

# Notes on a family

**JO-ANNE RICHARDS**, author of local bestseller, *The Innocence of Roast Chicken*, has just released her fourth novel, *My Brother's Book* (Picador Africa). This is an extract

**I** was born on page 23 of my brother's book. On page 52, before the whole world, I betrayed him.

There was so much in between though. So many days plumped by doves roasted on fires, and fruit straight off the tree. Dusty days, doused in heat, that we explored breathlessly and well. Yes, well, you bastard. How could you have crushed all that into fewer than 30 pages?

You don't mention it, but on page 62 I tried to make amends. And again on page 110. And twice more on 243 and 285. No reason you should, I suppose.

My brother hasn't spoken to me for 30 years.

We left Cathcart in the middle of the night. That's the part of my life I remember most clearly — which just shows how differently we turned out. No one told me why we were leaving, but somehow that didn't bother me. I was used to it.

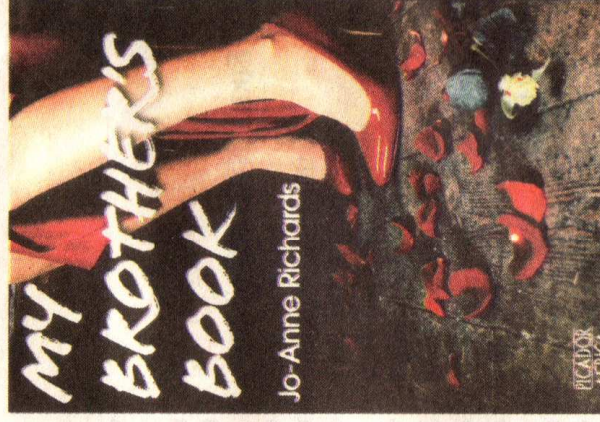
Tom woke me, shaking me with his left hand while he fought Pop over his right shoulder. Pop lifted his arms in the huge shrug he used when Tom nagged at him.

"But you never much cared for Cathcart, Tom-boy. I don't know why ..."

"That's not the point. At least we'd managed to stay here a while. We'd grown ... Lily was settling."

"It's just a village, Tom. A tiny outpost in a drought-ridden province of an old colony. The rest of the world is out there waiting for us."

Tom rubbed his arm across his face. It was all flared up with fury, especially around the pimples on his chin. He could never get rid of them,



no matter how he scrubbed at them 20 times a day.

I sat up and yawned. The boy I was crazy about was away in Port Elizabeth swimming in the provincial team. I loved him about as much as I loved Air Force Captain Borman, who was soon to orbit the moon in the riskiest space venture ever attempted. I'd probably never know how it went now — the swimming, that is. Not that he'd have told me. But it would have filtered down from the older kids. Tom would have told me, for sure.

I did like Cathcart, although it was much more hoity-toity than Fort Beaufort. At least in Beaufort most of the kids spent their time trawling the Kat River for eel and mud-fish. They ended up looking about as grubby and grazed as us.

I wonder if you still picture those small towns the way I do. Built by merchants and farmers, Cathcart was set in its ways, its solidity set in the stone of its churches. And yet, it had the whiff of something more. There was hope there, in the ethereal tracery of eaves and pediments. It whispered of a new start where life would be better, where children would grow in sturdiness and their respect of the world.

I wasn't that bothered about leaving though. There was an excitement to new starts, as the settlers of Cathcart had known. Like Pop, I was addicted

to beginnings, to the possibilities that floated like fairies in the veld. If ever you trapped one, grabbing it by the wings as it flew by, it always turned out to be a thistle seed. I still liked them, but they were better before you knew.

I'm fairly sure I was excited. I do remember that Pop gave another of his great shrugs. His shrugs had shaped in me a sense of patience with whatever fate tossed our way. I still believe it was Pop's way of saying we'd be okay, no matter what town we skipped at midnight, or new life we plunged into. He was wrong, of course. That's what you'd say. Yet I believed him.

You were always such an intense boy, your battle against teenage tears waged over dry cheeks and aching throat. I wonder why you took that move so hard. You never fitted in, in Cathcart. If you'd been a hotshot at rugby or cricket it might have been different. But your awkward lope never suited you to the heroic sportsmanship of small-town life.

The night air was buttery, thick with spring, smeared with stars. Pop tucked a blanket around me as I slid across the bench seat.

"The bikes, Pop. I don't care about the other stuff. Please bring the bikes."

Pop placed a finger across his lips. He and Tom wheeled the rattly bikes almost noiselessly around the side of the Grosvenor. We'd spent the last year there among the travelling salesmen and the boarders who worked in the banks and the post office.

I watched him carry out the precious transistor. He went back one more time for Tom's pellet gun and my dictionary and scrapbook. That was okay. Now I was happy. I didn't care much for all the other stuff.

We'd become rich when we left Fort Beaufort to come here. Pop had arrived piled with gifts. He'd been away, as usual. But this time he'd come back with bikes and toys, bell-bottoms for Tom and a daisy-covered handbag for me. All that stuff, pouring down on us like a thunderstorm in summer. And now Pop free-wheeled the bakkie down the hill, leaving it all behind us.