for a long time afterwards that they decamped because I had the complete series of *Little Women*, and Auntie Joubert was at a loss to know what to give me for my next birthday.

"I tried to bring her down," says my mother on the video that Nella's youngest daughter made of her a few years ago. "Auntie Flippy and I had arranged to play tennis. She's dead now but what a tennis player she was. I jumped over the net that day. *Five times. Five times* I jumped. Five's my lucky number." She laughs. "That's when we decided to join SAWAS, Auntie Flippy and I. They drilled us hard in the Women's Auxiliary Services. But the heat, the marching, the exercises did nothing for me. So, one afternoon when your grandfather, Reuben was at work, I soaked myself in a hot mustard bath into which I'd poured a bottle of his gin. I pounded my stomach good and proper while I lay there. But nothing happened. Then Auntie Flippy helped me to douche myself with carbolic soap and water mixed with glycerine and dettol. Still nothing. Finally we tried potassium permanganate and when that didn't work either, I stuck a piece of slippery elm up myself." Her voice drops to a whisper. "I was ready to try anything—a knitting needle, a wire hanger—but I was so afraid of doing myself an injury. I didn't want to harm or kill myself, you understand. I also drank castor oil every night—two tablespoons. Until it made me sick."

She gives a sigh: "You girls, you're the lucky ones, it's all so different for you today." She pauses for a few seconds and looks straight into the camera, "I suffered, mentally and physically. How I suffered." And here, she pauses again, and smiles slyly, "I eventually asked Dr. Kogan—he was a distant cousin of mine—if he could do something—scrape it away . . ." She laughs out loud. "He chased me out of his surgery. Did I want to get him into trouble? He

wagged his finger at me (and here, my mother wags her finger at the camera) and told me not to do anything stupid, that I'd have the authorities after us. He didn't want me crawling back into his surgery half-dead." Her face hardens. "I had two grown-up girls. That was no time to have a child. We thought they'd come and murder us."

I was born May 14<sup>th</sup> 1944, three months after our shop had been rebuilt and Maartiens had been installed as Night Watch Boy. On my fourth birthday the state of Israel was established. *Yom Ha'atzmaut*—Day of Independence.

Three days a week Maartiens, with a grey donkey in tow, would arrive at our kitchen door a little before noon. He'd announce his arrival to my mother and then make his way round to the front garden. There he untethered the donkey, letting the rope around its neck trail to the ground. The donkey immediately began to crop the lawn around our house and between the trees in the small orchard where it ate its way through the overripe fruit rotting in the grass—apples, figs, peaches, loquats, apricots.

Maartiens made his way back to the kitchen door where my mother unceremoniously said, "*Hier, Maartiens. Vat,*"<sup>9</sup> and handed him a deep white enamel bowl with brown sugar and lumps of butter steeped in glutinous *mieliemiel*.<sup>10</sup> On top of this bowl was a blue-spotted enamel plate weighed down on one side by two thick slices of white bread covered with butter and homemade grape jam (which we didn't like because the seeds stuck in our teeth), and on the other by a large red enamel mug of tea boiled up with sugar, a stick of cinammon and hot milk.

Periodically Maartiens would stop whatever it was he was doing in the garden to shovel up the fresh dung the donkey popped out during its steady advance across our property. He broke up the steaming turds and dug the crumbly pieces into the blaze of zinnias and iceland poppies that bordered the pathway up to our front door. It was very hot in the summer and he'd occasionally squat in the shade near a triangular bed built into the curve of the stoep under an overhanging gable. Here, in the black, loamy soil where

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<sup>9</sup> Here, Maartiens. Take it.

<sup>10</sup> mealie meal: a thick porridge made from maize

clumps of dainty purple and blue-tinged columbines trembled in the slightest breeze, he'd dig in the rest of the droppings. The more muck the donkey made, the happier my mother was. She said her plants thrived on the manure, and it's a fact that the excretions of that animal sustained our garden. The rose bushes on the sunny west side, the long row of sweetpeas outstripping their six-foot fence, and the nasturtiums spilling over the narrow, white flagstone path, were spectacular. Even the creepers covering the wooden trellises on the path—the orange and yellow hibiscus, the scarlet bougainvillea and the blue wisteria—got their share of donkey shit; although not as frequently.

Sometimes Jannie and Sarel would accompany their father. Jannie was a year older than me; Sarel, a year younger. We'd play together, which meant that they did what I said. I'd make up the rules for hide-and-seek, tag, Tarzan, Cowboys and Crooks, or whatever game it was I had improvised that day. I brooked no opposition; I never got any. While we waited for something to eat, we'd sit on the stone steps leading down from the kitchen into the backyard. Sometimes we'd try to catch the half-wild kittens, of which there was always a litter hiding in the *sloot*<sup>11</sup> under the steps. "Eat it all up," my mother said, giving Jannie and Sarel tin mugs of *oros*<sup>12</sup> and an enamel plate on which were two slices of bread smeared with grape jam. I was given a glass of milk and an apricot jam sandwich on my special plate: it had a border of ducks around the edge. Occasionally my mother added slabs of dark-orange cheese to our jammy bread.

One afternoon during a game of hide-and-seek, when I was *It*, I noticed that the back legs of the donkey were caught up in the rope. I had just opened my eyes after counting loudly and slowly in fives to a hundred. I shouted "Ready or not I'm coming to get you," ready to *skel out*<sup>13</sup> Jannie and Sarel if they hadn't hidden where I'd told them to. The donkey was flicking its tail and moving its hindquarters irritably, trying to shake off the nuisance of the rope. Maartiens was nowhere in sight so I squatted at the back of the donkey, fiddling with the rope, trying to untangle it. A massive blow on my face knocked me over and, I suppose, I must have lost

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<sup>11</sup> open drain

<sup>12</sup> sugared orange pop

<sup>13</sup> scold

consciousness because when I opened my eyes Maartiens was kneeling over me, wringing his hands, and Jannie and Sarel were peering into my face, their eyes big and shining. My mother was there too, speaking urgently, but I couldn't make out what she was saying.

Maartiens scooped me up into his arms and, holding me like a baby, he and my mother hot-footed it down to Dr. Kogan, whose surgery was at the bottom of the hill. There was no real damage done and the doctor gave me an injection (to console my mother, I think, for no skin was broken). He smeared some white cream onto my left cheek where the donkey had kicked me. My mother was tight-lipped on the walk back home. "*Maartiens, wag vir my by die kombuis deur.*"<sup>14</sup> Me, she told to lie down, that she'd be along soon with a cup of tea. Jannie and Sarel, looking very downcast, followed their father to the back of the house. Through the open bedroom window, which overlooked the backyard, I heard my mother berating Maartiens: Did he know how lucky he was getting off so lightly? Why wasn't he watching that donkey? Had I lost an eye, or gone soft in the head, or, God forbid, been killed, he would have gone to jail, straight to jail. Had it been the *Baas* and not she who was at home, he would have lost his job *on the spot* and what would have become of his boys then? The *Baas* might even have killed him. For his boys' sake she'd say he wasn't to blame, but he was not to bring Jannie and Sarel with him to our house any longer.

I heard Maartiens murmur, "*Vooitog, Miesies, vooitog, Miesies. Hoe is die klein nooientjie nou, Miesies?*"<sup>15</sup>

I wouldn't go to school or out to play because of the hoof mark imprinted on my cheek. So my mother continued to cover it with cream, one of her creams—a silky, beige cream from a blue jar—long after Dr. Kogan said to leave it exposed. "Rosa, tell them what the donkey did to you," my mother would urge me when we had visitors.

"He kicked me with his high heels," I'd say.

Then everyone would laugh and I didn't know why. Until one day my uncle Yitzzie, who was having supper with us, patted

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<sup>14</sup> Maartiens, wait for me at the kitchen door.

<sup>15</sup> Shame, Madam, shame, Madam. How is the little girl now, Madam?

my head and said, "You mean his *hind beels*, his back legs, don't you, you *oulike ding*."<sup>16</sup>

Three things I remember the week of my seventh birthday. One: the hoof mark disappeared. Two: I fell off the shop-wagon. Three: Glory returned home.

Ruby, our white carthorse, who pulled the wagon, was almost blind but she knew the route by heart, stopping outside the homes of regular customers whether or not there were deliveries for them. Maartiens, on a backless bench made of two rough planks secured with twine, held the reins loosely, giving Ruby her head as she clip-clopped through the streets of our town: Voortrekker; Queen; Rand; Van der Riet; St. Saviours; St. George. (Today, under the new post-apartheid era, many of these streets have been re-named.) The brown cardboard boxes and wooden crates filled with produce slithered about on the flat open area at the back of the wagon.

The farmers supplied my father and uncle with potatoes, onions and carrots, which were then rebagged and made ready for our customers. Maartiens collected the hundred-pound sacks from the railway station where they were offloaded from the goods train and heaved onto the wagon. Before I set off with Maartiens to do the deliveries, my job was to cut the shoots off the sprouting onions with small scissors. I was also expected to remove those onions which were soft and smelled bad, and to help fill brown paper bags of varying sizes with sugar, dried beans, rice, flour, nuts, dried fruit and whatever other bulk foodstuffs we stocked. Johannes and Andries, the shop clerks in Grocery, would weigh the bags to make sure the customers were getting the amount they'd ordered. "You've worked hard, Rosa? You've earned this money?" my father asked me as he picked out a *tickey*<sup>17</sup> from the change in his pocket. He'd lift me onto the wagon, nod to Maartiens, who tweaked the reins and we'd press forward, the boxes clattering behind us.

If the ice cream man spotted the wagon, he'd pedal toward us, ringing his bell and calling out "*Lekker*"<sup>18</sup> ice cream. Nice *roomys*.<sup>19</sup> Coming up! Coming up! One ice cream coming up for the

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<sup>16</sup> cute thing

<sup>17</sup> small silver coin worth three pennies

<sup>18</sup> delicious

<sup>19</sup> ice cream

*nooientjie!*” Ruby would wait for him to manoeuvre his cart alongside us. I handed over my *tickey* and held out my hands for the little rectangular wafer wrapped in white wax paper. No matter how quickly I ate the ice cream, it would melt and dribble down my arms and legs. I slurped up what I could, but the flies still settled on me, and I had to flick them away.

Miss Krog hovered over us in drawing class, ready to swoop on the pupil whose scratchings were unsatisfactory. Because white didn't show up on the paper, I'd colour Ruby brown or black. Once I made her a lovely bright yellow all over. Miss Krog swatted me sharply with her wooden ruler, once on each palm, and told me not to be *foolish*, to redo *that horse* and to be *sensible* about it. I never felt vindicated when I first saw the glorious efflorescence of colour in paintings of artists like Chagall or Matisse or Kandinsky. I was annoyed then, and still am, because I'm lumbered with the memory of Miss Krog's aesthetic.

There was a whip, a narrow thong of hard brown leather attached to a sturdy rod, but we didn't have to use it, Maartiens and I, for Ruby always behaved beautifully. When Maartiens dismounted to deliver the boxes, he'd let me hold the reins. On this day, a few days before my birthday, I sat at the back of the wagon: all the deliveries had been made and we were on our way back to the shop. My legs were dangling over the side and, as we bumped down Rand Street, lined on either side with bushes of prickly pears, I counted how many houses had the same coloured doors. Suddenly a little terrier came bounding out from behind one of the bushes, and, yapping furiously, ran in front of Ruby. Ruby, frightened, stopped and then, unexpectedly, jerked forward. I lost my balance, went careening over the edge of the wagon and landed on my bottom. I burst out crying. Occupants of the houses and passers-by came running over to me. Someone handed me a cup of sugared water. Someone else helped me to stand up, brushing off my clothes. I heard someone say, “*Dis Meneer Lieberman se dogtertjie. Dis sy waen. Ek gaan hulle bel.*”<sup>20</sup> I was shaken but not hurt, and Maartiens, who had stood aside while the *Europeans* fussed over me, stepped forward and lifted me onto the wagon. I sat close to him and, with his hands cupped over mine, calloused hands that felt very different from all the other hands I knew, we

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<sup>20</sup> It's Mr. Lieberman's little girl. It's his wagon. I'm going to call them.

continued on our way, with hardly any pressure on the reins because Ruby knew where she was going.

My father was waiting for us outside the shop. Lifting me up off the wagon, he scrutinized me quickly, but didn't say anything. As Maartiens dismounted, my father, still silent, strode forward and struck him hard, first on the one cheek and then on the other. Maartiens walked stiffly towards Ruby and led her round to the back of the shop to untether her in the stable next to the *non-European* entrance.

"Look at me! Look at me!" I began jumping up and down, doing frenzied cracker-jacks in the air, to show my father how both my arms and legs were functioning normally—more than normally—at top speed. I didn't want him to kill Maartiens.

Shortly after Nella announced her engagement to Alan, Glory returned home. We waited on the hot stone platform for the train to arrive. I broke out in goosebumps, something that always happened to me when I heard the humming of the rails and the long hooting sound of the whistle. The monstrously large, black engine, bellowing and hissing, clanked its way into our station. Steam clouded the hot, still air, and from this fug Glory emerged, waving to us. A different Glory: thin and flat-chested. But it was her face which had changed the most. Her cheeks were hollow and they made her already prominent cheekbones look more prominent. To me it looked like they'd been gouged by a shovel. Two deep furrows, running from her nose to her mouth, were etched into her puckered skin, and I stared at her stick-like arms and legs, worried they might snap at any moment.

My mother and Glory retreated into Glory's bedroom. The door was closed and I wasn't allowed in. If Glory's window was open—and it generally was—and, if I was in the backyard or, in my bedroom (the bedroom I shared with my mother), I could hear my mother's voice, low and compelling, and muted weeping. Every evening my father would deposit a small packet of chocolates on Glory's bedside table. Without opening it, she passed the packet on to me, the packet he had bought for her when he went out for his after-supper walk.

Cocoa and paint-by-numbers restored Glory—not to her former self, but to a larger self.

My mother set up a bedtime ritual around cocoa which she said would ensure a good night's rest for Glory. "Drink it all up, Gittele (my parents called Glory by the diminutive form of her

Hebrew name, Gittel). It's in the last drop—all the goodness." And Glory drank up the tank-sized container of cocoa made with full-fat milk and topped off by a blob of whipped cream. My mother stood by, her arms akimbo, her smile hopeful. The cocoa began to be accompanied by a slice of toast with a thin scraping of marmite, and then by two slices of toast and a few buttery shortbread biscuits, and so on, until Glory was consuming great quantities of food, three times a day and in-between.

Every Thursday after supper Glory and I retired to her room to listen to our favourite show of the week, "Consider Your Verdict." Glory was ensnared by one of the many ads somewhat randomly interposed throughout this program.

"Paint-by-numbers and YOU'LL be the artist you *never* thought YOU CAN BE."

Following this invocation, sounds of splashing water, giggles and sighs—suggestive but jolly—drifted from the boxy radio, and segued into *Washing in the bathtub/Washing with joy/Washing yourself with Lifebuoy*. And afterwards, while we were considering whether the accused was *Guilty or Not Guilty*, strains from Vivaldi's "The Hunt" led into another commercial, which went something like this:

*Woman's Voice:* Have you seen Ellen's paintings? She must have paid a fortune for them. They've transformed her home!

*Man's Voice:* Those paintings cost her five pounds, the lot of them.

*Woman's Voice:* Noooooooo!

*Man's Voice:* Yes! Only five pounds! That's what the Pillbury Paint-by-Number Kits cost. Five pounds.

*Woman's Voice:* Where can I get some Pillbury Paint-by-Number Kits? At only five pounds each, it's exactly what I need to solve the headache of what to buy for those special people in my life.

A third voice, clipped and authoritative, chimed in with beautifully modulated directions for purchasing the kits, a voice that spoke not the guttural South African English of the cheerful duo that preceded it, but the Queen's English as it was then spoken in the southern counties of England.



Finally—dénouement:

“Well, what was your verdict? In the actual trial on which this radio drama is based, the accused was found ....”

Painting.

“Why don’t you paint what you like?” I asked.

“I am painting what I like,” Glory said. She helped herself to another chocolate and tossed the package over to me.

Her brow creased, careful not to cross any lines, she applied the oils—thinly—to the numbered jigsaw spaces, dipping her brushes in and out of the dinky paint jars. Five: dusky-brown; seven: silvery-grey; fourteen: pond-green.

We got a double page, centre-spread in the *Oudtschoorn Courant*. *Bride of the Year*, *November bride*, *Nella Kirsch née Lieberman*, *her exquisite dress, the creation of ....* The columnist Hetty Hazlitt (that is, Rachel Maisel, Cherry Maisel’s great-niece) deconstructed rather than described the organza, the tulle, the heavy beading, the satin bodice and the French lace sleeves which had been transformed by her aunt into a work of art. Fulsome details followed about the rest of us. With one exception: the ensemble of Mrs. Kirsch, the bridegroom’s mother—a dove-blue guipure lace dress and matching wide brimmed hat—purchased ready-to-wear in a chic, city boutique, was glossed over coldly. But much was made of the pink silk dress of my sister Glory, the maid of honour. After the first couple of fittings, Glory had, as my mother said, *filled out*. Additional tussah silk, imported from India, had to be flown in from Cape Town at a special discounted price from our third cousins, who ran a wholesale textile business in Loop Street. The dye lot of the new bolt of material was a darker pink than the original but Cherry Maisel, in order to accommodate the overflowing Glory, cannily tucked the additional material under the fish-net tail at the back of the dress. She also cut the material on the bias so that the two different shades of pink resulted in *real movement* in the several layers of frills fanning out from said fish tail.

I was much gratified by what Hetty wrote about me and got it by heart: *The flower-girls, blonde Miss Rosa Lieberman, sister of the bride, and raven-haired Miss Maxine Woolgar, a young cousin from Bloemfontein, looked utterly sweet in their ankle-length rose-pink chiffon dresses with matching tiaras of pink sweetheart roses: truly, a charming Rose White and Rose Red.*

Nella had made a splendid match and the honour of our family was rock-solid, but my father had spent more than he could afford on the wedding.

We waved goodbye and cheered and clapped and took more pictures, and breathed a sigh of relief when the little plane that did a bi-weekly round trip from Cape Town to Oudtshoorn was swallowed up by the sky, whisking the *young couple* away to *happiness forever*. After seven months of *getting ready for the wedding*, we resumed our daily routine. But the following month we had to forgo our annual journey, a two-day sleepover on the train to visit my mother's family in Johannesburg, because we were still paying off bills.

Alan was Nella's *besbaerd*. Everyone said so: *they were made for each other*. Had Alan not met Glory, he and Nella might never have met. Glory must have come to this realization herself, for her stoicism was noted, and much commended by everyone. Shortly after the wedding she got herself a job with a firm of accountants. By day she was a bookkeeper and typist but by night she was an *artiste*. Her ponds with frogs on lily pads, a swan or two, knobbly hills and faraway mountains, all in ornate gilt frames, took over the entire house. The likeness between Glory's landscapes and the illustrated lids on the paint sets was a source of pride to my mother, who confided to our visitors that Glory was really quite talented.

While Glory dabbed and daubed, I lay on her bed going through back numbers of the *Ladies Home Journal* and *McCalls* which Alan's mother had sent her. I had the feeling that Mrs. Kirsch secretly wished that Glory and not Nella was her daughter-in-law. My favourite column was "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" *His side. Her side. What the Marriage Counsellor says*. Sometimes we'd turn up the volume of the radio and improvise a Vera Lynn or Doris Day routine based on the latest bioscope show we'd seen. We'd smile and wave to ourselves in front of the long mirror on the dressing table: Glory in front, me behind, holding onto her waist, kicking up our legs in unison.

"Is it my mother or my father?"

"How did you know?" Miss Paulina Burke asked. She handed Mrs. Malherbe a small glass of sal volatile and nodded in my direction. Mrs. Malherbe held out the glass to me.

“Why else would you call me down here at this time?” I took a sip of the liquid, pulled a face and handed the glass back to Mrs. Malherbe, who toyed with it, uncertain whether to defer to her superior or, in her role as senior housemistress, to order me to drain it to the last drop.

My father died while I was away at boarding school in Cape Town. I was sixteen and in Standard nine at Good Hope Seminary for Young Ladies. Right off, the first line of our school anthem, *Between the mountain and the sea our Alma Mater stands*, honed in on the location of our school in a seedy part of the downtown area known as The Gardens—at the foot of Table Mountain, not too far from the docks. High walls topped by barbed wire surrounded the grounds, and the iron gates were kept locked. From our bedroom windows, with the aid of binoculars, we could see the sailors and their doxies lounging on the balconies of the surrounding brothels. Occasionally some wanker, half-hidden in a bush from passers-by, would expose himself to those of us in the west dorm directly over the street. We giggled and stuck out our tongues and didn’t tell the authorities. One of the boarders, Patty, with pale blue eyes, stringy yellow hair and an unusually pale face, would sit on the window ledge in full view of the balconies, and fool around with a banana. But she was a sickie and we ignored her.

We were not young ladies—except, I suppose, in the most nominal sense—but raw, adolescent country girls, large-boned and eager. Afrikaans was the language of instruction in the *plattelandse*<sup>21</sup> high schools and our parents sent us to the city to matriculate through the medium of English. Miss Paulina Burke MA, resident headmistress of the boarding school and international poet (her anthologies of poetry were available in Malta and New Zealand as well as in South Africa) would smooth our rough edges, polish us, put her stamp on us. “Let her think what she likes,” said our mothers recklessly when they learned she was an atheist. A *brilliant English teacher and Jewish* (her mother was Jewish even if her father wasn’t), the revered Paulina Burke was exactly the cultural cachet we needed in our pursuit of suitable husbands.

“It’s your father,” said Miss Burke.

I remained silent.

“Was he ill?”

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<sup>21</sup> rural

He'd had a bad heart, diabetes and high blood pressure. But what was that to Miss Burke?

"No," I said, "He wasn't ill."

Mrs. Malherbe placed the glass of sal volatile on Miss Burke's desk. There weren't going to be any hysterics.

"It's sudden then. I'm sorry. Your family's arranged for you to be picked up. You can go and pack now. The car will be here in two hours. Mrs. Malherbe, will you accompany Rosa back to her room?" After tightening the cord of her blue dressing-gown, she shook my hand, "I hope we'll have you back with us before long."

My roommate was still asleep so I used my flashlight and didn't turn on the bright overhead. While I packed my suitcase Mrs. Malherbe drifted off in the chair.

I had a little over a year of schooling ahead of me. My father's opinion that girls were best off learning shorthand-typing and bookkeeping had been confirmed when Nella dropped out of her pharmacy program to get married and raise a family. "I wanted to become a teacher," Glory said on occasion. "And he made me go to business college." But Glory was wrong because if she'd persisted, my father would have consented. He would have done anything to make her happy. I dragged my case to the open door and finished my packing by the light in the corridor. I was relieved it was my father and not my mother who had died, not because of my aspirations for higher education but because I couldn't conceive of life without my mother, who was Home, Asylum, Security. Still, I thought, nothing can stop me from going to university now.

Because my father died on *erev Rosh Hashanah*, the day before our New Year, there was no *Shiva*, no formal mourning period of seven days when prayers are recited twice a day, morning and evening, at the home of the bereaved. Aunt Rhoda from Johannesburg, my mother's youngest sister, had come to be with us for the funeral and was sharing a room with my mother and me. Aunt Rhoda, the same age as Glory and Nella, modern in her ways, the arbiter of good taste in our family, a much respected doyen of fashion, said to me on the morning of the funeral, "Your white bra doesn't go with those black panties." I ran into the bathroom and, under cover of the noisy filling of the toilet, I wept. I *had* white panties. Why hadn't I worn them? And why, why didn't I own a black bra?

"Do you want to see your father?" I stood in the living-room looking out the window at the stream of people going up and

down our front path. I shook my head. My daughters tell me I must be imagining that exchange because Jews do not view the deceased. But Glory recently told me she and Nella had also declined to look at our father before the lid closed on his coffin, before it was carried out of our house to the waiting hearse. It's no use now wishing I had confronted my fear of seeing a corpse, or, more to the point, confronted my feelings about my father. I was a different person then.

"Admiring yourself?" asked my brother-in-law, Alan. I was standing in front of the hall mirror, fixing my hair before I got into the black Buick taking us to the cemetery. I blushed, mortified that he thought I was concerned with my appearance at such a time.

My father didn't say much, but when he did speak, it was an injunction rather than an overture to conversation: "Don't go barefoot on the lawn," or, "Turn off that light; it costs money." Old school friends, also the children of immigrant parents, tell me that their fathers were equally remote, that closeness between daughters and fathers is a New World concept, that it has to do with Freud and Dr. Spock and capitalism. On one occasion which has stuck in my mind, I accompanied my father on one of his after-supper walks. I was twelve and danced in front of him in red leather pumps which I had begged my mother to buy me.

"Do you like them? Do you like them?" I sang, twirling about in my new shoes, my toes pressing up against the supple leather.

"How much did she pay for them?" he asked.

When I stuttered out my reply, he turned round and strode back up the hill. I followed behind, unnerved by what was to come. Glory turned up the radio to block out the quarreling, but we heard it all. This time it was the shoes which cost two pounds, nine shillings and sixpence.

"You little troublemaker!" My mother shook me till my teeth rattled. "When will you learn to keep your mouth shut?"

I was in my bedroom packing for school, and I heard my father turn the bathroom door knob irritably. "Get a move on, Rosa. You spend too much time in there."

He began knocking on the door. Loudly. "Hurry up already!"

With bitter satisfaction I opened my door to show him it wasn't me occupying the bathroom, and, at that same moment, Glory piped up, "I won't be long, Daddy."

“Gittele it’s you. No hurry. No hurry.” He looked at me, opened his mouth to say something, thought better of it, and walked away without saying anything. That was the last time I saw him. The next morning when I was leaving for the train station my father had already gone to work. I was supposed to call him at the shop to say good-bye but I didn’t.

Maartiens was standing near the gate of the small Jewish cemetery. He was bareheaded, his hat in his hand. I tried to catch his eye as I passed through the gate with my mother and sisters, but his face was averted, his head bent down. As the funeral cortege proceeded to the freshly dug pit, he kept abreast with it on a path behind some gravestones—the one for *nie-blankes*<sup>22</sup>—the one that ran parallel to the one we were on.

When I was last in Oudtshoorn I invited the eldest daughter of Sophie Goljaard, our former washerwoman, to meet me at my hotel. “I’ll never forget your mother,” I said, giving her an envelope in which I’d enclosed a couple of hundred rand for her children. She smiled thinly and thanked me. She was reticent, not volunteering any information about her family, nor did she ask about mine. I remembered how Sophie would come by every Thursday, a fat bundle of clean washing on her head. When we shook out one of the stiff, white cloths before spreading it on our Sabbath table, a puff of powdery starch would float out of its creases. Such was Sophie’s alchemy that Nella, when she was first married, would send her cloths and sheets all the way from Cape Town to Oudtshoorn. Every Monday afternoon my father, carrying a parcel of crisp, gleaming linen, would head to West Bank to meet the plane. The pilot, the bearer of soiled laundry from Cape Town, was happy to oblige and would take no remuneration. Sophie’s reputation at the Municipal Wash House was much enhanced, and she raised her fee for a weekly bundle of washing from five shillings to five shillings and sixpence.

I wanted to tell her daughter all this. But there was a look about her that stopped me. She was a secretary for the same firm of accountants for whom Glory had worked. She used a computer.

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<sup>22</sup> non-whites

It was on impulse that I'd met with her. It wasn't her I wanted to see but Jannie and Sarel, the sons of Maartiens. No-one seemed to know where they were. "Do you want something to drink?" I'd asked her in the hotel lobby. "Coffee, tea, something stronger?" indicating we could have something in the bar lounge.

"No, I don't think so," she said. "I'll see what I can find out about those boys for you."

I didn't know Maartiens's last name—had I ever?—and neither did my mother or Glory. I called Nella in London but she had no idea she said. Then I recollected that some years earlier I'd heard Jannie was in business in a small way and owned his own shop. Sarel had put himself through teachers' training college and was teaching somewhere in the Karoo. But I was going through a divorce at that time and nothing else seemed to matter much.

I went to the cemetery like I do every year and was kneeling down beside my father's grave when I sensed someone standing behind me. I turned and there was Maartiens. A younger, more upright version—an authoritative version. Dressed in light oatmeal trousers, black loafers and a black pullover.

"Rosa Lieberman? You are Rosa Lieberman?"

"Jannie," I said.

"Sarel." He didn't take the hand I held out to him. "I heard you were looking for us."

"Your father . . ." I started to say.

"Is dead," he said abruptly.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I would have liked to have seen him again."

"He died five years ago. But you've been coming here for a long, long time."

I didn't respond. There was nothing I could say. I couldn't tell him how bereft I had felt each time I came to Oudtshoorn, how I was struggling in an unhappy marriage that quite often left me exhausted, and unable or unwilling to make contact with people. Going to the cemetery to pay respects to my father. That was it. That was all. Eventually, I said softly, "He meant a lot to me."

"He meant a lot to you," he repeated and gave a short laugh.

"I remember him coming to my father's funeral." I said. "That meant a lot to me."

"He never liked you," he said.

"That's not true," I said. "He liked me."

"You made a lot of trouble for him."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, hurt by his lies.

"He had to put up with you, he didn't like you. If he wanted to keep his job he had to put up with you. You were—how do they say it—you were the bad news."

"Your father would be very angry with you if he could hear you now," I said hotly.

"I'm only telling you what he told us." He laughed again. "You gave him a hard time. You made a lot of trouble for him. You got him into a lot of trouble with that donkey. He had to go to the *lav* and when he was gone, you pulled the donkey's tail. That's when the donkey kicked you. That's what donkeys do when you go up behind them and fool around. My brother and me, we had to stay by our place after that. Sometimes there was no food. My mother, she'd gone a long time. So it was good for us to go with our father. We had to play your games when we were by your place. We didn't like them—those games—but it was good we got something to eat."

"Where're you living now?" I asked.

"George. I'm in George; Jannie, he's in Mossel Bay. He's got a shop near the Sandtoss Hotel; they rebuilt it, you know. There's a lot of Americans in Mossel Bay. Germans too." I wanted to respond but Sarel got in first:

"Then my father got *dondered up*<sup>23</sup> the day you jumped off the wagon. Me and Jannie were by our place. We were waiting for our father to come home. He had food for us." He paused. "No, no, it wasn't *home*. Not a *home*. A *pondokkie*.<sup>24</sup> Our father came to us to give us something to eat before going back to watch the shop, to his night job. He took a blanket. It was very cold those nights. A horse-blanket. Your uncle, *Baas Yitz . . .*" He stopped himself, took a breath and continued, "*Mister. Mister* Yitzzie gave that blanket to him. My father was crying. Not because his face hurt. No, man, he was crying because he was a man and had been thrashed and could do nothing about it."

"Sarel, listen . . ." I began urgently, wanting to explain it all, but he interrupted me.

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<sup>23</sup> beaten up

<sup>24</sup> primitive dwelling-place made with found materials



“My father, he told us when you came back from the bioscope show, you walked past him. He greeted you but you walked past him. You didn’t greet him.”

“I ....” But again, he didn’t let me finish.

“And that ice cream, three *blerrie* pennies of ice cream. His voice trembled. “You didn’t say, ‘Maartiens, you want some? Here, my friend, it is very hot on this wagon, here is some ice cream for you.’” You let it melt and let the *frekking* flies eat it.”

And Sarel walked away without bidding me goodbye. I had some money with me, some rand, about the equivalent of forty Canadian dollars.

“Sarel,” I called out. He turned round.

“Sarel, I’ve got something I’d like to give you for your school, to help out one of your students.” He looked at me and didn’t answer. “Or, for whatever you like,” I said, too embarrassed to say *for you if you need it*.

He laughed. “No thanks,” he said. “We’ll manage without you.”

“Sarel.” I jumped up. I ran to the gate. “Sarel!” But he went on walking and didn’t turn round this time. I had wanted to ask him his last name. I crouched down again beside my father’s grave and reflected on my fall from the wagon. It wasn’t the way Sarel told it, but I wondered if it was then that my lower back problem had started. I sat for a while longer, and it began to get dark. I put three stones on the base of my father’s headstone, one from me and one from each of my two daughters who live in Vancouver, and then I walked back through the town to the hotel.