Apparently

By Karen Campbell

You are standing in a garden, crying.

This morning you watched your grandmother push scraps from the breakfast plates into a Tupperware bowl. *Lena can have this for lunch*. Tough rinds of bacon tumble onto a piece of yolk your father has dipped his toast in. The dirty knife from one of the plates keeps scraping until the plates are virtually clean. Food fit for a cat. Lena is their servant. She's one of the women your grandmother's been teaching English to, in secret, arranged through the Anglican church. There was news about it on the BBC, before you even got here – rioting in Alexandra because they were being made to learn in Afrikaans. Whenever South Africa is mentioned, you tend to tune in. You have family there. And you told everyone at school about it; how gran's house was turned by secret police, they huckled her and her friends into a van and interviewed them downtown. Your grandmother is a white woman. She was given a room with a chair.

Rebel gran, who's scraping plates and listening to her neighbours tell jokes about kaffirs as Lena polishes around them, her shy, downcast skin bright with sweat. It's not how you imagined, here. Oh, the sun is huge and raw with heat, dry granular grass and mealies on the braai make you know you're not at home and everything is out of date. Melamine shop frontages decked in chirpy sixties lettering, the men all congregating in one room, smoking while the women wear make-up and high heels. Plastic, chunky ones which match their oversized jewellery. The white women that is. The only black lady you've seen up close is Lena, and she's in blue nylon, a pallid dustcoat which makes her gleam.

Not your rebel gran either. She wears soft-draped colours of heather and moss, and flat, flat pumps which accentuate her tiny frame; the delicate stalk for her bubble-permed head with its fine jaw and the African hoops at her ears. There's a distinct tinge of purple in

those curls too. You love purple, it's your favourite colour. You watch her clip the lid on the bowl and tell Lena to take it. You hear her call her *girl.*

Now clean the floor, girl. This whole house needs redding.

Her voice goes loose and guttural, cracking back to the accent of her past. Today is the last day of 1983; the house zings with activity and rush. At home, it would be Hogmanay, and you hear your mother trying to get the neighbour to pronounce it right. *Not hodge. No, hog. As in pig.* You bite your smile because she really does look like a pig, this woman. She's large and blonde and pinkly orange, hails from Huddersfield but came here twenty years ago *on a ten pound ticket and she's never looked back, has she Jean?*

Vaguely, your gran trails a *no,* goes on chopping turnip. Or it could be pumpkin; it's the same colour as the neighbour. More stringy.

Standard of living's so much better, in't it though? I mean, we couldn't afford an house like this back home. Nor servants, eh? Although you can never trust the kaffirs, love.

She pats your mum's hand as she speaks.

So long as you know these girls'll thieve from you given half a chance, you'll do alright. In't that right Jean?

What's that? says your gran. Even now you can see her, considering the blue of the sky outside. She's an artist. Her lush paintings decorate all the walls. You decide, when you go to the game park next week, that you'll take your pastels with you. You'll draw one of those thatched huts gran showed you in her *Kruger Safari* brochure, and you'll sketch Lena sitting outside. This is your first Christmas in a foreign country and, so far, it's been very weird. Turkey dinner by the swimming pool, meeting cousins and aunts you've never seen. Observing the warp in your dad's face as your uncle and gran talk about a trip she took to Durban last year. Your uncle lives in Durban, has told you all about the shark nets, how safe it will be when you swim there. The nets are interlinked on the white beaches, sporadic on the Asian ones, non-existent for the blacks. Dad's mouth is older than his brother's, but it's the same shape. You've never seen a face that matches your dad's before. You think he's about to smile, but you're not sure.

You are not sure of anything.

The pig-woman is having a party tonight, and you're all invited to come. That's why she's here, her and her blue-blond son. The boy's about your age, but he's dressed in neatly-pressed shorts and a blue, checky shirt. He is the picture of wholesome goodness. He makes you want to boak. You sense him shuffle close to mother when you come and sit in the lounge. Eyelashes pale as dust, blinking at you. Your own are caked in mascara, ringed with clotted black kohl which matches your hair gone frizzy in the sun. Your mum has hidden your crimpers (in her suitcase, under the bed; you've already used them twice, but there's been so much swimming you doubt she's even noticed).

Swimming and scowling. That's all you're good for.

Doubt the lass would rather a night out with the youngsters, eh?

The neighbour's smiling at your mum, then you. The boy recoils. You witness him visibly shrink-in small, he's folding in on himself in his need to be not there. He makes you think of a Mini Milk, melting and dipping in the middle where you've licked it. You always lick the middle, make a belt of it then chomp the solid dumbbell either end. With crisps, it is necessary to smash the bag before opening, so crumbs rain into your concave palm and Kit Kats, well, obviously you slice the tinfoil with your fingernail, snap in two silver strips, peel off the wrapper and sook each finger until you strike wafer-gold. Obviously.

Our Pete's off to a party with his girlfriend. Why don't you head out with him? Eh, Pete? Eh?

Pete is now chewing on a wasp, mutely wrestling with all the manifest reasons why this would not be a good idea, and you agree with him, you really do. You want to ring out the old with folk tied to you by blood, not the happenstance of age.

Oh, that would be lovely, wouldn't it?

Dear old mum, her tight-wide grin with that warning chime. She wants rid of your sulky coupon, wants desperately for you to enjoy yourself *like normal kids. Because it's not*

normal, is it? What? Wearing Docs and a black leather jacket in the roar of an African sun? Lena's wearing a jumper over her housecoat, a great, raggedy shaggy thing, and no one bats an eyelid at her.

That's a thing you've noticed here. It is so apparent, it's scary, Stepford-wives-scary in the smooth and steady perambulation of it. It is the ability the white people have to utterly ignore. And it's not the eyes-down shuffle you get in Glasgow, when folk kid-on they can't see a jakey's begging hand. No, this is a bland blank non-acceptance of the possibility of life beyond beige-coloured skin. Delivered consistently and with precision, so you know it's not just your imagination. You've seen it in the bottle shop, with its 'In' door and its 'Out' door and its door marked 'Blacks'. Doesn't matter how many black people are queued there, they cease to exist if a white walks in. You've seen it in the silent, shameful slip from sidewalk to road as black dances white, so practised, so discrete. And you've seen your grandfather drop change into a car park attendant's hand. Your roly, jolly grandpa whose still-Kentish lilt and bawdy jokes have made you smack your lips with relish. Yes, him. The balding teddy bear you've only just met and how he dropped the coins in as if it were a bucket. That same dissociation of eye and hand and heart. Even when the attendant goes *Thank you boss*, your grandpa doesn't see him. Just drives fast and slick as lizard tongues while the man is lowering his hand.

Your gran has said the neighbours are serving haggis at the party, in honour of their Scottish guests. She's given them the recipe, though she's worried they'll not get proper pinhead here. But it will be some ersatz combination of offal and oatmeal, which is very kind. That's another weird thing. Mrs Piggy *is* very kind, has gone out of her way to make you welcome. She's so proud of her adopted homeland, almost as proud as the other-side neighbour, Mrs Van der Sandt, who has insisted you go to the Voortrekker next week. *Only if you put a chain round my neck*, you tell your mother later. You've already argued about the morality of this monument with your Uncle Pik, who has married in and would love to get another Rottweiler.

A keed like yi cannit indrstaand. Rearranging his testicles as he said it. Subtly mind, via the pockets of his shorts.

Uncle Pik will be there tonight. He's promised to bring his tuba. You look at your mum, still manically beaming, at Mrs Piggy hoicking a crumb from her teeth. Pale, pretty Pete seems enraptured with his feet, and you want, so much, to frighten him.

'Yes,' you say. 'That would be lovely.'

You go into the garden, spend the rest of the day reading, avoiding all the housework. It's daft; nobody will actually be *in* the house tonight, but there's no telling your gran. You take a sip of water, then slowly open your book. Highers soon, and you've not yet reached the close of Sunset Song. You don't want to. You are loving the journey too much, want to keep it incomplete and safe. Later, much later, you will realise this is the first time a book has moved you so completely: the language, the story, the bigger sense of it. The fact it is quite solidly and distinctively Scottish. You didn't know that writers could do that, that you were allowed to paint rhythms and cadences with your words as well as stories, and that it wasn't an affectation. It was the truth.

At the end, when it is done, you sit in your grandmother's garden. Water laps against the filter of the pool, foreign insects click and the seething liquid sun burns on, sticking the tears to your cheeks. You shudder again, again until your breathing steadies. You are crying for this girl who was the same age, had the same dreams as you and the possibility they may not happen. You are crying for the elegy of it all, and for the sudden rush of wind which rides you, smelling of cold and good damp earth. Lena sees you crying, offers an awkward smile, careful not to show her teeth. Then she goes about her business with the bins. Your gran says she has children, yet she stays here alone in the wee shed behind the bungalow, the one they call the pool house. You asked her yesterday where her children were. *Homelanma* she whispered. She gets nervous when you talk to her.

A quick shower, then it's time to PAA-AARTY! The house to yourself, they've all trouped next door already, scared in case the haggis might abscond. Well, they tend to, if you don't tether them first. If you had your own music with you, you would play it loud, but godknows what the radio's like here. The telly's bad enough. Half a channel for English speakers, and the best thing on that is Star Trek. Your mother has actually laid out a sundress on your bed. It's one she bought in Johannesburg, turquoise, ruched, with frigging elephants dancing on the hem. *Aye right*, you think, reaching for your old familiar black. This one is a dress though, a voluminous fringed affair with Afghan embroidery on

the bodice. You suspect it might have come from a carpet. You steal back your crimpers, load up with hairspray and taste that crisp dry sizzle as the snakes appear. Hundreds of crinkled black snakes, jagging high and wide and spiky. The smell of burning hair and Elnett, you back-combing the crown a little to froth it up. (Straighteners have not yet been invented but, oh, when they are, what joy you'll have making those flat, poseur planes.) In case the message is not clear, you douse yourself in patchouli. Quick glance in the mirror – a teeny glance since you eschew all forms of self-appreciation. That is not the way of the individual. Wee smudge more eyeliner, winging it out like Siouxsie Sioux.

There.

You are.

A punky musky adolescent. Gothic. You raise your batwing arms. Glorious.

Milky Pete awaits downstairs. He's standing with his girlfriend, another honey-blonde. Her name is Samantha, and her dress is reddest fire. Sits like a fifties siren, curving in, flaring out. It is the skirt you want to twirl in, twirl until you're sick. She smiles with teeth that properly shine, and they are very neat, these strips of white which run, concurrently, so:
A streak of white in the mouth: *check*.
A line of white round the waist: *check.*
A flash of white on the feet: *check*.

Pete wears white socks, and this time his shirt is gridded red. He's big enough tonight for long trousers, and to extend his hand.

'Yi lk nis.'

Surprised, you shake his fingers, follow him out to his car. Samantha links her arm through yours, gushes about your hair. They ask you about Scotland. You tell them about the Mearns of Kinraddie, about the vast parks and the meagre, honest living and how rigs undulate beneath a shifting sky and the land rises up to root the standing stones.
Thousands of years old, you say. Hundreds of thousands, probably.

Eet snds byitifl.

It is, you reckon. You imagine it must be. And you are furiously proud.

Gone eleven when you get to the party. It's in a massive white house, with lights in every room spilling onto the dry, rough grass where an empty pergola sits. If this was Scotland, they'd all be outside, revelling in the lack of rain, puking in the pool. Pete leads you indoors and you're suddenly shy. Lonely too; it rises like the stifling heat and slaps you in the face. Tingling cheeks, body far too hot in your truculent tent-dress. Your black clown-feet look massive beside the skittering, dainty sandals that abound. People turn to stare. This happens in Glasgow too, the sheep gawping, but they're *your* sheep, you've shared a lifelong diet of Irn Bru and the Sunday Post with them and when they chase you with bottles and half-hearted yells of *Haw, check oot the fuckin guisers* it doesn't feel this bad. Girls flitter past like bright, squawking birds; no-neck jocks neck their bottles, regard you with small, bleak eyes.

At first, no one approaches the huddled trio in the corner. Then some of Pete's friends come over, they bring you drinks, one asks you to dance. As he does, a familiar record jangles – it's Simple Minds. Yeah, you hate them, would die rather than dance to these sell-outs in your club up the town (they used to be called Johnny and the Self-Abusers for godsake). But they are here and so are you and you're both from bloody Glasgow! You swoop into the spangling shimmer of the music, arms wide and wild. Then Pete comes over, takes your arm. You find yourself hustled outside, Samantha scurrying after with the carry-out you brought. An older woman is shouting at you: *Ind dint cim bik! We dint wint yr type hier.*

My what? you say. She repeats her angular refrain, clipping each word into your heart.

C'min. Its fien, goes Pete, opening up the car.

But what have I done wrong?

She thinks yir taeking drigs. Stupid caa. Its yir pichili, that's all. Bit she widn't listn.

Ten to twelve and you're screeching down the highway.

Wi cint hiv Higminay in a caar, huh?

You don't care. You feel withered and sick and you want your mum. There's another party they're going to try, but you ask them to drop you at gran's. One minute to midnight, you'll be fine, you say, of course you'll go next door. But you don't.

Round the back, the pool water ripples, the insomniac filter churning its own rhythm. You are worse than naked, and you can't get that feeling to return, the one where you are smug and snug in your shell. You look up at a million pinwheel stars. To be different has always been your *Keep Out* sign, it stops you getting hurt. Gives you a place to belong. Copper light glows in the sky. Burning sky: there is a fraught haze over Alexandria. On the trellis above you, the scent of bougainvillea drips, bringing with it a distant, acrid sharpness. Across the Transvaal, you can see the gaudy shock of fireworks punching-in the witching hour. What if your difference is not your choice? What if your difference has been skinned on you since birth and it tells you: *Stay Out*?

Aching, breathtakingly hot. Air clotting in your lungs, your tight sore lungs and eyes, and you're pulling at your dress. Tugging it till you are unencumbered, seizing it by the throat. You chuck it into the pool where it blooms in widow's weeds, moving without you on the surface of the water. Night licks your skin like Ewan Tavendale's kiss burned Chris. Burned you. This morning, you heard your gran tell Lena she could no longer teach her English.

You are standing in a garden, crying. In the poolhouse, the curtains shift and the world celebrates another year.

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