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Dry White Season, A

Andrew Brink

A
DRY WHITE
SEASON

ANDRÉ BRINK

HARPERPERENNIAL  MODERNCLASSICS

Dedication

For

ALTA

who sustained me in the dry season

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FOREWORD

I used to think of him as an ordinary, good-natured, harmless, unremarkable man. The sort of person university friends, bumping into each other after many years, might try to recall, saying: “Ben Du Toit?” Followed by a quizzical pause and a half-hearted: “Oh, of course. Nice chap. What happened to him?” Never dreaming that *this* could happen to him.

Perhaps that is why I have to write about him after all. I used to be confident enough that, years ago at least, I’d known him reasonably well. So it was unsettling suddenly to discover he was a total stranger. Or does that sound melodramatic? It isn’t easy to rid oneself of the habits of half a lifetime devoted to writing romantic fiction. “Tender loving tales of rape and murder.” But I’m serious. His death challenged everything I’d always thought or felt about him.

It was reported in a humdrum enough fashion – page four, third column of the evening paper. Johannesburg teacher killed in accident, knocked down by hit-and-run driver. Mr Ben Du Toit (53), at about 11 o’clock last night, on his way to post a letter, etc. Survived by his wife Susan, two daughters and a young son.

Barely enough for a shrug or a shake of the head. But by that time his papers had already been dumped on me. Followed by this morning’s letter, a week after the funeral. And here I’m stuck with the litter of another man’s life spread over my desk. The diaries, the notes, the disconnected scribbles, the old accounts paid and unpaid, the photographs, everything indiscriminately lumped together and posted to me. In our student days he constantly provided me with material for my magazine stories in much the same way, picking up ten per cent commission on every one I got published. He always had a nose for such things, even though he himself never bothered to try his hand at writing. Lack of interest? Or, as Susan suggested that evening, lack of ambition? Or had we all missed the point?

Looking at it from his position I find it even more inexplicable. Why should he have picked on me to write his story? Unless it really is an indication of the extent of his despair. Surely it is not enough to say that we’d been room-mates at university: I had other friends much closer to me than he had ever been; and as for him, one often got the impression that he never felt any real need for intimate relationships. Very much his own man. Once we’d graduated it was several years before we met again. He took up teaching; I went into broadcasting before joining the magazine in Cape Town. From time to time we exchanged letters, but rarely. Once I spent a fortnight with him and Susan in Johannesburg. But after I’d moved up here myself to become fiction editor of the woman’s

journal, we began to see less and less of one another. There was no conscious estrangement: we simply didn't have anything to share or to discuss any longer. Until that day, that is, barely two weeks before his death, when he telephoned me at my office, quite out of the blue, and announced that he had to "talk" to me.

Now although I've come to accept this as an occupational hazard I still find it difficult to contain my resentment at being singled out by people who want to pour out their life stories on me simply because I happen to be a writer of popular novels. Young rugger buggers suddenly becoming tearful after a couple of beers and hugging you confidentially: "Jesus, man, it's time you wrote something about a bloke like me." Middle-aged matrons smudging you with their pale pink passions or sorrows, convinced that you will understand whatever their husbands don't. Girls cornering you at parties, disarming you with their peculiar mixture of shamelessness and vulnerability; followed, much later, as panties are hitched up or a zip drawn shut, by the casual inevitable question: "I suppose you're going to put me in a book now?" Am I using them – or are they using me? It isn't me they're interested in, only my "name", at which they clutch in the hope of a small claim on eternity. But one grows weary of it; in the end you can hardly face it any more. And that is what defines the bleakness of my middle-aged writing career. It is part of a vast apathy which has been paralysing me for months. I've known dry patches in the past, and I have always been able to write myself out of them again. But nothing comparable to this arid present landscape. There are more than enough stories at hand I could write; it is not from a lack of ideas that I had to disappoint the Ladies' Club of the Month. But after twenty novels in this vein something inside me has given up. I'm past fifty. I am no longer immortal. I have no wish to be mourned by a few thousand housewives and typists, rest my chauvinist soul. But what else? You cannot teach an old hack new tricks.

Was this one of the reasons why I succumbed to Ben and the disorderly documentation of his life? Because he caught me in a vulnerable moment?

The moment he telephoned I knew something was wrong. For it was a Friday morning and he was supposed to be at school.

"Can you meet me in town?" he asked impatiently, before I could recover from the surprise of his call. "It's rather urgent. I'm phoning from the station."

"You on your way somewhere?"

"No, not at all." As irritably as before. "Can you spare me the time?"

"Of course. But why don't you come to my office?"

"It's difficult. I can't explain right now. Will you meet me at Bakker's bookshop in an hour?"

“If you insist. But—”

“See you then.”

“Good-bye, Ben.” But he’d already put down the receiver.

For a while I remained confused. Annoyed, too, at the prospect of driving in to the city centre from the journal’s premises in Auckland Park. Parking on Fridays. Still, I felt intrigued, after the long time we hadn’t seen each other; and since the journal had gone to press two days before there wasn’t all that much to do in the office.

He was waiting in front of the bookshop when I arrived. At first I hardly recognised him, he’d grown so old and thin. Not that he’d ever been anything but lean, but on that morning he looked like a proper scarecrow, especially in that flapping grey overcoat which appeared several sizes too big.

“Ben! My goodness—!”

“I’m glad you could come.”

“Aren’t you working today?”

“No.”

“But the school vac is over, isn’t it?”

“Yes. What does it matter? Let’s go, shall we?”

“Where?”

“Anywhere.” He glanced round. His face was pale and narrow. Leaning forward against the dry cold breeze he took my arm and started walking.

“You running away from the police?” I asked lightly.

His reaction amazed me: “For God’s sake, man, this is no time for joking!” Adding, testily, “If you’d rather not talk to me, why don’t you say so?”

I stopped. “What’s come over you, Ben?”

“Don’t stand there.” Without waiting for me he strode on and only when he was stopped by the traffic lights on the corner I did catch up with him again.

“Why don’t we go to a café for a cup of coffee?” I suggested.

“No. No, I’d rather not.” Once again he glanced over his shoulder – impatient? scared? – and started crossing the street before the lights had returned to green.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Nowhere. Just round the block. I want you to listen. You’ve got to help me.”

“But what’s the matter, Ben?”

“No use burdening you with it. All I want to know is whether I may send you some stuff” to keep for me.”

“Stolen goods?” I said playfully.

“Don’t be ridiculous! There’s nothing illegal about it, you needn’t be scared. It’s just that I – “ He hurried on in silence for a short distance, then glanced round again. “I don’t want them to find the stuff on me.”

“Who are ‘they’?”

He stopped, as agitated as before. “Look, I’d like to tell you everything that’s happened these last months. But I really have no time. Will you help me?”

“What is it you want me to store for you?”

“Papers and stuff. I’ve written it all down. Some bits rather hurriedly and I suppose confused. But it’s all there. You may read it, of course. If you promise you’ll keep it to yourself.”

“But—”

“Come on.” With another anxious glance over his shoulder he set off again. “I’ve got to be sure that someone will look after it. That someone knows about it. It’s possible nothing will happen. Then I’ll come round one day to collect it again. But if something does happen to me – “ He jerked his shoulders as if to prevent his coat from slipping off. “I leave it to your discretion.” For the first time he laughed, if one could call that harsh brief sound a laugh. “Remember, when we were at varsity, I always brought you plots for your stories. And you always spoke about the great novel you were going to write one day, right? Now I want to dump all my stuff on you. You may even turn it into a bloody novel if you choose. As long as it doesn’t end here. You understand?”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t understand you at all. You want me to write your biography?”

“I want you to keep my notes and journals. And to use them if necessary.”

“How will I know if it’s necessary or not?”

“You’ll know, don’t worry.” A pale smile twitched his tense mouth. He stopped once more, an unnatural glare in his grey eyes. “They’ve taken everything from me. Nearly everything. Not much left. But they won’t get that. You hear me? If they get that there would have been no sense in it at all.”

We drifted along with the crowd.

“That’s what they’re aiming for,” he proceeded after a while. “They want to wipe out every sign of me, as if I’d never been here. And I won’t let them.”

“What have you done, Ben?”

“Nothing. I assure you. Nothing at all. But I can’t go on for very much longer and I think they know it too. All I’m asking of you is to keep my

papers.”

“But if the whole thing is really all that innocent—”

“Are you also turning against me now?”

There was something paranoid in his attitude, as if he'd lost his grasp on the world, as if we weren't really in that street in that city at that moment, as if he weren't really aware of my presence at all. As if, in fact, he himself were a stranger whose slight and superficial resemblance to the Ben du Toit I'd once known was pure coincidence.

“Of course I'll keep your stuff for you,” I said, the way one would comfort or humour a child. “Why don't you bring it round to my house tonight, then we can have a quiet chat over a glass of wine?”

He looked even more perturbed than before. “No, no, I can't do that. I'll make sure it gets to you. I don't want to cause you any problems.”

“All right then.” I sighed with resignation. All the sob stories I'd seen in my time. “I'll look through it and let you know.”

“I don't want you to let me know. Just keep the stuff like I told you. And if something happens—”

“Nothing will happen, Ben,” I insisted, not without some irritation. “It's just hypertension. All you need is a good holiday.”

Two weeks later he was dead.

By then I had already received the bulky parcel postmarked in Pretoria. And after our meeting that morning I was curious to find out more about the whole baffling affair. At the same time I couldn't repress a feeling of resentment, almost of nausea. Not only at the impossible mess of the papers I'd received, but at the embarrassment of having to work through them. It was bad enough to get mixed up with the life stories of total strangers, but at least one remained objective, uninvolved, a more or less indifferent spectator. With an acquaintance it was different. Too private, too bewildering. I was expecting to have to tell him, as to so many others: “Sorry, old chap, but I really can't find a worthwhile story in this.” Only, with him it would be so much more difficult. And even more so in view of the state of his nerves. Still, he'd assured me he wasn't expecting anything beyond keeping them safely.

That night I stayed at home, trying to sort out the mess on my carpet. The black notebooks, the school exercise books, the bits and pieces of card or paper torn from magazines, the typewritten pages, letters, newspaper cuttings. Aimlessly I started skimming and dipping into odd passages. Some names recurred regularly and a couple of them appeared vaguely familiar –Jonathan Ngubene, Gordon Ngubene – but it was only after I'd looked through the cuttings that my memories were clarified. Even then I couldn't make out what Ben's connection with them had been. Actually, it put me off. My novels deal with love and adventure,

preferably in Old Cape settings or in distant romantic surroundings; politics isn't my "line". And if Ben had chosen to get involved in that way I didn't want to be drawn into it as well.

Glumly stowing away the piles of papers in the dilapidated box they had arrived in, I noticed a couple of photographs that had fallen from a large brown envelope I hadn't examined yet. One was quite small, passport size. A girl. Long black hair tied up with a ribbon, large dark eyes, small nose, rather generous mouth. Not beautiful in the sense of the heroines ambling through my books. But there was something about her which struck me. The way she looked right into the camera. A fierce, unsettling, uncompromising stare, challenging one to a duel of the eyes. It was an intensity belied by the gentleness, the femininity of the small oval face: *Look at me if you wish, you won't find anything I haven't discovered for myself and come to terms with. I've probed my depths: you're free to try too if you want to. Provided you do not expect it to give you any claim on me.* – It was something along these lines I found in the photograph, used as I was to constructing "characters". At the same time the face seemed disturbingly familiar. Had I come across it in a different context I might have recognised it more readily, but how was I to expect her among Ben's papers? It wasn't until the following day, working through the cuttings and notes again, that I recognised the same face on some of the newspaper photographs. Of course: Melanie Bruwer. The recent rumpus in the press.

The second photograph was an eight-by-ten on glossy paper. At first I took it for one of the pornographic pictures so readily available abroad; and it didn't interest me much. If that was Ben's way of getting a brief private kick it was none of my business and harmless enough. Not a very clear shot, as if the light had been bad. A background of fuzzy out-of-focus wallpaper, a bedside table, a crumpled bed; a man and a girl naked in a position of intimate caressing, apparently preparing for coitus. I was on the point of restoring it to the brown envelope when something prompted me to take a closer look.

The girl, the dark-haired girl, recognisable in spite of the heavy grain, was the same Melanie Bruwer. The man with her was middle-aged. The man was Ben.

The Ben I'd known at university was different. Reserved without being secretive; rather quiet, at peace with the world and himself; and, yes, innocent. Not that he was a prude or that he scorned student pranks, but never a ringleader. I never saw him drunk; at the same time he didn't try to avoid "the boys". A hard worker, above all, perhaps because he had to see his way through university on grants and loans and couldn't afford to disappoint his parents. Once, I remember, I saw him with a history book at an intervarsity rugby match. During the game he joined in the singing and merriment; but in the interval he quietly went on studying, oblivious

of the noise around him. Even in a room filled with talking or carousing students he could carry on working steadily when there was something he'd set his mind on finishing. Not much of a sportsman, but in tennis he sometimes surprised one with his speed and agility. Whenever teams had to be chosen, he would lose convincingly. One got the impression that he did so deliberately to avoid official matches, because in friendly games he often beat the regular team players; and on the few occasions when, as a reserve member, he was forced to step in for someone else, he amazed the lot of us. On these occasions, with something really important at stake for his team, he returned the most incredible shots. But when the time came to pick new teams for the following year, Ben du Toit would cheerfully lose hands down.

His main diversion, a characteristically private one, was chess. It would be too much to call him a brilliant player, but he was stolid and meticulous and more often than not wore his opponents down by the sheer doggedness of his slowly unfolding strategies. In the more public area of student affairs he was seldom noticed, except for a certain unexpected flair which he sometimes revealed at mass meetings. Not that he liked these public appearances – and he consistently refused to stand for the Student Representative Council – but when he did get up to say something there was such an air of conviction and sincerity about him that everybody paid attention. And in his senior years many students, including girls, used to come to him with their personal problems. I still remember thinking enviously: Jesus, pal, you don't know your own strength with these chicks. The rest of us, experts at impressing the ladies with swaggering savoir-faire, don't stand a chance against that slow apologetic smile of yours-yet you don't seem to realise it yourself. Instead of making a grab you sit there like a clumsy young dog, allowing all the bright chances to slip past. In fact, you don't even acknowledge them as "chances"!

Only once, as far as I can remember, I caught a glimpse of something else in him, something normally obscured by his attitude of placid withdrawal. It happened in our third year, in History, when for one semester during the sabbatical of our regular Senior Lecturer a temporary bloke took over. We couldn't stand his schoolmasterly habits and discipline soon became a problem. On the day in question, catching me in the act of launching a paper missile, he promptly, in nearly apoplectic rage, ordered me out of the room. That would have been the end of it, had Ben not decided to emerge from his habitual lethargy and protest against my being singled out for punishment while the whole class had been equally guilty.

When the lecturer refused to budge Ben drew up a petition and spent a weekend collecting the signatures of all the class members, threatening a boycott of lectures unless an apology was offered. When the ultimatum was delivered, the lecturer read it, turned white, and summarily tore it

up. Whereupon Ben led the threatened walk-out. In this era of demos and Student Power his action might appear ludicrously insignificant; but in those days, in the heart of the war years, it caused a sensation.

Before the end of the week Ben and the temporary lecturer were both called in by the Head of the department. What happened during the meeting leaked out to us much later, via some of the other academic staff, as Ben himself offered no more than a very brief summary.

The prof, a benevolent old bod loved and respected by everybody, expressed his regrets over the whole unfortunate affair and announced that he was prepared to treat it as a mere misunderstanding, provided Ben would apologise for his impetuous action. Ben politely expressed his appreciation of the prof's goodwill, but insisted on an apology from the lecturer who, he said, had offended the class with his unjust behaviour and ineffectual teaching methods.

This caused the lecturer to lose his temper once again and to start fulminating against students in general and Ben in particular. Ben quietly reacted by pointing out that this outburst was typical of the behaviour the students had been protesting against. Just when everything was becoming hopelessly complicated the lecturer offered his resignation and walked out. The prof punished the class by setting a test (in which Ben eventually obtained third or fourth highest marks); and the Administration solved their part of the problem by rustivating Ben for the rest of the semester.

It probably hit him harder than it would any of us, for his parents were poor and his grants were dependent on living in residence, so he had to find money for digs in town. I suppose we all felt a bit guilty about the outcome but the general attitude was that he had really brought it on himself. In any case no-one ever heard him complain. Neither did he embark, as far as I know, on any further rash ventures of that kind. Almost effortlessly he sank back below the unrippled surface of his sedate existence.

The evening paper carried a brief announcement on the funeral arrangements. I had planned to attend, but in the end it didn't work out. That morning I had to come in to the city centre for a lunch date with a visiting woman writer and I'd hoped to use the funeral as a pretext for getting rid of her in reasonable time: one of those ladies addicted to cream cakes and the wearing of lilac hats, who write about blood, tears and unmarried mothers, and who guarantee tens of thousands of readers for our journal. Which explains why I wasn't in the best of moods as I set out on foot from my parking spot towards the Carlton Centre, more than fifteen minutes late to start with. Moodily withdrawn into my own thoughts, I wasn't paying much attention to my surroundings, but in the vicinity of the Supreme Court I became aware of something unusual and

stopped to look about. What was happening? It took a while before it struck me: the silence. The customary lunchtime din of the city had subsided around me. Everywhere people were standing still. Traffic had stopped. The very heart of the city appeared to have been seized in a cramp, as if an enormous invisible hand had reached into its chest to grasp the heart in a suffocating grip. And what sound there was resembled nothing so much as the dull thud of a heartbeat, a low rumble, almost too low for the ear to catch, so it had to be insinuated into the body through blood and bone. Like a subterranean shudder, but different from the mine shocks which one experiences in Johannesburg every day.

After some time we became aware of movement too. Down from the station a slow wall of people were approaching in the street pushing the silence ahead of them: a dull, irresistible phalanx of blacks. There was no shouting, no noise at all. But the front lines were marching with raised clenched fists, like branches protruding from an indolent tide.

From the streets where we were standing innumerable other blacks started drifting towards the oncoming crowd, as silent as the rest, as if drawn by a vast magnet. We whites – suddenly very isolated in the expanse among the stern concrete of the buildings – began to edge towards the reassurance of walls and pillars. No-one spoke or made a sudden gesture. All action was delayed like a playback on TV.

It was only later I realised that judgement had been set for that day in one of the numerous terrorism trials of these recent months; and this crowd was on its way from Soweto in order to be present at the verdict.

They never arrived, though. While we were still standing there police sirens started wailing and from all directions vans and armoured vehicles converged. The sudden sound shocked us from our trance. In a moment noise came washing over the central city like a tidal wave. But by that time I had already moved away from the scene.

At least that gave me a valid explanation for arriving late at the Carlton Centre; and I still proffered the funeral as an excuse to make an early escape from my lilac lady. But by that time I no longer wanted to attend; I simply couldn't face it.

In the CNA Bookshop in Commissioner Street I bought a card of condolence which I signed in the shop and posted in Jeppe Street on my way back to the car. And then I went straight back home – I wasn't expected back at the office anyway – and began to work almost compulsively through Ben's papers again.

So far, there hasn't been a thank-you note from Susan. Of course, I didn't write my address on mine and she may not know where to reach me. Perhaps it's better that way, for all of us.

There were those who didn't regard Susan as the right sort of wife for Ben; but I cannot agree. He always needed someone to urge him on, to

prevent him from getting stuck in a rut, to define goals for him and supply him with the energy and the drive to reach them. If it hadn't been for Susan he might have ended his life in some small, forgotten backveld village, quietly content to teach a bit of history and geography to one generation of school children after the other, or to spend his leisure time "uplifting" the children of the poor. As it turned out, he at least managed to end up in one of the top Afrikaans schools in the city. Whether he would have been happier in a different environment or in different circumstances is a moot point. How am I to judge the components of another man's happiness? But I really believe Susan knew how to handle him: how to let him have his way when he got one of his crazy notions; how to prod him when he had to do something constructive.

She probably inherited it from her father who made it from small-town attorney to M.P. Her mother, I believe, was something of a sentimental wash-out who meekly followed her lord and master wherever his ambition led them. Of course, the fact that he'd never made it beyond M.P. would have added to Susan's determination. Caught between a father with great ambition but not enough talent to really reach the top, and a husband with enough talent but no ambition, she made up her mind very early as to who was going to make the important decisions. And in my efforts, at this stage, to sort out and clarify my meagre personal recollections of Ben I find it easier to explain Susan.

There was something – a magnetic field, a tension, an electricity – between us when I once spent a fortnight with them. It was just before I moved from Cape Town to the North, some twelve years after their marriage. I'd met her a few times before that, of course, but never for long enough really to get to know her. Not that I would like to convey anything improper in talking about a "magnetic field". We were both too well conditioned by our respectable backgrounds to indulge in anything rash; and both of us, albeit for different reasons I imagine, respected Ben's position in the middle. At the same time there's no denying that sometimes, in a sudden and unnerving way, one "recognises" a stranger as an equal, as an ally, as a companion, someone significant to oneself. It doesn't happen rationally or consciously. It is intuitive, a guts reaction. Call it a soundless cry for help. That was what happened when I saw Susan. Unless it's the fanciful writer in me taking over again. I really don't know: I'm not used to this sort of stock-taking and fiction still comes much more naturally to me than brute indecent truth.

From the beginning she proved to be the perfect hostess, protected by an impenetrable wall of courtesy, correctness, friendliness. Not being of a disposition to get along well with servants, she did everything in the house herself; and her thoroughness and good taste were evident in the smallest detail: the turned-up sheets at night, the small ice-container beside the water carafe, the exquisite little flower arrangement on the tray on which she brought me breakfast in bed in the mornings. Even at

that early hour her make-up used to be immaculate, the merest suggestion of moisture on her lips, eye-shadow and mascara heightening discreetly the intense blue of her eyes, her curly blonde hair coiffed in a skilfully contrived look of naturalness. During the last few days of my stay she grew more at ease. Ben had the habit, late in the evening, just before going to bed, of withdrawing to the study he'd installed in what must have been intended as the servants' quarters in the back yard. Perhaps he left his preparation for the next day's lessons till then but I had the feeling that his real reason was to have a brief period of silence all to himself; wholeness, self-containment, reassured and surrounded by his books and the familiar objects he'd accumulated over the years. And after he'd withdrawn in this way Susan would bring me a last cup of coffee to my room and unceremoniously seat herself on the edge of my bed to chat.

On the Friday there was some school function or other which they'd been expected to attend, but at lunchtime Susan casually announced that she was in no mood for the "boring business" and would rather stay at home. "After all," she added, "we have an obligation to our guest."

"I'm sure he wouldn't mind being left alone for one evening." Ben looked at me. "He's not a stranger who must be amused at any cost."

"I'll gladly stay," I said.

"I wouldn't have gone, whether you were here or not," she insisted, suggesting a rock-hard will of her own below the slightly deliberate musicality of her voice.

So he went alone, but only after he'd performed his evening ritual of putting the children to bed: two pretty little blond girls, both of them variations of their mother's beauty – Suzette nine and Linda, if I remember correctly, five.

In spite of my repeated assurance that I'd be happy with a very simple supper, she prepared an impressive meal and laid the table as formally as was her wont, the full show of crystal and candles and silver. We remained at table for hours. I kept on refilling our glasses and fetched a new bottle from the cabinet after we'd emptied the first; followed by liqueur. Once or twice she covered her glass with her hand as I approached the bottle, but later she no longer bothered. She undoubtedly had too much to drink. One of the narrow straps of her dress slipped from a tanned shoulder but she made no effort to push it back. From time to time she pushed the fingers of one hand through her hair, and as the evening deepened her coiffure became less severe, more gentle, softer. One notices trifling things at a time like that. The sensuality of a lipstick smudge on a white damask napkin. Candlelight touching a ring as the hand makes a gesture. The curve of a neck and naked shoulder. Moisture on the swelling of a lower lip. A conversation pursued in innumerable ways behind the casual movement of words.

I cannot pretend to remember what we said – it’s seventeen years ago – but I can recall the feel and general drift of it. By that time it was very late. The wine had brought a flush to her cheeks.

“I envy you, you know,” I said lightly, intimately. “Whenever I find myself in a family like yours I begin to doubt the sense of a bachelor existence like my own.”

“All happy families are alike.” A small, cynical line tensed her mouth. “But every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, puzzled.

“Isn’t that what Tolstoy said?”

“Oh. Yes, of course.”

“You don’t sound very convinced.”

“It’s just that I – well, the sort of twaddle I write doesn’t bring me in touch with Tolstoy very much any more.”

She shrugged. The narrow white band remained slack across her arm.

“Does it matter?” she asked in a brief surge of passionate feeling. “You can write, whether it’s twaddle or not. In one way or another you can give some sort of shape to whatever happens to you. But what about me?”

Here we go again, I thought. The story of my life.

“What are you complaining about?” I asked deliberately. “You have a good husband, you have two beautiful children, you’ve got lots of talent...”

She drew in her breath very slowly and very deeply.

“God!”

I kept my eyes intently on her face.

For a long time she sat motionless without looking away. Then, with passion just below the surface of her rich voice, she asked: “Is that all you can say to me? Is that all I can hope for?” And, after a pause: “In a year’s time I’ll be thirty-five. Do you realise that?”

“That’s young. A woman’s best decade.”

“And if the Bible is anything to go by, I’m halfway now. What do I have to show for it? My God! For years on end one keeps thinking: *One day ... One day ... One day ...* You hear people talking about ‘life’. You start talking about it yourself. You wait for it to happen. And then? Then, suddenly, you realise: *This* is the ‘one day’ I’ve been waiting for. ‘One day’ is every bloody day. And it’s never going to be any different.” For a long time she was silent again, breathing deeply. She took a sip of liqueur, then said, as if deliberately trying to shock me: “You know, I can understand very well why some women become terrorists. Or whores. Just to have the experience of knowing you’re alive, to feel it violently

and furiously, and not to give a damn about whether it's decent or not."

"Is it really so bad, Susan?"

She stared past me as if she were not really talking to me – and perhaps she wasn't. "They always kept me on a tight leash when I was small. Said I was too wild, I had to control myself. 'Girls don't do this. Girls don't do that. What will people think of you?' I thought, once I'm grown up it will be different. Then I met Ben. We were both teaching in Lydenburg. I don't suppose there really was anything extraordinary about him. But you know, whenever he sat so quietly while everyone else was talking their heads off, I always tried to imagine what he was thinking. It made him seem different, and special. The way he handled the children, the way he just gently smiled when everybody else was arguing in the common-room ... And he never tried to force his opinions on me like other men. I began to think he was the man I'd been waiting for. He seemed to understand people, to understand a woman. He would allow me to live the way I'd always wanted to. I suppose I was being unfair to him. I tried to imagine him the way I wanted him to be. And then—" She fell silent.

"Then what?"

"You mind if I smoke?" she asked suddenly. It surprised me, because on previous occasions she'd been very disparaging when Ben took out his pipe at table.

"Feel free," I said. "May I – ?"

"Don't bother." She rose and went to the mantelpiece, lit a cigarette, and came back to me. As she sat down she resumed unexpectedly: "It's not easy for a woman to admit that she's married to a loser."

"I don't think you're being fair to Ben now, Susan."

She looked at me wordlessly, took another sip of liqueur, then filled up her glass again.

At length she asked, "Who was it who said people who are afraid of loneliness should never marry?"

"Must have been someone who burnt his fingers." I consciously tried to be facetious, but she paid no attention.

"After twelve years I still don't know him," she went on. The small bitter line appeared at her lips again. "Neither does he know me." And after a moment: "The worst of all, I suppose, is that I don't even know myself yet. I've lost touch with myself."

Angrily she stubbed out the half-smoked cigarette and got up again as if in search of something; then she took another cigarette from the packet on the mantelpiece. This time I got up to light it for her. Her hands were trembling as I briefly touched them. She turned away to the piano and opened the lid, moving her fingers across the keys without depressing them; unexpectedly she looked up at me:

“If I’d been able to play really well it might have been different. But I’m a dabbler. A bit of music, playreading for the radio, all sorts of unimportant things. Do you think I should resign myself to the thought that one day my daughters may achieve something on my behalf?”

“Do you know how beautiful you are, Susan?”

She turned round, leaning back with her elbows resting on the piano, her breasts pointing at me, gently provocative. She still hadn’t replaced her shoulder strap.

“Virtue is supposed to outlast beauty,” she said with a vehemence which surprised me. Then, after a brief, tense inhalation of smoke: “All I have is the happy family you spoke about. Full time. Not a moment for myself.”

“Ben does a lot to help you. I’ve noticed. Especially with the children.”

“Yes. Of course.” She returned to the table and we sat down again. “Why,” she asked suddenly, “why does one allow oneself to be reduced to a domestic animal? Don’t you think I also want to do something, make something, create something?”

“You have lovely children, Susan. Don’t underestimate your creativity.”

“Any bloody dairy cow can produce offspring.” She leaned forward. Once again I was conscious of her breasts. “Did you know,” she asked, “I had a miscarriage?”

“No, “I said.

“Two years after Suzette. They thought I wouldn’t be able to have another baby after that. I had to prove to myself that I was, well, normal. So I had Linda. It was hell. The full nine months. I resigned myself to being maimed for life.”

“You look more beautiful than ever.”

“How do you know? You didn’t really know me then.”

“I’m convinced of it.”

“And in five years I’ll be forty. Do you realise what that means? Why must one be condemned to a body?” This time she was silent for so long I thought it was the end of our conversation. We drank again, in silence. When she finally spoke it was much more restrained. “I’ve always had this feeling, ever since I started ‘developing’.” She looked straight at me. “There was one time, when I was fifteen or sixteen, when I believed in castigating my body like some mediaeval nun. To rid myself of evil desires. I would tie a knotted rope round my waist and wear rough underclothes. Even tried flagellation in a mild way. In the hope of setting myself free from my body.”

“Did it do any good?”

She gave a short laugh. “At least I’m no longer wearing the rope.”