

October

Zoë Wicomb

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*You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*

*David's Story*

*Playing in the Light*

*The One That Got Away*

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# October

A Novel

Zoë Wicomb



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Mercia Murray is a woman of fifty-two years who has been left.

~~There is the ready-made condition of having been left and that, as we know, as she knows, involves~~ a death of sorts. But that is a less-than-helpful metaphor. For all the emptiness, there is her broken heart and an unthinkable amount of tears. As a thinking woman, Mercia goes over every gesture, every word that was uttered at the time, in search perhaps of ambiguity, but reflection reveals no hidden meanings. She has been left, and that is the banal truth. Thus, moving from the passive voice, from the self as subject, her thoughts stumble over the question: whom has she been left by? Well, she can hardly say that Craig has left her, since the man who spoke and acted was not the Craig she knew. Thus another ready-made: Mercia has been left by a stranger. Which should mean that there is something unreal about her grief, but that does not stop the tears from flowing, the heart from bursting.

Mercia has a best friend, her younger colleague Smithy, who says that time will bring an end to the suffering. When Mercia, slumped on the sofa, stops crying for a second to send a scornful look, Smithy warns that ready-mades cannot be sniffed at, and that there is the danger of becoming addicted to grief. Many a left one will not let go of the condition, will cosset a heart that lurches about to the broken rhythms of sobbing.

Smithy claps her hands and says, Let's get organized. What do you have to do this week? Let me clear lectures and supervisions for the next three days so you can get some healing sleep. Which makes Mercia sit up. Good old considerate Craig, she says wryly, not a stranger after all. See how he chose a Friday afternoon to tell me. All packed up and gone within a day, leaving me with a long weekend for grieving. By tomorrow I will have cried my heart out, so no need to miss a single class, she sobs.

There's my girl, Smithy says, and pulls out of her bag the peaty, medicinal Bruichladdich that she discovered on a trip to Islay. This will put hair on your chest.

Jacques Theophilus Murray is a bad egg.

~~Unlike an egg his badness is not contained, concealed within a sound, flawless shell. He is a drunk~~ and wears his drunkenness on his sleeve, which is to say that there are bags under his eyes, that his face is a flushed mass of veins barely concealed by his dark brown coloring, and that Meester, a pillar of respectability in the village of Kliprand, has suffered the humiliation of his son spending his days in the new, unfortunately named Aspoester bar that has opened in the village. Jake wears his trousers low down on his hips, showing the crack of his buttocks. Which may be the fashion nowadays among well-to-do young men, but he is neither young nor well-to-do; there may well be a whiff of urine; and in fact, the trousers reference the skollie gear of his youth.

When Jake wakes on the morning of the first of September with an evil taste in his mouth, his first thought is of oblivion. What would he give to sink into the softness of a feather pillow, down into deep, forgetful sleep, but there is no pillow under his throbbing head. His mouth is parched; he stretches out his hand for the jug of water—Sylvie always puts a jug of water by his bedside—but there is no jug. Light drilling through the curtains, blood-red curtains for fuck's sake, pierces his eyes, so that he turns onto his stomach. Already the heat is oppressive. He must snatch more sleep, but then a groan escapes as he remembers what has to be done on that day. Already it is late; he can tell from the light; and there can be no more than say nine hours of daylight left.

On that first day of the month he must kill Grootbaas, Meester, his father. In the kitchen, Sylvie has a fine butcher's knife, which she keeps razor sharp. He need look no further. He will plunge the knife, twist it into the bastard's heart.

Sylvie is in the kitchen feeding the baby. She knows nothing of Jake's thoughts, but the baby, Willem Nicholas Murray, known as Nicky, who has woken up late after a night interrupted by his father's shenanigans, must sense the patricide, for hearing Jake groan in the adjacent room, he spits out the nipple and purses his full rosy lips with distaste for the nasty world of adults.

Nicky is nearly five years old and given his rude health and firm tread is by no means a baby. Some busybodies would say that he is well beyond breast-feeding. Sylvie has thought of weaning, but what harm could a suckle at the beginning and end of the day do? Besides, the boy would make such a fuss. But what now? Has the little one decided for himself?

What's up with you? she asks. But Nicky stares at his mother and refuses to speak.

Sylvie has much experience with sheep. She has since childhood reared lambs, has cradled hanslammertjies in her arms, hand-fed them milk from a bottle and teat, knowledge which she expects to transfer readily to child rearing, but this one has flummoxed her since birth with his contrary human ways. She tries the left breast. The child turns away with unmistakable disgust, so that she pushes him down on the old sofa and buttons up her blouse. He does not protest; instead, he stares at her with wide-open woeful eyes. Nicholas, she says, trying out the controversial name. The child, normally a chatterbox, does not answer.

She has insisted; it was only right that Nicky should have his grandfather's name. Jake had no business registering the first name as Willem, a common Afrikaans name at which she still smarted. Why not at least William? Jake was of course drunk, but for all her scolding he just nodded knowingly, and spat, Call him Klaas if you like. And count yourself lucky I didn't call him Theophobe. Which sounds quite respectable to Sylvie. She has a feeling that Jake does not care for the boy. She knows that to be a sin.

Sylvie is unnerved by the child's silence, by his unflinching stare. Standing like the countrywoman that she is, her left arm is tucked back, the left hand stretched across her back to clutch at the right elbow. The right hand rests on her chest. In this manner, an expert on the television said

countrywomen announce at the same time their humility and their steely determination to see things through. Sylvie listened with interest; she is not averse to explanations that show her to be part of the wider world, only what a pity that the program was in English, which she does not follow with ease.

Thank God, the boy shuts his eyes abruptly and turns over, draws up his knees as if to sleep. No. Sylvie will have to deal with Jake, who is stumbling about behind the door. Damn, damn, damn the devilish drink. She has never been read to as a child the terrifying tales of monsters and giants which chill the blood, but who get their comeuppance in the old end. Behind the door Jake grows vast and evil, a giant-devil capable of anything, so that she flinches. Perhaps it is she whom he will kill today.

Thank heavens she baked yesterday. Sylvie takes Jake a placatory cup of coffee and peanut buttered bread as well as some panados, and gently pushes him down, back onto the bed.

Here, she says, you'll feel better after more sleep.

You get that knife sharpened, Jake says quietly. Today, no later than today, I'll kill him.

Sylvie laughs mirthlessly. He's dead and buried, Jake. How many times do you want to kill him? He's saved you the trouble, remember?

Would you like sausage and beans for supper? she asks, in the knowledge that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. She has made the sausage herself, and would stretch the dish with salted wind-dried intestine. What Jake imagines they live on, Sylvie has no idea. Her part-time job at the butchery is poorly paid and Jake has been on sick pay for two weeks. What she does suspect is that he has been lost for good to the evil drink, that she will never have him back, and although she knows that there is nothing a girl can do to change the course of events, she should at least make an effort to challenge Lady Fortune. For all her social fears, Sylvie does not take things lying down. She has after all nursed him back once before, rescued him from death's very door, and that only six years ago. But today he is impossibly evil.

You've crept out of a reed hut to ruin my life, Jake replies calmly, and reaches for his bottle. He coughs violently, then a horrible gurgling sound escapes from his throat.

See, she says, it's not nice to drink from a bottle, not healthy, and points to an empty glass.

Jake picks up the glass, a tumbler, turns it this way and that, for all the world as if he were checking for any smudges, for evidence of her failing as a wife, before aiming it at the wall.

Ouch, Sylvie laugh-cries, holding her head, as if she's been in the firing line. This is no way to behave. If only you could pull yourself together and stop this childishness, this badness. What a good example for Nicky! I'm not used to such behavior. Also, I didn't grow up in a reed hut, she adds, musing. AntieMa's house has a good zinc roof.

So why don't you fuck off to AntieMa. Or to Kiewiet Street. Fuck off and take the little bastard with you. Get out.

Sylvie sighs. She hopes the child has not heard. She may be a nobody, but she hasn't bargained on raising a child on bad language. Sylvie knows that Kiewiet Street is shorthand for Meester, whose name Jake will not, cannot utter. But surely he has not forgotten that Meester is dead, that the house is now being sold?

At the kitchen sink, instead of doing the dishes, she stands clutching her right elbow in her left hand, staring fixedly ahead. Just her luck that Jake is not only a drunk, but is also losing his marbles.

It is in the small, dark hours that things get tough, and Mercia must find ways of stemming the phantasmagoria of grief. The conference paper is finished, needs to rest (like pastry, she advises her students, acquiring new properties in left-alone time) so that it becomes more legible for the final edit and now she should perhaps try her hand at . . . memoir. Oh, there is cause for pause. Mercia, skeptical of the genre, has misgivings about the contemporary turn to memoir, would not dream of reading such a thing. A cliché, of course, this kind of writing deemed suitable for a woman who has been left. Which means that she spends some time hunched over the screen, blank save for the words of the memoir at the top of the page, typed first in plain text, turned into bold, then into parodic italics.

Mercia's youthful idea of herself as a poet, she thinks, has in fact been a false start at an autobiography, and meeting Craig, a real poet, has mercifully put an end to that folly. Then there was much raking of fingernails across her scalp, much doodling in the margins, as you would, not knowing who you are. But now, in a forest of midnight liveness, in the crazed hours of grief, she grows bold. She thinks of such writing as private, not for publication, then really she is free to write; there need be no thinking through the reason or purpose, no need to retract her views on memoir, and more importantly, no repetition of the angst-ridden biting of the pencil. There is after all a screen, ready to receive an image of herself, but also to protect, to conceal.

Mercia has no intention of wasting her research day on this project. The memoir will be strictly for the midnight. And so her fingers fly across the keyboard; words flow effortlessly, for rather than starting with the self, there are her parents, Nicholas and Antoinette, both dead and representable. How little she really, she remembers or knows about them; how much there is to invent. She saves the file as Home

In the past friends have said wistfully—even Smithy—How far you have traveled. You should write your story.

Mercia has met this with embarrassed silence. They are mistaken, also about the source of her embarrassment. Yes, she has come a long way geographically, crossing a continent, but what people really are alluding to is what they believe to be a cultural gap, a self-improvement implied in the distance between then and now, the here of Europe seen as destination. In that sense, Mercia is not conscious of having traveled any great distance. As she once deigned to explain to Craig, her humble origins left little room for improvement. Besides, autobiography is what people like her are expected to produce, and thus for Mercia not a possibility.

Craig has been gone now for eighty-seven days and sixteen hours.



Nicholas Theophilus Murray was a good man, a decent colored man, with a name that he had never disgraced—unthinkable, he was a Murray, of civilized Scottish stock. He neither drank nor smoked. A good man need not rely on anything other than himself. Nie Klaas, he jested, cracking his name in two. No Klaas, so ever my own Baas, and he thumped his chest proudly.

I am Meester, he announced when he first arrived in Kliprand as a young teacher, and Meester was what everyone called him. Within weeks he became a deacon in the Sendingkerk with its new modern building in the center of the village. There he devised plays for young folk, Old Testament narratives turned into dramatic dialogues, with brimstone homilies for keeping the youth out of the bar and off their toes. His thoroughly up-to-date Moses would strike a papier-mâché rock and declaim the commandments, bringing tears to the eyes of old and young alike. But the truth was that even the respectable, churchgoing people were all too fond of the devilish drink. Which saddened Nicholas, not least for the fact that the bar was a humiliating window at the back of the Drankwinkel, where they waited (how could they?) until every white customer had been served. Really, it was this abject

behavior that made him think of the Namaqualanders as hotnos.

Not that Nicholas had any objection to a decent tot of whisky or brandy, or even a beer stout; he was not narrow-minded, and a drink on festive occasions, birthdays, New Year and so on—though not Christmas—was not a problem. For such rare occasions he favored brandy, something with a good name like Oude Meester. Wine, like the cheap Oom Tas or Lieberstein favored by the people, did not so much turn his stomach as turn his thoughts to dignity, a reminder to straighten his back and lift his chin. So that Jake the reprobate said that in spite of Grootbaas's belief in his own rectitude, it showed that everyone slumps and slackens, and from time to time finds to his horror that his head is hanging. Like shitting, he added, everyone slumps, so that Mercia shut him out with palms pressed against his ears.

Nicholas was not a vain man. He wore a goatee and a moustache that marked his respectability. For some time it had been white with age, in other words, what is known as distinguished in a man. Thus he did not long for the days of youth when he courted the beautiful Antoinette with his raven black hair; rather, it was the sprinkling of salt and pepper of his forties, when poor Nettie had already departed, that brought a tug of nostalgia. Youth, he knew, was overrated. Being hotheaded and impetuous, a young man could not know where he stands, or indeed at times how to stand, his hands darting in and out of pockets searching for a comfortable place.

How well Nicholas remembered his youthful arms dangling awkwardly, or how shifting his weight from one hip to another brought no end to uncertainty. Then, neither Klaas nor baas, it was a matter of tottering and stumbling on shifting sands. No, it was in the middle years of salt-and-pepper respectability, when Nicholas stood firmly on the rock and uttered his words with precision, that he knew who he was. That, he thought, was also when a man was most attractive to women, for he could not fail to note their interest. Not that he'd had much to do with women. With the help of God, Nicholas had found a wife whose price was above rubies, a good woman who produced two healthy children, but who died all too early at the age of thirty-nine. Yes, he had been tested by God, but the premature death had not encouraged desire for another marriage. He was perfectly capable of boiling an egg himself, of raising his two children, and the good people of Kliprand helped out from time to time, for Meester was a good man.

Nicholas believed that there was a handsome solidity, as well as virtue, to be found in a disciplined man given to gravity and kindness, but irrevocably single. So people said that Meester was a good man and that a good man, as everyone knows, is hard to find. Which for some with a literary bent might signal a well-deserved murder, although it would be foolish to expect a match between life and art.



It is not the case that Mercia neglects her duties. She works as hard as ever on lectures, tutorials and supervisions. Given who she is, she expects no allowance for slack, but it is the case that her research project on postcolonial memory is slowly being supplanted by the memoir. Mercia reassures herself that the funded work is well ahead of target, that for once she ought to let go since the personal writing gets her through the pain; it won't be long before she is back on track. She must make allowances for herself—it is not so surprising that her habits are being amended. For instance, if academic life has left little time or inclination for contemporary fiction, a recent review has persuaded Mercia, titillated by the title, to order the prize-winning novel *Home*.

The book arrived at the same time as Jake's letter. News from home was always disturbing, making any kind of work impossible, thus she started reading the novel, partly to put off reading the

letter and thinking about Jake, darling Jake, her no-longer-little brother. As it turns out, Mercia consumed by the novel. All evening, she reads, until late that night, barely stopping to eat a hurried supper. In the morning, a glance in the mirror confirms that she looks awful, unwashed and haggard, much like the fabled writer she once would have liked to be, stumbling out of an attic, disheveled and blinking in the northern light.

Mercia may not be as good as the glorious sister in the novel, but the correspondences are there, including the ironic depiction of home. Strangely familiar, this story of siblings, brother and sister that turns out also to be one of father and son. But theirs—Mercia and Jake's story—is from a different continent, a different hemisphere, a different kind of people, a kind so lacking in what is known as western gentility. Theirs is a harsh land that makes its own demands on civility. Their father, too, a good man, even if he does not know how to show his love for an errant son. By the time she gets to the end of the novel she has doubts about her own memoir. Is hers not redundant for the telling?

Mercia, an English teacher, an academic, necessarily thinks of texts and their families, thus she will suffer with the anxiety of influence, but more importantly, she no longer feels like carrying on with her story. There is, as she has always suspected, in the face of fiction and its possibilities, no point in telling the true tale; besides, she can't vouch for the truth, since already there is more invention than memoir. For her story is also Jake's, and has she not always, or in some ways, avoided Jake's story, avoided being caught up between him and their father?

Jake's letter, still unopened, landed in her house as a caution against writing, against the presumption of knowing (it is as if she can hear his voice)—and from such a distance too. There is also the small matter of the research for which she has been awarded a sabbatical, and which will not brook delay whilst she messes about with memoir. She does not delete the morning's work as she promised herself; instead the file, Home, is saved and closed. Will she open it again? Mercia thinks not. An aberration, that's what it is, another ready-made response to being left. She ought to have known from the uncanny flow of words. For heaven's sake, she has after all no interest in this genre that floods the markets, or supermarkets, these days. All the same, she does not delete the file.

Now, whilst there is still the business of adjusting to being alone, unloved, Jake's please-come-home letter has arrived. He has never written before, never replied to her occasional, dutiful accounts of her life in Glasgow. There are neither recriminations nor a reminder of her rash promise at the father's funeral to return, just the brief note, a single page on which is hurriedly scrawled, without salutation: Come home Mercy. Then plaintively, You haven't been home for ages. There is a gap, as time has passed and he has deliberated over the next line: The child (yes, that was how he referred to his son) needs you. Please come and get the child. You are all he has left. It is signed Jacques, which she has never called him.

Mercia knows of course about the boy, Nicky, who at the time of the funeral had been packed off to his granny. She thought it strange, but it was so much easier not to ask questions. Strange too that she has not been shown any photographs; she cannot remember how old Nicky is, has no idea what he looks like, does not understand how he could possibly need her, but then people seldom say what they mean. Mercia knows Jake's letter to be histrionic nonsense. Has he returned to drinking? If there really were a problem, an emergency, he would have called. Nevertheless, she may have to heed his request and go home, or rather, visit. Maybe that is the place where she might stop crying—at home, a place where a heart could heal.

The thought of the Cape as home brings an ambiguous shiver—the small town in Klein Namaqualand, Kliprand. Hardly more than a village. *How could anyone want to live there? Why would anyone stay there?* These are questions that Mercia too must ask, although in those parts the words

live and stay are interchangeable. South Africans, having inherited the language from the Scots, speak of staying in a place when they mean living there. Which is to say that natives are not expected to move away from what is called home. Except, of course, in the case of the old apartheid policy for Africans, the natives who were given citizenship of new Homelands where they were to live. But they were required after all to work and therefore to stay in the white cities from which they had been ejected. *Come stay with me and be my slave . . .*

In Glasgow Mercia insists on the distinction between living and staying; she is only there temporarily; it cannot be her home. She visits Kliprand often, but knows at the same time that to stay there would allow the soul to die rather than to live. Which is how Mercia and Jake had always thought of the place, although they would have balked at the word soul. The soul of black folk? Or rather, Jake corrected her on an earlier visit—colored folk like them who once adopted soul; nowadays it is better to come clean as colored, he laughed. Typically, he would not expand, could never allow himself to see a thought through, so she exclaimed provocatively, *Mayibuye Africa!*

*Bu-ullshit*, he said, turning bull into two syllables.

Nicholas, now dead for several months, had never made a distinction between living and staying. A son of the soil, he called himself, without irony, which was to say a good person. To stay put was virtuous; to stay there was to be alive. Like the great old thorn tree that he planted on his arrival at the gate of the dip-kraal, now rooted in the history of the place, he lived and naturally, necessarily, stayed.

Mercia thinks of her father as still being there. Like the thorn tree. Stricken with guilt, she had come for the five days it took to manage the funeral that Jake and his wife seemed incapable of doing.

I know, her father used to say at the end of each of her visits, *I know in my heart that you'll come back home one day.*

Yes, she agreed at first, as soon as this monstrous government is overthrown. After the end of apartheid she had nothing to say, would smile sheepishly at him.

Home to stay!—the opening words of the father in the novel, which strikes a chill in the fictional daughter's heart, as it does Mercia's. The chill is laced with guilt. Oh, if only she had spent some time with him before he died.

*Bu-ullshit*, Jake said, the old bastard was well past his sell-by date.

Ag, Jake, don't be so disrespectful, so unkind, she pleaded.

Respect! he snorted. I've never forgiven him for the beatings. And neither should you.

Was it grief that made Jake speak so cruelly? She was his sister, the one he loved, so why did he seem intent on hurting her? And why did Jake not want her to stay at his house? She saw his wife Sylvie only briefly at the funeral, had not seen the child at all. But Jake shook his head, stared vacantly.

Man, he said, you won't like our way of doing things. Just count yourself lucky that you don't stay here, in this mess.

Mercia assumed that he was speaking of the state of the country, of the disappointing aspects of the New South Africa. Perhaps you have unreasonable expectations, she said, given how much of the old South Africa is still in place. But Jake would not be drawn.

I'll be back soon, she said rashly. I'll come home for the summer, the winter I mean, so just you get yourselves ready.

There was something unspeakably forlorn about Jake. For all his callous talk about their father, he seemed more distressed than he would admit. Jake needed her, but then, Jake had always needed her. Mercia thought guiltily.

Whatever, he said.

So, fashionable expressions nowadays spread even to unlikely places like Kliprand, a place she thinks of as the bundus or whatever the contemporary word for such places might be. At least Jake does not say Bu-ullshit. Which she hated.

For Mercia there could be no return to the pays natal where the same old dabikwa trees lean to the west and ghanna bush turns gray and crumbles in midsummer. Jake too had gone to Cape Town for good, except that he succumbed to drink. Mercia wept as her father told of how he had become a drunken vagrant, found in the Cape Town docks sleeping rough, and racked with pneumonia. Nicholas had fitted the back of the bakkie with foam and an old traveling rug, and fetched Jake from the gutter of the city; he nursed him back to health in the room that the children once shared. Then Mercia wept on Craig's shoulder, stricken with guilt for not being there for him, her baby brother, abandoned to the city's cold wet winter. But their father said that Jacques had only himself to blame, that Mercia should not spill any tears over a good-for-nothing. As for the rug, he was sad that after all those years it had fallen apart, a thing to be thrown away. Their mother, Nettie, had bought it when the children were infants, and he did not like throwing Nettie's things out, but, he tutted, it was soiled after the journey. A disgrace.

Mercia has never minded Jake being Nettie's favorite. She struggles to summon a memory of the mother, but a flash of blue striped fabric is all she can muster. That, and yes, a cake for Jake's birthdays, dried fruit and the smell of clove and cinnamon and nutmeg rising from the oven. Is it an actual memory? her own? Or is the smell entwined with that in the novel she is reading, where the house is filled by the mother with fragrant food? Mercia recollects the message of that fragrance: *this house has a soul that loves us all, no matter what*. She shakes her head. Again, the soul! She ought to have known the memory to be false. It is just as well, if she can't distinguish between her own history and someone else's fiction, that she has abandoned the memoir.

With a sabbatical awarded for the autumn semester, Mercia cannot leave for the Cape right away. There are a number of administrative duties to fulfill over the summer, the re-sit examinations to manage, and her monograph has to be advanced in order to finish it by the end of the leave period. Much as she hates not going away over the summer, there is only just enough time to catch her breath. The memoir has been a foolish distraction.

In the past Mercia has rushed off to escape the disappointing weather. Now the gardens in Glasgow compensate for staying put. With the enduring summer light comes wave after wave of botanical efflorescence, which anyone would prefer to drought-stricken Namaqualand. Mercia watches over the fading of glorious forget-me-not, the powdery fragrance of lilac, species after species of flowering rhododendron, and the trellises spangled like so many stars with clematis. She awaits the explosion of flamed poppies, the roses that will stay in bloom until the autumn. That is when she ought to be away, in the month of October, when the sadness of retreating light strikes.

At home, in the Southern Hemisphere, with the sun well on its way to the equator it will be warm at least during the day. How effortlessly the word comes: home, the place she has not lived in for more than twenty-six years. Hot, oppressive, and heavy with the memories of growing up under the eagle eye of the old man, Our Father, Old Who-art-in-heaven, as the seven-year-old Jake mocked irreverently, but whispered all the same. Home, no more than a word, its meaning hollowed out by the termites of time, a shell carrying only a dull ache for the substance of the past. But living in another country, in a crazy era, Mercia is not yet ready for its collapse.

How the Old Ones would have danced around the strange word, home, poured into it their yearning for a break from the mud and wattle and hide shelters of hunter-gatherers who followed their herds who muttered under the breath their supplications to the moon, who relied on the seasons to assuage

the restlessness of the soul by moving on. Even before the word, there would surely have been women who sucked their gums in despair and dreamt of living as staying, dreamt of seeds taking root in the earth, growing into ripeness, even as a headman announced the decision to decamp. If nowadays ambition cannot accommodate the old notion of home, there has surely always been ambivalence, the impatience for something new, for moving on, across the world, whilst at the same time, at times feeling the centripetal tug of the earth.

Always in the period before going home, Mercia finds her nose twitching to various smells: onions sizzling in a pan, a patch of dug earth, or infuriatingly, something she cannot identify that nevertheless transports her to the Cape. From which she chooses to infer that the world is much the same all over that we necessarily rely on nostalgia, the trace that connects us to the past. If the novel that Mercia is immersed in speaks of the soul finding its own home if it ever has a home at all, she must add that places like Kliprand, where the idea of home is overvalued, laden with sentimentality, the soul produces its own straitjacket. Then she swallows, once, twice, to relieve the lump in her throat.

When Mercia and Craig decided to buy a house together, she wrote to her father in carefully chosen words: I am throwing in my lot with a Scotsman, hitching up with a man called Craig McMillan.

Nicholas, who naturally read that as marriage, took what was for him the unusual step of telephoning. Were there any problems with this man, Craig? he finally asked. Does he have children? Is he divorced? And Mercia, having said no, prised out of him the problem, the question he could not quite bring himself to ask: Why has Craig not managed to get a woman of his own kind? What was wrong with him?

Mercia, not having the will to deal with such self-hatred, resorted to humor.

Nothing much wrong with Craig, she assured him, it's just that he has only one leg and one eye and it so happens that Scottish women are mortally afraid of men who do not have thumbs.

Her father said he was sorry, but he would not manage the trip overseas to give her away. He hoped that Jake would do. Jake, he assured her, was quite respectable these days.

Mercia refrained from saying that she was not for the giving. Instead, she wrote, no, no need for Jake to come, that neither she nor Craig was keen on weddings, an ostentatious waste of money leaving him to infer that it would be a simple registry office marriage. She dropped the flimsy blue aerogram hurriedly into the post box, suppressing guilt. She had not actually told a lie, had merely nudged him into believing that they were to marry. And really, there was nothing to be gained from hurting him with the truth—that she had no interest in marriage. The absence of a ring would be easily explained. She had never worn rings, chose not to draw attention to her ugly hands. As it turned out, Nicholas was still anxious.

It was good, he said hesitantly on her next visit home, that she had chosen a man from Europe, but he hoped that she would be careful, vigilant against anything shameful.

What on earth did he mean?

We-ell, he said, people say that European men, at least here in South Africa, are disrespectful, that they hate themselves for going with nonwhite women. He hesitated before adding, and that's why they beat their wives, for separating them from their families and their country. So Nicholas could only hope and pray . . .

Mercia laughed, relieved that she could set his mind at rest. Are you mad? Do I strike you as someone who could be beaten? No one, she assured him, would as much as try. When apartheid came to an end, and it wouldn't be long, Craig would come to meet them, and he could see for himself that she was not living with a brute. She felt his anxiety, and so said nothing about his use of the word

nonwhite. She shudders to think how her father would have interpreted Craig's leaving. Would she have told him at all?

Jake, overdressed in a dark pinstripe suit and carrying a leather briefcase, laughed uproariously. Mercia could do with a good hiding, he said. I thought, Grootbaas, all those beatings when we were children were meant to prepare us for marriage. Now Mercia knows what to expect, and I'll know what my wife will feel when I beat the shit out of her.

It's no laughing matter, the old man said. I have set you an example. You do not as much as hurt a hair on the head of any woman, let alone a wife. When your mother and I—

Jake interrupted, holding up both palms. Oh please, not another sermon. Look, I promise to choose a wife like Mercia, one who can't be beaten.

Do you like my gear, Jake said mockingly, once their father had left. This nonsense, it's what Grootbaas rigged up for me, and you know what? I didn't have the nerve to say no. So here I am, Mr. Bigshit, I mean Mr. Bigshot, driving a Chevy in my suit and tie. I'm in the liquor business, the only secure business in South Africa, one that will never go under. Your people over there in Britain will pretend to boycott South African products, but you know what? My shares in liquor are doing just fine. So now, and he held out his wide lapels parodically, I'm a proper playboy, hey.

Then he looked her up and down, puzzled by her plain skirt and T-shirt, the scuffed flat shoes. Aren't you supposed to be some grand professor or something? So what's it with the clothes? Do you think you have to dress down for us? Are we not good enough for you? For a proper hairdo and makeup? We're not plaasjapies anymore. I'm a city playboy, don't you know.

Yes, I mean no, not at all, Mercia stumbled. I teach in a university, that's all, not a professor. At any rate, not yet. And you, playboy of the Western world, she sighed, for peering ahead, squinting through time, she saw a flash of axe being wielded at their father's head.

For some time Jake had addressed their father as Grootbaas, a name the old man found amusing. But Mercia knew that Jake simply could not bring himself to call him Father, saw that the child's fear and dislike of Nicholas had not dissipated with time. Surely that was childish, she said to Jake, surely you can see him as a product of his time?

Mercia was shocked by the bitterness of his reply. Let me be. You left home, you got away, so no need to bother your head with me. But don't expect me to stand in for you, to be the dutiful child.



On the sideboard there is a photograph of Jake clutching at his mother's skirts. A plump child, but in those days, in those parts, not wanting to look impoverished, it was known as healthy and strong. The mother is of another era. Her dress sports a bow at the throat, the skirt skims her ankles, and her hair is raked back severely into a bun. Good hair all the same. No hot iron, her husband would proudly offer, apropos of nothing, has ever touched that head. If nowadays it is the look of a prude, it is worth remembering that then the severity signaled that she was a good woman. There is further, bucolic virtue in the hand that rests on the haft of a garden spade. There is nothing of the raciness one would expect to find in one called Antoinette.

Some who come across the photograph are surprised. Has Jake not claimed that his mother died at childbirth? That he was responsible for her death?

Nowadays, a disheveled Jake shrugs, Whatever, who gives a shit. And if the speaker is one of those smarty-pants Cape Town types, he may throw in, shockingly, Jou ma se poes, and cackle at the sharp intake of breath. That is Jake's new thing: being a foulmouthed, lowdown, drunken colored.

Sylvie is furious; she has been betrayed. It further infuriates her that he would never use such

language in Mercia's presence. What use is it being married to a Murray who has sunk lower than the lowest farm laborer?

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The poor Antoinette might as well have died in childbirth for all the trouble the boy had been. Far in spite of being breast-fed, and jolly as an infant, he was much given to laughter, a levity that turned out to be a precursor to lewdness. At the age of two and a half Jake discovered his penis, which he whipped out at every opportunity, both in public and private, causing his parents unspeakable shame and distress. For all the punishment, the child simply would not understand that he was doing wrong. Once he found the matted doughnut around which Nettie wrapped her hair into a perfect bun, and balancing it over his erect peetie stumbled giggling into the room where a meeting of deacons was being held. They took him to Dr. Groenewald, whose assurance that the child would grow out of it. Nicholas thought to be mealy-mouthed. In the meantime, he recommended, circumcision was worth the try, advice that Nicholas scorned. God could not possibly approve of bits of the body being lopped off. He would rather rely on the solution of regular beatings.

On Sunday nights before supper their father held aloft the aapstert whilst he reiterated the sacred duty of chastising his own flesh and blood. That was what the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob commanded. Nicholas did not relish this task, but in addition to whipping them at the time of actual transgressions, he would beat both children for the secret sins accumulated through the week, for those that only God knew of. Mercia complained that she did not even have a peetie, which earned her an extra blow; they were not to speak of the organs.

Nettie thanked the Lord when Jake grew bored with his peetie. She suggested that they now could drop the Sunday thrashings, but Nicholas explained that that would be wrong, that it would encourage other secret sins. Jake, who retained no memory of the peetie days, did his best to justify the punishment, and with hearty laughter boasted of his misdemeanors. Thus his mother came to understand the necessity of the aapstert, even if she thought the instrument brutal. Would a stick not do, she asked, but Nicholas said no, that animal hide, used also by the police, was the material for correction, that they were the unfortunate parents of a miscreant.

Nettie worried about the boy's waywardness, and in the short week that it took for her to die, got Nicholas to promise that Jake would be shepherded through school and sent to university to study medicine, that he should start by teaching the boy Latin. Which Nicholas hoped to achieve by keeping up the regular beatings of both children.

Jake was eleven years old when he completed primary school, and took the aapstert to the cemetery behind the hill. He checked the graves, mounds of baked red earth studded with white stones and the rough wooden crosses with names of the departed and dearly beloveds in crooked writing. There he found Antoinette's, away from the rest, where the veld was left to encroach. Jake pulled over his mother's cross, and alongside her grave, covered with soutslaai and vygies, used it to dig a long, slightly curved channel in which he laid out the aapstert. With his bare hands he scraped together the red earth to mark the curve of the grave.

The very name, aapstert, was proof of his father's folly. The whip was of course not the tail of an ape, who would have bared his teeth and hissed rather than part with his tail; rather, it was the curved hide of a common donkey's tail, a stupid obedient animal that bowed to its fate. Jake would not wait for the earth to settle. He collected white stones from the hill and arranged them to write the letters along the curved grave: DONKIESTERT. He remembered just in time to replant Antoinette's wooden cross. The very next day an unseasonal rainstorm washed much of the mound away, but the leather switch lay snugly in its grave, under the mangled letters of dislodged stones.

That Sunday night Nicholas looked behind the door where the aapstert was kept, found it gone, and

found Jake with arms folded, looking him squarely in the eyes. It's dead and buried, you'll never find it, he said calmly. Nicholas clenched his fists, shook his head, and proclaimed: Gods water oor God akker. Mindful perhaps of Nettie's misgivings, he asked no questions and never again mentioned the aapstert. Jake could have sworn that, for all the show of disappointment, Nicholas was relieved. But, the Sunday-night ritual was stopped, Nicholas did not now hesitate to remove his belt and thrash the offending child within the proverbial inch of his life.



Not even a full day has Mercia been here in Kliprand, and already she would like to wash her hands of these people who are her own, would like to pack her bag right away and leave. But that is not possible. One does not walk away from family. Patience and kindness, that is what family lays claim to. Which may mean that one should not come to see them in the first place.

Mercy, that was what her father called her. You'll be a professional, an angel of mercy, called to minister to the sick and needy, he pronounced. Nice and smart, that nurse's uniform of starched white and good brown walkers, perfect for an angel of mercy. Of course, being a clever girl, you'll be promoted to matron in no time. Which sounded fine until Mercia reached her teens and thought with distaste of a matron's headdress, clearly modeled on that of a nun.

Nonsense, Nicholas said, nursing was not only a good profession, it was also a noble vocation. Mercia's argument that a vocation could by definition not be imposed by another did not sway him. What did was the confident assertion that she'd be a doctor instead. Nicholas had expected Jake to be a doctor, that's what he promised dear Nettie, but really, he had his doubts about the reprobate boy. Anyway, so much better if there were two of them. And if Mercia's Matric results showed her to be outstanding in languages, she allowed herself to be bullied into registering for a science degree. After a BSc her father said, she could transfer to medicine at the white university.

It was less than halfway through the year that a disheartened Mercia gave up. Could she not start again the following year on an arts degree of English and history? Nicholas tried once more to sell the noble vocation of nursing, before giving in.

When Mercia gained her doctorate her father shook his head: a doctor of literature who could not even cure a headache? He hoped she would not go about calling herself doctor, making a fool of herself. Doctoring books, he said wistfully, well, what good could that do? He supposed if one day she brought a steady, well-paid job . . .

It was shortly after her mother's death that Mercia announced that she would no longer answer to the name of Mercy.

Jake complained. No man, Mercy man, it's too late now. How would a person remember to call you by that mouthful of a name? Anyway what's in a name? In that little add-on?

Everything, she said, and stuck to her guns until everyone learned to say Mercia. An entirely new name was really what she had had in mind: how much better something plain, like Mary or Jane; she hated both Mercy and Mercia. But her father exploded, an outrage it was to her mother's memory, so that she abandoned the idea.

Now that she is an older woman, she ought not to care. That label after all supersedes a name, wipes out presence itself, as she has found even in her privileged position. An older woman is not only left, but left behind, which she supposes refers to reproduction, as if that is what every woman wants. Here, back home, it is clearer than ever that a child would have been a horrible mistake. Not that she has ever had any doubts. But then, once upon a time she was sure of Craig, sure enough not to marry-

oh it does not bear thinking about.

~~And once, in bygone days, Mercia was a place, an English region, the name for border people~~ which she supposes has its own resonance for certain South Africans like them, or for that matter her own liminal self. Nicholas and Nettie would not have known these meanings, on that dry Namaqualand plain would not have known of the lush Trent Valley, the land of the Mercians. No, more likely they were guided by the word mercy, guided by a cry that must have issued from every soul who set foot in that godforsaken place. But Mercia cannot take her cue from mercy, since there is for her no deity who will or will not, according to his caprice, dispense the stuff. Given the Christian fondness for abstract nouns, the virtues as names, she supposes that she has come off lightly after all. Imagine being called Charity, Prudence, Sobriety, or Virtue itself. Names for girls. Names that boys happily escape.

Mercia—she has always hated the name, and attached to Murray it sounds too foolishly alliterative, an aural joke, thus a good enough reason to marry and take a stranger's name. Which she now supposes she may well have done had there been children, but not having the stomach for reproduction, and with Craig's claim that he didn't care for children, it seemed too self-loathing to take another's name. Abbreviated to Mercy, the name puzzled the child, for whom words, if not names, had meanings. What was the child to make of Mercy? That as an embodiment of mercy she like a god, would be the one to dispense it? Or was she to inspire mercy in others, which gave her license to offend? Would she have wanted mercy from Craig? That too does not bear thinking about.

Here in Kliprand, trapped in this cramped house where Jake lies in a darkened room, it would seem that she must be the angel of mercy, though what quality of mercy she cannot imagine. All she knows is that it won't be easy, that its twice-blessed promise has to be taken with a pinch of salt. Rather, it will be a haphazard affair, like groping for an herb or spice in a dark cupboard, any herb or spice for flinging into a tasteless stew. Mercia does not see herself as being up to the task. No, it's ridiculous. Jake can't expect her to take the child.

The child seems about five years old, but how would Mercia know, having had so little to do with children? There is the full mouth and the brow of the Murrays to identify him as one of them, but he is very like his mother, more's the pity. It puzzles her, Jake's retreat to Kliprand. They have always talked about it as a place to leave behind, so why has he stayed and taken this Kliprand girl as wife? Mercia corrects herself; she must not be unkind or snobbish, must also try to see things from the mother's point of view. It is difficult though, given Sylvie's eagerness, the way she presents the child like a trophy, as if reproduction were a feat.

The child is uncomfortable. His eyes flit between his shoes and Mercia's face, but then, as if preparing himself for combat, he boldly returns her stare. Shame, his eyes sparkle; he is a little boy with an irrepressible brightness about him. The brightness tugs at her heart, or is she being unsettled by the word that has crept up on her? For it suggests to her that he is doomed, that he will pay for the sins of others. Mercia wishes that her father's horrible notion of sin would keep out of her consciousness. The boy is bright, new as a penny, but then one would imagine that all children are necessarily bright and new, that is, until they are scuffed or battered by parents. Who may not mean to, as the poet has it, but nowadays even that sounds optimistic.

For all his brave stare, there is something about the child, something that casts a shadow, a guardedness perhaps, and there is, if she is not mistaken, a faint trembling of his chin as if he were summoning the courage to speak. Like an old man he runs his hand across the tight black curls, then settles his shoulders in an extravagant gesture of nonchalance.

Nicky, this is your auntie Mercy. Give Auntie Mercy a kiss, his mother commands. Mercia winces at the woman's loud voice.

No, he says. Upon which his mother slaps him decisively about the legs; she will not have any rudeness from him. The child does not flinch. He steps forward and formally holds out his hand for Mercia to shake, so that his barely proffered cheek discourages kissing. The gesture relieves her of the shock of the smack. Should she say something? Let the woman know that it is despicable to beat children? But then, what difference would it make; the mother—for that is how she thinks of Sylvie—formally, in terms of the biological relationship—would pay no attention, would think of Mercia with her fancy foreign ideas as meddling. Oh yes, Mercia all but hears her say, there overseas where people are still decent, children may know how to behave and so, of course, do not need the belt. But here, in this godforsaken place, nothing other than a smack will keep a child on the straight and narrow and prevent him from diving straight into indecency and drunkenness. Things have really gone wild in the New South Africa. A person can't allow any rudeness at all; give them a pinkie and they grab the entire hand; and besides, what did Mercy know about being a parent?

The trick is not to give the woman too many opportunities to air her views. But the smack, that affront, smarts in Mercia's own flesh, so that she drops to her haunches and pats the boy about the legs, where she imagines the imprint of his mother's hand lingers under the synthetic fabric, a gesture that the mother understands only too well.

It is I, his mother, Sylvie says, only I, who have to see to him, make sure he behaves, right from when he was only so small, and her flattened palm skims the imaginary head of a smaller child. The Nicholas boy is now stubborn, even as a baby he always wanted his own way. Takes after you people the Murrays, so I have to make sure from the start that he does as he's told. And my word, you just have to beat him before he'd listen, enough to break any mother's heart. That brother of yours does nothing, doesn't care, leaves us to find our own way, just as long as he has his bottle. She giggles. Like a baby really, before her face straightens and resumes: that is why the child must now look to you, the auntie, for help, for direction to his life. As I said to Nicky, just because your father is useless doesn't

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