

ONE

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 thirty 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 thirty 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 twenty 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 mudfish. 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 sportmanship 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.

The engine choked itself awake when we passed the town hall. It was the last time I'd see its bell, smuggled off *The Orient* when it was wrecked off East London. Miss van Rensburg told us that in history class. The last time I'd see Windvogel, which we climbed nearly every afternoon to the caves where the big boys could smoke. The last time I'd see the Royal, where we'd ordered Hubbly Bubbly while Pop had a toot ...

Just before we reached the main road, Pop jerked to the side of a road. An old Xhosa man was walking into town. He was the only sign of life in the village, except for the woof of a prowling dog.

"Have we got any money left?" Pop asked.

"We've only a couple of bob, Pop. Please. It's all we've got." Tom held a hand over his pocket. "Give it to me."

Tom handed it over with the sliver of a shrug. There was no use arguing. Pop dropped from the truck and leapt over the furrow that would carry the floods when the rains finally came.

"*Molo, Tata*, how are you?"

The old man gazed into the distance, his beard jutting fiercely in front of him. "*Molo*, Master. I am fine. Is Master fine too?"

"I am also fine, *Tata*. Life is good. I would like you to take this home with you. Spend it on your family because God has been good to me. He has given me a truck and these two children, both strong as yellowwood saplings when the rains have fallen."

"*Inkosi kakulu*, Master. My grandchildren will eat well today. God has been good to me today, through you."

Pop sprang back into the bakkie. Turning to Tom, who was ignoring him, he slapped him on the shoulder and laughed.

"My zun, my zun. My beautiful boy. What a glorious life."

Tom said nothing, but his body softened a little. I think he'd given up. When Pop was like this, there was no use fighting him. Leaning his arm along the back of the seat, he made room for me to sleep. I dozed between Pop's warm tummy and Tom's firm side. After a while he must have thought I was asleep because he said: "Why, Pop?"

"Why what, son?"

"Why did you play those guys? We aren't in the same league as the doctor and the chemist."

"Don't ever think that, son of mine. Don't ever consider yourself less than the likes of them."

"But Pop, the stakes were too high. You knew ... knew they were." Tom's voice broke on the "knew". He stopped and cleared his throat.

"But I'm better than they are."

"Well, not this time, you weren't." Finally, I felt Tom's ribs vibrate.

"Too clever by half, aren't you?" Pop reached over me to cuff Tom's cheek. "Everyone can have an unlucky run. Anyway, it's good we're leaving. It's time. The old Grosvenor's about to be knocked down. They're going to build something else there."

I felt Tom nod. "That's not the point though, Pop. It's the way of leaving, without ever asking Lily and me if it's okay. It's always too much or too little with you."

Pop just went on as if he hadn't heard. "And there's talk that some people are against building the new location. Cost, of course. It always comes to that, doesn't it? Always makes good men argue bad."

"Ja, Pop, I heard, but I'm talking about us . "

"If they don't build, they'll have to send the 'surplus' Africans back to the Transkei. Do you know what that means? The ones without work. Saves building schools, I suppose, to have a location without kids. Come on, Tom-boy, I'm not a political man, but we don't want to be mixed up in a thing like that."

Tom didn't reply. There was silence before Pop spoke again.

"It makes you strong, you know, Tom. You're strong and you're brave and I know you'll get on in life. I'm not a rich man - not often anyway ..."

"Ja, and usually not for very long . " Tom laughed out loud now. Thank goodness. Oh, thank goodness.

" . Ja, Mr Too Clever. When you're right, you're right. But the thing is, I don't know how to be another kind of man. So perhaps that's all I can give you to get along in life. That, and the presence of something greater than us .

"And if I say to the mountain

*Move, cast yourself into the sea,
And believe it will come to pass,
It will come to pass.
For eye has not seen,
Nor ear heard,
Nor heart felt,
What God has prepared
For them that await on Him."*

You joined in then, I'm sure you did. You always said you didn't believe in God, and certainly not Pop's kind of God. But I remember feeling the flutter of your breath as you joined his refrain:

*"In God do I live, In God
do I love, In God do I
breathe, In God do I
move, In God I am."*

It was light when I woke. We had already passed through Fort Beaufort and were waiting to cross the narrow bridge on the Adelaide side. The moment is as clear to me as it was then. You would say that's an illusion; that I've recreated it as I think it must have been. But you'd be wrong. I remember all of it.

The mountains were a blue smear, still clutching the last of the night. Pop rolled down the window, breathing deeply. The morning was sharp, tangy with orange-blossom from the citrus farms.

"Nice Chevvie," Pop said as we waited for it to cross the bridge. We rattled over the bridge in our turn, and on through thorn trees burnt brown and dusty by drought. Rising and falling through the kloofs, we smelt the khaki tang of *droog my keels* and *suurbessies*.

"Where are we going?" That was me. You probably knew better than to ask.

"Wait and see," said Pop.

That journey was the beginning of the best times. But also, I'm sure you'd remind me (were you ever to speak to me again), the beginning of the end of childhood. The *rooigras* tinted the brush pink. And before the sun rose thick and heavy, Pop slammed his foot on the reluctant brake.

"Look, my children. Every day we are granted at least one thing that makes us happy to be alive. This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it."

Flattened against the sky, a kudu stood to survey his kingdom. Horns thrust towards heaven, he lifted one hoof then the other, before tossing his head and trotting across the road and out of sight.

Pop was trying to give you something that day, Tom. I wonder if you grasped his sanctified little offering. He didn't ever have much to give, but he was generous with what he had.

The heat dropped roughly across us before we reached Bedford, where it seemed we were to stay. They were working on the road again, so we took the detour past Malangskraal and came in on the Grahamstown road.

We rounded the bend past the railway station. The village erupted from the land with no scattered forethought of homestead, shop or shed. On one side of the road, cows tugged at sweetveld. On the other, shops and houses proclaimed the town centre.

Descending into a still drowsing Donkin Street, we drew up outside the Bedford Hotel, its batwing bar doors closed to passers-by. Somewhere, a bell pealed an invitation to Sunday worship.

"I'm really hungry, Pop," I said.

"Shut up, Lily," Tom said. "There's no money left. It's no good whining about it." But he said it in a quiet way. I could tell he wasn't really cross with me.

Pop waved his arm like he was about to bow. "What? Princess Lilibeth is hungry? Well that shall not be. Enter, my Princess. Enter your castle and you shall eat all that your royal stomach can bear."

"Don't tease her, Pop," Tom said. "She's only ..."

"I am not," I declared, before he could say what I thought he was about to say. I was very nearly a teenager. He knew that very well.

"Tom . "

"It's not fair, Pop . "

"Tom . I was here last week."

"Oh."

"We're paid up for two nights - dinner, bed and breakfast. So now, my beautiful children, we can eat." "And after that, Pop?"

"Oh, ye of little faith. Tom, I'm astonished at you."

"I'm only asking because of Lily, Pop. What'll happen after the two nights?"

"My zun, my zun, life is amazing. I have an idea or two. But let's first eat and explore. Lilibeth, your practical brother is right about one thing. We have no money for lunch, so eat enough to last till supper."

We stuffed our faces on eggs, bacon and baked beans on toast. I was crazy to explore, but we had to unload our stuff into the hotel Annexe, where the boarders stayed. Our neighbour's name was Willem. He was a teller at Barclays and looked a bit like Paul McCartney, even though he was Afrikaans and his teeth stuck out a bit. It came to me that I might have been wrong about my kindred spirit being a provincial swimmer in Cathcart.

We wandered around Bedford, cool under its tent of jacarandas. I liked that it had dirt roads. Not everyone knew this, but they were much better than tar. You could kick the dust into clouds that stuck to the Sunday skirts of the lah-di-dahs walking by. And when it was really hot, the roads couldn't melt and glue themselves to your feet.

Bedford was much *larnier* than Beaufort, and maybe even Cathcart. There were at least four churches, and it had a tennis club as well as a gentleman's club. It had loads of the usual houses, with curly, corrugated roofs over stoeps. But it also had grand double-storeys, with sash windows looking onto balconies and downstairs stoeps. It even had new houses, with hedges and stone walls.

"I had some luck here," Pop said as we wandered past the old prison. "I found some fine old pieces in the location. And I have a fair idea that's not the end of it."

If you asked Pop what he did, which people sometimes did, he would say that he did and thought many things. If you pushed him, he would say he was a traveller and an adventurer.

But I knew that he bumped his V8 across the length and breadth of the Eastern Cape, swapping old yellowwood for nice new pine and melamine. It was tough work. He even said so himself sometimes, but that somebody had to do it. He laughed while saying it, though, to make less of it. Pop wasn't full of himself.

I was proud of him. The one time we'd gone with him, I'd seen for myself how happy he made people. Finding some old kist that had been palmed off on a coloured auntie by her Madam, he'd swop it for a lovely new chest of drawers. Not only that, he'd give her five bob as well. Those aunties loved my Pop. They'd feed us all tea and *koeksisters* before we could ever be off to the next house.

"I'll take as much as I can to Port Elizabeth tomorrow. That should set us up for a while, oh my son the worrier." Pop paused to point out a bird with a really clumsy way of flying. A something coucal. I wasn't listening. I think he just wanted to change the subject.

"So you knew we'd be leaving, even before last night."

"Since I seemed to be having a run of luck, I thought I should take advantage ... and that wasn't the end of it. This drought has brought misfortune. But when God strikes a blow to some, he makes sure it brings fortune to others."

"To you, you mean." Tom nudged Pop, who dropped into his fighting position.

I remember that moment so clearly. You were laughing, fending off Pop with the flat of your hands. You never would make a fist, no matter how often Pop tried to spar with you. The afternoon buzzed, smothered in jasmine. A Knysna lourie croaked frog-like from the bougainvillea in the park. That time we spent in Bedford, Tom, when Pop could still charm you into childhood, was the time I loved best of all.