

My Room

There was always light in the little room. It came through the lonely window above the bed I shared with my sister and brothers. It had only a big enough gap for everyone to move between the three beds that occupied it. Ma slept on the narrowest bed between mine and that of her two youngest daughters who weren't much older than I was. I shared a bed with my younger brother, John, my older sister, Gertrude and my older brother, Frank. That was not their real names.

We had special names for each other. John was Mantis, Gertrude was Gertie, Frank was called Flash and I was called Pinky. We called each other by the new names when we were alone, but my grandmother didn't like it because it wasn't very Christian. When she caught us saying these names, she would make us fetch red peppers from the garden and eat them raw in front of her, but Frank never got any peppers. Ma found out Frank liked peppers and that he would get caught saying our special names on purpose to get them, so she started washing his mouth with soap instead. That made Frank more careful when he called us.

The furniture in the bedroom was older than me, but still looked and smelled like new wood. Ma would spend the best part of her Saturday morning polishing them with the very expensive beeswax polish that she bought from a store in town to which only white people could afford to go. She bought the polish with the money she made sewing dresses or seaming the legs of pants for our neighbours. The big dresser and cupboards we all shared were built by my grandfather just before he and my grandmother

moved into the house on their wedding day. She was so proud of it because he made the exact set for the rich Malan's who owned the dairy and farms in Paarl. She always touched the handle of the cupboard before she knelt to pray with us each night.

Sometimes when it was cold she would let me sleep in her bed and quietly tell me stories about him. Ma always smelled sweet like flowers and a little dirt mixed into it, from working in her vegetable garden every day. Falling asleep next to her gave me good dreams. I would just lie there and listen to her speak till I fell asleep. "Pappie was too nice a man" she told me one night. "When he was a prison warden and had to take an inmate to the magistrate, he would bring him home with him for a night and make me cook my carrot stew for them. At night, he would boei (handcuff) them to the kitchen table, but before they left in the morning he would let me make them an English breakfast first. Some of those prisoners who got released would come here to say thank you, because he was always so good to them". Smiling she turned to me and said: "You must find yourself a good man, Charmaine, someone just like Pappie," and kiss me goodnight.

She never did that with her own daughters or Gertie, only with me, but at least Gertie never seemed to mind it. Waking up in her bed always made me so happy, which is why what happened that morning felt so terrible and wrong.

I was seven years old when he came back for us. Ma came to wake us up, but her usual playful anger wasn't there and I knew, we all knew that something was wrong. She didn't let us go and wash like we normally did first thing Saturday mornings; instead she made us get dressed in our church clothes while she put our clothes in old suitcases. We knew what it meant. Her eyes looked

shiny, like the tears she wouldn't let out were gathering in protest. Even little Mantis saw it and when he cried, we all joined him.

How we must have looked to her; her three coffees and me, her little tea with milk, standing sleepy-eyed, drool-faced and half-dressed with tears rolling slowly down our cheeks.

She cried then too, left our clothes and held all our hands in her own. Then one by one, she hugged us and whispered her goodbyes in our ears as tears rolled down her face. I could not make out what she said to them but her words to me buried themselves in my heart.

"I am so sorry" she said. "This is my fault. I had too many children. Your twelve uncles and aunties never got the love I owed them. It was difficult raising so many children and loving them after grandpa died. I knew I was a bad mother and that God would make me pay for it one day". One of her tears rolled into my mouth and I could taste the sadness that was leaking out of her as she continued.

"When they were all old and you came to me, I loved you. You were my second chance from God. It's not right that you should pay for my sins."

"Why can't I stay with you Ma?" I interrupted, but it only seemed to make her tears flow faster.

"Your father is here to take you away, but he doesn't have love in him" she continued. "I made him like that. Don't become like him. Remember love. Remember I love you Pinky". She got up then and left to attend to her guests.

When we had all finished getting dressed and packing, in the room I thought could protect us from anything, we walked into the living room to meet them. Gertie walked in front, she was the

oldest, then Flash, myself and Mantis. I didn't look when the stranger sitting on our couch with his new wife said my name. Flash nudged me and then I remembered I was also called Charmaine.

The stranger who called himself our father looked familiar. Four years ago, when I last saw him in the hospital he had a welcoming, handsome face and a smooth head of straight black hair. The man in front of me looked as though he was going bald, even though he had combed his long hair to the front to try and cover it up. His frowning eyebrows reminded me of the white police who always came looking for my uncles, but I knew it was him. His face was my own, and that of Ma.

The smile he gave didn't seem right. It was the smile you give to a stranger you see in the street not one you give to your daughter. But I was a stranger to them. Since that day in the hospital when my mother died giving birth to Mantis, he's been gone and now he didn't know who we were anymore. It must have been stranger for Mantis as neither one of them had ever seen the other. Mantis prayed every night that our father should come back and take us with him so we could live together, but by the look on his face I could see that he wanted to take back all his prayers and stay in our room.

His new wife was next to him. She looked like someone from a magazine. She smiled and waved at me and all I saw were the layers of gold on her fingers and the fancy necklace around her neck. When she told us to call her "mommy," I felt sick. Her narrow eyes and long fingers made me think of pictures of Judas Iscariot, that I had in the Bible storybook that Ma bought me. He was a bad man who gave Jesus to the people who wanted to hurt him

and I took her looking like him, as a sign. Ma told us that our mother was an angel now, and this Judas Iscariot looking woman could never be an angel. I decided that she wasn't to be trusted and that she would never be my mother.

We sat down on the couch opposite them in the living room. Between us there was the little table with the gramophone that we weren't allowed to touch. They, my father and his new wife, spoke to us but while Gertie and Flash were nodding their heads at their questions nervously, trying to cover their shaking legs with their hands, I looked around the little house. I wanted to remember every little inch of it forever. I looked at the little ornaments of Jesus and the nativity on the windowsill and sent my goodbyes to them in silence. I looked at the brass that Ma usually let Gertie and me clean on Saturday mornings and said my goodbyes in silence.

When the little teacups, the ones we never used, were empty we followed our father and the woman to their car. Flash and Mantis got into the car first after Flash put their bags on the roof. Gertie was doing the same, but there was no way I was going to be able to put my suitcase on the roof. It wasn't that I was too small or too weak or anything. It's just that while my suitcase was standing there alone and everyone was wondering why, I was already down the road, passing the Bhai's shop and around the corner, far away from that car and the people who wanted to steal me from my room.

- Robert La Vita