

Absolution

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For
G.L.F. *and* A.E.V.

Absolution

I

Sam

'I'm told we met in London, Mr Leroux, but I don't remember you,' she says, trying to draw her body upright, making it straight where it refuses to be.

'That's right. We did meet. Just briefly, though.' In fact it wasn't London but Amsterdam. She remembers an award ceremony in London where I wasn't. I remember the conference in Amsterdam where I spoke, invited as a promising young expert on her work. She took my hand charmingly then. She was laughing and girlish and a little drunk. I can see no trace of intoxication this time. I've never met her in London.

There was the other time, too, of course.

'Please, call me Sam,' I say.

'My editor says nice things about you. I don't like your looks, though. You look fashionable.' She draws her lips back on the final syllable, her teeth apart. There's a flicker of grey tongue.

'I wouldn't know about that,' I say, and can't help blushing.

'*Are* you fashionable?' She spreads her lips again, flashes her teeth. If it's supposed to be a smile it doesn't look like one.

'I don't think so.'

'I have no memory of your face. Nor of your voice. I'd certainly remember that voice. That accent. I don't think we can possibly have met. Not in this lifetime, as they say.'

'It was a very brief meeting.' I almost remind her that she was drunk at the time. She's affecting to look uninterested in the present meeting, but there's too much energy in the boredom.

'You must know I've agreed to the project under duress. I'm a very old woman, but that doesn't mean I intend dying any time soon. You, for instance, might well die before me, and no one

is rushing to write your biography. You might be killed in an accident this afternoon. Run down in the street. Carjacked.'

'I'm not important.'

'Quite so.' There's a lick of a smirk on one side of the mouth. 'I've read your articles and I don't think you're an imbecile. Nonetheless, I'm really not optimistic about this.' She stares at me, shaking her head. Her hands rest on her hips and she looks a little clumsy, at least clumsier than I remember. 'I would've chosen my own biographer, but I don't know anyone who would agree to undertake the task. I'm a terror.' There's a hint of the girlishness I saw in Amsterdam, something akin to flirtation but not quite, like she's hoping a man will find her attractive simply because he's a man, and I have to admit she still has a kind of beauty.

'I'm sure lots of people would jump at the chance,' I say and she looks surprised. She thinks I'm flirting back and smiles in a way that looks almost genuine.

'None that I would choose.' She wags her head at me, a reprimanding schoolteacher, staring down the famous nose. I may be tall, but she's taller still, a giant. 'I'd write my autobiography, but I think it would be a waste of time. I've never written about my life. I don't entirely believe in the value of life writing. Who cares about the men I loved? Who cares about my sex life? Why does everyone want to know what a writer does in bed? I suppose you expect to sit down.'

'Whatever you prefer. I can stand.'

'You can't stand the whole time.'

'I could if that suited you,' I say, smiling, but the flirtatious mood has passed. She pouts, points to a straight-backed chair and waits until I sit, then chooses a chair for herself on the other side of the room, so that we're forced to shout. A cat wanders past and jumps on to her lap. She removes it, putting it back on the floor.

'Not my cat. My assistant's. Don't put in the book that I'm a cat lady. I'm not. I don't want people thinking I'm a mad old cat lady.' There's a picture on the back of her early books – the publicity

shot used for the first ten years of her career – in which she holds a baby cheetah, its mouth open, tongue sticking out as her tongue does now. It suggests the suckling toddler, or the stroke victim. ‘My British publisher insisted on the stupid cheetah,’ she’ll tell me later, ‘because that’s what an African writer was supposed to have, the wild clutched to her bosom, suckling the continent, all those tired imperial fantasies.’

‘What form do you anticipate this taking?’ she asks now. ‘Please don’t imagine I’m going to give you access to my letters and diaries. I’ll talk to you but I’m not going to dig out documents or family albums.’

‘I thought a series of interviews to start.’

‘A way of getting comfortable?’ she asks. I nod, shrug my shoulders, produce a small digital recorder. She snorts. ‘I hope you don’t imagine that we’re going to become friends over the course of this. I won’t take walks with you in my garden or visit museums. I don’t “do drinks”. I won’t impart the wisdom of the aged to you. I won’t teach you how to live a better life. This is a professional arrangement, not a romance. I’m a busy person. I have a new book coming out next year, *Absolution*. I suppose I shall have to let you read it, in due course.’

‘I defer to you.’

‘I’ve read your articles, as I said. You don’t get things entirely wrong.’

‘Perhaps you’ll be able to correct some of my mistakes.’

Clare did not answer her own door when I arrived. Marie, the beetle-eyed assistant, delivered me into a reception room that overlooked the front garden and the long drive, the high beige periphery wall mounted with barbed wire shaped and painted to mimic trained ivy, and the electronic gate closing out the road. Security cameras monitor the property. Clare has chosen a cold room for our first interview. Maybe it’s the only reception room. No – a house this size will have several. There must be another one, a better one, with a view of the back gardens and the mountain

rising above the city. She'll take me there next time, or somehow I'll manage to find it on my own.

Her face is narrower than her pictures suggest. If there was a fullness in her cheeks five years ago in Amsterdam, the health has receded and now her face is wind-cracked, a lake bottom in drought. It looks nothing like any of the photographs. Her unruly squall of blonde hair has silvered, and though it's thin and brittle it still has some of the old lustre. Her abdomen has spread. She's almost a very old woman, but doesn't look her real age – more like sixty than whatever she really is. Her skin is tanned and the line of her jaw has a plastic tension. Despite the slight hump in her back, she tries to remain erect. I feel a flash of anger at her vanity. But it's not my place to judge that. She is who she is. I'm here for something else.

'I hope you've brought your own food and drink. I don't intend to feed you while you feed off me. You may use the facilities at the end of the corridor on the left. Please remember to lower the seat when you've finished. It will encourage my sympathy.' She narrows her eyes and seems to be smirking again, but I can't tell if she's joking or serious.

'Are you going to record these discussions?'

'Yes.'

'Take notes as well?'

'Yes.'

'Is it on?'

'Yes. It's recording.'

'Well?'

'I'm predictable. I'd like to start at the beginning,' I say.

'You'll find no clues in my childhood.'

'That's not really the point, if you'll forgive me. People want to know.' In fact, almost nothing is known about her life beyond the slim facts of public record, and the little she's condescended to admit in previous interviews. Her agent in London released a one-page official biography five years ago when requests for

information became overwhelming. 'Both sets of grandparents were farmers.'

'No. My paternal grandfather was an ostrich farmer. The other was a butcher.'

'And your parents?'

'My father was a lawyer, an advocate. The first in his family to go to university. My mother was a linguist, an academic. I never saw much of them. There were women – girls – to look after me. A succession of them. I believe my father did a fair amount of *pro Deo* work.'

'Did that inform your own political stance?'

She sighs and looks disappointed, as though I've missed a joke.

'I don't have a political stance. I'm not political. My parents were liberals. It was to be expected that I would also be a liberal, but I think my parents were "liberals" in the reluctant way of so many of their generation. Better we should speak of left-wing and right-wing, or progressive and regressive, or even *oppressive*. I am not an absolutist. Political orientation is an ellipse, not a continuum. Go far enough in one direction and you end up more or less in the place where you started. But this is politics. Politics is not the subject at hand is it?'

'Not necessarily. But is it difficult, do you find, to engage in a critique of the government, as a writer?'

She coughs and clears her throat. 'No, certainly not.'

'What I mean is, does being a writer make it more difficult to criticize the government?'

'More difficult than what?'

'Than if you were a private citizen, for instance.'

'But I am a private citizen, as you put it. In my experience, governments mostly take very little notice of what private citizens have to say, unless they say it in unison.'

'I guess what I'm trying to ask –'

'Then ask it.'

'What I'm trying to ask is whether you think it's more difficult to criticize the current government?'

‘Certainly not. Just because it’s democratically elected doesn’t grant it immunity from criticism.’

‘Do you think that fiction is essential to political opposition?’ I regret the question as soon as it’s out, but sitting in front of her all the carefully formulated questions I’ve spent months preparing seem impossible to ask.

She laughs and the laugh turns into another fit of coughing and throat-clearing. ‘You have a very strange idea of what fiction is meant to do.’

I stall for time, feeling her stare at me as I study my maze of notes. I naively assumed it would all go so smoothly. I decide to ask her about the sister; there’s no denying the importance of politics there. As I’m trying to frame the question in my head, she clears her throat again, as if to say, *Come along, you must do better*, and I rush into another question I didn’t mean to ask.

‘Did you have any siblings?’

‘You know this, Mr Leroux. It was the climax of a turbulent period. It’s a matter of public record. But I absolutely will not talk about my sister.’

‘Not even the bare facts?’

‘The known facts of the case are on file in the court records and countless press clippings. No doubt you’ve read them. Everyone has read them. A man acting alone, he said. The court found that he was not acting alone, though no one else was arrested. Like so many others, he died in police custody. Unlike so many others, he had actually committed a crime – at least he never denied doing it. I can add nothing else except the experience of the victimized family and that is not new material. We all know how people suffer over the unexpected, violent death of a family member. It is fundamentally no different for the family of a murdered innocent or the family of an executed criminal. It is vivisection. It is limb loss. No prosthetic can substitute. The family is crippled. That is all I wish to say.’

Though it's only supposed to be our second meeting, Clare can't or won't see me today. Instead I go to the Western Cape Archives, park on Roeland Street, and nod at the car guard who's sheltering in the shade of a truck. He gives me a subservient smile and makes some kind of sound of assent. I find myself always on edge, expecting the worst. At the airport I was a foreigner, but a week later, in the market yesterday, I was already a local again. Over a display of lettuces, a woman addressed me, expecting a reply. A decade ago I might have come up with the right words. I had to shake my head. I smiled and apologized, explaining that I didn't speak the language, didn't understand. *Ek is jammer. Ek praat nie Afrikaans nie. Ek verstaan jou nie.* I've lost too much of my Afrikaans to be able to answer. I didn't know what to say about the lettuce or the fish, the *vis*. She looked surprised, then shrugged and walked away, mumbling sharply, assuming perhaps that I knew but was refusing to speak her language.

The Archives have been housed on the site of a former prison for nearly twenty years. The car guard watches as I walk up the steps and through the green grille of the old gate in the nineteenth-century outer wall. Inside there are shabby picnic tables and plantings, and the new structure, a building within a building. I sign the register, put my bag in a locker, and carry my equipment to the reading room. The woman behind the desk, a Mrs Stewart, is uncertain at first what it is I want. She looks vaguely alarmed when she understands, but nods and asks me to take a seat while she sends someone to look for the files. All her sentences rise at the end, in a tone that questions everything without questioning directly. A few years ago, the staff might have let me do my own digging in the stacks – friends had such luck, finding things they weren't supposed to find. Now everything is more organized and more professional, but also a little less hopeful.

The other people in the room all appear to be amateur genealogists working on family histories. When the stack of brown folders with bold red stamps appears on my table I feel the others staring, wondering what kind of files I might be consulting, no longer confidential but still bearing that mark. I take out my camera and tripod and photograph page after page throughout the morning.

At lunchtime, two women from the reading room approach me in the lobby.

‘Are you working on family history?’ one of them asks, her voice rising like Mrs Stewart’s.

‘No. It’s for a book. I’m looking at the files of the Publications Control Board. The censors.’

‘Ohhh,’ the other one says, nodding. ‘How verrrry interesting.’

We talk for a few moments. I ask about their research. They are sisters, investigating their ancestors, trying to track down the right Hermanus Stephanus or Gertruida Magdalena over centuries of people with the same names.

‘Good luck with your researches,’ the first one says as we part on the steps. ‘I hope you find what it is you are looking for.’

I give the car guard what I think is proper. It always seems like too little or too much. Later, I ask Greg what he thinks. I trust his opinion because I’ve known him since we were students in New York, and because he’s the most morally and socially engaged friend I still have in the country. When I told him I was coming back, and that my wife would be joining me later in the year to take up her new assignment in Johannesburg, Greg insisted I stay with him for as long as I needed to be in Cape Town.

‘It can never be too much because they need it more than you,’ he says, balancing his son on his knee. ‘Just like if your hire car gets stolen or somebody takes the radio or the hubcaps – you have to tell yourself, whoever took it needs it more. It’s the only way to live with yourself.’

‘I don’t ever want it to look like charity.’

‘Think of all the fuckers who only give them fifty cents and can’t be bothered. Money isn’t an insult. There’s nothing wrong with charity. Not everything has to be payment for services rendered, however informally. And if you’re a tourist you owe them a little more.’

‘I don’t think of myself as a tourist any more. I’m back now.’

‘You haven’t been local for a long time, Sam, no matter what shirt you wear or the music you listen to. And who’s to say you’re going to stay in the long run? Sarah’s post lasts for – how long? – only eighteen months?’

‘Three years if she wants it.’

‘But then you’ll go somewhere else. That means you’re a tourist. You don’t have to feel bad about it. Just remember it.’

‘And how much do you give?’

‘No, see, the thing is, I give less than I expect you to give because I give every day and have been giving for years. I employ a nanny who comes six days a week, a gardener who comes twice a week, a domestic who comes three times a week, and I give soup packets to the old man who comes to my front gate every Friday. I give my domestic and my nanny money to put their kids through school. I buy the school uniforms. I pay for their medical aid. When I park in the city, I don’t give the car guards as much as I’d expect you to give because I give so much already, and even that isn’t enough, you know. And I don’t give food to people who come to the house any more, except the old man, because he’s never drunk. So I’m one of the fuckers I hate. But you tourists, you’ve got to give a little more.’

He speaks quickly, his son playing with the beads around his neck. ‘Dylan, don’t pull Daddy’s beads.’ He looks up at me, smiling. ‘I was thinking, let’s go to the Waterfront this afternoon. There’s a new juice bar open and I feel like shopping. We’ll leave Dylan with Nonyameko. We can see a movie afterward.’

*

Another day. Clare shows me into the same room as the one we used for our first interview. This time she has buzzed me in through the gate and opened her own front door. The assistant must have the day off. We sit again in the same chairs. The cat passes through the room, only this time it takes to my lap instead of hers. Purring, it drools on my jeans and digs its claws into my legs.

‘Cats like fools,’ Clare says, straight-faced.

‘Can we go back to your sister?’

‘I knew you weren’t going to let Nora stay dead.’ She looks weary, even more drawn than the first time. I know that her sister’s story is a detour from the main route. This is not the real story I want, but it might be a way of getting there in the long run.

‘Was your sister always political?’

‘I think she regarded herself as *apolitical*, like me. But, that’s not quite fair. I’m not apolitical. I’m privately political. But if one chooses a public life – either by career or association or marriage – that’s another matter. She chose a public life by marrying a public figure.’

‘A writer’s life is not a public life?’

‘No,’ she says, and smiles – either condescendingly or, I flatter myself, enjoying the parry. ‘It was unconscionable to take an apolitical stance in *this* country at *that* time, as a public figure. She was a victim of her own naïveté. She should have known she was marking herself for death. But she was the firstborn. Our parents made mistakes. Perhaps they left her crying in the crib instead of comforting her. Or they were strict where they should have been trusting. She always resented that I was allowed to shave my legs and wear lipstick when I was thirteen, to have skirts above my knees, to bleach my schoolgirl moustache. It was obvious the same standards did not apply to me, and she saw that. Our parents held her under their thumbs until she was sixteen. She did not go to university. Marriage was an escape from authoritarian parenting into an even more authoritarian culture. I was luckier.’

‘You were educated abroad.’ I know all this. I’m laying down the foundations. Everything else will rest on this.

‘Yes. Boarding school here, then university in England. A period in Europe after that.’

‘And then you returned home, at a time when many in the anti-apartheid movement – writers especially – were beginning to go into exile.’

‘That’s correct. It was before I had published. I wanted to come back, to be a part of the opposition, such as it was.’

‘Do you resent those who emigrated?’

‘No. Some had little choice. They were banned, they or their families were threatened, and some were imprisoned. Or they left for a brief while – to study overseas – and found that because of their political activities they could not return, or simply they realized it was easier in many ways to stay in England or America or Canada or France, and so much the better for them, I suppose, if that’s what they wanted, if that is what they felt they needed to do for themselves. I was not threatened, for the most part, and so I stayed – or rather, I returned and stayed. Is this going anywhere, this line of questioning? What can it say about me?’

When we met in Amsterdam she was drunk on the adulation, and on quantities of champagne. As a result, she was effusive and open-handed then, or seemed so maybe only because she was away from home and being celebrated. She pretended it was her birthday and took a magnum of champagne from the conference reception. At the bland tourist hotel where she was staying, she pleaded in halting Afrikaans for the concierge to get some glasses from the restaurant so she could toast her birthday with her friends, old and new. The concierge tried not to laugh at her language, but it had the desired effect.

I was one of the group then, a new friend. Given the champagne, it shouldn’t surprise me that she has forgotten our first meeting, or that she imagines it was in London, at an awards ceremony

instead of a conference. She's an old woman. Her memory can't be perfect.

I find it difficult, though, to reconcile the writer I so esteem in print, who took my hand with such grace in Amsterdam, with the woman sitting across from me now. There is open mockery on her face. It triggers a flash of memory that I instantly suppress. I can't allow myself to think about the past, not yet.