

OUT OF SHADOWS

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J a s o n W a l l a c e

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‘If I stood you in front of a man, pressed the cold metal of a gun into your palm and told you to squeeze the trigger, would you do it?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course, sir. No ways!’

‘What if I then told you we’d gone back in time and his name was Adolf Hitler? Would you do it then? Would you?’

For my mother, June, and my stepfather, Richard,
who took us on an adventure

And for Katharine

ZIMBABWE
1983

ONE

Go ahead, shoot, I thought, because I was thirteen and desperate and anything, absolutely anything, was better than the fate to which my parents were leading me.

The policeman sat astride his growling motorbike, one hand on his holster, anonymous behind shades. He was one of the outriders for the new Prime Minister's motorcade, signalling for cars to get off the road. If drivers didn't stop quickly enough he was entitled to shoot. If they didn't move right off the tarmac, he could shoot. If they *did* stop but the policeman thought the passengers inside looked shifty or saw them messing around, he'd shoot. He was nothing like the policemen back home.

Home, I thought. An old ache swelled in my stomach. England. Britain. So far away. For me, this Africa was another world, and as we sat there watching the rider watch us, Britain felt further away than ever.

I sighed.

My father completely misinterpreted it and tutted as he showed me his watch against a sunburned wrist.

'We've plenty of time, I made sure you wouldn't be late on your first day,' he said.

And instantly the fear came charging back. It was here: the day I'd prayed would never come. Any hope that my father might have a change of heart and take us back to our own country flickered and finally died.

The policeman didn't move. With sweat glistening on his

black-brown skin he just glared at my mother and father and me as we sat rigidly in silence. It was getting hotter and hotter now the air wasn't rushing through the open windows. Beyond the car, insects clicked and buzzed in the dry grass. We were miles from anywhere. Anywhere but here.

A moment later the motorcade rushed by at a million miles an hour, the cars all secretive and dark. I didn't know which one was the Prime Minister's because you couldn't see behind the tinted glass, though I guessed it was the biggest and sleekest Mercedes in the middle with the flags.

'You see that?' My father spoke with the look of a child gazing through a toy shop window. 'There goes a great, great man. He's given the people freedom – what could be a greater achievement than that?'

He caught my confused look in the rear-view mirror.

'Didn't you read the book I gave you?'

I nodded, lying, but he knew perfectly well I hated history.

'For generations, Europeans have treated Africa like a playground. We've carved it up amongst ourselves, stolen its riches and not given a damn about the poor people who live here.'

My mother sighed but my father was in full swing now.

'Britain claimed *this* land and called it Rhodesia, but the black Africans have fought back at last and tipped the balance of power, son. White minority rule is over, thank goodness. Rhodesia no longer exists. This is Zimbabwe. And, now that the fighting has finally finished, that man there's going to do tremendous things for this country, you mark my words. He's a hero.'

I nodded subserviently while inside I was chewing over his words: *tipped the balance of power*. It seemed a strange expression to me because it gave me an image of a seesaw, and when one end was up the other was always down. It was never actually balanced.

The tail of the motorcade whooshed by, followed by yet more policemen on motorbikes, sirens wailing. Our man joined them and left us in a cloud of red dust that filled the car and made a mess of everything.

‘Yes indeed, a hero. Do you know something, darling?’ My father spoke to my mother. ‘If I could meet him, just to be in the same room as him, I would consider it the greatest moment of my life.’

And he made a silly laughing sound as if it were something that might actually happen.

He never did meet Mr Mugabe. For me, it was to be a very different story.

TWO

We pulled off the main road and between huge stone pillars that bore Haven School's name. Up a willow-lined drive, then down and round to where the boarding houses were. A jostle of vehicles had already filled the small car park, a reassuring reminder of life beyond the grounds. The baking January sun glinted off windscreens.

My father stopped the engine and sat a moment without speaking, looking up at Selous House – my house – like it was a monument or something.

'Named after Frederick Courteney Selous, one of Rhodesia's founding figures,' he said at last, as if we hadn't stopped talking about it. 'All five boarding houses in the school are named after Rhodesian founders. Giving names of important people to buildings and places is just one way the white government asserted power.'

He gave me a meaningful nod.

'But that's in the past now. Colonialism is an outdated ideal that was never going to work. It doesn't matter who you are, you can't simply plant a flag and claim rights over someone else's land. This is Africa, for Africans. And black people had every right to rise up and use aggression.'

Even though most of the other parents and boys around us were white I started to feel even more nervous about being here, and I wondered if he knew how he was making me feel. I opened my mouth to speak.

'So was that what the war was about?' I asked. 'Land?'

'*This* is what it was about,' he replied, finding and pointing to a black family standing isolated on the grass. The boy was small and looking at his shoes while his parents tried to appear relaxed. 'The winds of change. Opportunity for all. Boys like him wouldn't have been allowed in a school like this before independence. But you can't suppress people because of the colour of their skin. Or at all, for that matter. Do you think it was right?'

'No,' I said.

'It was utterly, utterly wrong.' I wasn't sure my father had heard me. 'White people should be ashamed.'

He climbed out and walked enthusiastically towards the family. Soon, the three grown-ups laughed, and I noticed some of the white parents glancing and shaking their heads.

My mother sat silently in the front fanning her face. She'd cried almost the whole way here.

'It won't be so bad,' she said, a line she'd fed me on and off all through Christmas – I'd felt safe then, despite the weirdness of unwrapping presents in the heat, as though the start of the school year might never find me. But it had. 'You'll make lots of new friends, you won't have time to be sad.'

We sat and watched my father. Two tall senior boys greeted him politely as they passed. My father puffed himself up and stroked his beard, and responded in the voice he saved for the telephone. He looked strange today, wrapped in one of his London suits as if he was on business. All the other fathers were in short-sleeved shirts, shorts, desert boots and long socks. Their wives wore floral-print dresses like ones I'd seen on old British TV programmes.

'You mustn't blame your father,' my mother spoke again. 'He has a very different sort of background, his parents never had money. He feels very strongly that you should take the opportunities he never had.'

She dabbed her nostrils with a tissue.

‘The Embassy has been very kind in offering to pay the fees. We could certainly never afford a school like this on your father’s salary.’

‘He could get another job.’ I spoke petulantly into my tie knot. ‘In England. He acts like a stupid history teacher most of the time, he could be one of those.’

‘Now, now. Don’t be rude,’ my mother told me, but with her face pointing the other way.

She blew her nose.

‘This country is our home for the time being,’ she went on dutifully. I could tell she was forcing her mouth into a smile. ‘It’ll be better this time. I believe that, I really do. Back at home your father’s old department just didn’t appreciate his . . . *skills*, but I think he’ll finally find his feet with this new job. He’s running a whole office. Things will be different.’

‘But I don’t really know anything about this country,’ I said, a plea as I eyed the small boy over on the grass who now appeared to be looking right back at me. ‘What if they don’t like me?’

She turned round again.

‘Then we *will* go back, one way or another. I promise. It’s where we belong. We can go and live with Granny while we settle back. She says we’re always welcome. She misses us so much since we left.’

Now her smile was real.

‘But you have to promise you’ll at least try. If you can do that then I’ll see what I can do. Your father does listen to me sometimes, he does care. Maybe he can put in for a transfer – I’m sure the Civil Service does that sort of thing all the time. Deal?’

I nodded quickly up and down, knowing I could believe her optimism, and my mother leaned into the back to give me a hug. Beyond, my father waved me out with impatience.

'You're at grown-up school now, Robert, you don't want the other boys seeing that,' he said as I went to him. Until that point I'd always been Bobby. It seemed Bobby had been left at home and I wished I was there with him.

I lowered my head and pulled on the oversized blue blazer that itched my skin.

'We've found you a new friend,' my father went on, pointing to the small black boy. 'He's starting today too. This is Nelson. Nelson, this is Robert. You two are going to be best friends.'

Nelson's father smiled and agreed. Nelson himself didn't move until his father gave him a nudge, and he nodded a silent hello. His eyes cried out that he was in fact having the same kind of day as me, and we laughed anxiously together. It wasn't a sound we would make many times that first term.

'Nelson can give you a hand with your trunk, if you ask nicely,' my father added.

My head went down again and he folded his arms. His shirt had dark blots all over it and was tight across his stomach.

'Come on, stop that. You're thirteen years of age,' I was told as if it were news.

Nelson and his parents were watching me, and I looked away.

'Time to take your trunk in, Robert. Up you go.'

'Can Mum come?'

'Your mother isn't feeling well in this heat.'

'But can't she come up, please? Can't she come and see me before you . . .'

Go, was the word that wouldn't form.

My father stood solid, then eventually uncrossed his arms.

'I'll see what I can do.' He took his wallet and extracted two ten-dollar notes, thought about it, then put one of them back. 'Here. And don't go spending it all on sweets in the first week.'

* * *

When I was little my father always insisted on covering any scrape, large or small, with a lock-tight plaster because he said the city we lived in was filthy dirty and infection spread quickly in hot weather. I hated it because I knew when the time came to take it off again he was going to make me cry.

It was always the same: 'OK, Bobby, I want you to count to five. One, two . . .'

Not once did I ever get to five. Apparently it was for the best.

That's what it felt like the whole of that day: counting to five, waiting for the pain.

The dorm was big and open-plan with about twenty beds – ten beds on each side of a chest-high wall. The floor was an ocean of grooved tiles the colour of dried blood, and the walls were painted a stark white. Louvred glass filled the room with light. You could see right over the lower playing fields and across the bush but it felt like looking out of a cage because all the windows still had grenade screens on them from the war.

We carried our trunks up one after the other. When we were done I sat on my bed and it pushed against me, a mere pancake of foam over a thin board on legs. Everyone had their own wooden locker next to them, and sheets and blankets had been folded and put on the top.

'You reckon we have to make them ourselves?' I asked.

'Guess,' said Nelson. 'Do you know anyone here?'

I shook my head.

'Me neither,' he said. 'I wish I did. Someone to look out for me, like an older brother. It wouldn't be nearly so bad with an older brother. We're from Town. And you?'

I told him.

'Close to Town but just outside. It's really boring there sometimes. My dad doesn't like cities because of all the people.

But we're British really, from England,' I added before I could stop myself. The words were suddenly guilty on my tongue, abrasive. They never had been before. 'Does that mean you hate me?'

Nelson frowned. 'Why should I hate you?'

'Because I'm British. And . . . you know . . . the war.'

'The war wasn't against Britain.'

'Oh.'

'I obviously didn't fight in the war, but even if I had been old enough and you'd been too, I still wouldn't hate you.'

'Oh?' It was my turn to be confused. 'Why not?'

'Because surely wars are about putting an end to a wrong, not making a new one?'

'I guess so.'

'Most black people don't hate white people, and most whites don't hate blacks.'

'So what *was* the war about, then?'

He fidgeted slightly.

'Some of the white people that first came loved Africa and everything in it, just not the Africans. They didn't understand us, so they treated us differently . . . badly . . . and that wasn't fair. That's what my dad says.'

'I didn't realize,' I said.

Nelson shrugged. 'It's all over now, that's the main thing. Hey, at least your folks live close, it won't be difficult for them to visit.'

'My dad says it'll be worse for me if they come.'

'*Ja*, mine too. Looks like it's just us then. Maybe we should look out for each other, hey?'

'Like brothers?'

'*Ja*,' he said. 'Like brothers.'

'Yeah,' I said, pleased. 'You're on.'

We shook hands to cement the deal.

I flipped the catches on my trunk. Khaki shorts and shirts for classes, black trousers and white shirts for evenings and Sunday chapel, socks, shoes, sports whites, pyjamas . . . Matilda, our maid, had ironed, folded and packed my stuff immaculately. Postcards from my grandmother lay safely on top in a protective envelope.

The dorm was filling up. A boy came panting in towards us with flushed cheeks because he was carrying his trunk on his own. He dropped it too early and it clattered to the floor. The name on the lid said *Jeremy Simpson-Prior*.

'You want a hand with that?' I offered, but he shook his head and wiped snot.

Boys were looking over from the other side of the partition. One of them kept staring at me – or maybe at Nelson, I couldn't tell – and eventually he came round and tapped my shoulder.

'There's a spare bed next to mine,' he said.

His eyes were a sharp, intense green. I glanced away to Nelson, who I think was only pretending not to listen as he started to unpack.

'I'm OK here,' I said.

'Are you serious? Next to stinking chocolate-face here?'

Simpson-Prior barked out a laugh. If it was a joke I didn't get it.

'Take the bed.'

'Really, I'm fine where I am,' I replied, feeling a whole new sensation of nervousness.

To my relief, the boy shrugged. 'Your choice,' he said, but then gave Nelson a push against the wall.

I had to do something. Nelson was doing his best not to look at anybody, as if he wanted everyone to go away, but we'd just made a promise.

'Hey! Leave him alone,' I said, not quite knowing what would happen.

The boy with the green eyes blazed at me, and I thought maybe he'd hit me. Instead, he simply pointed at my face.

'Don't say I didn't give you a chance.'

'I'll come,' Simpson-Prior stood eagerly. 'I'll sleep over on your side.'

The boy didn't even pause to think about it and turned Simpson-Prior's trunk right over, spilling everything.

'Why would I want a poof like you next to me? Your breath stinks.'

That was my first encounter with Ivan Hascott. It wasn't going to be my last. Not by a long shot.

We continued unpacking our stuff. I checked my watch and glanced at the door but couldn't hear my father coming, and as the minutes went by I realized he wasn't coming back at all, that this time he hadn't even let me start counting before ripping off this particular plaster.

Nelson kept himself busy, taking his time over everything.

'Are you OK?' I asked him.

He nodded. '*Ja*. Fine. Thanks for helping.'

'Any time. See? We're like brothers already.'

And if someone had told me then how badly I would actually come to let him down – and in the way I did it – I would never, ever have believed them.

T H R E E

Our official introduction to the house involved us being herded into the common room where Mr Craven, our housemaster, was waiting.

I can't recall exactly what he said that night though. A greeting. A welcome. Some acknowledgment that as the third years, the youngest in the school, we might be feeling homesick but that wasn't anything to dwell on because we'd get over it, there was a lot to take in and a lot to find out so if we didn't know anything we mustn't hide in a corner; we should *ask*.

Then he left and a senior called Taylor took over. He was tall with wide shoulders, a strong jaw and sandy hair. Handsome. Stern-yet-fair. Matter-of-fact without menace. Everything about him said Head of House. His tie was different from anyone else's. In fact, the two other sixth formers behind him – Greet and Leboule – weren't like him at all. They just eyed us in a way that made us feel like intruders while Taylor welcomed us new boys to Selous in a smooth and controlled voice.

'Forbes, Heyman, Burnett, Willoughby . . . Those are the other houses, each named after an important person' – I straightened my back, strangely pleased with my father for telling me that – 'and I daresay the boys in those houses might try and kid you that theirs is the best. But they'd be wrong. Selous House is the best house in the school, in the best school in the country. No one can take that away from us, so take pride and don't let the house down.'

He went on to read out the study room list. There were only ten boys to each room, and Simpson-Prior was already frantically wetting his lips because our names had been read out with Ivan's, while Nelson escaped and was placed in the next study along the corridor.

The parquet floor reeked of polish, instantly establishing itself as the smell of New Term. Simpson-Prior pushed past and grabbed the best cubicle and pointed me to the one in front.

'Go there! Go there!' What Ivan had said about his breath was true, it was as if he had rotting meat in his teeth, plus he followed certain words with a fine spray of spit. But I felt sorry for him because he seemed more afraid than anyone else. I'd thought I was going to be that person, being in a new school *and* a new country, but I wasn't. 'We can swap prep easily,' he said.

I put my tuck box onto the desk, which made a loud creak.

Ivan came in and sneered at us before taking a cubicle on the other side of the room. He had a red mark on his cheek as if he'd been hit.

'Shit. Not you two,' he said.

Before I had a chance to react, a more senior boy – the only black boy in the house I'd seen other than Nelson – suddenly rushed in and twisted Ivan round. Ivan lost his balance and fell to the floor.

'Don't walk away from me,' the senior barked. 'I know it was you. If you ever push Nelson around again . . .'

Maybe he didn't know it yet, but clearly Nelson had someone else looking out for him. I felt strangely jealous, and a little bit alone again.

Ivan was belligerent.

'So what if I did? Why do you care?'

The senior boy glared. His tongue – bright pink against his deep brown skin – darted like a snake’s to lick his lips.

‘Things are different now. You lost the war. It’s not how it used to be, remember? So I’m warning you, white boy.’

And he stole a packet of Chappies sweets from Ivan’s tuck before heading out.

Ivan got up and pushed his shirt back into his trousers.

‘What the fuck are you looking at?’ his voice growled. He marched right up to me, blocking the light from the window while Simpson-Prior slipped back out of the room.

For the first time I consciously registered the murky tanned colour of Ivan’s face, which somehow made him look older, and his curling brown hair that was thick and rich and tinted by the sun conversely giving him boyish appeal. But then camouflage and contradictions were one of the dangers of Ivan, something I wouldn’t realize until it was much too late.

He was waiting, so I asked, ‘Who was that?’

For a moment I thought he was going to get me for earlier.

‘Told me his name is Ngoni Kasanka.’ He smiled instead. ‘Remember it. He’s a bastard. I’m telling you, he’s going to be trouble.’

‘Why was he picking on you? Does he know you?’

‘No.’

‘Do you know him?’

‘No. He’s more senior than us and that’s just the way shit rolls in a school like this, seniors can do what they like to us. We’re just squacks. Bottom of the heap. Don’t you know anything?’

Then the smile disappeared.

‘But I know he’s only doing it because I picked on that Nelson. And I bet he’s already dreaming of being Head of House one day, Head of School if he can – I can tell he’s that sort – and God help us the day *that* happens.’

‘How come?’

Ivan shrugged in a *well-it’s-obvious-isn’t-it?* kind of way.

‘You can’t have a Kaffir running things. It isn’t right. Don’t you see?’

I blushed and shuffled my feet. My father had warned me the merest mention of the K-word was illegal and could send you to prison now.

‘Yeah,’ I said. Anything to make him go away.

‘Don’t say “Yeah”, you sound like a Pom. Open up.’ Ivan pointed at my tuck box and hovered. I did as I was told. ‘Jeez, you haven’t got much, have you? Your folks must be tight.’

He grabbed the packet of biscuits, the tin of condensed milk and the only two bars of chocolate I had.

The school ate all its meals together. Simpson-Prior and I sat with the other eight boys from our study room, and Ivan made sure we were at the bottom two places. No one spoke to us so I spent much of the time gazing round the hall and at the lines of tables with mostly white faces.

Up on one expanse of wall there were wooden plaques with gold lettering displaying lists of Haven old boys, while another roll of honour was headed ‘Brave Boys Who Have Fallen’: *Banatar FG, Burnett House 1973; Fearnhead TE, Forbes House 1974; de Beer WS, Heyman House 1976* . . . In total I counted thirty-seven old boys who’d fallen and never got up again.

As far away as possible from this list was a framed photograph of Robert Mugabe, because all schools and public buildings had to have the new Prime Minister on display. His black face beamed like he’d been caught at the end of a joke.

A spoon came clattering to our end of the table.

‘Hey!’ It was Ivan. ‘What are you two gawping at? We need more bread.’

'*Ja*, more bread, stupid,' the boy next to him echoed, spraying crumbs from his mouth. His name was Derek De Klomp, and he hung on Ivan's every word like a new best friend. He looked to me like a gorilla, with thick black eyebrows hanging like weights and swollen lips that never quite managed to meet.

'Put some spoof into it, Simpson-Prior. *Jislaaik!* You are one ugly baboon.'

The table laughed as Simpson-Prior consciously or subconsciously concealed his buckteeth, his small, sprout-like ears burning pink. So I went, but in the steamy kitchen the African workers stared like I was coming to steal, and then one started shouting something I couldn't understand and waved me away.

When I went back empty-handed and tried to explain, Ivan snatched the plate. Less than a minute later he came back with a pile of thick white slices.

'You've got to put them in their place,' he said.

I didn't know if he was talking *to* me or *about* me.

Later, when we were getting ready for bed, Ivan came to our side of the dorm.

'Kasanka says I have to stop pushing you around,' he told Nelson.

Nelson looked scared. 'I didn't tell, Hascott. Honest.'

'Good. So he shouldn't hear about me ripping up your bed, then,' Ivan went on, and pulled Nelson's sheets and blankets until they were in a pile, looking at me as he did it. When I opened my mouth to say something he cut me off with, 'Relax, Pommie, it's only a bit of fun.'

Simpson-Prior laughed like it was something cool, but if he thought it would win him favour he was wrong, because Ivan destroyed his bed as well.

‘See?’ Ivan said to me, as if that proved he was right. ‘Just a bit of fun. Sleep well, girls.’

At nine exactly our light was snapped off and we were told to get our heads down. Two of the sixth formers, Greet and Leboule, menaced the dorm in the dark for a full ten minutes to make sure there was no talking, Greet knocking a hockey stick against the ends of beds. No one dared do or say anything. They were the top of the school, all-powerful; they could do anything they wanted so we lay still and hoped they’d just go away.

Every morning, in the haze before waking, there was a brief moment when I thought I wasn’t there, that I was far away somewhere else – at home, in England with my grandmother, anywhere. Those were the best moments of the day.

I wrote to my mother constantly, and almost all the letters started with the word ‘Please’.

F O U R

One morning at the end of our very first week we were waiting for Mr Dunn for the start of Geography. He had told us all to go not into the classroom but around the rugby fields and into the bush slightly, over by Monkey Hill, where there was a special rock formation he wanted to show us.

Geography was the only class Nelson and I shared, and as we walked together behind the rest of the class he pointed out what I thought were patches of weed in the grass and told me to step clear of them.

‘Why?’

Nelson bent low and put a narrow finger to something growing the size of a large coin, with two points sticking up.

‘Devil thorns,’ he explained. ‘Watch out for those. Tread on one and you’ll know about it, it’ll go right through your shoe. Hey, look! Lion ants!’

Close by, miniature craters had pockmarked the sandy ground, and Nelson snapped off a blade of grass and gently prodded the edge of one of the indentations.

‘What are you doing?’ I wanted to know.

‘Watch,’ he said. ‘You won’t have seen these in England.’

The tiny grains at the bottom of the hole started to shift. I thought he was making it happen somehow, then suddenly they lifted in a mini eruption and something too quick to see darted out, grabbed the end of the grass from Nelson’s fingers and pulled it down and into the sand. The grass wriggled as it went, as if trying to escape.

'That's so cool.' I'd never seen anything like it.

'*Lekker*, hey?' Nelson agreed with a smile.

'You didn't wait,' said another voice.

I smelled then heard Simpson-Prior coming up next to me. His feet landed too close to the lion ants and filled in all their holes, and Nelson got up and stood back slightly.

Simpson-Prior hovered accusingly, sweating. The brown grass was taking a particularly harsh beating that day, and even though the sky was full of clouds they seemed too afraid of the bullying sun to get in the way.

'I thought you were going to wait,' he said again.

When I didn't say anything he took my elbow and led me a few feet away.

'Sorry about that,' he went on, meaning the yellowing bruise that Ivan and De Klomp had taken turns in kneading into my arm the night before.

I hid my annoyance and made as if it was no big deal. Simpson-Prior had been caught whispering to see my work during prep and everyone in the study room had got a Task for it. As far as Ivan was concerned it had been my fault.

'Hascott's right, we should have been more careful,' I said.

'That's not why he picks on you. He's only like that because . . . You know.' Simpson-Prior checked over his shoulder and made his voice low. '*Jislaaik!* You've got to be careful what you say these days. He's only like that because you're friends with that Ndube. He hates him.'

'Nelson? Why, what's he done?'

'He hasn't *done* anything.' He smirked horribly. 'He's just, you know . . . I don't know what it's like in England but you don't really make friends with *them* here. You will let me copy in tests, hey?'

A bee flew close by and he ducked and swatted like a mad man. Some of the other boys from the class jeered at him.

'I'm always getting stung,' he explained to me proudly. 'Once, when I was eight, a bee flew into our car and stung me five times and I didn't cry.'

'I thought bees could only sting once,' I pointed out.

He paused before shaking his head. 'This one stung me five times.'

Suddenly the whole class erupted into commotion. I thought there were more bees but something rustled through the brittle scrub and I felt it move over my foot. By the time I looked I saw the green markings disappear into the trees. I yelped and staggered backwards into a bush just as Mr Dunn appeared.

'Jacklin!' he bellowed. 'What the hell are you playing at? I said, *No talking.*'

The snake had slipped deeper into the leaves. It moved quickly, tail flicking. Everyone rushed around and talked at once.

'Where did it go?'

'What sort was it?'

'Must be a python,' Ivan declared. 'We get hordes of them on our farm.'

'Or a boomslang. It looked like a boomslang.'

'Hey, Ndube. Catch!' Ivan shouted, flicking something snake-sized at Nelson and making him leap. Ivan and De Klomp cut him with laughs. 'Jeez, it's only a piece of bark, you poof. Do one of your witch doctor dances, that should bring it out.'

All the while no one had noticed that Simpson-Prior was now a few metres away and moving stealthily through the tall grass. He stopped to break off a bit of tree, snapped the end so that it was forked, and then gently stabbed the ground.

'*Eweh!* Check it out,' he called.

We rushed over. He'd pinned the snake down, and we all jumped as it thrashed around, but as soon as Simpson-Prior put his hands to it and picked it up by the back of the neck

it suddenly came over all calm – sleepy, almost, like it had been drugged – and gently coiled its tail around his arm.

Simpson-Prior's eyes glazed. He brought the snake frighteningly close to his face.

'Green mamba.' His cheeks glowed, and in that brief moment the usual drawn, tense expression had gone and he looked brilliantly happy. For no real reason I felt irritated by him, perhaps because for the first time he seemed less afraid than I was, and I wished I could be that happy.

'She's a beauty. And you found her.' He turned to me, and I felt guilty for thinking the way I was about him.

'Is it dangerous?'

Everyone laughed at me.

'Deadly,' Simpson-Prior nodded.

'Jeez, Prior, you are bloody *penga*,' Ivan said. 'Kill it.'

Mr Dunn agreed, but Simpson-Prior pleaded and asked if he could just let it go.

'OK. But take it right out into the bush, as far away from the school as possible. And take that clown Jacklin with you.'

The other boys groaned enviously. I asked if Nelson could come with us but Sir said absolutely not.

Nelson was standing on his own, looking adrift and wilting under Ivan's gaze.

'Please, sir?'

Mr Dunn rolled his eyes and nodded sternly.

'Hurry up.'

Simpson-Prior talked about snakes the whole way. I liked the fact that he was so enthusiastic but at the same time felt sorry for him because it made him even more different from most other boys, and anyone who's different in school will always be a target.

When we were far away, he crouched low and gently put the snake on the ground, readied himself, then leaped back.

The mamba had already disappeared. Simpson-Prior laughed with relief.

‘Did you check? How quick she moved? *Lekker*, man. And you found her.’

I think, though I can’t remember for sure, that it was a green mamba that killed Jeremy Simpson-Prior. Certainly a snake of some kind. But that was much later, when he was a young working man doing the thing he loved in a game park down in the low veld, long after he’d run away because of what we did to him. His death, at least, had nothing to do with us.

‘. . . So I look down and this thing’s going over my foot, and it feels . . . *weird* . . .’

The five-minute warning for Lights Out had rung. Most of the dorm were in their PJs and on beds while I was still buzzing with words tripping off my tongue. I must have told the story four times that evening and I didn’t mind one more in the slightest. Nelson was by my side, and Fairford and Lambretti and the Agostinho cousins listened intently, while Simpson-Prior waited for the part that involved him.

‘. . . and I swear, it checks round at me like it’s going to graze my leg, one-time.’

I was even talking like everyone else.

‘Meanwhile your *machendes* have shrunk to the size of a couple of peas,’ one of the Agostinho cousins heckled.

‘And let’s not even mention the chocolate runway in your gudds,’ Lambretti rabbit-punched me. Everyone roared.

‘Shut up, guys,’ I said.

This was great.

A missile flew across the dorm. A shoe. Ivan was standing by the door.

'You girls stop shouting,' he breathed heavily. 'I could hear you squealing from the top of the stairs.'

Everyone went to their beds but Ivan didn't move.

'You're sounding like a Pom again.'

'Sorry, Hascott,' I said.

'Greet wants tea. He wants *you* to make it for him.'

'Why me?'

He threw his other shoe.

'Because it has to be someone's turn and I told him it should be you.'

Over the last six nights some random boy had been selected to make Greet's tea, and at least three of them had come back crying.

'Get a move on. Two cups.'

My stomach bunched and loosened as I stood up to go. It was a comfort to feel Nelson at my side, coming with me, but Ivan blocked his path.

'Where do you think *you're* going?'

'To help,' said Nelson.

'Greet doesn't want *you* touching his mug. He wants Jacklin. Only Jacklin.'

Greet's study was right at the end of the sixth-form corridor. The gloom seemed to thicken the further I went. His door was open, and as the kettle filled the seniors' kitchen with steam I could hear voices over a watery cassette player trying its best with Def Leppard or Van Halen or someone like that.

When the tea was made I stood at the door and dutifully lowered my head. Leboule was in there too, swinging a bat and practising cricket strokes. Greet himself lay on his bed in the far corner, waving his stick in the air as he broke wind. Above his head, the green and white of the Rhodesian flag clung belligerently and illegally to the wall next to an equally

dangerous poster of a white soldier with the words *Rhodesians Never Die*. It was the only decoration Greet had given his room other than a dozen or so empty Castle lager cans along a shelf instead of books.

A fire crackled. It was January, the middle of summer, but I didn't dare think anything strange about having a fire going.

Greet spotted me first.

'At last.' He pointed towards the mantelpiece. 'Put them there.'

The heat of the fire pushed against my trousers as I got near. The smell of wood smoke was strong. There was something mixed with it, and out of the corner of my eye I could see the red of a pack of Madisons peeking out from Leboule's pocket.

Leboule hit an imaginary six. 'Who are you?'

'Jacklin.'

'First name?'

'Robert.'

'Serious? As in *Rroh-bett?* Like our *grrreat Mist-ah Muga-beh?*' he mimicked. 'Your parents must have hated you. Are you a Pom?'

'I was born in England, but—'

'In that case I loathe you. Get out.'

He turned his back. Defensive shot.

I put the mugs down and turned.

'Wait,' Greet called before I made it. He was holding out his hand. My heart thudded. 'Do you expect me to fetch it myself? Bring it to me, you queer.'

One was a Haven School mug, the other was brown and had a picture of a white family looking over a huge dam with *Kariba* above it and *Rhodesia Is Super* underneath. I'd seen Greet drinking from it before and took it to him. He looked pissed off that I'd got it right.

'Think you're clever, hey, squack? How am I supposed to

take it if you're holding the handle? You want me to burn myself?'

'No, Greet.' A tremor had come into my voice.

'Then hold it. Like this. With both hands.'

The warmth spread into my palms and quickly became heat as Greet teased.

'I'm not thirsty yet, go stand by the fire. Nice and close.' He lay back against his pillow. His stick started to swing again. 'So you're a Pommie.'

'I was, but now I live here.'

'So? You're still a Pom. In what way do you think you're not a Pom, Pommie?'

Of course, I didn't know.

'What are you doing in our country?'

'My dad is attached to the British Embassy.'

'Oh, *is* he now.' Greet gave his best English accent, a cocktail of aristocrat and chimney sweep. 'How very *noice* for dear Papa, being at-'*atched* to the Bri'ish Embassy. Must be a *lekker* job, hey? The Bri'ish Embassy, cor bloimey.'

Leboule fed him laughs.

'So what's wrong with Pommiland? Too much rain for you?'

'Yes,' I said too eagerly, fear making me betray the land I'd been born in and yearned to go back to.

'Place is a mess. You let your blacks get out of control, they're all taking drugs and starting riots and shagging white women, and the government lets them get away with it. I could never live in a place like that.'

'Yes. I mean, no.'

'And now people like you think you can come here and screw our country again. Wasn't Lancaster House enough?'

I didn't know what or where Lancaster House was, just that it wasn't good.

Greet let the silence needle me. A log spat. Sweat was starting to run down my legs.

‘Or does your old man just enjoy African women?’ Leboule wanted to know, swinging the bat towards my groin. Boiling tea spilled over my knuckles. ‘Well? Does he?’

I remembered now that Leboule had been one of the seniors who’d walked by and greeted my father while he was talking to Nelson’s parents.

‘He tried to get a posting in lots of countries,’ was my only defence. ‘Thailand, Singapore, India . . .’

Leboule scoffed. ‘A Kaffir’s a Kaffir, whatever the country. Your old man like the taste of coloured women? Or is it because he’s crap at what he does and can’t hold down a job in Pommiland?’

‘He was in the army once,’ I said, as always hoping it might give me some credibility.

Greet reacted suddenly. How was I to know the things he’d gone through? In those early days how was I to know what a *lot* of people had gone through while the country was being ravaged by war?

The stick stopped and he glared. Even Leboule seemed uncertain. Then Greet got off the bed and came right up close.

‘The British army?’ he breathed. I could smell cigarettes and the beef and cabbage we’d had for supper. His eyes reflected the fire like broken glass in the sun. ‘They’re the worst of the bloody lot. I hate them the most.’

Now I fully expected something bad to happen so I was surprised when he removed his mug from my red and swollen hands. The skin sang merry hell. He took a long sip and I wondered if that was it – he hated me, but I could live with that as long as he let me go.

He put the drink down.

Kneeling, he grabbed the ends of my trousers with his fingers

and pulled. I didn't get it at first; it seemed a bit weird. A moment later the black material was gripping my calves. Pain roared and dug in. I could feel the hairs curl and singe under polyester that had soaked up the heat of the flames like metal. Already the blisters I'd have for days were starting to bubble. Fortunately there were no tears, but they would come later.

Greet stood.

'Now piss off, Pommie bastard. You make shit tea, I'd rather have a bloody black do it.'

Leboule sniped my backside with the bat hard enough to push the air from my lungs. The door slammed behind me.

Before I reached the end of the corridor the sound of Don Henley on cassette was drowned by their own gruff voices.

'We are Rhodesians and we'll fight through thick and thin,' they sang.

'Three six six five, please.'

The handset was black and heavy in my hand. I struggled to keep my voice from cracking. I knew I was breaking all the rules but I had to. I didn't care. I needed to tell my mother what it was like. I needed her to take me away.

The operator made a gentle slap with his tongue – a lazy sound. I made up a picture instantly: a friendly black face, half-lidded and drugged with sleep. As I sat in the lightless telephone booth I kept one eye out of the small window, checking, but the school was dead beneath the moonlight. My legs throbbed.

'The tellyphone exchange is closed,' said the voice. I knew the operator room was nearby, at the back of the kitchens where we weren't allowed, but he sounded miles away. 'The tellyphone exchange is open between six eh-em and nine pee-em, you must try again tomorrow, pliss.'

Tomorrow?

'It's an emergency.'

'Then you must speak with your house mastah. The tellyphone exchange is closed now. From nine pee-em in the evening until six eh-em in the morning.'

'I have to get through tonight. Please.'

He thought about it. 'What is your name?'

Maybe he sensed the desperation in my words, or maybe he'd just had too many boys like me in the past.

'Jacklin. Robert Jacklin.'

'*Manberu*, Rhrob-ett. *Tonana mangwana*.'

'Pardon? I don't understand.'

'I said, good evening, Rhrob-ett. But I am very very sorry, the tellyphone exchange . . .'

The receiver weighed like a brick. A hundred metres away Selous House was hulking in the dark, waiting.

'Mastah Rhrob-ett?'

'Yes?'

'My name is Weekend,' he said, 'and I will be here tomorrow.'

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