

The Innocence of Roast Chicken

By

Jo-Anne Richards



We support Food and Trees for Africa



Our commitment to the Environment is through
publishing eBooks and Print On Demand Books:
Preserving the Environment One Book at a Time.

Copyright © 1996 Jo-Anne Richards

The right of Jo-Anne Richards to be identified as the
Author of the Work has been asserted by her in
accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents
Act 1988.

First published in 1996

First published in paperback in 1997

Republished in 2011 by Rebel ePublishers

e-books ISBN 978-0-9869871-0-6

Paperback ISBN 978-0-9869871-1-3

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or
transmitted, in any form or by any means without the
prior written permission of the publisher, nor be
otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover
other than that in which it is published and without a
similar condition being imposed on the subsequent
purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any
resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely
coincidental.

Cover design by Jacques Stenvert

<http://www.stenvert.co.za/>

Printed by Lightning Source

Other books by Jo-Anne Richards

Touching the Lighthouse

Sad at the Edges

My Brother's Books

THEN

Everyone should have a farm like that in their childhood – too idyllic to be real outside the tangible world of a child’s imagining. And it really was like that, the perfect background for a charmed and untouched childhood. The farm itself was untouched: by ugliness, unpleasantness, poverty, politics, or so it seemed to me. Until that particular year when it was spoiled. Everything was spoiled.

As an intense teenager, years later, filled with angst and misplaced sensitivity, I wrote a poem about my childhood, I wrote of a white sheet hanging on the line on a summer’s day, rippling and flapping in a gentle breeze, warmed and dried by the cloudless heat of the day. Then I showed it fallen, a graceless heap on the grassless ground, soiled by filthy footprints which could have been mud, but which looked a bit like blood.

Don’t think badly of me. Everyone is filled with self-pity at fourteen. And for many years I carried the full guilt of that year. I lugged the intense, silent burden of having caused everything that happened by doing something very bad, or not standing in the way of the bad things – to field and divert them from us, from my farm.

I had too much faith in the way things would continue, in the beauty of before.

When I was older, I realized that, after all, I had been just a child, powerless to deflect the horror, not strong enough to be chosen as the cosmic goalie. Then I felt sorry for myself, until I was older still, and the guilt – more collective this time – settled again. That was when I locked myself away from all the perplexing ugliness of life, from any taint of hurt or violence.

But I didn’t set out to tell about 1966. I don’t want to talk about it. I want to describe how it really was, how it was before – before the ugliness. I want to tell you about the soft, lilting nature of my holidays there.

This is how it really was. Each morning at five we awoke, my two brothers and I, to the same sounds. The drowsy sounds of hundreds of chickens, interspersed with the sharp crow of awakened roosters. Lying very still in my bed I could hear the grating beat of the belt-driven generator. From the bedroom next door, the early news on the Afrikaans service, then my grandmother’s soft-intoned, Afrikaans-accented reading from the English Bible, before my grandfather’s deep English voice joined hers in the Lord’s Prayer.

The *skree-bang* of the fly-screen door into the kitchen and the cleaning noises in the lounge – invisible cleaning, for we never saw it being done. When the smells of bacon and Jungle Oats finally reached us, we catapulted noisily from our three beds, just in time to join my father heading for his unfailing early morning swim.

Before the full sun of the morning heated the dusty path through the orchard, I trotted barefoot alongside my father while my brothers raced for the pool. We joined them only after my father and I had stood to eat still-cool figs from the tree. And he invariably said: ‘The only way to eat figs, straight off the tree before the sun’s properly up.’

The swimming place was huge and old fashioned, a reservoir built in the war years, now used only for swimming. Moving hand over hand along the sides in the morning, one could be sure of finding a bullfrog or two wallowing in the small square holes just above water level.

Shivering and chilled, we would make for the warmth of the kitchen, where we dried off before the huge coal stove, pinching cinnamon-flavoured *soetkoekies* from the china jar on the dresser. The admonishments this would draw from enormously fat Dora, who ruled the kitchen, never managed to outlast her chest-quivering, almost toothless laugh.

Breakfasts were huge, lunches merely a welcome interruption to an otherwise unfettered day, in which the grown-ups remained satisfyingly remote from our adventuring, but comfortingly near at hand for my little-girl needs. Ouma, solid and practical, had a face

which brooked no nonsense and truly softened and sweetened only when she looked at us kids. To my kind, literary Oupa – so civilized and impractical – she spoke always in a hectoring tone, which he answered meekly but with a wink at me. Once, while I sat on his knee being read to – *A Child's Garden of Verses*, I think it was, though I can't be sure – he told me it was Ouma's way of showing her love for us, the dreamy impractical ones, her way of chivvying us into coping with the harder side of life.

But it never worked. She always called me *pieperig*, and Oupa always sat reading or writing in his library, his soft, persistent cough and wisp of pipe smoke betraying his presence. Ouma, whom I never saw with a book other than the Bible, was out on the farm, supervising the feeding of the new chicks, the nailing of sacking over the chicken *hoks* before a threatened hailstorm and, of course, the killing – which I was never aware of and never went curiously in search of, as my brothers did. And when the crunch finally came, when the hardness of life finally came home to me, I wasn't strong enough to deal with it. My grandmother's attempts to toughen me were no defence against the events which caused the collapse of my life and the devastation of my childhood – or so it seemed to me at the time. Even if, in retrospect and with adult consciousness, you smile cynically and think me melodramatic, I can describe it in no other way. Anyway, I wasn't going to talk about that time.

I was going to talk about Ouma's boys – William, her right-hand man, Petrus, and the others – who smiled at us and loved us and carried me over the dusty ground when the sun heated it too much for my small feet to bear. They let me plunge my hands into the barrels of feathers and gently hold the tiny yellow chicks among the deafening chitter of the new arrivals. And each morning after breakfast I would sit with William and Petrus in the boys' room, drinking forbidden coffee from a tin mug, poured from a large can boiling on a brazier and sweetened with their ration of condensed milk.

And I haven't yet described the glory of the long lawn rolling from the front of the house, the wonder of Ouma's pride: the flowers that caused travellers to stop and ask if they could buy an armful. Ouma would generously fill their arms for free and when she had done so, the plentiful garden looked no different, no emptier. The enormous spreading wild fig tree at the bottom of the garden provided the shade for the long summer evenings, when my father would carve up a watermelon and we would gorge ourselves, the sweet, sticky flesh causing rivulets of juice to run from our chins and down our arms to our elbows.

This is where I should stop, leaving the impressions of long, adventure-filled, dusty days of swimming, exploring, climbing trees. Of lying full length on the library floor with a fluttery, exciting feeling of reading some never-before-discovered book. Of the wildness of the veld and the magic of the people there. I shouldn't go on to tell you about that holiday, the one I have clutched silently to myself for all these years. What good will it do to bring it out now?

*

It was 1966. I was eight years old, in Standard One in Port Elizabeth. In this small coastal city of the Eastern Cape, where everyone knew my family, I grew up believing I was something of a princess. The youngest child and only daughter, I attended a girls-only school where we wore panama hats and regulation bloomers. There they stressed the importance of turning out 'young ladies'; of deportment; of climbing the stairs one at a time.

The cataclysmic political events of the 1960s had, for the most part, passed me by. But I did know that blacks, or 'Africans' as I was instructed to call them by my enlightened, English-speaking parents, were badly treated and poor. 'Don't call them natives, dear, they don't like it.'

But I knew that we were on the side of right, as my parents treated Africans with kindness. They were early 'Progs' and weren't scared of arguing with their friends, not all of whom were so sure that Africans were capable of exercising the vote – qualified of course. 'But don't you see,' my father would argue, 'your argument doesn't stand up. According to the Progs' policy, old Joseph, your garden boy, wouldn't have the vote, but the educated African would and he's probably more capable than some of the poor whites who have it now.'

I knew that if we had our way and got those damned Afrikaners out of power, everything would be OK. And maybe the Progs would win one day. I had a fantasy of taking a ragged child from the street and dressing her in nice clothes and giving her books and money for school. In those days, the days when the fanatical Dr Hendrik Verwoerd was prime minister, we felt bad that we received a good, free education, while blacks had to pay for theirs.

But of the inferiority of Bantu Education I knew little. I remember only that my mother would lecture me when I complained about going to school. 'Education means so little to you because you have it so easy,' she would say. 'Some African child would die to be able to go to school as you do.' So I thought of giving this chance to some child, who would weep with gratitude and her parents would clutch my hands with tears in their eyes. I felt so warm and good.

Of course, like everyone else we knew, we had a maid. She loved us as her own, hugged us, read to us, dressed us each morning and carried all three of us on her back until we were too big to fit. Margaret cooked for us and cared for us and I couldn't imagine life without her warm presence and love. She was the first person we three scampered to greet the moment we heard her comforting clatter each morning.

But I can also, still with a smarting clarity, remember how I hurt her that year. And for no explicable reason other than the ease with which I could do so. This is an unpleasant story and it puts me in a bad light. But I've decided that if I am to speak of that year and that life, if it has to come out now, I have to tell it all no matter how badly you might think of me. And somehow, I think that if I speak of everything that happened that year, all that I did, it might help me to understand what happened later.

I don't think it would ever have occurred to me to use the word 'native' when addressing black people. It wasn't used in my home or at school. But when I was warned against using it, I can remember that quite suddenly it became a 'forbidden' word, unbearably enticing in its wickedness.

'Native,' I taunted Margaret, running guiltily through the kitchen. 'Oh no,' she said, dropping her head while her face became, it seemed to me, frightening in its desolation. Of course she forgave me, never mentioning it again. But for ages it would come to me, that cringy sweaty feeling of regret, of wondering if she could still love me. And then, of course, I hurt her again. But this time it was worse, because it was a rejection of her.

Dawdling and dreaming, I would fairly regularly miss the number eight bus, which carried us Mill Park girls' home from school. I relished the stomach-trembling adventure this gave me, of having to walk to my father's office across the Donkin Reserve. I loved the imaginings aroused by the gracious buildings lining this humpbacked commonage.

A slight detour took me past the delicate metal lacework of an old gate, which had once swung open romantically to admit butterfly ladies in horse-drawn carriages. Gazing through the gates into the sash-windowed hotel, tracing the filigree with my fingers, I could so easily believe that I lived in that grandeur outside of my allotted time.

A zigzagged wander took me to my second lingering ritual, which was to run across the grass to touch the red-tipped lighthouse and gaze over the top of 'downtown'. Beyond town, which squatted comfortably at the foot of the hill's steep bump, were the wind-whitened tips of the waves – a startling blue in sunshine, muddying to dirty green under clouds. And the ships moving inexorably past me to the harbour wall.

Just beyond the terraced houses which snaked their way down the swelling bulge of the hill, was my father's office. Here, I could play with rubber stamps and be spoilt by beehived office workers who looked so similar I would confuse them. 'Will you take me up and down in the lift again?' I asked one, only to find it was another dark beehive with fluttering false eyelashes who had taken me on the trip in the metal-caged lift.

My mother would usually arrive at the office within ten minutes of my phone call. In her miniskirt and upswept glasses, she would breeze in efficiently and carry me home in her car. But on that particular day, sometime in 1966, my mom was out when I called. Margaret came instead, using her own money to catch the bus into town and struggle up the hill to the office. When she took my hand for the walk back into town, I was humiliated by the thought that people would think me baby enough still to need a nanny, one whose hand I had to hold. Petulantly I flung myself away from her and spat out that I didn't want people to see me with her. She never spoke a word of reproach but held firmly on to my hand, telling me the streets were dangerous.

1966. I hated school that year. Removed from the comfortable sub-Standards, we were now part of the real school and no longer permitted to hide behind our infant status. But school was such a small part of my life and I was, in any case, such a daydreamer that I could float free any time I felt the need. To escape the vitriol of our pinch-mouthed teacher, Miss Harper, with her pointy blue glasses, I would picture Margaret in the kitchen and my mother taking her afternoon rest. Tea and Salticrax to the sound of the children's programme and Woman's World in the afternoon.

That was the year Prime Minister Verwoerd was killed. There was no sorrow in our family and I remember it only because of two things. Miss Harper, her crissy hair pulled tightly back from her face to make it straighter, told us that 'our leader, Dr Verwoerd' had been murdered by a madman. But the silence of her solemnity was broken when she announced a half-day holiday to mourn his passing. And on a Friday, a special bonus.

That I remember most of all. My friend Jackie and I rode our bicycles to the local newsagent to collect the June and Schoolfriend comics which they held for us each Friday. Only British weeklies, of course. We weren't allowed, on pain of tearing up, American comics like Caspar and Richie Rich. With our comics and an early picnic lunch, we retired deliciously to a tent we had pitched in our garden and read them from cover to cover. That's the only reason I remember the assassination at all.

But on the Monday it was back to school, without another thought for Verwoerd or who would come next. Each day we hung up our hats and lined up outside the school hall. At the first piano-thumped strains of march music we would parade in. There, at the piano, we would see the dead-straight back and teased bouffant of our one glamorous, pancake-smooth teacher. After the hymn, psalm and prayers of assembly, monitors inspected our bloomers, fingernails and hymn books and closely watched us file from the hall to check for stairs taken two at a time.

But I had another life. Each morning at half past five my father would wake me by staring silently at my sleeping face. As the sun was rising in summer, we would be stepping on to the chilly sand in its warm early glow. The first shock of the water always gave way to the fresh cleansing of salt and the exultancy of being the first people in the world, or so it seemed, to squint over the gold sparkling water and imagine where the ships were going and what they were carrying. Tide-walkers, we would find treasures like false teeth or money, or more wonderfully, signs, boxes or bottles from faraway places, washed in from exotic ships. If we had time we would drive to the steep point of the aloe-stalked hill, where we would revel in the full sweep of the golden bay. Or to the harbour, where my father would talk to sailors and, just sometimes, we'd be invited onboard to look around. After that, how could the restrictions of school seem harsh?

When school was over, there was adventure. Perched on opposite hilly points, our suburbs plunged, in their centre, down to the wild scrub bush of the Valley. With its small river and sheer rock cliffs plunging headlong, it spelled a questing excitement. On its rough forbidden paths we could dash through monkey ropes and gnarled, bandy bushes. We could bundu-bash through the adult-tall reeds along the river and shriek at the surprised *tuk-tuk* of the thrashing guinea fowl and the yell of the hidden hadeda. Mimicking the piercing *ah-ah* of the peacock, we would disturb them into flustered flapping and indignant cries.

‘Don’t ever, ever go into the Valley,’ we were told. I more forcefully than my brothers, who were boys and impervious to danger. ‘There are bush-dwellers down there.’

It didn’t stop us from following the little-used paths from suburb to suburb to visit each other, or to go adventuring. But it added spice. We never saw a bush-dweller, yet the throat-tlingling fear of possible watching eyes gave us the *grillies*. What they would do if they found two or three exploring little girls we never could imagine. But once, when we found a rough, abandoned bush dwelling, roofed with bendy saplings, we scrambled and ran, screaming deliciously and giggling, up the overgrown, nasturtium-strewn hillside to the safety of houses and streets.

I remember the music my brothers played that year: ‘Eleanor Rigby’, ‘Nowhere Man’ and ‘Yesterday’ played one after the other on our portable gramophone, with a clunk as each stacked record dropped into place. I, following the example of my mother – ‘But they scream so, and they look so nasty with all that long hair’ – hated the Beatles, to the noisy derision of my brothers. Sometimes one, sometimes both of them, when the elder could be shaken from the scornful superiority of his advanced years, would chase me and hold me down. One would tickle me till I wet my pants, while the other would hold my head to the thump of ‘Please Please Me’ on the wireless. I would scream futilely and hold my hands to my ears.

My favourite seven-single was ‘Telstar’, which I played into scratchy submission. But my absolute best was *kwela* music, which my dad would play on his mouth organ before supper in the evenings, thumping his foot on the carpet. He had all the Spokes Mashiyane records, which my mom would never allow him to play. ‘All that African music is so repetitive, it drives me mad,’ she would say. But she never stopped him playing it on his mouth organ. He held it the wrong way round, the way he had taught himself as a child, away in the backveld.

My most urgent memory of that year is Snowball Scratchkitten. ‘If you to go school without crying and moaning, your Ouma says she’ll send you a kitten from the farm,’ my mother told me. Oh, the waiting for this kitten to arrive; the anticipation which plunged into despair each time I cried and was told the kitten wouldn’t be sent.

But he came, a beautiful, clean, pure white piece of the farm, into which I could bury my face each day after school. I loved him and played with him but he was always that little bit wild, never quite tamed into easy domesticity.

As the year drew to a close, with my first school exams and the smell of jasmine plunging my room into holiday anticipation, my excitement about Christmas on the farm grew. My friends couldn’t understand why I would look forward to spending summer holidays away from the beach – and I couldn’t explain to them. I didn’t have the words to tell them that I longed for the sights, smells and tastes of the farm: the smell of coal smoke, which to this day wrenches me unwillingly to an earlier place and time, the clustered clucking of the fowls, the taste of those unbelievably huge free-range chickens, roasted for us nearly every day, and the *skree-bang* of the fly-screen door. So I told them only of adventures to be had, of the huge reservoir and exciting grounds to explore.

On the last day of school at the end of the year, we were all given free tickets to the circus, which had just arrived in town – or perhaps they were half-price discount vouchers, I can’t remember. On the school bus, the full load of excited little girls in their school gymslips and panama hats was cluttering with anticipation at the prospect. I, who would not be in town to

see the circus, fantasized about giving the ticket away to a poor African child, who would weep with joy. As we stepped off the bus, I saw my opportunity.

Parked in the street was the dust van, from which the dustboys loped, lithe and long-legged, into our gardens to empty our dustbins into the huge baskets they carried over their shoulders. We usually kept a slightly fearful distance between us as they were always running, leaping for the back of the van as it moved off. They never smiled or stopped to chat, as the nannies and garden boys did, with a 'Hello, little missus' and a respectful duck of the head. And they carried the tainted smell of the open garbage in which they had to ride.

This time, one of the men had sat down briefly under the *kaffirplums* on the wide, grassy verge. He was cutting the front off his worn *takkies* with a penknife. 'Here,' I said, holding out the ticket. 'Take your children to the circus.' He stared at me with so little warmth in his eyes – with none of the indulgence I was used to from the Africans I knew at home and on the farm. Then he ran, without a word, for the van which had begun to move.

'Don't worry,' said one of my friends. 'He was mad. Did you see? He was even cutting holes in his shoes.' I felt humiliated and rejected but, even then, knew it wasn't as simple as that.

My end-of-year excitement and shivery joy were gone, and I didn't quite understand why. Perhaps he didn't speak any English, I thought. When I consulted my brothers, of course they crowed. They jeered at my childish gesture and said I was stupid for not knowing that Africans weren't allowed to attend the circus.

So I didn't tell them about his shoes. But I held that memory in my head where it worried at me. Only years later did I manage to work out for myself what he was doing: he was cutting the fronts off his *takkies* to free his constantly running feet from their constraints. Too small, he had probably just discovered them in the rubbish. And his eyes – those blank, cold eyes – they followed me too. And afterwards I saw them as an omen. But of course, that's just silly.

That was the start of it, the holiday which caused everything in my life to change colour, smell and taste. But please remember, it was an aberration. That holiday, which imprisoned me in the glass of my adult reclusiveness, wasn't what the farm was all about. So why couldn't I have stopped it? Why couldn't I have done something to prevent those inexorable events which moved us all into disaster and despair?

1989 ... 15th October

We fought again last night. I with my glassy silence, he with the rage of a sudden hailstorm. As usual it was hope – or rather my lack of it – which started it.

I married a patient man, comfortable in his large, warm security. I think it is only I who, constantly testing in my imperturbability, can drive him to the wild savagery of last night's fury. And somehow I just can't seem to stop myself. Safe in the secrecy of my glasshouse, I even feel a heart-twisting sense of satisfaction. It is my belief, you see, that human beings are inherently violent, cruel creatures. It amuses me, in my remoteness, to demonstrate this so graphically with the mildest person I've ever known.

Oh yes, hope! I am incapable of it, you see. I see no point to it. No, I think I should be honest, now at least, and say that it's more than that. It twines around my neck and chokes me. I can't provide God – that rancorous Spirit who created Man in His own loathsome image – with that kind of weapon.

I feel it a bitter cosmic joke that I, who am entirely without hope, should be doomed to live through a time that is so full of it. We're at the end of 1989 and I am in my early thirties, married but childless – by choice. My choice, I should add. I live in one of Johannesburg's nice suburbs, dark with tree-shaded old houses. The village, as the suburb and small cluster of shops are referred to in that twee northern-suburbs style, is populated by young executives. So new age they are, in their identical polo shirts and baby backpacks, and their wives, with clothes carefully chosen so as not to betray their affluence. The older residents, those brown-skirted women with short grey hair – their cracked heels pressed to flat leather – ride their bicycles or walk their Labradors, retrievers or collies, and behave with public and uncompromising liberalism.

But now has begun a time of a great sparkling euphoria, delicately balancing on the very verge of change. For most of those charming executive families, negotiated happiness and non-racial heaven seem tantalizingly close as they stop to chat outside the Spar shop. Some of them now daringly sport ANC T-shirts, still illegal but, of course, carrying little danger of arrest in these days of hope and glory. And those same grey-headed dog walkers, who have always voted Prog (even when it became the Democratic Party), discuss whether to join the ANC when it is unbanned – 'it's inevitable any day now, my dear' – or whether to stick with the Progs from loyalty. That great shining unbanning feels imminent. And I know that after today, I will have to suffer even more 'any day now' conversations with earnest, glowing faces.

Today, as no one could have missed, after a full week of 'jubilant crowd' stories in the newspapers, is the release date of the eight jailed heroes of the struggle. All this week the 'jubilant crowds' have been busy, it seems: jubilant crowds marching, jubilant crowds singing, jubilant crowds dancing ... that's what caused the latest storm in the tranquillity of our marriage teacup.

My husband is desperate for us to form a little jubilant crowd.

He's finally been overtaken by the general euphoric hysteria. It's everywhere. It's everywhere! Right in the middle of our supper last night, he burst forth. Should there be a rally in Johannesburg to *toyitoyi* a welcome to the leaders, he said in all seriousness; he thought we ought to go. Apparently, the word around – if you're in the right circles of course – is that a rally is likely within the next couple of weeks.

I gave him my look – I'm very good at it now – half mystification, half amusement.

'What is your case?' It erupted from him as if it had been waiting there all the time, hovering in the wings behind his tongue.

I remained silent. I'm expert at it at this stage of my life. It's probably the only thing I have truly perfected. His hands were shaking and he'd thrown down his fork. I could see the

gravy dripping in great brown globs on to the table. It was his idea to eat at our beautiful yellowwood dining-room table every night. Years before, he had triumphantly ‘discovered’ it on a sortie through Graaff Reinet and carried it exultantly home to the Transvaal on his roof-rack. I stared at his shaking hands and remembered how he had lovingly scraped the generations of paint from it and ruined his hands with paint stripper and steel wool. I carefully placed another forkful on my tongue and consciously savoured it. It was remarkably good actually, a roast chicken from Woolworth’s. It’s funny how so many moments of consequence in my life have been marked by roast chickens.

‘Can’t you, just once, respond to me? Can’t you shout or rage or tell me something about what you’re thinking? I just don’t think I can cope much longer with your fucking superior smile and your vacant expression.’

That hurt, of course. I don’t mind the ‘superior’ bit. That’s what I’ve perfected so well. But vacant? I didn’t answer. I never do. Finishing absolutely the last grain of rice – that’s my curse from childhood, my inability to leave a speck of food on my plate – I pushed my delicate *riempie* chair back roughly to watch him wince. And then I spoke. I very often save my most cutting comment for the moment when I’m on my way out, a parting shot while I’m already retreating to safety.

‘It’s funny how the times we live in seem to have sucked the brains from all you former “bright young men”. Turned into empty-headed zombies, that’s what you are, with nothing left but faith, hope and glory and an idiot smile.’

I thought he’d given up as I ran the bath in my favourite retreat – he stayed away so long. Our fights never last long. He batters against me with cold fury while my little glasshouse remains impervious. It is our unspoken code that when I return from my retreat in the bath, I speak as if nothing has occurred between us. And he, well, he recovers more slowly. But he never speaks of it again. What would be the point?

But this time was different. He’s really got it bad, this hope thing. It’s even overflowing into our marriage. That makes me distinctly unsettled. I think we have a very workable marriage. I’m comfortable with it and I don’t like it messed with.

I heard him knocking on the door but I had to turn off the taps before I could hear what he was saying.

‘What is it that causes you to be so bitter?’ I could hear the tears in his voice. There was a certain gratification – but also, if I’m to be honest now, a deep-down shame – in being able to bring him so quickly to tears, while I remained unmarked by those particular battle scars.

‘What on earth was it that made you feel so unworthy, that makes you hate yourself so much? Why do you always act as if you don’t deserve anything, not even a small bit of happiness?’

‘It must be a terrible burden to you to be a failed Psycho One.’

‘Fuck you, just fuck you!’

Retreat at last. Did I feel a sense of triumph? I don’t know. I don’t think I ever feel much of anything. I lay and gazed at the soap dish, with its mushy soap lying in the small puddle of water which never seems to escape entirely. And the razor: that absolutely safe modern twin-blade razor.

I think about suicide a lot. In a very abstract way of course – I wouldn’t like you to think me melodramatic. It’s just that I look at that razor and consider how impossible it would be to use. I think of all the sharp knives in the kitchen and imagine the strength one would need to force the blade through unyielding flesh. It’s all very theoretical. I could sink my head beneath the surface of the bath – the ultimate retreat – and take a long, last, considering breath. Merely contemplating all the ways there are to make myself disappear calms me. I don’t have to do it, but the option is always there. It makes it easier for me to face the next bout of life.

I stepped silently, nearly invisibly, into the bedroom, pyjama'd and gowned. That's my choice of sleep clothing. He likes to be naked in bed. Of course! It is only life's most confident fools, its innocent dupes, who need so little in the way of defences.

'You always make such a big deal of the fact that I failed one lousy year at varsity.' He rolled, fully clothed still, on to his back to catch me. In the full glare of his very blue, spotlight eyes, I felt very visible, uncomfortably conspicuous.

'But I'm not going to let you get to me any more. You may have got your lousy MA *cum laude*, but what do you expect? What else could you have done – you were nothing but a bloody swot who never said a word in tutorials, or moved from the library, for your entire university career.'

I sat gingerly on the edge of the bed and looked down to avoid his riveting gaze. My hands were shaking.

'And what have you done since then?'

I shrugged. He knew I hated my job. He knew I was incapable or unwilling to do anything about it.

'Nothing. But what do any of us achieve, actually? A job is a job. Most people on earth are put here just to get through it. I'm not conceited enough to think I could actually have made a real mark on the world. And what's the point of that, anyway? You still die, whatever you do, and people forget you.'

'But at least I enjoy what I do and really believe in it, in its worth. I actually feel some satisfaction in doing the best I can for my clients and, believe it or not, I actually still believe in justice.'

'Oh, my God. No one really believes that, do they? Not in real life. And certainly not in your snooty Wasp law firm. All they believe in is money.'

'Shut up, I'm trying to get through to you here. Can't you listen to me for once without sniping? Now things are finally happening in this country. And I've finally broken into labour work. With this union as a client, and consulting during this strike, I really think I'm, well, part of things, of the change that's happening.'

'So you've got your snotty Establishment firm's token "public interest" client. You really feel like the white knight, don't you? You really think you're doing something – as if you play an important role. But you're really nothing but a useful little tool. And if your stuck-up senior partners had given you management as your client, you would have been equally useful to them. Just don't expect the workers to fall neatly into your naïve, liberal "noble savage" mould.'

He sighed and rolled away from me, to gaze into the darkened garden. Our high white wall was just visible through the gloom, but the pool had already disappeared. The bronchitic gargle of the pool pump was very loud through the wide-flung summer windows, which welcomed in the drone and clatter of suicidal rose-beetles and the suffused sweetness of jasmine.

I relaxed and pulled back the duvet, beginning my fussy ritual of placing my pillows. I thought he'd given up, you see. How wrong could I be? The worst was still to come.

'I want to go to the coast this Christmas.' He meant the East Cape coast, where we both grew up.

'You know I don't go to the Eastern Cape, ever.'

'What is it about that place? What happened to you there?'

'Nothing!' I bellowed, cornered now by the tightness of the duvet, held down by the weight of his body 'It was perfect. It was a perfect childhood. It's the most wonderful place in the world. I just don't feel like going back. One can't travel backwards. We've left there. Why can't we leave well alone?'

And it was perfect, I thought, as he finally gave up and slammed into the bathroom. The perfect place to grow up, to be a child.

The smell of the jasmine, that youthful harbinger of Christmas, of end-of-year holidays, began suddenly and inexplicably to suffocate me.

1966 ... Seventeen days to Christmas

I was carried, coiled in sleep, from the car, too dark and dreamy to join in the half-heard greetings and embraces. My cheek against his jersey, I could smell my father's strength in the sweat of his body. But the chill of the night air feathering my hair carried, inevitably, the essence of the farm – that foetid mixture of soil, coal smoke, chickens and pigs.

Warmth embraced me as we passed from the veranda, my father's feet shushing on the smooth stone, into the wooden echoes of the old house. In its musty smell of old books and excitement I could discern our passing through Oupa's library. And then the passage, with drifting aromas of newly-warmed bread and vegetable soup. Yes, surely it must have been soup. It was always soup. The smell of welcome, of murmured greetings in the sleepy darkness.

And then the smell of sleep in crisp, clean cotton and woolly blankets, soon to be kicked off in the closed-in heat of the shared room.

I awoke early, in the brisk clarity of just-risen light. I sat up quietly, rejoicing in the stomach-coiling excitement of the crowded *kip-kips* and the strident, competing call of roosters. The other animals, the few cows and pigs, were too far away for me to hear. But I strained to catch – I could picture them grunting their greeting – those wriggling pink piglets, born just before our previous visit. Bigger now, I was sure, but not yet gross and unsympathetic in their scaly-skinned imperviousness.

Standing on my bed I could gaze through the window at the constant, grating belt of the generator, stolid in the settled dust of the yard. Curtains were never drawn in our family – my father believed in the rightness of waking with the morning. But here on the farm, we children would always wake earlier than he, to his chagrin. Built on, to accommodate the first grandchild nearly sixteen years before, our room now contained three narrow, spring-based beds beneath the largest windows in the house. My father's sleep would be broken only when the strangled early sun could force its way through wood-framed panes to reach the bed. In our room it burst unrestrained through the wide, modern metal windows, which were Ouma's pride.

The squealing creak of my bedsprings brought my brother, Michael, instantly upright in the bed. 'We're here, we're here,' he yodelled, bouncing on his bottom and flinging his pillow at me. Just as suddenly he subsided, with a sigh of ennui and a glance backwards at the other bed. My elder brother Neil, superior in his almost sixteen, teenaged status, was groaning exaggeratedly and shaking his head, wearing his grown-up-bewildered-by-puerile-antics-of-siblings expression. Michael, at twelve, swung wildly between unrepentant childhood and unappreciated attempts to emulate the exalted age and behaviour of his brother.

'Oh my God, can't you *piks* run outside and make that noise?' Neil's groan betrayed the slightest catch at the end, a faint memory of childhood's piping squeals.

'Oh shut up, you're not so grown-up, you *vrot* backside.' Michael's humiliated fury was transposed into motion as he leapt from the bed and raced from the room, grabbing one of the pile of swimming towels left for us by Ouma.

I can remember the sudden quiet return to the room and the distant *skree-bang* of the screen door. It's funny; I can still remember every feel and smell of that holiday. Every minute has the clarity of a glass-encased specimen. I often think of it as one of those ornamental snow-filled domes with a castle or church inside. I never thought, until now, that I would be leading anyone inside that dome to taste the bitterness trapped, hidden inside the castle. But now that I have begun, I must do what I have been avoiding for so long, and finally confront its ghosts.

I often wonder when exactly the awfulness began. At the start, everything was as it always had been, as it should be. And I do want you to feel that, to know that that's how it really was. It's just that now, knowing what happened, it seems to me that the violence didn't just collide with the peace of my world in one gigantic crash. From the moment we arrived, it seemed to slither insidiously into the joy of the prosaic everyday, into the innocence of roast chicken and the happiness of baby chicks. But perhaps it's only in hindsight, in knowing what was to come, that I feel as if a malign force was festering all the time we were there. Perhaps it's the memories of that suggestible child, who died that holiday and was replaced by this dark-filled shell, which makes me remember it as a grub nestled in the heart of a perfect pear.

That morning, the first morning, all I wanted was to feel the farm, to touch it with eager eyes, to smother my face in its smells. Standing on my bed, I thrust my head through the small rectangular hole in the meshed-metal burglar bars where the window catch was intended to fit. My bed being the one directly below the window, I used this hole every year to catch my first-morning sight of the farm