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ABSTRACT

Molla's Music is a novella about Maureen (Molla), a white Afrikaans woman born in 1935 in Cape Town, who faced poverty and abandonment before apartheid and who, during apartheid, faced the choice between an unwanted pregnancy with a married man, and a career in music funded by the father who had betrayed her.

Maureen is introduced in three sections with very different voices in each. In the first section she is depicted in the context of being cared for by a single mother with severe post natal depression. The short chapters and long sentences reflect the naivety of the subject, whose unfiltered observations allow the reader to bear witness to the traumas that dictate her character later in life. She was so ashamed of her poverty, her father's abandonment, and her pregnancy, that she hid all memories of her past from her children and grandchildren and almost managed to die with all her secrets in tact.

The second section becomes more sophisticated with longer chapters. The reader is guided through the fifties by a young adult whose adolescent memories inform the events that unfold over a mere two days. Finally, the last section consists of only one chapter, but it reviews an entire life. It is written in the first person, revealing the identity of the narrator.

Maureen taught herself piano before school. Her father played the violin and her dedication to music seems to be a mechanism for connecting to him and what his absence from her life represents. It is an absence that eludes consolidation until her death.

Molla proved to be such a gifted child that she skipped two years of school and took on music as an extra subject until matric, but financial strain and the shackles of patriarchy limited her options and only after years of working, does she apply to the UCT college of music. She inherits a piano from her landlords, who are evicted during the implementation of the Group Areas Act of 1957. In the years after that, playing piano becomes her private liberation practised in plain sight, on the only heirloom that persists from her past. When she dies, her granddaughter has a heritage that beckons to be resolved and remembered. She does not play the piano she inherited from her grandmother, but starts to investigate its past.

In the course of *Molla's Music*, I explore themes of Afrikaner identity, and question modes of being for white Afrikaans women in South Africa today. By offering an intimate depiction of an individual's search for meaning, while negotiating the forces of Apartheid and patriarchy, especially as a confluence of forces, I hope to gain clarity with regard to my own questions about identity.

KEYWORDS

Afrikaner, Identity, Cape Town, Apartheid, Historical Fiction,
Creative Non-fiction



MOLLA'S MUSIC



Vir Ouma Mollie



ALLEGRO VIVACE (G MINOR)

1

Ouma recited 'Winternag' to Molla and washed her pink baby body in a pale, speckled basin. The door to the AGA stove was left open to fight against the cold that seeped up through the cement floor, all the way from Black River. 'O koud is die windjie en skraal.' This child was also too slender. The stove embers danced in the baby's eyes as Ouma tickled her belly. Too flat. The water giggled on tin as she dangled her over the basin. The sound of newspaper from the corner of the room where the candle lit Oupa's reading interrupted them. His socks, propped on the log basket to catch some heat, had holes in them. She would get to that tomorrow. His polished shoes soaked up their shine in the heat of the oven in protest of the dust that collected every day walking to the Post Office. The newspaper was that morning's. His foreman let him take it home at the end of the day. Every night he shrouded himself in it. Germany had removed citizenship from Jews. The Representation of Natives Act was passed, abortion was legalised on medical grounds. She swathed the child in linen.

It would be another two years before Molla's first real memory, the only memory of her father and the one she would cling to in secret amid the silence that surrounded him for the rest of her life. Only fragments of this early time remained, not as memories, but as a prelude to that first memory when they came to visit for Christmas.

Until then it was just Molla and Ouma and Oupa. Falling asleep meant being close to Ouma's skin that became clammy and heated under blankets. By the time of her first memory it had become her habit to grab Ouma's hand and put it under her cheek as a pillow. And Ouma's fingers took the hair out of her face in the rubbing way she had of touching. Mornings were made of stretched soaks in an aluminium tub on the back stoep to play with waterfalls and bubbles from a jam jar. Ouma was the cry when she fell, and Ouma's were the hands that

lifted her from her afternoon nap to laze on a bedpan in the sunned cement of the kitchen step, peeing into wakefulness.

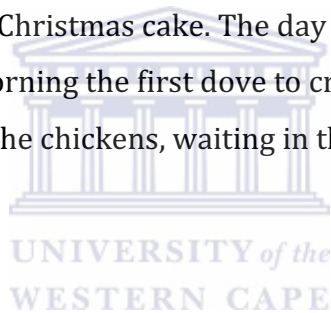
The dust yard was bountiful with granadilla winding up the fence between them and the Van der Merwe's. The Van der Merwe siblings were older and stuck their tongue out when they caught her searching for chameleons in the fence. When they found a chameleon they'd put it on each other to see it change to the colour of their clothes, but she liked to watch it walk on the vine, eyes turning and skin swarming until, if she was lucky, its tongue would shoot out to some insect she hadn't even seen. Maybe if she were a chameleon she would choose to just be green. There was a big lemon tree that seemed to always have lemons. The water of her morning bath was emptied beneath it. Ouma raked all the dead leaves in the garden to its trunk and Molla heard things move underneath when she watched Ouma pick the biggest and yellowest lemons for their suurlemoensap. There was a guava tree, still her favourite smell. A fig tree that brightened their meals over December. Sprawling pumpkins and squash on the hot sand, and a wall of mealies along the fence to the Begley's. Chickens lived between the house and the mealie fence and she would sit with them for hours among the eggs and the feathers and the droppings, and imagine having a beak to eat with.

There was one photograph of her parents. On the morning when they came to visit she knew their faces because she had studied it every day. It was pinned to the wall right behind the piano. Once she climbed on the open keys to see better and her shoe chipped the lid. So now she knew to stand on the stool and she could see them well enough. They were standing in front of an arch of small white roses. There were fallen petals at her mother's feet that turned in towards each other, one knee bent over the other, both of her hands on his elbow. Her smile seemed to have only just looked up at the camera. But he looked out of the photograph straight at Molla with both eyes, hands resting in pockets of pants that creased in a straight line down the middle of each leg to feet that pointed out as much as the corners of his smile.

At night Oupa would name them before they ate their broth. Molla sat on the piano bench and Ouma and Oupa on opposite ends of the square table. They held hands as he ended off with: 'We pray for Chris and Frieda, Priscilla and Karen, Lord keep them safe'. She could not pronounce those last two names so

she would call her sisters Lallie and Kallie when she sat in the chicken coop pretending that they were there with her. Every morning as soon as Oupa left for work Ouma played the piano, still in her nightdress. Sometimes she and Molla practised the songs they would sing for her sisters if they came to visit: 'Hasie hop, hasie hop, hasie hop hop hop' or 'Jy in jou klein hoekie, en ek in mijn'. She would see a star-filled blackness in the shape of a square where she sat in one corner and her sisters waved at her from the other.

The week before her first memory, Ouma started baking buttermilk rusks thick as bricks and gave her one straight out of the oven to put butter on and she wasn't allowed to touch the rest as they dried on a sheet of newspaper with the front door and the back door open. Ouma even baked a Christmas cake and sent Oupa and Molla to the bottle store. When they got there Molla had to wait outside because no children were allowed in a bottle store and then Oupa came out with a half jack of brandy for the Christmas cake. The day before, Ouma ironed their Sunday clothes. The next morning the first dove to croon woke Molla up and she spent the morning without the chickens, waiting in the front yard.



They arrived with dust on their shoes, but she recognised her Pa among the other men in the street by the hard lines down the front of his pants, just like in the photograph. He was carrying a suitcase in one hand and a long box over his shoulder. Behind him trailed a woman with a child on her back, and holding the hand of a girl who was taller and skinnier than Molla. For a while she thought of hiding. Then she thought of calling Ouma. She was sitting in the shade of the stoep and they hadn't seen her. For the first time she wondered if they had a photo to recognise her by. Did they also pray for her at dinner time?

When he opened the gate, Ouma heard the sound and came out. Molla hadn't realised that Oupa had been sitting behind her on the stoep all the time until he said 'Heito mannetjie! Is this the time to arrive?' and laughed in the way he reserved for oom Danie and the boys who sometimes came over to play cards with him on the front stoep when they would carry the kitchen table out, and Oom Naudé who worked at the brewery brought a crate of Lion Beer. He stood with his hands on his hips while Molla stayed in the shadows in the corner of the stoep and couldn't move. She watched as Ouma ran out to help Ma with the gate and Oupa took the suitcase from Pa and everyone kissed everyone and Ouma cooed over Kallie and she couldn't hear what Ouma and Ma were humming to each other while Oupa and Pa slapped each other's backs. Lallie was the only one who saw her in the shadows and kept staring at her.

When Ouma said 'Molla, come greet your parents,' she realised that everyone was already looking at her, not just Lallie. 'Molla?' She walked to Ouma's legs and told herself not to hold onto them.

'Hallo Pa, Hallo Ma.'

'My magtag Molla! Look how big you are! We're going to have to put a brick on your head', Pa said as he swung her onto his shoulders from where she saw the world as a taller person than she'd ever even imagined being.

Priscilla was still looking at Molla with her soup-bowl eyes burning her cheeks red. Ma was busy taking Kallie off her back while keeping a dummy in the toddler's mouth. It was one of those difficult things that only Ouma would do: carry and hold and open and close. Mammie's pencil legs almost tripped when she turned around to greet the daughter she last saw as a baby, one month after Priscilla was born and she didn't have enough milk for both of them and Chris's mother telegrammed that she had arranged for a wet nurse in Cape Town and Chris brought Molla down while Frieda stayed behind in Aliwal North and a few months after Chris came back, Frieda found out that she was pregnant for the third time.

The lines of Frieda's lashes blocked her eyes and Molla followed her mother's gaze to the straps of her sandals over brown stockings. When Mammie looked up it was straight into Molla with eyes that were already shiny. The warmth from Molla's cheeks spread all the way to her ears.

Later she had to share her piano seat with Priscilla at the table for dinner and this time the prayers were a thanks for the whole family being together. Her Ma sat next to Ouma while Pa and Oupa each had their own side of the square table. Kallie was already in bed. She noticed that Lallie and Ma smelled the same and wondered if she smelled different. It made her cross that Ouma had let these people come into her house.

After dinner she discovered that the long box Pa had been carrying over his shoulder was a violin case and that she wasn't allowed to touch any of the wires. Priscilla and Molla were scooted off the stool for Ouma to play the piano. Pa stood next to Ouma with his violin in the air just so, and Molla stood on the other side to turn Ouma's pages taking care to make sure that the book hid the chip in the wood where she banged her shoe the time she tried to get too close to the photo. It was always Molla's job to turn the pages and she looked back to see what Priscilla thought about it, but Lallie was sitting on Ma's lap, sucking her thumb. Ouma never let Molla suck her thumb.

When the singing started, Pa's violin made their songs sound wider. The whole room became bigger and even Oupa sang so that she could hardly hear Ma and Lallie and Kallie. 'Jy in jou klein hoekie, en ek in mijn.'

Afterwards everyone helped to make a big Christmas bed on the front stoep with blankets rolled up into long pillows while Oupa and Pa each had some Lion Beer that Oom Naudé had brought over especially the day before. Molla was told to sleep between Ma and Lallie, but she woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of an animal growling next to her. She knew with a fright that it was a lion who would hear her heart throbbing all the way to her neck and come to eat her. So she held her breath until she realised that it was only Pa snoring. She wondered if Ma and Pa would be angry if she climbed back in bed with Ouma and whether she'd be able to make it all the way through the dark kitchen on her own.

It was almost as scary to walk through the kitchen, as it was to walk to the outhouse before bedtime. The tree next to the outhouse looked like a giant Egyptian Goose from Observatory commons with its duck tongue pointing at her out of its open beak. But the kitchen had its own monster in the oven where the dying embers glowed in cat eyes out of the stove handles like St George's dragon curling in waiting on the floor. She decided to brave it anyway and heard Ma say 'Molla?' just as she saw the dragon in the stove and lost her voice. She crept past the piano where the picture of her parents that always gave her so much comfort was now less powerful than the flesh and blood family snoring on the stoep.

When she got to her normal bed, Ouma already smelt of sleep, but put one hand out for Molla to lay her head on, and dragged the hair out of Molla's face with the other. It was the first time that Ouma had ever been asleep before her.

She woke up to the sound of chatting in the kitchen and the smell of toast. She knew everyone by their voices and the sounds they were making.

Pa was scraping coals out of the coal room, 'It's almost empty in here, Ma'. Ouma was flipping slices of bread with a spatula on the stove, 'Ja toemaar. Petrus is bringing more later'. Mammie was squeaking a chair with either Kallie or Lallie or both on her lap, one of them hitting a spoon on the table. Oupa was turning the pages of his paper in the corner, feet propped on the wall to catch a breeze as usual.

Their breakfast was marmite toast with a treat of grilled cheese on top and even some suurvy konfyt that Ma brought all the way from a train stop in Hermanus. The cherry on top was that today their rooibos tea had milk in it that the Dippenaars, whose son worked on a dairy farm, brought over just yesterday. Ma said Kallie was too young for tea and too old for bottles, but Ouma just ignored her. She took Molla's old bottle out of the back of her clothes shelf and gave it to Kallie right on Ma's lap. Everyone was on the front stoep, Pa and Ouma and Oupa, while Molla was showing Priscilla how to play the piano.

Not that she knew how, but she had been watching Ouma for long enough and maybe if she pretended to teach Priscilla then Lallie wouldn't realise. When she played with all of her fingers, it sounded almost right and Priscilla's pudding-bowl eyes got even bigger. Then Molla showed her with one finger 'See, like this', and it sounded even better then. She reached slowly for the right sound and each note sounded either close or far away from the one she was playing, either one of the black notes which were just a small distance from the white notes on either side of it, or one of the white notes, which all felt the same distance from each other. It was a fun guessing game and it was easy when she tried to play 'Stille Nag'.

'Now you try, Lallie.'

'Nee wat, show me some more first.'

Outside Pa was talking about how Marais refused to speak any English after the Boer War even though he was educated in London and from a Cape English family. Ouma was saying something about how one could never understand a clever man like that without at least having lived in his times. But Oupa interrupted with 'No. Ag man. He was co-opted by these Nationalists; let's just remember him for 'Winternag', which is really the first Afrikaans poem ever. Did you know that, Chris?'

Molla heard that sound of adults talking. It sounded like they were talking in a big room like when she fell asleep on Ouma's lap while everyone was still catching up the night before, but Molla didn't hear when they stopped talking. They heard the music from inside that could not have been by Ouma because she was sitting right there on the stoep. Pa and Ouma got up to have a look. Ma stood behind them, but she was so short that their shoulders were in her way.

When Molla did see them she froze. Priscilla ran through Pa and Ouma to Ma's legs and Molla was left looking at their gaping mouths.

'Oulik, Molla!'

'Sjoe, Molla. Was that you?'

'My mens,' said Oupa from the stoep.

'Where do you learn so fast? Come, let me show you.'

Ouma sat next to her on the stool.

'See, this is middle C. No, with your thumb. Daar's hy.'

'Let's play together, Molla.'

Pa took out his violin from the big black case and they spent the whole morning singing all over again.

'I saw Three Ships!'

Pa's violin danced swallow swings around them and although Oupa stayed outside to speak to his old colleague Petrus who came by to deliver the coal, they did not stop singing song after song, as Ma held Molla's shoulder and Ouma let her try a note here and there, and Pa asked her to do a solo, and Lallie laughed at Kallie who also tried to join in from Ma's hip, clapping her hands. They didn't stop until Oupa came in with: 'Now are we now never going to have lunch again?' and

everyone burst out laughing that they hadn't even thought about the pumpkins from the back yard that needed peeling or the chicken (one of Molla's favourites called Daphne) that lay in the clay pot on the coals in the stove.

When she woke up from her afternoon nap there was no chatting in the kitchen. Ouma was packing Molla's clothes out of the little basket where she usually kept her potatoes and onions. She put two vests on top, and one cardigan on the bottom shelf where Molla could reach it. Molla didn't catch Ouma crying because Ouma knew the breath of the sleeping child from that of one just wakened.

Chris had been ready to let Molla go back with them to Cape Town, but then Frieda started crying again, like she had all those months after Molla was born and Oupa decided that she sure was no mother if she didn't want her own children.

'But we can't give a child to a mother that doesn't want her.'

Chris walked his shoes dusty again out ahead of Frieda and Ouma tried to hug Frieda's skinny shoulders, but it was as difficult as kissing a baby porcupine. She managed to smile for Lallie and Kallie who waved and waved all the way down the road. Inside Ouma found Oupa scurrying for his paper.

'She just has that big sadness of some people, Leon. Like Marais. Try to understand her, for your son's sake.'

'Did she also have malaria and become addicted to morphine? That's no woman that.'

So when Ouma went in to unpack the basket she had prepared on her son's instructions that it was time for his daughter to live with them in Aliwal North, she was thinking how grateful she was that his wife was too weak for three children to look after because it gave her at least one to teach the piano to.



Maureen with her father, Chris van der Horst before she went to live with Ouma Daphne. Frieda is hiding from the photo behind Chris. Her arm is visible as is her dress.

By the time Molla finally did go to live with her mother, Ouma had had more time to prepare and packed a book of Christmas carols she had bought at the church bazaar. It was the newest thing that Molla had ever seen: a shiny cover of snow falling on a dark house with a window-full of light where a family stood around their father who was playing the piano. Ouma and Oupa walked her all the way to the train station and Liesbet, the ticket girl, said she would keep an eye on Molla and Oupa said something to Ouma about the things women have to do in the war these days.

It was Molla's first time on a train with women ticket collectors, but Liesbet made sure she knew how to find the toilet and her way back to her seat, and asked her if she wanted to drink some water. When Molla said 'No, thank you', Liesbet asked how old Molla was and she replied with a flat palm raised and one thumb tucked in, 'On three September when Britain declared war on Germany, tannie'.

Liesbet laughed at that and called Molla a clever girl.

When she got off the train she was looking for Pa by the lines down his pants, but found only Ma whose black sandals looked older over the same brown stockings Molla remembered from Christmas. When Molla asked where Pa was Ma pretended not to hear her and just took her hand to walk her home.

The house was a long walk from the station over red rocky sand and dry short grass, unlike anything she'd ever seen in Cape Town.

At the house Lallie and Kallie were sitting in the front yard waiting for them, but there was no stoep like at Ouma's just a flat step big enough for Kallie and Lallie to sit on with their feet in the red sand.

That first week she found many things were different to life with Ouma. An hour after bedtime a loud siren and all the church bells clanged.

When Molla whispered to Lallie, 'Whatsat?' Lallie's reply was nonsensical: 'It's to tell all the blacks to go to bed.'

At night Lallie screamed in her sleep and woke Kallie who cried every time. Mornings with Ouma on the back stoep were replaced by the girls doing each other's hair with a hard brush that scratched and broke their hair while Ma got their clothes from yesterday off the line in the wind. They ate white mealie pap with a layer of sticky slime on top like a waterproof lining instead of the Maltabele pap that Ouma always made (Ouma said if it was good enough for black people it was good enough for us). All Ma's food tasted of wood shavings and was white, mostly cabbage soup or potato soup or macaroni. The clothes Molla shared with Priscilla were a little too small for them and so thin that they tore if she bent over too far while sitting and Ma had to mend it.

On her first Sunday, church bells woke her when the sun was high and Ma was still in her bed. Lallie and Kallie were already outside. She could tell because their blankets next to her on the floor were swung wide and their shoes weren't at the door. When she got up she looked straight into a woman washing dishes in the house next door who smiled at her with the first smile she'd ever seen that looked unfriendly.

When Mammie still hadn't woken up she joined Lallie and Kallie outside where they'd dressed up with hair that they'd made into plaits for each other like bird's nest on their heads. They'd wound granadilla vines with their small white and purple flowers from the fence around their dresses as a belt and they were dancing around the yard.

'London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down,
London Bridge is falling down, my fair lady.'

When Kallie saw Molla she declared, 'We're going to church, Molla. Are you ready?'

Molla had never left the house without Ouma or Oupa, but maybe Lallie and Kallie did things differently. So as not to seem bashful she said, 'Okay, but I have to go pee first'.

The outhouse was smelly and the last roll of toilet paper on the floor only had a scrap of paper left, but there was an old newspaper that someone had torn from and Molla decided to follow their lead. When she got back out she found Lallie and Kallie in the kitchen, using their fingers to eat out of a cold pot of krummel pap.

'Let's go! Kallie, let me do your sandal strap, there.'

Kallie's ankles were a childish warm under socks that smelt of dank.



Their chins baked in the sun reflected off the wide dust sidewalks all the way to the church. The steeple announced its white pointy pride from three blocks away, *punt in die wind*. The three girls walked hand in hand. Molla felt like she was a long way from home already and when she looked around she couldn't see their fence anymore, just the fences of all the other houses along the dusty sidewalk. A sour washed into her mouth from her tummy, a sour that tasted of the leftover krummel pap that she had scraped out of the bottom of the pot before leaving the house.

As they walked up the church stairs Kallie fell and when she stood up there was blood on her knee. Before she could cry, Molla smiled at her. 'Airie tjêrrie, tjiekerie tjêrrie, airie tjêrrie tjorts!' she said, just like Ouma always used to, before she spat on her hand and wiped the blood off Kallie's knee and then she sommer licked the new drop right off of her skinny leg.

'It kielies!' Kallie snorted.

'Sssssh! We must be tjoepstil!' Lallie said as she led them by the hand, up the rest of the stairs. They crept in through the back door.

Inside everything was pitch black until their eyes adjusted. Then they saw that the ceiling was so high, the dust looked like fireflies up there. They had walked in through a door that had a long aisle of red carpet leading to the front of the church so they sommer sat in the middle of the aisle, right there at the back door. She could smell the freshly baked bread from the bakery opposite and her stomach turned. The church was bigger than the one she and Ouma went to in Cape Town. There was a piano right in front and a woman was playing a song she hadn't heard as the kollekte went around, a red velvet bag with a wooden handle. The dominee shuffled papers on his pedestal.

The other little girls sitting on a pew next to their parents all had flowery ribbons in their hair that made their bobs pop up at the back of their heads. Their Pa gave each of them a shilling to put into the red velvet bag. The little girl at the end of the aisle passed it down to Priscilla sitting on the floor next to her. Lallie went bright red like that velvet bag and gave it to Kallie who took a bunch of leaves from the vine belt around her dress and dropped it into the bag before handing it to Molla with a smile that showed her missing front teeth. Molla took the wooden handle of the bag and gave it to the man on the bench next to her.

‘Hier oom.’

He took it smiling as his wife leaned over to look at Molla. Her nose was squeezed high up between her eyebrows. Molla looked right back at her, but she just kept staring at them with a look that said ‘ag shame, fooi tog’. Molla knew that look, but it was the first time that she felt it on her skin. It was the same look that Oupa gave to the slammie who came to sell koesistes on a Saturday while Ouma went inside to find a shilling for Oom Sadeek’s sweet balls of cinnamon dough rolled in tiny flakes of coconut.

Then the dominee cleared his throat and started to talk. He talked for so long that the air became thin, but Molla remembered to put a hand in front of her mouth when she yawned. She was practising for one day if she met the Queen because then she must have good manners just like Ouma taught her. The dominee was talking about divorce. Molla didn’t know that word so she listened. ‘Divorce is a sin.’ he said. ‘God made Eve from Adam’s ribs because husband and wife become one. We are born in sin and the sins of our fathers are carried over to the third and fourth generation. Let us turn to Mattheus 19:9 for the guidance that is reflected in the laws of our country.’

There was a big rustle of pages as everyone opened their bibles, some black and others brown, some with gold edges and others with little finger-sized curves cut out. Molla saw that the tannie with the nose so high between her brows had lots of bookmarks and dried flowers and underlined parts in her bible as she paged through it to Mattheus as though they grew up together and knew each other from toeka. .

Then the dominee started again. 'Anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.'

Molla remembered that part by old Mattheus because right after that the dominee himself said her name.

'For this reason the Van der Horst family have been placed under sensuur.'

He took a long pause. Straightened his cuff. Straightened the papers on his pedestal. 'This is a fair system. If I were to divorce my wife...'

He said this 'I' the same way he said 'Die Here' when he spoke of the Lord.

'If I were to divorce my wife, I would need to prove that one of us had committed adultery or abandonment and I would lose my position as your dominee immediately. And so with any of you who commit divorce. You will be placed under sensuur and will need to show remorse for a period of time that your children will not be allowed to be baptised and you will not be allowed to attend communion or attend church until you have shown enough remorse. It is with a heavy heart that I announce this sentence on the Van der Horst family. Let our benevolence stretch even towards sinners just as we extend our warmth and goodness to the blacks. No white shall sleep hungry. Let the Lord judge them as he will judge us and may he find us merciful towards our neighbours.'

Molla was thinking how naughty it was of them to be there when the dominee had just told them that they were not allowed to be. Then the tannie next to them said 'Jissis, Willem, can the man not see that the children are sitting right here?'

The second she said 'Jissis', the row in front of her turned around and the rest of her sentence got more and more quiet as she realised she said a bad word in the church. The dominee was still talking, but the tannie's husband whispered in the tannie's ear just loud enough for Molla to hear 'galavant' and 'daai mal vrou'. But before she could figure any of it out there was one helluva Bwaaaaaap Bwaaaaaap and everyone was standing to sing along. Kallie stood happily singing all the wrong words and Molla saw that it was the weird piano-looking thing making the racket that shook up all the ugly words the dominee had said from inside her and brushed them all out the door. One day she would play that piano too, she promised herself, and then the dominee would not be angry that she was

in his church and she could play music to make everyone happy when the dominee got cross.

The kollekte came around again and this time the Oom sitting next to them gave each of the girls a coin to put in it. The tannie held the oom's knee when he did it and smiled at them. That same smile from before. Kallie still took a granadilla flower from her belt that had now closed its bright blue and white face in a jacket of green, and she put it in the red velvet bag along with her coin before picking at the sore on her knee. Molla said Ouma's rhyme in her head, 'See a penny, pick it up, for the rest of the day you'll have good luck'. But the rest of the day was not a lucky day and later Molla decided it must be because the penny was not picked up, but given. Years afterwards, when her father gave her some money it didn't feel like good luck either.

On the steps outside the church the sun blared through the thin clouds and blinded them. Clusters of people gathered to talk about Malan's new party, and how Boers were fighting for the British in a war that had nothing to do with them, and how little rain the farmers had this season. The three sisters were nearly out of the gate when the tannie with the oh-so-high-nose caught up with them and grabbed Molla by the hem of her skirt, tearing it a little.

'Wait, I'll walk you home. Three white girls can't be walking the streets alone like this.'

But she didn't walk with them right away. First she took out her handkerchief and wiped the snot from Kallie's nose. Then she took a comb out of her little purse and brushed the hair out of their faces and tucked it behind their ears, and when she put it back in her purse, Molla thought that now they can finally leave because other people had started staring, and instead of talking about Smuts they started talking about divorce and daai arme kinders. But instead of going, tannie Lettie took out a nail file and cleaned their fingernails right there in front of the people. Molla thought of walking away, but she remembered the tear in her skirt and decided not to disobey this tannie.

When they did walk off Molla's cheeks were as blood red as Priscilla's and Kallie started singing softly.

'Siembamba, Mammie se kindjie,
Siembamba, Mammie se kindjie,

Draai sy nek om, gooi hom in die sloot,

Trap op sy kop dan is hy dood.'

Then tannie Lettie clucked her tongue and began with her questions that lasted all the way home. 'Where is your Ma?'

'Sleeping, tannie'

'Tannie Lettie!'

'Jammer, tannie Lettie' they chorused.

'Why did you come to church alone?'

No one knew the answer.

'I see. When did your Pa leave?' Molla didn't know the answer to this one either, but Lallie chipped in.

'Just before Molla got here and just after Pappa shouted that only crazy women cry all the time and don't want to look after their own children.

'Where did your Pa go?'

'He proolly went to Cape Town. We went there once, tannie. Ag I mean Tannie Lettie. To visit our Ouma and Molla!'

'What else did your Pa say before he left?'

And each time Lallie had an answer for the tannie and Molla thought that Lallie must be very clever to know so many things. When they got home tannie Lettie didn't even knock on the front door. She just walked straight into the bedroom and said, 'Wake up. Your children went to church without you. Not that you're allowed to be there anyway. I'll make some tea. Get dressed.'

For the next half day Mammie sat crying in the kitchen and tannie Lettie listened and listened and boiled more water for tea and left long after lunch time and her husband must have been wondering where she was and Molla's tummy was making noises, but she and Lallie and Kallie stayed out of the kitchen and all the crying.

When tannie Lettie left Mammie said 'It's okay meisies, one day soon I'll take us all to Cape Town.'

And Molla knew that everything would be okay because then she could live with Ouma again and maybe this was a good luck day after all.

Mammie started every day in tears and every day tannie Lettie passed the Van der Horst house on her way home from work. Her work at the library ended before Mammie's work at the dressmakers. She'd call the girls in from their games in the street and tell them to stay at home until Mammie came to make supper.

On the day that Mammie stopped crying, Molla was picking through a pomegranate when tannie Lettie came to check up on them. She'd split it open on a rock under the tree and now she had two open halves with little bits of white skin to peel through to the red beads. Lallie was trying to do the same with hers when tannie Lettie opened the front gate and said 'Nou toe nou, where is Kallie?'

They looked around, but found her nowhere and Molla and Lallie didn't know where she was because she had been right behind them with her snot nose and her missing front teeth the whole time. They split up to look for her, tannie Lettie towards town and Molla and Lallie to the riverbed where Kallie loved to play. Just past the street they heard a helse lawaai at the tracks and saw a train standing still with a bunch of people far behind it. Molla and Lallie ran to the people just as three little girls about Kallie's age ran in their direction and Molla knew that one of them would be Kallie, but then all three ran past them to the road, screaming and Molla saw the little body cracked open on the tracks.

Molla ran away after the other three girls to call Tant Lettie and get some help, Lallie just got down on the tracks to lie next to Karen. The other people were saying things and screaming things and ordering children to stay away and praying, but Lallie didn't hear a word and by the time that Molla came back and tannie Lettie picked Lallie up, all Kallie's warmth had left. Men in uniforms were talking softly to them and telling everyone to get out of the way and tannie Lettie took Molla and Lallie home and gave Lallie a bath in the middle of the day.

Mammie came home from work early saying ‘They wouldn’t let me see her.’

After that day Mammie never cried again. She never mentioned Pa. And when they moved to Cape Town a week later and Molla asked about Ouma, Mammie told her that she was never ever to mention her father’s family ‘under my roof.’



They moved into the backyard room of the Willemse's on 47 Brockhurst Road, Lansdowne. Molla had nothing of her own left to pack except the shiny book of Christmas Carols.

Lansdowne was a very different Cape Town from Ouma's Cape Town at the foot of the mountain and Molla missed Ouma more now that Mammie's face had the same expression every day. Where Ouma lived the sand was hard and tan and smelled of fynbos, but here the sand was white and dry and there were lots of moles that pushed up little mounds and when the wind blew the sand hit your legs to a burn.

In the next-door room lived Tant Sannie and Oom Jan with their toddler Stephan. Stephan crawled around in the chicken coop the way Molla used to do at Ouma's house, and his bottom was permanently brown from the way he'd slide around the yard in a sitting position. Tant Sannie stayed at home to keep an eye on him and on Molla and Lallie. She ruled with a wooden spoon that once broke on Molla's bottom when she put her finger in the dough that was left to rise on the window sill. Tant Sannie was Mammie's friend from school and they smoked long Pall Malls every night and looked out over the back yard. Mammie got a job with Oom Jan at the post office and when she came home she'd twist her wrists round and round. It made her look like a scarecrow the way Tant Sannie also did after she spent the morning kneading dough for their rusks.

She was the baker of the werf so they all had fresh bread twice a week. On baking mornings the dough rose along with the sun and by breakfast time there was bread for everyone. On those mornings Lallie and Molla loved to sit and watch it rise on the stoep, pushing the cloth covering the big pot out into a white boepens with three skinny black legs. When the bread came off the fire, Tant Sannie knocked it out of the pot with one sharp beating of a fist swathed in cloth

and everyone stood waiting as she held it to her apron and cut the entire bread up while holding it in the air like that.

The Willemses lived in the front house and everyone used the same kitchen in their house. They didn't have any children because there was something wrong with Mrs Willemse's tummy, but Mr Willemse had his doves in a big cage next to the chickens and after work every afternoon he'd go sit with them. Afterwards he'd put Molla and Lallie on his knee and bob them up and down like a wild horse and they had to hold onto each other shrieking to keep from falling off as he sang 'Want ek het 'n perd en 'n blinkvos perd met 'n splinternuwe saal, ek klim op my perd, op my blinkvos perd en ek kom om jou te haal.'

Molla liked the wild horse, but the most important thing about living with the Willemses was that they had a piano in their house. It was the luckiest thing that ever happened to Molla.

Mammie couldn't play, but tannie Sannie knew how so when she wasn't baking and washing and gardening and keeping them out of the street while the Willemses and Ma and Oom Jan were at work, she taught Molla and Lallie songs. She even knew 'Hasie Hop' that Ouma used to play and Lallie sang along and bounced like a rabbit all around the kitchen table while Molla played piano. That was how, by the time they went to school, Molla already knew how to count and read from the music book Ouma had given her and the ones Mr Willemse kept in his piano stool.

On the last sleep before school, Molla heard Mammie and Tant Sannie having a long zaan out on the front stoep of their room and the Willemse's back stoep. Molla was already in bed.

'Hoe moet ek maak, Sannie? These children then don't have a uniform. Won't they shame themselves to death if I send them there with their hand-me-downs?'

'Ag wat, Frieda. You'll see. They won't be alone.'

And Tant Sannie was right because the next morning there were so many children who had no uniform that the school decided to abandon them completely until the students' third year, in Standard One.

On that first day, Molla and Lallie walked hand in hand and Molla thought of the time they went to church with Kallie because that was the last time that they were so dressed up. There were no belts of granadilla vines this time, but they had their Sunday dresses on and Mammie had done their hair in French plaits. It was so hot that all the children were barefoot. Miss West showed them their pigeonholes where they could keep their lunch until break time and Molla and Lallie were the only ones who didn't have anything to put in their pigeonholes. But from the first day Molla loved school because Miss West read stories to them and they sang songs together and all the letters of the alphabet were stuck on the wall with pictures next to them.

Molla and Lallie were the only ones who had never heard of V for *violet* or D for *daffodil*. Maybe all the English boys and girls understood what the difference was between Peter's jersey and Jane's cardigan or Peter's hat and Jane's bonnet. There were so many words they didn't know and their first test had a bitter end. Miss West lined pictures against the board and numbered them and then everyone had to write down the first letter of the thing in that picture. The pictures were different to the ones that were next to the letters of the alphabet on the wall, so they had no clues when there was a picture of a blomkool.

Molla had no idea what a blomkool was in English so she asked the girl in front of her 'What do you call that?'

Jessica whispered 'Cauliflower!'

The next question was whether cauliflower started with a C or a K, but by now Molla knew that English words liked to start with a C even when it sounded like they were a K so she decided to tell Lallie because if Molla didn't know the answer then she bet Lallie wouldn't know either.

Just as she was bending over to tell Lallie, Miss West saw her and sent her to the principal's office. Gavin in line two found this so funny that Miss West sent

him with her. And it was lucky because Gavin had been to the principal's office so often that he was able to show her the way. All the way there she wondered what the principal would do to them. Could she be kicked out of school and never be allowed to listen to stories again or sing songs with the rest of the class? Would the principal hit her very hard on her bum and then would Mammie see the bruises and be very angry with her? Would he ask her lots of questions and then find out that she was too Afrikaans to be allowed into an English school? And what should she tell him? Was it better to be a naughty girl who couldn't keep from chatting during a test or was it better to be so Afrikaans that she didn't know the English word for cauliflower? She decided to lie. It was surely better to be naughty than to be an ignorant Boer.

When they got to the Principal's office, which was on the other side of the door to the secretary, both the secretary and Mr Gould were on very good terms with Gavin and everyone knew Gavin was very naughty. They laughed to see him again and Mr Gould even allowed them to sit opposite him at his big desk like royalty. Molla had never felt so grown up. He said that if he ever saw them in his office again he would tie them to that chair over there for a whole day, but he had a smile so Molla didn't believe him.

He also asked Molla something she understood even less. He asked if she was bored in class. She had never been *less* bored. Singing and reading and doing sums and listening to stories was the most fun she'd ever had and she was learning to sound like her teachers who used lots of clever words. They said 'such fun' instead of 'so fun' and said 'help' instead of 'yelp' like Mammie and Tant Sannie who said 'lekker' and 'simpel' for everything and their biggest compliment was to call something 'nice', but Miss West said that only a cup of tea is nice and that there are many other words to describe things. So Molla answered Mr Gould's question as proudly as she could.

'Thank you for asking, Mr Gould. School is such fun.'

That was the last time she was ever in Mr Gould's office. But the next day when she went to stand in line with all the other Class One's Miss West said that she was supposed to stand in line with all the Class Two's.

'Van der Horst! Stand in Mrs Thornhill's line.'

Everyone knew that teachers only ever called your name out in line if you were naughty and all the boys started laughing on cue. Lallie's face looked a little like the day on the train tracks in Aliwal North and Molla knew the scariest part of the day ahead of her wasn't meeting a whole new class of children who were older and smarter. What would happen to Lallie if she wasn't there to help her with words like cauliflower?

Her first lesson in her new class with Mrs Thornhill was dictation. Mrs Thornhill stood at the front of the class and looked much more scary than Miss West. She read a poem out to them that they had to write down in their note books. Molla still had the same foolscap that she had written her Class One exercises in, but all the other kids had big books covered in brown paper with pretty pictures cut out and pasted on them. Molla was given a desk right in front of the class so she knew everyone was looking at her and wondering what she was doing in their class. Mrs Thornhill had a big bush of curly brown hair that bounced like springs as she walked in the front of the class reading out the poem.

'O koud is die windjie en skraal, en blink in die dof-lig en kaal.'

Molla thought of Ouma's kitchen and her place at the table on the piano stool. She wondered what Ouma was doing and whether Oupa was doing better at his cross word puzzles in the newspaper. When they finished writing down the poem, they all had to read and Mrs Thornhill called them up to her desk one by one so that she could mark their dictation. When it was her turn, Molla felt everyone's eyes on her with her bare feet and her old dress and her big Class One note book. Mrs Thornhill peered at her over her glasses and Molla almost didn't think she would be able to walk all the way there and stand next to the teacher with the big hair. Mrs Thornhill read all the way through Molla's copy of 'Winternag' and at the end she drew a big circle in red pen that Molla instantly knew meant she had done it all wrong. Then Mrs Thornhill drew a face inside the circle that had a big smile and crowned it with five stars on the little man's head.

'Well done, Molla! That deserves a Mr Five Star. Welcome to Class Two.' At break time she met Priscilla behind the library stairs where no one could see that they didn't have sandwiches for lunch like all the other children and asked her everything about Class Two.

'Jislaaikit, Molla! Hoe op dees aarde do you know all that stuff?'

Molla answered quickly so that she would still seem as clever as Lallie thought she was 'Because Ouma taught me how to play piano when I was still small.'

Lallie nodded knowingly, remembering how Molla taught her on Ouma's piano that Christmas when they still had a Pa.

Before the end of the year, Molla would be moved up another year, this time to Mrs Scott's group in Standard One. Mammie was very upset because this meant that Molla needed to get a school uniform already and she was hoping to have another two years to save up for one. But women from the church came to their house with a mealie meal bag full of old school clothes and Molla could try them all on until she found one that was just a little too big so that she would have time to grow into it. Tant Sannie washed the smell of moth balls out of it and Mr Willemse gave her a brand new matching blue ribbon to put in her hair. Lallie didn't get a ribbon and spent the day with Stephan in the chicken coop until Tant Sannie went to fetch her and told her that if she worked very hard she would have a brand new blue ribbon of her own when she went to Standard One.

Molla still got all her answers right and when she didn't know the English word for something, her classmates often didn't either. Mrs Woodward kept Molla back after class one day and asked her what her favourite subjects were and what she liked to do at home so Molla told her about how she played piano with Tant Sannie and how sometimes she struggled to find the right English words for things. After that Molla skipped every second sums class and went to piano lessons with Mrs Allan instead. Every afternoon she played 'school school' with Lallie and taught her how to write and read and do sums and when Lallie wanted to play outside with Stephan, Molla would go into the Willemse's house and practise the exercises that Mrs Allan had given her.

Mammie still didn't talk about Pa or Ouma or Kallie, but sometimes when she was smoking long Pall Malls on the stoep with Tant Sannie after Molla and Lallie had gone to bed, she laughed in a way that sounded like she was crying.



Molla and Lallie on the Willemses front yard with the pink hibiscus behind them. Molla, the eldest, is the shorter on the left. They were born nine months apart.

LARGO (C MAJOR)

1

In 1957 South Africa ignored the UN General Assembly call to reconsider its apartheid policy and introduced the Group Areas Act to Cape Town for the first time. Elvis Presley's *Loving You* opened in the theatres and Frank Sinatra released *Close to You*. A twenty-two year old Molla woke up in a dark Cape Town and thought of Chris Mouton.

Her ears always piqued when she heard her father's name, Chris, on an aeroplane. But that day, when she turned around to see who it was, the stranger looking at her was already smiling straight back. She couldn't wait to see him that day. She'd look at the reach of his fingers (his middle and index bent towards each other from writing so much) as he flipped an album in the stereo and he asked whether she'd heard this new swing, his lips kissing the cigarillos he smoked, and the way the two arcs of his hairline matched his eyebrows. She knew it would be a hot day because there wasn't a breeze to be heard among the many tin roofs around them and the first glow of daylight was orange with the smoke of last night's fires still in the air around Table Mountain. Its silhouette looked like a medieval castle all the way from the Cape Flats. Lansdowne did not fall within the shadow of the castle, but was close enough to feel its protection.

Molla woke up before Priscilla as usual and walked over the dark yard to the kitchen at the back of the Willemse's house. She stoked the fire in the stove where Mammie had already heated water for tea. She left for the post office with Oom Jan at five every morning. Molla emptied the kettle's lukewarm water into the wash jug. When she got back to the room, Priscilla was already in the outhouse and Molla looked at how neatly Mammie's single bed was made up, blanket folded in a neat square with her pillow on top in the centre of the bed as though she was a guest instead of permanently living in the Willemse's back room seventeen years later.

Molla looked at her own bed, her South African Airways uniform folded on the foot 'n end with her blue pillbox hat on top, silver-winged springbok pinned to the side. Underneath the mattress she'd hid the letter. It arrived in yesterday's mail and she'd spent the night in a half-sleep deliberating it. Dreaming of snakes.

She emptied the jug into the speckled pink washbasin that stood on the dressing table, the centrepiece of the room. The dressing table was the most beautiful piece of furniture they had. It had a white lacquered top in a kidney shape with an oval middle mirror and a swivel mirror on either side, and pinned from the edge hung a pink print of edelweiss all the way to the floor. The dressing table was second-hand, but it was Molla's gift to Lallie and Mammie that year. She stepped out of her nightdress, folded it in under her pillow, left her underwear next to the basin to wash out later, and realised the letter was thanks to a visit to Ouma and Oupa six years before.

At the age of sixteen, Molla had decided that it was up to her to get in touch with Ouma again. Every evening at dinner, she said a silent prayer for Ouma and Oupa just like they had done for Mammie and Pappie all those years ago. Mammie had given up on praying ever since that day that Molla and Lallie and Kallie had gone to church and tannie Lettie walked them back home. Molla used to wonder if Ouma was thinking about her, but Molla never said anything to Mammie. Mammie's silence was an unwritten rule. Lallie kept the same silence. But on errands in the city and every time she got on a train Molla hoped to see Ouma.

One day she realised that nothing was stopping her from going to see her all by herself. The moment landed on her hand like a ladybird. So that Friday

afternoon after piano practice with Mrs Allan, she walked the streets of Observatory until she found the old house on Merrick Street.

The only change was that the low white wall was now completely covered in vines. But she could smell the guava trees and the chickens in the back yard, and the same stone foot path still led through Ouma's veld daisies, vygies and malvas to the house, and Oupa was still sitting on the stoep where he always had, chatting to Petrus like she'd never left.

'My jirre ou Piet, that's mos Molla there. Daphne! Daphne come look who's here!'

Molla didn't cry easily. Between Mammie's refusal to cry and Priscilla's easy tears it seemed rude to cry in her house. But when she saw Ouma she knew that she had taken too long to come back and her throat squeezed. Ouma ran out to her right there on the sidewalk and gave her a hug that made her realise she'd been homesick all this time.

'Kom in Molla, I'll put the kettle on for us, kom in. Toemaar, kom in.'



Back in Lansdowne, Molla dipped her sponge into the basin, listening to the sound of the drops clanking into the bowl and looking at how dark her blonde hair seemed first thing in the morning. She had Ouma's hair. Mammie and Priscilla were dark with thick eyebrows and long lashes. She had almost no hair under her arms and none on her legs, just like Ouma. She hadn't told them at first that she had gone to see Ouma. Any mention of Pa and his family was so taboo Molla didn't even talk about him to Ouma. But she told Mammie and Lallie that she had been to Observatory, and Obs was only connected to Ouma and Oupa in the family's mind, so when she excused herself for lunch one Sunday, they had the good sense not to ask.

Since that day Molla went to visit Ouma every Sunday and she started noticing ways that the house had changed since the post-war years when she last lived there. There was now a wardrobe in the bedroom instead of the shelves their clothes had always been on and there was a brand new fridge in the kitchen right next to the old piano. It still had that old chip on it, but Molla noticed that the photo she loved so much was no longer there. For lunch they'd make a roast chicken with potatoes that they'd pour the chicken fat over and over until it made a hard crust around each brown potato. Or they'd make barley, drenched in gravy, and sometimes they made malva poeding with custard from powder. And while the food was in the oven, Molla played piano for them and sometimes people walking past in the street would stop and chat with Oupa on the stoep until there was nothing left to say and they still stayed standing there listening to Molla play.

It was Ouma who insisted that she take pianoforte and music theory as subjects all the way to matric and it was Ouma who, just two months ago, had told her that she was wasting her time trying to earn money with this new job.

'It's now all very glamorous and all, Molla, but seeing new places only goes so far. With a brain like yours you should have been at university five years ago now.'

They were in the kitchen, Ouma making the household lemon cordial that still tasted just like Molla remembered, and Molla looking for some Sellotape for a new playbook that she wanted to cover in paper.

'There's no money, Ouma. I can't study and do this work.' Molla said, scratching through the basket where Ouma kept old envelopes and scissors and pens.

'Lallie wants to teach and Mammie is still years away from retirement. I can't sommer just do that to them. Nee Ouma.'

Ouma had her head in her wool bag where she kept her other thingamabobs and whatnots, looking for the Sellotape, when Molla remembered the measuring scale on the kitchen counter. That's where Ouma used to keep a ball of thread with needles in it, a paper knife, extra postage stamps, some from nineteen-voetsek, a few pennies and the Sellotape. Sure as hell, there it was.

'Hierso Ouma! How can you forget it's always here!'

'Ag, man! Listen to me Maureen van der Horst. Apply. We'll make a plan, but just apply first,' she said as she left Molla to cover her book and returned to squeezing out lemon after lemon. 'I always did see you as a lecturer. It's a good work for a woman in this world.'

Molla knew Oupa's pension was not enough to support her studies, but a part of her wanted to see if she could get in. Just that would be something to hold onto after a day of serving men in suits their newspapers and drinks. So she did it.

They decided on Rachmaninoff's fourth. After four years of doing no theory, no formal training, she would need to impress them. It was a risky choice, but if she could pull it off she'd be sure of a place. Ouma set the metronome back and forth to challenge and comfort her, but it kept feeling jerky, forced. Every evening she practised at the Willemse's until everyone was trying to sleep, but no one told her to stop. She didn't dare admit that she was applying to university, but it was clear to them that this piece was important to her so they left her to it. At work she found ways to have access to the pianos in the hotels where they stayed. Still, she didn't seem to be getting any better.

On that June morning she sat in the train to the College knowing that if she could do it all over again she would have chosen another piece to play. The campus kept nearing with its red tiled roofs and virginia creeper clad walls at the foot of Table Mountain as though in defiance of her wish to go back in time. When she got off at the bus stop, a parade of lecturers and students in their academic robes marched past protesting the Separate Universities Education Bill. "Universiteite moet vry wees," their slogans read. Right behind the drums a black man walked with his colleagues and looked straight at her. She took his smile to be a good omen and held onto it as she walked into the walnut parquet entrance to Strubenhalm house.

There were only two other women in the queue of prospective students in the hall and they were staring at the flying stairways and ball and claw furniture upholstered in velvets as much as she was, each as ashen as the other. By the time it was her turn to enter the audition room she had managed to quiet her mind. There were only two judges. She sat down and adjusted her seat. It was the same ritual as every Sunday lunch at Ouma's house where her place at the table was still the piano stool. She looked down at her nails that were shorter than her employers allowed. She'd be in trouble for that later when she went to work. She thought of Ouma's hands on the old piano in her kitchen, took a breath, and played.

When she got back out to the bus stop on Main Road, she smelled the wet under her arms and realised that she couldn't remember actually greeting the judges before she walked out.

'Yes, but how did you play?' Ouma asked the next Sunday.

'I couldn't remember a second of that recital if I wanted to, Ouma. We'll just have to wait and see. And when last did you make some lemon juice? Jou boom dra swaar aan al daai suurlemoene. I'll pick them after lunch and then we can start.'

And now she sat in the back room with that letter hidden under her mattress. She looked down at the sponge floating in the wash basin that Ouma said she'd been bathed in as a baby and decided to tell Ouma after all. She didn't have the nerve to write it in a letter. She'd just put it in a new envelope and send it to Ouma as is. She wondered what Ouma would be doing when she got the

letter. Maybe after raking up a round wall of dirt and leaves all around the lemon tree, Ouma would rest the rake next to the shovel on the side of the outhouse, fetch her mail while rubbing her hands clean on her garden apron, and bring the letter to the kitchen table where she'd make some tea before opening it. Then, after the first sip of her dark rooibos she'd take the black ball point that she buys at ABC and rip the envelope in one smooth movement and think that Molla was writing to tell her about plans to visit on Sunday, or maybe that she'd be away on another flight.

Molla took the letter out to read it one more time.

To Whom it may concern

Maureen Daphne van der Horst ID 3509130034080

Application to study at the University of Cape Town College of Music:

Successful

We are pleased to confirm that your application to study at the University of Cape Town has been successful.

You have been accepted for the Bachelor of Music degree and this qualification will take three years to complete full time. Your term will start February 1958.

The University of Cape Town admissions office and Faculty of Music congratulate you, look forward to welcoming you to our student body, and wish you all the best for a rewarding time at our College.

She licked the glue and flattened the seal of the envelope. It tasted like everything was going to be okay. Where there's a will there's a way, Ouma always said. Unless she got bad news at the clinic.

Priscilla walked in, kettle in hand just as Molla was pulling up her blackmail-coloured stockings, careful not to snag them on her now-long-again nails, her letter to Ouma safely tucked into her blue satchel.

‘Hey snipstert! Are you dollying up for Chris today?’

‘Loop speel, man!’

Lallie loved a good gossip, but Molla was not interested today. She had her visit to the clinic in mind and Lallie would know that something was up if Molla even so much as thought about it in front of her. So she changed the topic to one she knew Lallie would love.

‘Do my makeup for me today, won’t you Lals?’

Ever since their month of finishing school, Molla had loved to ask Lallie to do her make up.

Not that it was Molla’s idea in the first place. She was clerking at Syfrets House at the time, imagining that with a little luck she’d become an accountant like her dad who Ouma said worked at Old Mutual. Molla never did run into him in the streets, no matter how much she looked around for his signature hard-ironed pants, not knowing what she would say to him if she did anyway.

The summer that Lallie finished school, news of the bursary to participate in the holiday finishing school at the Rhenish Girls’ Missionary was all over the radio. There would be a talent show competition at the school hall and Lallie convinced Molla to practise for it with her. Lallie’s voice wasn’t great, but with Molla next to her on the piano, she stood a chance. So Molla agreed and she found herself playing Doris Day’s ‘Que Sera Sera’ surrounded by the whole household at the Willemse’s piano every evening.

Molla was usually playing all kinds of serious music alone, but now that Lallie was singing along, the Willemses and Tant Sannie and Oom Jan and even Mammie took it as an invitation to join in, everyone except Stephan who had

graduated from scuffling around in the chicken coop to playing rugby in the street. And deliver commentary they did. Especially Mr Willemse who fancied himself a bonafide musician since his days as pianist in The Sugar Boys Jazz Band that played at the Bromwell in Woodstock.

‘Let the Rah float as you emphasise it, Lallie. It must float! Kay, se RAAAAAAAH se RAAAAAH! Yes! Now imagine that hot potato in your throat, drop your shoulders and push it out from your diaphragm. Yes! Okay start from the top, Moxy.’

Mr and Mrs Willemse called Molla ‘Moxy’, and sometimes she even caught herself telling them a story and putting their first names in there without thinking.

‘You should see those women in Johannesburg, Ria. They wear suits just like men, some of them, and go everywhere without hats, even the older ones.’ Or she would tell Mr Willemse ‘No man, now Wanie. I’ll get fat if you keep bringing me Marie Biscuits and butter every time I play piano, and next time they measure me at work I’ll have you to blame when they send me home packing.’

‘Ag Moxy, you can’t play that piano so much you get flippen skinny. Not under my roof.’

‘Ja okay, Mr Willemse, but leave us now. Lallie needs to get this pitch just right if we’re going to win that thing, you know.’

And so they kept practising night after night until Lallie even started adding a swing to her hips so that at the school hall show, the judges found their little recital charming enough that they got the spot to go to finishing school. When they got home everyone had been listening to the competition on the radio and as they rounded the corner into their street, there were the Willemses and the Pienaars and the Van Wyks and the Gamiets and the whole shebang waiting to cheer for them, and Stephan and his gang doing cartwheels, and Mammie and Tant Sannie right in front of everyone to hug them. Her boss at Syfrets House gave her unpaid leave for December, imagining maybe that she’d be more presentable on her return from finishing school. But she never did return to being a clerk after that.

Not that she was any good at it either. For once it was Priscilla who was the star of the show. She held her tea cup better than Molla did, tied her apron

better than Molla did, baked a meringue to golden perfection better than Molla did, her rusks were sweeter than Molla's and her rouge was blended in more subtly than Molla's. Her pointy cheeks bulged into happiness, but Molla loved it too. It was the first time that Lallie had been better than Molla at anything! It lifted a weight off Molla's shoulders that she hadn't known to be there. But like a cruel joke, Molla was rewarded most for participating in finishing school and Lallie, being too tall and skinny, just went on to work at the local pre-primary like she'd planned to in the first place.

On the last night of the month, the finishing school put on a fashion show to display their skills in dressing and walking and talking properly, and prospective employers were invited to attend. Molla hated the whole blêrrie idea, but Priscilla said, 'Aaaag, Moxy. Relêx.'

Lallie had a good collection of dresses she'd already made for herself during the school holidays and she added some pearls to the neckline of the yellow one for herself, but first she promised to alter an old frock of Mammie's for Molla, simply by adding a strip of cotton to the bottom. She even embroidered it to hide the obvious fact that it was added for extra length, Mammie being so much shorter than Molla. Molla was also loaned a bathing suit for the occasion. The one she wore to Muizenburg beach was deemed too plain by Mrs Turner, the instructor of the finishing school, so she gave Molla her daughter's in red polka dots and with frills around her legs and arms. Molla felt like Rudolf the red-nosed reindeer with chicken pox. Her lifeline was that after all this was done she could go home and tell Ria and Wanie about the whole ordeal and play the piano until they chased her out to let them sleep.

After she had paraded up and down, smiled the right amount, and tilted her feet out and her head up just enough to questions as imperative as 'What is the most important ingredient in any kitchen?' and 'Which local charity is your favourite and why?' a man in a suit approached Molla with a pamphlet.

'Mrs Turner has handed me your measurements and from what I've seen today you'd be perfect for the new intake of girls to the SAA fleet. Please be at Zeelandhuis at 8 am on Monday morning to start your training. And congratulations!'

He walked off with the benevolent smile of the ladle bearer at a soup kitchen. Molla looked down at the pamphlet.

'Girls! Positions now open as stewardess with South African Airways. Qualifications: Unmarried; High school graduate; 5'2" to 5'7" tall; Minimum age 19; Good appearance. Free training if you qualify!'

There was a picture of a girl in a dress suit with a smart little hat on her head and one knee bent in front of the other, ankle twisted in just as they'd been taught in finishing school.

That same little dress suit was now folded up at the foot 'n end of Molla's bed. That pamphlet was how Molla had met Chris on his flights from Windhoek for work. And all of that was why she loved to ask Lallie to do her make up.

'Do my makeup for me today, won't you Lals?'

'Ja okei, but I need to wash first or this water will get cold.'

'Reg so, I'll make breakfis.'

Molla first hung her underwear behind the pelmet where it could dry in the heat from the window without being visible. Then Molla went back across the yard to the kitchen and put some bread on the stove to toast away the stale. The Willemses were still quiet behind the kitchen door. Molla took some polony out of the icebox and bit into it before cutting out the evidence and eating that too while cutting thin slices to put on top of the butter that was already soaking into the slices of toast. She put some rooibos in their strainer and dropped it into the same kettle Lallie had just used to heat her bath water with and when she was done Lallie was still not dressed so she went out to fetch the mail so long. As Ouma had said when Molla told her about her new job, the art of being patient is

doing something else in the meantime.



Molla in her airhostess uniform at the age of twenty two.

Outside the sun was only just shading the mountain orange and the chickens skelled Molla as she walked past. Those chickens seemed equally indignant at her presence every morning, no longer as welcoming as when she was a child who sat among Ouma's hens for hours imagining she had a beak to eat

with. Out front Trissie the postwoman was closing the mailbox just as Molla turned the corner, its pole bobbing a little under the force of her certain hand.

‘Jinne nooi, but won’t you believe who has another letter today! All too fancy.’

‘Ag, Trissie it’s probably nothing.’

‘And then there was the one from the college just noudiedag. Just because Trissie knows how to shut her mouth does not mean she’s not wys. I tell you now, soon is the day our favourite organ player stops putting on that ridiculous blue uniform with the oh-so-smart-paper-boat hat on top and finally becomes a learned woman. And she will still come back on Sundays to play for us, ne? But maybe the men at College are not as rich as the men she’s meeting on aeroplanes, or how? Wheh LA! Or who else is this oh-so-elegant little blue letter from now if not from die uwe Chris Mouton again, huh? Imagine. Og, and then she will move under the mountain and never come to visit poor old Trissie. But no man will ever be more dapper and delightful than Trissie’s Sharrel so never you mind. Did Trissie tell the nooi how Sharrel proposed to me all those years ago now?’

Trissie spoke too much and had no respect for the secrets she surmised from poring over the mail she was meant to deliver and her own uniform was far more jolly koddig than Molla’s anyway.

‘Oh no man now, Trissie! If you tell me once more how Sharrel’s cork wire is your favourite ring I’m going to rip it right off your finger and throw it in the harbour, you hear?’

‘Nogal! Djy sal probeer. Elkgeval, today is a day of news, I tell you Moxy ou nooi. I just had to drop a letter from the city to the Willemses into that post box. Felt infected just touching it. Like it would give me smallpox. Not a good news day for everyone so you just go get your education and your eligible marriage and leave Trissie alone with her ring.’

Just then Maria’s front door clapped open in the breeze as she walked out to meet them at the post box. She saw Molla and Trissie and shook her head at them. Trissie nudged Molla, her head straight to Molla, but her eyes fixed to the slowly-approaching Ria.

‘Nee wat, I’m off. Tell me tomorrow.’

Molla felt like calling Trissie back. Her loud mouth had its uses. Molla didn't know whether it would be ruder to stay and watch or go back inside and leave Ria to fetch it all alone.

'Moxy we all know what's in that blêrrie box. It will be easier if you read it for me.'

Molla took out the envelope.

'Ja, you can sommer open it too then I'll get less of its rot under my fingers.'

Molla could see no way out of it. She put her telegram under her arm and tore open Ria's envelope from the city.

Dear Mr and Mrs Ikwaan Willemse

Herewith please find your final notice of eviction from the whites-only suburb of Lansdowne. As notified three times prior in the preceding year as per due process, you will be forcibly removed if your premises are not found vacant at precisely twelve noon tomorrow 3 November. Your new residence in Walmer Estate is available immediately.

Yours in service excellence

The City of Cape Town

'They're putting us up on Devil's Peak. Where the wind will blow all kinds of kak out of poor Wanie. And have you seen how small that little room on the hill is? So steep no car can drive to the door. And no space inside for a proper oven and sewing machine, never mind our piano. Not even a yard for a fruit tree. And where will Wanie go with his doves? Nee wat, Moxy. Nee wat.'

She kept shaking her head and mumbling all the way to the front door, which she didn't close behind her.

The sun was breaking through the Hottentot Holland Mountains in full force now and already toasting the Willemse's roof, painted red in time for spring, just last month. The granadilla fence that blocked the chicken coop from the street was starting to bloom and so was the hibiscus tree next to the post box. It plopped pink bits of itself all over the gravel sidewalk, like a woman too far gone to fold up her clothes while undressing, dropping her scented garments on the floor. As though pain is best suffered naked. She'd never thought of a hibiscus as sad.

The bottom half of the front door slamming closed on its spring reminded Molla that the tea had probably soaked bitterly strong by now. She hurried back to Priscilla, chickens indignant once more.

'What took you so long?'

'Jissis, Lals. Maria-them have to move out by tomorrow.'

'Jirre. Skies.'

'What time do you get back from school today?'

'I'll be here to help them all afternoon, don't worry.'

'Dankie tog.'

She sat down for Lallie to do her makeup, plonking the tea and bread down on the dresser with her, both of them too dumbstruck to speak. Lallie swished a ball of fur into some talcum powder and dabbed it all over Molla's forehead, down her nose to her chin and ended off with a plop on each eyelid, rubbing a little to get it smooth into the little fold under Molla's eyes. It tickled in the same way it did when Ouma used to stroke the hair out of her face and neck at bedtime.

'What the hell is Wanie going to do without his doves?'

'Ja nee. It's a blêddie skande.'

Next Priscilla took a pink ball of fur out of another pot and worked it into Molla's cheekbones, all the way from her ear to the rounding of her smile.

'Keep still'

This fake smile to accentuate her cheeks always made them smile at each other and lifted Molla's mood a little. Next Lallie brushed up some lipstiffie and first outlined her lips before painting in the middle.

'Any post for me?'

Her lips being taut Molla just managed an 'uh-uh' from her throat.

'What's that letter then? From Chris?'

Shucks! Molla had forgotten to hide it from Lallie. Now she was going to have to be careful not to talk about the clinic.

'Ja. Read it for me while I do my mascara.' Molla tried to sound nonchalant.

'Ooh, ne? Nou maar toe.'

Molla busied herself with scraping the black paste onto the brush and hiding her face in the mirror while Priscilla opened the envelope.

Lallie looked at the envelope with Chris's handwriting in navy ink: Adv. C.J. Mouton PO Box 903, Windhoek. And on the other side: Miss M.D. Van Der Horst, 47 Brockhurst Road, Lansdowne, Cape Town.

Dear Molla

I don't know if I folded this envelope letter correctly, it's the first time that I am using it, perhaps seeing as you are in the 'air force' I thought it would be suitable! My dear sweet, you have no idea how I am missing you! This afternoon after lunch I dreamt of you –

'Nee man, loop skeit! Give that here!' Lallie ran away from Molla's shrieking.

I saw you in your uniform. I wish constantly that I could be with you to kiss and cuddle you.

'Stop it now! Ek sal jou dood maak!' Lallie side-stepped Molla grabbing at the letter. Holding it above her head where Molla couldn't reach.

*You'll be on your way to me in Johannesburg by the time this letter reaches you. I can't wait to see you
Love to Sandra and Lallie and everyone there and lots of love to you*

'Lalla, you skurk!'

'Jislaaikit, I'll sommer get wet!'

'SIES!' Molla smacked Lallie on her skinny legs just as Tant Sannie walked in.

'Wat de hel gaan hier aan? Screaming like fishwives for every Tom Dick and Harry to hear! I thought you were ladies by now. My goodness.'

'Skies'

'Jammer, Tant Sannie'

'Tant Sannie, did tannie hear about the Willemses?'

'What now, Lallie?'

'They have to be out by the end of the day.'

'You lie! How will they move all their things?'

'Mrs Willemse says there's not enough space in the new place for anything and not even a yard for a tree.'

'Ja, I've heard. And how is a person supposed to eat? Buy everything?!

'She says Oom Wanie won't be able to take his doves.'

'Are they packing?'

'She didn't look in a hurry just now when she got the letter.' Molla said, thinking of that hibiscus dropping bits of itself all over the sidewalk.

'And what the hell are you two not busy helping her for then? Huh? Why for do I only hear about this now?' Tant Sannie looked at them like they could stop all of it from happening.

'We have to get ready for work, tannie.'

'And that is exactly what it seemed like when I walked in here. Where do you think you will be living tonight if they kick the Willemses out, huh? We're all living on their property in case you've taken leave of your wits completely.' She stormed over her shoulder across the yard to Mrs Willemse.



As Molla walked out of the front gate, past the post box and over the fallen hibiscus, she noticed old Jana sitting on the curb in a new way. She sat in a pool of sun on the street corner every morning until it got too hot. Then she shuffled down to the harbour to scavenge. Today she was sifting through edible bits of a vrot peach she had found somewhere. Molla saw her toss a worm on the ground. Molla's court shoes crunched on the gravel sidewalk as she passed with a nod. The dog at old Jana's side had swollen nipples and lifted her head to smell at Molla just like most other mornings. It felt like a kind of recognition. It was a short walk to the station, which was one of the nicest things about their house. That and the fact that Molla could play piano at the Willemse's. That and how they shared the produce of their orchard with Frieda and Sannie-them. It reminded Molla of Tant Sannie's fresh bread that she still cut against her chest just like that first day Frieda and her two daughters arrived from Aliwal North and hunger and Kallie and silence still hung like a sinker from their ribcage. She never spoke to Chris about Aliwal North or her father or Kallie. Priscilla and Mammie never spoke about it among themselves so there was no way Molla was speaking to someone else about any of it. The blanket was growing thicker over the mountain now and the seagulls overhead were struggling even more than usual to look graceful as the wind blew them about.

The station was still full even though Molla was quite late. Top hats and broad hats and pillbox hats and bowling hats were all pushing through the gates in every direction, the paler masses through the front, the darker ones through the back of the building and on the side of the tracks. The vinyl brown seat Molla chose near the front of the compartment was squeaky, but the thought of going to the clinic made her want to avoid people and this way she had a better view. She loved the broad strip of Woodstock beach and today it was packed with ships of every size coming in to the Alfred Docks. The fisher people were already sorting

through the first catches of the day on the messing stations. The little ascent meant the train went slower next to the beach and she could marvel at the big nets being pulled in ten men afoot among the little fisher boats stacked together. The train picked up speed at Salt River, but once in Woodstock the breweries' windmill was stationary in a city that was windless for once. As the train slowed down for the station, Molla looked past the rows of tracks to the pier. It was full of people even now, meeting each other at the clock tower from different directions across the Peninsula, but at night it came to life, strings of lights dancing in the breeze to the music of a street violin, guitar and trumpet played by the Bo Kaap Klopse or a traveller just off one of the ships.

'Such a jolly sight.' Chris had said when he was in Cape Town last and he kissed her goodbye at the station.

The brakes of the train started screeching as they rolled into the giant ship's sail of the station roof. Inside was a bustle of warmth under signs of Five Roses Tea and Kodak and Lion's Beer, 'Tuis met Lion in die huis' and 'South Africa is Lion Country.' The biggest sign, 'There is no better', stretched in the arch of the roof, all over their heads, haloed by leaf hearts trailing through the glass-paned ceiling.

She cut up Adderley where the Christmas lights were already hanging. She passed the new Standard Bank Building where the photographer still stood taking pictures of passers by for sale. The one of her and Chris walking arm in arm, her in white florals and matching white heels, him with his court suit, hat slightly tilted to the side, taken a month into their affair, reminded her of the photo of Mammie and Pappie that used to hang above Ouma's piano.

'A photo for the jong nooi?'

Molla smiled and nodded without slowing. Could he not tell that she had no need for a photo of herself on her way to a darned clinic? Past the Supreme Court and into the Company Gardens, the cool of the oaks calmed her. She took a right off the promenade to snake through the smaller walk ways with greater anonymity. She'd pass the wishing well, she decided. When she got there she was alone with the low, stone wall next to the old tree stump where the hand-levered tap still stuck out like a branch, but long out of use.

'I wish I may, I wish I might, wish upon a star tonight' Chris had swooned as he searched the mist for a reason to kiss her on a sunset walk along the promenade when he was staying in Sea Point for a case a month back. She did love him.

She took out three dimes and tossed them in, not because she believed in luck, but because she didn't believe in prayer either, yet good wishes still wanted a ritual and this one was as good as any. The dime for the Willemses went first and bounced off the side of the well before splashing into the water below the darkness. Next was one for the plan that Ouma said she could pull out of a hat if Molla's application was successful. The last one got a squeeze before she let it drop, for the news she was about to receive from the clinic.

Molla usually walked like she was about to leave her legs behind, head out and shoulders forward, but today they scrunched higher and her neck dragged her body along. She made her way through the aviary, letting the finch songs fall on her. Past the long fountains she marched up to the lioness archway, (which had opened recently to a fanfare that was all over the papers) and through the prowling cats' gateway, to the Hidding Town Clinic. She passed the long queue of people among whom she had waited for a chance to see the nurses the last time she was here. This time she had a letter that allowed her to skip the agony of having to lie about a cold and a fever when it was clear that she had the beaming health of any twenty-two year old. At her age, walking into this clinic was as good as being pregnant and being pregnant without a wedding ring was as good as being a total floozy and nothing was as bad as being a total floozy.

Inside the nurses looked busy and one named Veronica guided her into a small cubicle with a door. She was still thinking of how silly it was to have come in her airhostess uniform and wondering how she could have avoided it when she realised that Veronica had already said the dreaded words.

'Mejuffrou, your test results are positive. You're pregnant.'

Having just called Molla 'mejuffrou', the nurse looked duly sympathetic. Molla's mouth went very dry and she kept staring at the woman's name badge, reading 'Veronica' over and over as though some sense could be derived there. The blood hissed in her ears, heart clapping to get out of her throat and then disappeared all together, as though floating. When the hissing and the clapping

came back she realised that she would be sick. The nurse just managed to aim the paper bin under her in time as the morning's polony and toast left her body in shame.

Veronica was talking about coming back in the first trimester and which foods to avoid, but the meaning was lost in the bitterness in Molla's mouth and the hissing that was back in her ears as much as she tried to focus. Veronica handed her a tissue and tried to pat her back. Molla felt herself soften and her eyes begin to burn into tears. She stiffened away before they came.

When she walked out of there, the uniform that had fit so perfectly just that morning sat oddly on her, clinging to all the wrong places. She found a bench in a quiet corner of the garden behind the maze with the lemon tree in the middle of it, to sit down and figure this all out. She had to wipe fallen red hibiscus off the bench first, the droppings of a waning bush next to the bench. Chris leaving her, Mammie's shoulders drooping even more, Ouma's heartbreak, and Oupa looking at her the way he used to look at Mammie. All these things spun through her mind on repeat. She hugged her satchel to her and clenched her teeth to ward off the burning in her eyes. A squirrel came towards her in smell-smell bursts over the fallen hibiscus. At her toes he stopped and cleaned his paws. She didn't dare move in case she scared him away, but for a squirrel he didn't seem hurried at all. When he appeared set to stay she relaxed and only noticed that she had let out an audible sigh when he ran off. And even then the exhale continued.

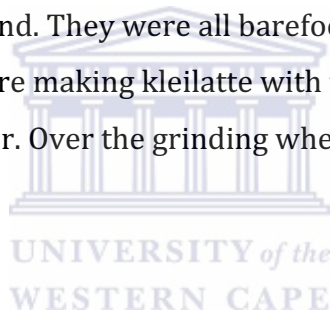
She realised she was late. Chris had arranged his meeting in Johannesburg around her shift this afternoon. She would land at seven, just in time for a quick shower before a dinner at the Grand Hotel in Hillbrow. She caught the noon train in a sweat, but it was empty. She had the back seat all to herself and chose the right side, looking south toward Muizenburg where she had spent so many afternoons since being an airhostess, especially with Sandra when their families were working, but they were off duty on a sunny day in the middle of the week.

Sandra had been an airhostess for six years already and had seen her fair share of girls getting pregnant on the job. She had also told Molla about the things girls do to induce abortions. And then there was the day when she was practising the organ at the Rondebosch church, and heard a crying outside. It was not unusual in that busy part of Rondebosch to hear children crying as mothers

walked into town along the lane of trees that flanked Church Street. She played the entire Bach's requiem and afterwards the crying was still there, right outside the door. She went to look and someone had left a baby on the stoep. Molla handed the baby to the parish and when she asked about it afterwards, Father Yates said not to worry, he'd been placed with a good family, but he changed the topic immediately to her next recital.

The power station blocked her view now, billowing smoke out of its salt and pepper shakers. 'What would Ouma have me do?' Molla wondered. 'Make sure he marries you as soon as possible.' She heard Ouma's sigh of resignation. She'd have to give a month's notice to the airways. And then she'd have to move to Namibia where Chris lived with his son and his mother. To think that just an hour ago she still had a chance in hell to study music.

Far over the flats a few children were playing in one of the streams that survived the thirsty dune sand. They were all barefoot and hatless and most of them were topless. They were making kleilatte with the reeds and catapulting mounds of mud at each other. Over the grinding wheels she could hear their screeches.



At the airport she ran through the back doors, straight to the meeting room.

‘Maureen! What the hell happened to you? You look awful!’

‘Oh, jee. Thanks Sandra.’

‘Are you meeting Chris in Johannesburg again?’

Nosey poke! This was going to be a long flight. Luckily the new girl walked in at that moment. She’d need someone to show her the ropes on her first flight.

‘Jana! Would you like to share my aisle with me today?’

‘That would be great, Maureen! Thank you!’

Molla took her straight through to the boarding gates. This would be her first time out of Cape Town, Molla assumed, and she reminded her of her first day at the airport, pamphlet with directions to the office still in her hand. That was two years ago now. Since then she had seen new cities, earned her own money, met more people than she ever had, heard more stories than she could dream of. But never could she have imagined a day like today at the clinic. Molla looked back at Jana and knew that if she could, she’d give up the last two years just to reverse today’s news at the clinic. She noticed how Jana’s eyes darted everywhere, especially up to the high ceilings in the boarding hall and back to the restaurant with its white tablecloths and waitresses in heels. Jana still hobbled in hers.

‘Try to put the weight on your heels, not your toes.’

She smiled a thank you and tried, but still stomped too loudly while Molla clipped along the linoleum. She’d learn soon enough, just as Molla had.

The man at the x-ray machine stared them down the minute he heard them. There were no other heeled feet in the hall.

‘Well hello there new one! What’s her name then, Maureen?’

‘She has the capacity for speech and hearing, Frans. Ask her yourself.’

His stare said that Molla was being insolent. Jana went whiter and her eyes wider as she looked to Molla for clues and then at Frans.

‘My name is Jana, Frans. And how do you do?’

So ewe! Molla hadn’t expected that from the little chirp.

‘Oh most excellent young one and just look at the likes of you showing old girls like Maureen over here that she can learn a thing or two from you. You hear, Molla?’

Molla picked up the satchel that the machine had spit out and handed Jana hers.

‘Here, don’t mind Frans. There’s plenty more of his kind on the aeroplane.’

As they walked away Molla realised that at that very moment Frans was probably staring at the new girl’s derrière just as he did to every stewardess who walked past his post. She turned around and sure as the stain on his teeth, there it was. His face dropped in a defeatist plea.

‘Good evening dear patrons.’

Molla checked her coif. It had significantly drooped while running down Adderley Street and Jana’s embarrassed look made her realise it. All it needed was some heat.

‘Maureen, L7 is asking for his fourth whiskey.’

Molla let Jana help to warm the towels in the cabin of the B.O.A.C. while Mariette chatted on about her newly improved beauty regime of a home-made facial made with baking soda, lemon, wheatgerm and egg whites. Molla pretended concentration on steaming the towels and making a pyramid with pliers. Nora was welcoming everyone and they all knew their cue when she announced ‘Welcome to the blue and silver fleet’. Molla went out to hand everyone their towels and Jana trailed behind with an extra silver tray of pretzel folded fresheners. Her uniform was a shield. ‘Smart’, Chris called it. She greeted everyone with eye contact and a smile just as the airline had taught them. She added a dip of the chin and an understanding softness to her eyes just like the finishing school had taught her and Priscilla.

There were women on this flight. She preferred the flights when there were very few women. It was a long weekend and so couples were probably flying together to holiday instead of the usual business flights of mostly men.

Women weren't as used to flying so they needed more attention, asked for cigarettes to calm their nerves, needed to be watched in case they were sick, spent ages in the rest room.

Molla knew the couple in 2D and E were going to be interesting the moment she set eyes on them. The man already had his eyes on her when she walked through the curtain. His wife's face turned when she followed her husband's gaze, not to disgust as with so many others, but to discomfort. There was honesty in that, at least. As Molla passed them she heard her.

'These trolley dollies are all either glamour girls without the looks or ticket girls WITH looks.'

Molla had heard worse. Trollie dollie, airy fairy. She always finished it off in her mind with the song Ouma used to sing when she hurt herself. 'Airie tjêrie, tjiekerie tjêrie, airie tjêrie tjorts!' And oh tjorts indeed because here she was behaving just like a verdomde hemelhoer, getting herself pregnant without a ring.

Jana was blushing. It was a combination of flattery at the attention of the men and embarrassment at the stares of the women. Molla had forgotten that feeling. 'She'll learn soon enough,' Molla thought again.

Making their way back to starboard the same woman as before was saying to her husband: 'As my father always said, and I know your people share our standing my dear, a woman of a certain calibre just doesn't deign to earn wages.'

Molla feigned the need to tuck a suitcase corner into the overhead compartment and turned to see the way the woman whispered conspiratorially at his knowingly nodding head, both of them looking straight at her. She walked out ahead of Jana and practised Rachmaninoff's fourth, the allegro in G major right at the end, imagining her fingers hitting each key with certainty, getting the timing to the meter of her steps down the aisle. Ever since her auditions she still played it on Friday mornings when Tant Sannie was out shopping and there was no one else in the yard and the Willemse piano shook with her as she played. It was her favourite private hour.

Molla always wished she knew someone among the crowd when they entered Jan Smuts. Perhaps they could skip the show tonight and find a quiet place to talk, just her and Chris. How she would manage to choke the words out of her mouth she could not imagine.

She caught a Trolley Bus out, its jolly sucker-red colour and double-decker shape always reminding her of London. London with 10 Downing and a bridge on the river Thames and English roses in hats all out to tea. She wondered if she would ever see it. Chris planned to take her on a holiday to Greece. She had imagined such Mills and Boon nonsense. He would propose to her there. He'd leave her on a balcony overlooking the sea and go in to flip the album in the stereo and when he came back he'd hold her and say, 'I can't go all my life waiting to catch you between flights.'

She loved Jan Smuts Airport; the vast lawns and sprawling gardens around the elegant approach as to a manor house with carved beddings of hedge and rose. They'd agreed to meet at the Casa Mia where the airhostesses always stayed. He'd probably already be there by the time Molla arrived. She handed a few shillings to the conductor who didn't tip his hat at her as he had to the man in front of her. Tomorrow all the girls would lounge at the hotel pool and do their nails and compare tanning oils, while Chris and Molla went over to Joubert Park for a stroll and some solitude or they'd have a coffee with Mario and Ricardo at the corner cafe. She found a seat in the middle of the bus, next to a young man in a smart hat who waved at her. It was the only seat available. He looked out of the window as she sat and shifted his back closer so that when he turned around he was right up against her. The steel bar at her back pressed cold and hard as she practised the fourth to her fastest metronome.

Park Station had almost succeeded at lifting her mood as they drove in, with its surrounding skyscrapers and trees stretching towards the promise of sunlight somewhere above in an almost always blue sky. Jana gawped at the people in the street: women in dresses above their knees and plunging collars, men all in white. Inside the hotel she bumped into Molla with her eyes trapped by the chandelier above. She'd love the massive hotel where the airhostesses stayed in Durban. At the reception desk all the girls checked in together. When Molla got to the counter she asked if Chris Mouton had checked in.

'Ja, Mejuffrou'

Sandra's eyes sent her a question that she should have known from experience Molla had no intention of answering.

The lights of the first skyscrapers were flickering on, silhouetted against oranges and baby blues between buildings, everything reflected in the pool.



The pool was reflecting orange from the hotel's walls. The sky was too blue and empty. He'd probably already gone for a run before dawn. After it all, she'd returned to her own room. When she handed the key back to the concierge, she couldn't help but ask if he had checked out too. Maybe he was having a coffee at the hotel cafe, waiting to kiss her goodbye as he usually did. But maybe today he wasn't. She'd rather have the disappointment hit her right now than while standing in the middle of the cafe, searching for him like a damn fool.

'Yes, Mejuffrou, Chris Mouton checked out while Maisy was still on shift.'

At least she was already up and ready to leave so she had time to kill before getting back onto that blasted aeroplane.

The great doors to the dining hall were closed and heavy to open against the automatic arms they attached to keep doors closed nowadays. Pieter was nowhere to be seen to ask if she could play, but in the last two years he'd been manager, he'd never refused her access to the piano. She'd even caught him slipping into the back of the hall to listen from the darkness. Her lungs sucked in the coolness as she weaved around the faint outlines of the tables to the piano. Her hands found the stool first, its canvas cover scratching. She smelled the vase water before she saw the flowers on top of the black baby grand. Her fingers scratched at the curved fall as she opened it and apologised to the old thing. It shouldn't have vases put on top of it, and Molla shouldn't be scratching at it with her long nails. The green felt with golden embroidery she draped over her knees.

And then. First came the searching and prodding to find the tension and warm the muscles, also Molla's. Greeting with her hands like a dog snouting at her ankles. This was the march that makes their acquaintance. Until the temperature rises and the shoulders drop. The notes all primed now. The ears receptive and soothed. The piano's sinews softer, her fingers stretched. Hands cross over to reach the length of the thought. Louder ideas fight to be heard over

the pattering of her left hand, trying to keep the peace in the middle. Insisting and straining, twisting her back to sound each side of the argument, highs and lows as her right crosses over her left and then all the way back to open her chest wide until her left hand has no choice but to join, all reasoning lost but a new ally won, the war-cry in unison now. Sometimes a third force still intrudes, as it always seems to do. Where she finds a third hand she's forgotten since years of practice. Somewhere between thumb and pinkie as they swop places and compete at a Russian Tropak dance falling over itself, before her feet on the pedals silence it, echoing motionlessly. Her body as on sea straining to feel the tempo in the sloshing waves. She'd lose it if she opened her eyes.

She awoke from the music sweating. She covered the piano's body, still vibrating, with its thin green cover of felt, saying bye for now as her fingers rippled over the ribbing of its protruding black keys.

'The rest have all left on the same bus, but I simply couldn't interrupt you. The hotel car is at the door and ready to take you, Moxy.'

The silhouette in the doorway still had its head leaning on the frame, one leg draped over the other.

'Oh! Thank you, Pieter. Thank you!' He whistled for a bellboy who, by the time Molla reached the door, was running along with her.

Sitting in the car, last night's words came back to her.

'How dare you?' he had said as he threw his book across the room. Graham Green's *The Heart of the Matter*. All Molla could think then was how she had bought the same title for Mammie three Christmases ago so that she might be encouraged to read. She just stared at the book on the floor and thought of Mammie. Daring. Something brave and audacious. Something she had done. An act of defiance. She didn't remember the moment or the inclination.

'The divorce has not gone through yet.'

Divorce. Beginnings and endings. The beginning of the end right at the start.

If he was out jogging now, was he running past their Italian friends at the corner cafe, thinking of how they'd planned to honeymoon in Italy? As he passed the milk truck leaving crates at the tall doors of the skyscrapers where young and old lived their lives on top of each other, was he thinking of the home they hadn't

had time to plan together yet? Was he thinking of how he told her that she'd love to meet his son and his mother, staying together in Windhoek? Or was he thinking of his little Erik's mother? Never 'my wife', always 'his mother'. What was he thinking just then as he ran in the early morning shadows of the high buildings, heavy with cold, his nose wet against the wind, his eyes blinded in the first rays as he turned a corner squinting.

When she landed in Cape Town she took the train all the way to Kalk Bay to sit on the jetty among the noise. The harbour parking lot was full of couples having picnics out of their Morris Oxfords or Ford Escorts. By the time she got to her street in Lansdowne, the sun had just set. Stephan and a few boys were still out playing rugby and three girls skipped rope to the tune,

'En Sannie sê, Sannie sal sewe sakke sout sleep

Sonder Sannie sê, sus Sannie sleep swaar

Sannie sê, Sannie sal sewe sakke sout sleep

Sewe sakke sout is swaar so waar!

The road was darker than usual. And then she realised that the Willemse's stoep light was off. Something else was different too. Wanie's doves. They were perched all over the Willemse's roof. Not a single dove on the fence or the other roofs. All of them were perched on the Willemse's roof. When she got to the front gate Ma and Tant Sannie were standing at the post box looking up at them with frowns.

'Molla! Is this a time to get home?'

'Jammer, Tant Sannie.'

'What's happened Moxy-lief? You look so...' Mammie scrunched up her nose and shook her head, 'Misserbel.'

Molla nodded to the doves. 'What's all this? Where's Lallie?'

'Nee, hemel alleen weet. When we got back from helping the Willemses unpack, that's where Lallie is now, helping them with the last of it, then these bloody doves we'd just left on the sidewalk in their hok in front of Wanie's new house in Walmer, ag jinne Molla, you should see how bleddie small it is, not even a yard and that hill so steep I won't be able to walk tomorrow after carrying all their stuff up there, these bleddie doves were back here before we even got home. How in God's name do you explain that?'

'Vaderland!'

'Spooky.'

'Ja nee.'

'I'm going in to make tea. This day needs to end before I kill it with my bare hands.'

'Wait for me, Sannie. Molla, these came for you.' Mammie stuffed two envelopes in Molla's hand, but didn't let go.

'And, Molla. They left something in their house for you. Go look.'

Mammie gave Molla a hug then into which Molla collapsed for the smell of Pall Mall in Mammie's hair, and the sunlight soap on her skin, and somehow the smell of the earth below the lemon tree when she watered it too.

'Okei my kindjie,' Mammie said. 'See you now-now.'

When Molla opened the door that Ria had let slam behind her just yesterday, trailing fallen hibiscus as she went, the street lamp through the door fell on the only piece of furniture left in the room. Wanie's piano. The burning in her eyes that she'd been clenching away since yesterday finally won and she sat it out on the stool. When the convulsions subsided she looked at the two envelopes in her hands. A telegram from Chris and a letter from Ouma. She opened Chris's first.

POST OFFICE TELEGRAPHS: URGENT. DRINGEND.

RECEIVED ONTVANG WCA6 WINDHOEK F 25 2 0815

=D= MAUREEN VANDERHORST 47 BROCKHURST RD LANSDOWNE =

SO SORRY ABOUT CERTAIN THINGS MY LIEFSTE MOLLA EXPECT YOU

HERE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE NOTIFY WHEN YOUR RESIGNATION IS IN

YOU CAN CALL ME ON 4219 LOVE = CHRIS

She wondered which certain things he was sorry for. She would reply to him soon enough, she thought as she opened the envelope from Ouma. What if Ouma had managed to make a plan after all? If today was anything to go by she wouldn't have. There was no letter inside the envelope, just a cheque. It was made out to The University of Cape Town College of Music and signed by Molla's father, Chris van der Horst.

She opened the piano lid and put both envelopes behind the cross bar, out of sight.



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ALLEGRO VIVACE (D-FLAT MAJOR)

When the peeping heart monitor above her bed made a flat line I was holding Ouma Mollie's hand and had just finished reading 'Winternag' to her. 'In elk grashalm se vou blink 'n druppel van dou, en vinnig verbleik dit tot ryp in die kou!'

It's true. Sometimes the truth really is stranger than the bits of fiction I've had to make up until now, piecing together the few facts I have.

I remember her getting up before dawn to scratch in her neighbours' bins for recyclable items my nephew needed for a school competition. I remember her racial slurs around the dining table, speaking about 'them' and 'their different ways' while her too-long finger nails, always unpainted or chipped the minute they were painted, were digging into the carcass of a crayfish that she was sucking at long after all the meat was out of it. I remember the way she dug a finger into my armpit while standing next to me in conversation just as I was entering puberty. It seemed as though she was checking to see if I had grown hair there and the memory fills me with confused embarrassment to this day. She would talk at length about the lineage of the British royal family since the Middle Ages, smoking long Peter Stuyvesant Reds until you could smell the burning plastic as she sucked the coal right to the filter. But she never spoke of before the 60's when it came to her own life. Not until my Oupa Chris died, and then she started to drop a few clues my way.

I remember her housekeeper Lea who lived in the small room at the back of the house that smelt of Courtleigh's and of ironing and of large bars of green sunlight soap bought from the bulk-trading store where most of the household groceries came from. Lea was her best friend if only she had allowed herself to see it that way. They spent all day in that house with only each other for company once all her children had moved out and Oupa Chris was always working. Ouma Mollie and Lea appeared together in the newspaper when my grandmother's knitted dolls for the church bazaar or the collection of antique irons she had found and polished for a local antique store, made the news. Lea was included in family wedding photo's, but all this seemed to be forgotten when I asked about where Lea was nowadays. She answered that she wouldn't know.

I remember her being dead silent when, on the morning that my matric results came out and they weren't to her expectation, she refused to speak to me for an entire day while the rest of the family congratulated me on my marks. I remember her giving me strict advice about the 'tyre' around my waist without a hint of irony or humour after I returned from university with a customary first year spread. I remember the way she acted out the gestures of someone who is used to people admiring their beauty and finding them charming, long after both of those attributes seemed tragic and comical worn on her smoke-wrinkled skin and her unwashed face. I remember throwing out shoes that were too scuffed and broken for me, but that she took for herself and was still wearing ten years later. I remember, just after she was tied up and beaten during a robbery at her home, the way she replaced her one broken pearl earring with a golden dolphin, and she wore the mismatched pair with an air of practical and defeatist indifference.

I remember how regularly and for weeks on end she cared for me while my parents were on holiday or my mother was studying for an exam. I always did better at school while I lived with her. And of all the many adults who raised me, I remember her being the one who would go down on her haunches so as to be on my level when she spoke to me.

Ouma Mollie was the one who taught me the piano. She used to pace my practices with breaks: a small plate of Marie Biscuits stuck together with butter and a glass of lemonade diluted from the concentrate she made from the tree in the front yard.

I was thirteen the day she gave me her piano and I knew that it was a very important day. My grandfather had just died two weeks before, and my Ouma was busy moving to her Swakop house. I was sitting on the backseat of my mother's Land Rover, on our way to Ouma in Swakop for the December holidays when she called on my mother's cell.

'Ethne, Ouma hears that Valerie has agreed to accept you into her classes at the Conserve? Is it? Yes? Well Ouma is very proud of you and listen carefully now.'

I looked at my mother's smile in the rear view mirror.

'Listen carefully to Ouma. My piano needs a new home.'

'Haai, Ouma. Ai, ji...'

She didn't allow herself to be interrupted, especially not when she chose to have a pause for effect.

'There just isn't space in the Swakop house for it,' she sighed, 'and Erik wants to rent out this house. Oupa mos left everything to his son in the will. Anyway. So Ouma has to get out of Windhoek. None of my children can play a single instrument, as you know,'

I could hear the smile in her voice.

'And Ouma has always hoped that you would play the piano. Now, Ethne I want you to have my piano. Okay? It can stand in your parents' house and then you can practise on it every day. Yes. Okay.'

She was talking quickly now, not letting me say a word.

'So tell your parents they can arrange for the transport when they get home, but you must do it as soon as you get back so that you can start practising. And you must practise every day. Yes, so well done, and listen now to your Ouma for once, practise every day and remember it is your Ouma's piano she gave to you.'

Ouma Mollie had a habit of repeating the key message of her monologues a reliable three times. The piano she gave me is a black baby grand and it is still in my childhood home in Windhoek where for years it has hidden her story in plain sight. I never did learn to play it as well as she'd hoped, but one day I did discover its story.

I practically grew up in her house in Windhoek where she lived for forty years until after my Oupa Chris died. After that she packed up the entire house in two weeks, scrubbed all the memories off every wall, dusted all the smells out of every corner, and moved to their holiday home. But before then the Windhoek house was an immovable identity in my life, and I still remember every detail. The smell of guavas on the kitchen table. The tin of apricot jam in the fridge that my grandfather would take a teaspoon of when he got back from work. The wicker of toys on the bottom shelf of the pantry that we were allowed to empty out in the dust of the back yard. I spent hours in that house with the ding-dong of the clock above the mantle and marvelled at the furniture and trinkets, everything with a patina of history.

In grade four, I wrote my first essay about what it sounded like to listen to her shake up her piano.

'This is Allegro Vivace' she'd say.

'Yes, the third movement. Neh. Ouma?'

'Mooi, ja. And who's the composer?'

'Rachmaninov, Ouma.'

'Right.'

As she played, I'd write and pause to look for the stories behind each piece. The bust of Mozart was made of real gold and modelled after the great man while he was still alive. The escritoire was once in the drawing room of an old castle where a great-great-grandmother of mine, wearing billowing silk robes, wrote letters to her lover in the war. The oval frame of a woman's unsmiling face in grainy sepia was of my great grandmother who walked barefoot over the Drakensburg. The massive piano had the best sound in the world. In time I saw them differently, but my assumption about the piano was the only one my grandmother actually corrected.

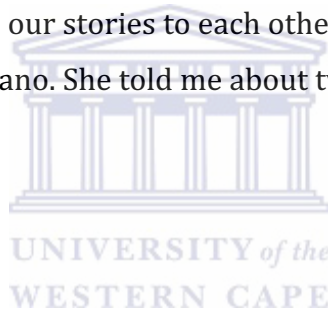
'No, ever since the move from Cape Town and finally up these stairs here, this old thing can't play a true note if all the blind tuners in the world looked after it.'

And that is how I know that old Wanie's piano was probably the only piece of furniture in that house that wasn't purchased brand second-hand new by my grandparents, making it the only heirloom.

On the weekend that she passed away I flew to Windhoek to visit her because I missed her. She was in the Medi Clinic Retirement Home because she needed daily nursing for her newly acquired diabetes. The first thing I did when I drove in from the airport was to visit her old house, now an office, to spend some time in the garden with the old lemon tree whose crop she used for lemonade. The office workers would think I'm crazy, but I was in a sentimental mood. I hadn't been home in too long. The tree would ground me.

I parked the car at the bottom of the driveway and walked up the rocky path to the tree. Which was no longer there. In its place were a few rocks. There was no sign that there had ever been a tree.

I drove straight to see Ouma, but was sure to wait for my red face to calm before I got out to knock on her door. She would not tolerate such sentimental nonsense and I didn't tell her about the tree. We spent the day going through her books and using them to tell our stories to each other. She had taken up knitting again. She asked after her piano. She told me about two old envelopes behind the cross bar.





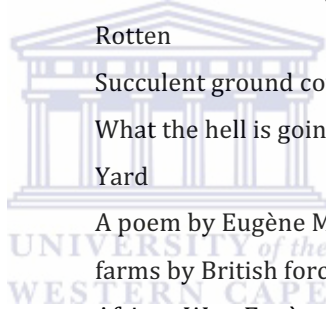
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GLOSSARY

Airie tjêrrie, tjiekerie tjêrrie	A nonsensical limerick.
Ag shame	An expression of pity
Arme kinders	Poor children
Bleddie skande	A bloody shame. Less harsh-sounding than the variant which uses the r-sound, Blêrrie but has the same meaning.
Blêrrie	Bloody. An expletive.
Blinkvos perd	A song about a farmer who wooed his wife by fetching her on his handsome horse and then had twelve sons with her only to decided that it was best to avoid women so that your sons wouldn't grow old enough to ask your for horses of their own to fetch women on.
Boepens	A pot belly
Boom dra swaar aan al daai suurlemoene	Lemon tree sagging under the weight of all the lemons
Daai mal vrou	That crazy woman
Daar's hy	There it is. An affirmation.
Die uwe	Sincerely. The one and only.
Djy sal probeer	You could try. A challenge.
Elkgeval	Contraction of 'in elk geval'. In every scenario. Anyway.
Ewe	Equal. 'So ewe' is a way of expressing the observation of audacity.
Haai	Another expression of shocked surprise
Hasie Hop	An Afrikaans nursery rhyme called Hop Rabbit
Heito mannetjie	Hi there, young man.
Helse lawaai	Hellish Noise
Hemel alleen weet	Heaven only knows
Hierso	Right here
I Saw Three ships	A Christmas carol
Ja nee	Yes no. A term of agreement.
Jinne	Goodness. An exclamation.
Jirre	A play on Here meaning God
Jislaaikit	Derivative of Jesus to express surprise
Jissis	A play on the Afrikaans for Jesus
Jy in jou klein hoekie en ek in mijn	'You in your little corner and me in mine.' A Christian praise song called 'Laat ons skyn vir Jesus.'
Kak	Shit

Kielie	Tickle
Kleilatte	To catapult mud at your opponent with reeds
Klopse	Minstrels
Koddig	Ridiculous
Koesistes	A Malay desert. Like 'koeksisters', but with softer dough and with cinnamon and coconut flakes.
Lekker	Nice
Lief	Beloved
Lipstiffie	Lipstick
Loop speel	Go play. Get lost.
Loop skiet	Go shoot. As above.
Magtag	Goodness gracious
Meisies	Girls
Mejuffrou	Miss. As opposed to Mrs.
Mos	You know what I mean? Don't you agree?
My mens	My person. An expression of shocked sympathy.
Nee wat	No what. A nonsensical way of expressing sympathy, or exasperation, or reassuring someone that no inconvenience is required, among other meanings.
Nee, hemel alleen weet	No, heaven only knows
Nogal	Rather. The audacity.
Nooi	A term of endearment for a woman. During the period of <i>Molla's Music</i> it was mainly used by coloureds to address a white woman.
Noudiedag	The other day contracted into one word
Nou maar toe	Well then
Now now	Shortly
Oom	Uncle. Used as a title of respect rather than relation. See Tant.
Op dees aarde	How on earth? Wonderment.
Ou	Old. Affectionate.
Oulik	Sweet, nifty, endearing.
Poeding	Pudding
Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 4	One of the most difficult piano pieces that it is unlikely Maureen played for her audition, but that she was rumoured to have mastered. I think this is a stretch, although I did hear her play parts of it in childhood.
Sannie sal sewe sakke sout sleep	A tongue twister about carrying seven bags of salt
Sellotape	British brand name for masking tape or Scotch tape

Siembamba	A lullaby describing the killing of a snake
Slammie	An affectionate word for someone who follows the doctrine of Islam. It also has derogatory connotations.
Skel	Admonish
'Skies	Short for 'askies'. Excuse me.
Skurk	Mongrel
Sommer	Carelessly, Nonchalantly.
Snipstert	Nipped tail. Someone cheeky
Tant/ Tannie	Aunt. Used as a title of respect rather than relation. See Oom.
Toemaar	Nevermind. A comforting expression.
Tjoepstil	Dead Quiet
Vaderland	Fatherland. Heaven. An expression of surprise.
Veld	Field
Verdomde hemelhoer	Damned heaven whore.
Voetsek	Get lost. To hell and gone.
Vrot	Rotten
Vygies	Succulent ground covers. Stone plants.
Wat de hel gaan hier aan	What the hell is going on here?
Werf	Yard
Winternag	A poem by Eugène Marais about the damage to Boer farms by British forces during the second South African War. Eugène was seen as part of the Afrikaans Language Movement at the start of the century.
Wys	Wise



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FAVOURITE AND MOST IRKSOME: WRITING *MOLLA'S MUSIC*

Molla's Music is contextualised by the death of my grandmother in 2013 and the complex experience of my white Afrikaans identity in a post-apartheid South Africa. In the simple events of her commonplace life I saw the tension of negotiations that continue to be made by many women. As in her time, women still need to navigate limited access to opportunities despite the extent of their own abilities. They still need to strain against the limited scope of expression available to them to accommodate the full needs of their personhood. This tension had particular interest to me as someone who is still designated a white Afrikaans woman: it afforded me an opportunity to explore the limitations of my racial classification, my linguistic-cultural identity, and my gender.

So living in contemporary South Africa, I find myself asking: To what extent am I permitted compassion for ancestors who were complicit in the laws and customs of a country that oppressed the majority of its people? To what extent can I speak my truth until I am forced, by my own conscience or by normative pressure, to create a fiction? To what extent can my heritage be shaped into a source of strength before it must be resigned to the burden that it simultaneously is? *Molla's Music* addresses these questions directly in the reflection of them in Molla's own actions as she learns about and works to create her place in the world. The same questions are addressed indirectly in the way I have had to navigate them in telling the story of my own grandmother.

I had started writing *Molla's Music* before commencing the MA Creative Writing at UWC and found the course worked to lift a burden of insecurity that had been stifling to my creative process until then. Writing is a solitary activity, but the comfort of being able to discuss it with people whose opinion I valued, and who were skilled at providing constructive feedback, bolstered me with the courage I needed. The effect was significant progress made in the quality and quantity of work I produced.

Paradoxically this meant that, over the length of the course, I needed to learn to accept that my creative process required periods of time for being unproductive. My supervisor, Julia Martin, was instrumental in facilitating this. She maintained a steady pressure on me to meet deadlines in a structured work

schedule while being pragmatic and gentle when I failed to meet them. As a result I was able to persevere through periods of being blocked that would have seen me giving up otherwise.

Interestingly, those periods of being blocked and unproductive were often needed. During those times I was able to adjust my dogged persistence that the story should follow the plan I had for it, and instead I came to accept that the characters or the nature of the story itself did not fit into my plans. This process lent *Molla's Music* more authenticity, because I came to realise that it was exactly when I was forcing the story into an insincere direction, that I became blocked. And it was only by letting the work itself guide me, even if it deviated from historical fact, that I was able to continue writing. Sometimes it could take an entire week to come to that realisation, but learning to recognise this, and to persevere through it, has seen a significant improvement in my creative process. The lesson learnt is threefold: Firstly, my creative process benefits from support from people who are willing to engage with my work. Secondly, the practice of writing every day is not nearly as integral to my creative process as it is for me to be gentle enough on myself through the blocked and unproductive days. Thirdly, although planning is beneficial, recognising the need to deviate from my plans when they are forcing me to be inauthentic is imperative for my creative process. Sometimes the truth of the story that I needed to tell did not lie in the 'facts' of my grandmother's past, but in the momentum of the fictional characters who had already come alive on paper.

Grace Paley's idea of 'the lie of injustice to characters', articulates this principle well. In Paley's advice to writers she explains that writing means 'to tell the truth' and that to tell the truth one needs to remove all the lies. The first of six lies she lists is 'the lie of injustice to characters' (Paley 152). It is applicable to my writing because as a 'white, Afrikaans woman in Africa' I felt, at times during my project, that there was little that I was entitled to say. My feminist understanding demanded that I 'speak truth' to patriarchal power, and it encouraged me to liberate my language from the homogenising influence of English. At the same time, however, it stipulated that I stay silent and listen, or speak only as an ally against the colour of my own skin. I felt that it was my turn to listen to others who spoke against the power of my own class, that it was my turn to stand in

solidarity with those who spoke up against the historical dominance of my language as white cultural identity. This thought, that I did not have the right to tell another single story about a white person in a context where white narratives have wielded so much harm, choked the words from my writing efforts. This impulse to refrain from telling my story was compounded by how personal the narrative of *Molla's Music* is to my own life. It is a fiction that is loosely based on the life of my grandmother, but I have come to realise that ultimately it is a story about me. Knowing this made it frighteningly exposing. At this point, Grace Paley's advice not to betray my own character created a necessary distance between Molla and myself, so that she could decide for herself what she wanted to say to the world. It also had a valuable effect on the way I portrayed Molla's hapless mother, Frieda. I hope this will prove to be an enduring lesson in my creative process for the future.

At the start of the MA Creative Writing course, my fellow students and I were given the habit of free-writing. This process taught me how vulnerable yet wise the unfiltered voice in each of us is. When all the censorship and associated noise of my thoughts were put aside, it becomes natural to write. So I started all work assignments with a free-write. In the second semester, however, with the distracting course in documentary film as well as with the time-consuming drafting of my thesis proposal, I lost this valuable habit. These were such significant diversions from the literary creative process that by the time I was able to focus solely on *Molla's Music* again, my writing had become strenuous and halting. It required a meeting with Meg van der Merwe to remind me of the simple efficacy of free-writing: that meeting changed my productivity overnight.

The value of free-writing is echoed in the lessons of Julia Cameron as well as Elizabeth Gilbert, both of whom reflect on the creative process. Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* (1993) reminded me to take care of quantity and not worry about quality, or as the Post It on the screen of my word processor reminds: 'Progress not perfection.' Cameron's advice was another tool that enabled me to continue with this project even when progress was worryingly slow, and everything I wrote seemed unbearably amateur. Another writer who alleviated the anxiety and torture of my creative process was Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear* (2016). In the Ted Talk on her book,

entitled 'Your Elusive Creative Genius' she advocates the externalisation of the creative force into a muse who shares responsibility for her work. Her admonishing words to her muse were a daily source of encouragement for me to persevere through writing that I cringed at rereading. As Gilbert puts it, 'If this is bad, it is not entirely my fault. You need to help. But if you don't I'm still going to show up and write because that is my job. And I would please like the record to reflect today that I showed up for my job [even if you didn't]' (Gilbert n.pag.).

In the actual practice of writing the novella, my experience of the development, drafting and revision of *Molla's Music* differed from my expectations. I had anticipated that the development phase would end with the completion of my thesis proposal, which included a detailed plan. By that time I had conducted extensive research into the historical periods and places that I would be writing about. However, I found the need to continue my research throughout the drafting process, and even into my revisions. I spent many hours in the Western Cape Archives and Records Service, reading through old newspapers that offered invaluable insights into the zeitgeist of the thirties and late fifties. I read books on etiquette, with names like *Trek Reg Aan* (1975) and *So Is Onse Maniere* (1965), I interviewed a dominee on sermons about divorce, and I read through the Immorality Act of 1927. All of this piqued my awareness of the stifling gender norms prevalent at the time. As regards the setting of the narrative, I took long drives through Lansdowne and visited Aliwal North in order to depict a tangible sense of place. I walked the streets of Cape Town to gain a sense of which buildings populated the streets back then. I visited museums such as Melck House and Vrede & Lust where old photographs rendered detailed pictures of the city in the late fifties. These added to information gained from the books I had already referenced for a sense of Cape Town's history. Especially those by Baxter (1954), Fairbridge (1928), Green (1969, 1966), Papa (1961), Rosenthal (1966), Spencer (1951), and Wells (1947) were very informative. Even Pinterest proved a valuable source of photographic material and I assembled a pin board (<https://za.pinterest.com/ethnemudge/mdm/>) that I referred to throughout drafting and revising *Molla's Music*. It includes an old advertisement for stewardesses for Hawaiian airways that I used almost verbatim. To help further evoke the ambience of the time, I created a playlist of music from the thirties and

late fifties. Old movies were also a helpful aid, and I sourced many from Lloyd (1982). As regards characterisation, I spoke to Priscilla, my grandmother's sister on whom the character by the same name in *Molla's Music* is based, about her childhood and I spoke to her son, whose name is also Chris, about his parents' past. I found the Company Gardens a valuable setting for part of the novella because much of it is unchanged since the fifties, so I regularly spent time there. I also spoke to Erik Dippenaar at the South African College of Music about Strubenhalm House, the venue at the University of Cape Town where Molla would have had her admissions audition. Finally, my research for *Molla's Music* involved questions about poverty. My own privilege proved a challenge when trying to depict poverty, so I needed to talk to various people about their experience of poverty. It was important to me to get a sense of what poverty was like in the thirties and early fifties as it differs quite remarkably from what poverty looks like today when, for example, access to fruit and vegetables have become a luxury for many who might previously have had the space to grow their own.

A second challenge to my expectations as set out in the thesis proposal had to do with the time-span of the narrative. In planning *Molla's Music* I had anticipated that the novella would span a bigger portion of her life, but in the final version her later years in Windhoek and Swakopmund are almost entirely omitted. Even the events of her young adulthood are condensed into a mere two days in the novella as it stands. This means that the abstract I submitted as part of my thesis proposal differs significantly from the one that now describes the finished novella. This change can be attributed to my focus on 'showing' and not 'telling'. I came to realise that the word limit for the Masters mini-thesis simply did not permit sufficient scope to tell her whole life story, despite my careful planning of each chapter's word count. It did however invite a more poetic approach. I found that by taking the key aspects of the story and showing them within fewer scenes than originally planned, I could focus the narrative on moments that felt more real. My intention was to suspend disbelief in my reader, and I found it much easier to attempt that when distilling the narrative to a handful of scenes because that gave me the freedom to imbue those scenes with richer dialogue and more sensory images. If I had resolved to hold to my original plan of several more scenes from her life, I am not sure that I would have been

able to make those scenes as believable or as alive as I have tried to make them in the novella as it stands. The result is that in the future, the novella could be expanded into a full-length novel that includes more of Molla's later life. I look forward to that possibility, since reducing the time-span of the narrative for the purpose of this novella has come at some cost. I feel especially regretful that I failed to show how later in her life, when caring for a large family and supporting the career and high social standing of her husband (which offered little opportunity to assert her own identity), Molla was able to achieve a vulnerable self-expression by playing the piano. For my grandmother's otherwise stoic and stern personality, this was like revealing her greatest secret in plain sight.

As regards technical issues, despite diversions from the planned time-span of the narrative, I resolved to maintain the three-part structure, each with its own register. Not only should each period look different, but it should also sound different. The fact that Molla was a different person in each section should be reflected in the style of writing. To this end, the two most significant technical challenges had to do with point of view and tense.

Originally I wanted the immediacy and subjectivity of a first person point of view written in the present tense. I knew that this was a difficult choice, but I wanted the novella to be as good as it could be. I also felt that the key premise of the novella lent itself to a first person point of view. If the premise seeks to explore the extent to which we can sympathise with a character that we find ideologically problematic, then it stood to reason that that character should speak for herself while also revealing her most intimate and uncensored thoughts. I therefore thought that a first person point of view in the present tense would engender a useful familiarity and closeness with the protagonist while revealing the naivety of her worldview. Instead, it narrowed my scope of expression. I found that I failed to make her childhood thoughts realistic, and that it was frustrating to be limited to her interiority regarding what I was able to say about her world. I know that I would have been able to achieve all of this if I were a more skilled writer, but I came to accept that the story itself was more important than my need to attempt a difficult skill. So the choice of third person omniscient allowed me to get completely into the consciousness of more than one of my characters, while also describing things of which they would have been

unaware. It allowed me to stand witness to my grandmother's life in a way that was less invasive than imagining that I could know her every thought. It also made for a more compassionately critical approach.

This change in point of view corresponded with a change to the past tense because I then realised that the third person omniscient narrator could be revealed, at the end, to be myself. This resolved the problem of who was telling the story, which in turn made it more authentic. I found that this change had a positive effect on the flow and continuity of my narrative. Perhaps because I am a native Afrikaans speaker (a language which has a different use of the present tense to English), I found it much easier to write in the past tense in English and this translated into a more logical progression in the text of *Molla's Music*.

Another significant technical aspect of my work had to do with the use of direct speech. At one level, *Molla's Music* is a story about Afrikaans. This is hopefully highlighted by the motif of 'Winternag', an iconic poem by Eugène Marais (1934) that for many people signified the birth of the language, and one that is also (ironically and perhaps prophetically) about death. Yet although Afrikaans identity is a major theme of the story, *Molla's Music* is written in English. I found this paradox unproblematic until I needed to make my characters speak. In English, their dialogues felt flat, soulless, and bland, even when I brought in many Afrikaans words and bilingual vernacular. In the end I played up the extent to which they creoled their language and mispronounced their words.

In order to make this work, I eavesdropped on conversations around me, made notes of uniquely South African expressions and pronunciations, and tried to 'amp up the volume' of Afrikaans in the story even when it deviated from how I assumed that a white Afrikaans-speaking person growing up under British rule in Cape Town would have sounded. Despite the fact that much of the vernacular is grounded in historical research, I did not mind deviations because *Molla's Music* is in part a *rewriting* of my past. Any blurring of the lines between the Afrikaans spoken by 'white' people as opposed to others who claim the language as their own, is encouraged by my story of Molla. For this reason classifications of race are kept opaque within *Molla's Music* as much as the events of the time allow.

The last technical aspect that I have the scope to discuss in this essay is my use of imagery, especially with regard to the pivotal turning point in the plot.

Throughout *Molla's Music*, recurring images connect various moments to key themes. The motif of the washbasin opens the novella and is repeated at the start of part two, when Molla reflects back on her grandmother. The motif of the hibiscus denotes cycles in which the end is written in the beginning, as with the poem, 'Winternag'. The motif of the book of Christmas carols and the piano imbues the theme of music with ideas of continuity, and a heritage that can be a burden, but also a source of comfort. In the pivotal turning point of the plot, the use of imagery was especially useful. The crucial conversation between Molla and Chris about her pregnancy test is not shown explicitly, but only alluded to. I needed a way to foreground this (absent) moment so I created a mirror image of orange and blue: the day ends with orange in the blue sky from the sunset, and the next day starts with the orange of the building reflected in the blue of the pool. I doubt that this device was strong enough, but I enjoyed using imagery to help me tell the story. Of course, despite my enjoyable engagement with technical and thematic issues, they came to the fore once again through revisions in many edits, rather than in my adhering strictly to the original plan. This can perhaps be attributed to the fact that *Molla's Music* tries to articulate a story that I myself did not know in full until it was told.

My intention as a writer, in writing *Molla's Music*, was simply to answer the question of what to do with my grandmother's death, or heritage, or my personal political identity as 'white, female, Afrikaans-speaking South African'. Or, to put it in terms of the imagery of the novella, what to do with the piano looming in my flat.

Having now completed this project, the future of my working practice as a writer is yet unclear. Before it began, I was working full time as a copywriter and I have continued to freelance as copywriter, copy editor and editor. I would love to continue the daily torture of trying and failing to write, but because I have proved to be far from prolific in the past few years, I doubt my ability to do so. When I look at the work of my contemporaries, young local writers at the start of their career such as Jen Thorpe, Jolyn Phillips, Nick Mulgrew and Rosa Lyster, I see people writing short stories and simple narratives of ordinary lives like I do. But I also see people who seem to be able to produce far more work than I have done. However, I do recognise a level of skill that I feel capable of achieving, and

my hope is that *Molla's Music* will have helped me to reach it, irrespective of whether or not it is published.

The publishability of *Molla's Music* is very difficult for me to determine. At one level, I am convinced that it is utterly unpublishable, even if lengthened and significantly altered. At the same time, it is my irrational hope that there exists a small chance. I have not been able to find many fictional narratives from my generation about my particular concerns. Successful novels such as those of Lauren Beukes or Alex van Tonder steer away from historical facts or non-fiction to explore horror and futuristic thrillers set in America. My hero, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, was a massive support through her books that I read while writing *Molla's Music*. Her acclaimed novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), does exactly for the Igbo in Nigeria what I would love to do for Afrikaans identity in South Africa while *Americanah* (2013), and tells the story of a woman who bears an uncanny resemblance to the author. Alexandra Fuller can be argued to have written a book of the same kind for Zimbabwe in *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* (2001) and *Under the Tree of Forgetfulness* (2012). Gabriel García Márquez's *Living to Tell the Tale* (2003) epitomises the genre internationally and although it cannot be improved on, it is an inspiration for writing in the South African context. Chris van Wyk's *Shirley Goodness and Mercy* (2004) is as close to the story that I want to tell as can be, and makes me feel that I almost needn't have tried to write *Molla's Music*. The same is true of Jolyn Phillips' *Tjieng Tjang Tjerries* (2016) except that Molla's story is even more specifically to do with my own experience than Van Wyk or Phillips' stories. Jeanne Goosen's *Ons Is Nie Almal So Nie* (2006), is about Afrikaans identity from a white perspective, but is written in Afrikaans, whereas *Molla's Music* is in English.

In conclusion, I believe that the *most* that I can hope for as regards publication is that there is enough interest in what constitutes Afrikaans identity when it is made approachable and written about in English, even if it is spoken from a white perspective. The paradox is that I am not certain that there should be such an interest! What I do know is that, for my own purposes, I needed to write *Molla's Music* all the same. The *least* that I can hope for is that, even if none of my work is ever published, the experience of writing the novella will have

sated my need to stand witness to the meaningful and loaded heritage of my close connection with my favourite and most irksome grandmother.



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