

## **Short story**

### **Birdwatching by Mia Uys**

It is raining when William wakes up, and he spends the first moment of his day thinking about his mother, while watching Cape robin-chats hop around the wet grass trying to pull worms out from the soil. He has always liked birds. They seem so detached from the world, witnessing life from high above, tied to nothing. Deep down, he knows this is just an illusion, a romantic idea that creatures with wings are somehow free. He knows birds are constrained by the same physical limitations that affect all living things on earth. Like him, they are hopelessly attached to many things.

This window has provided countless hours of entertainment during his first few months of university. Besides the birds, he enjoys watching other students making their way to class down Merriman Street. The guys wearing Vans, skating past with their books stashed underneath their armpits, or the groups of girls huddled together arm-in-arm. He wonders what it must feel like to belong somewhere, to feel like life is really happening, to have other people to share that feeling with - as they all do.

Although today is a Monday, William can sleep late and stare out at the rainy morning without anyone bothering him. Normally, he would have to get up really early to avoid physical confrontations with HK members in the passages. He would shower alone in the dark and change in his room quietly, using his phone light to guide him. His roommate, Charlie, is a deep sleeper, thank god, but most of the girls he brings over aren't. William can tell when they are awake by the way

they shift positions, pulling the duvet over their bare arms in irritation. One of them whispered hello to him once which gave him such a fright that he fled from the room with his shirt inside out.

He is no rush today. Charlie is back home in Constantia like all the other students who have fled to safety. South Africa is in week five of a nationwide lockdown, which means no one is allowed to leave their house unless they work for an essential service, or desperately need an essential service. William falls within neither of these categories. He is merely an inconvenience, the only student left in Simonsberg Manskoshuis. Outside his window, the birds peck at the soil, and the number of Coronavirus cases continue to rise.

\*\*\*

His mother, Theresa, had been so excited when he got in. They had just finished eating breakfast at home in Johannesburg when he told her the news. William was drinking a cup of black coffee. She was drinking her daily 'cancer killer' smoothie. An open packet of kale and half an orange lay abandoned near the sink.

'Your father's old residence! Oh, my darling this is so exciting!' she said. 'Just imagine sitting in the same cafeteria where he ate! Or even sleeping in his old room? Maybe we could organise something like that?'

'No, Mom, please,' he said urgently. 'It's great I got in alright, let's just leave it at that?'

'Doubt you'll survive long in a place like that,' Steven said as he walked into the kitchen.

He had just got back from a long cycle, the only thing Steven seemed to enjoy in his life. His thin blonde hair was stuck damply to his forehead. He snapped a single banana off from the bunch lying in the glass fruit bowl.

‘They eat boys like you for breakfast in Stellies.’

William didn’t react to his stepfather’s comment. He has learnt through years of practice, that it is always better not to react. Steven had thrown a full glass of red wine at him from across the dinner table once for reacting. So now when he speaks, the things Steven says pass straight through him like a cold draft of air. As he left the kitchen, his mother brushed her thin fingers lightly over William’s palm before getting up to make Steven’s breakfast.

‘I don’t know if I should go,’ William said slowly.

She turned around and looked at him, her mouth parted open in shock. Her voice was hoarse, and she sounded angry as she spoke. ‘Don’t you dare stay here for me, Will.’

‘Fucksakes, Mom,’ he said. ‘How can I leave you here with him?’

The pipes creaked above them as Steven turned the hot water of the shower on. She was frowning sadly at him while retying the pale blue bandana she wore over her bare head. She was still so beautiful, his mother. His heart ached as he watched her there, knowing already that of course, he would go. He would pack up his room, the eighteen years of his existence into one small black suitcase. He would hug her tightly at the boarding gates, and sit at the window seat as the aeroplane took off into the sky. In just over a month, he would be in a different province, living an altogether different kind of life.

‘I will never forgive you, if you don’t go,’ she said. ‘Never.’

She cracked an egg open into the pan. William got up to make another pot of coffee.

\*\*\*

William gets changed now, pulling on his jeans, his only clean jersey and an old pair of Nike sneakers. He grabs his wallet from his bedside table and walks quickly through the eerie passages.

‘Molo Sinethemba,’ William says to the security guard at the front desk. Sinethemba raises his hand but says nothing. William cannot see if he is smiling behind his mask, but somehow he doubts it. There is little to smile about at the moment. He tugs his mask over his mouth and nose trying to breathe normally through the clinical smell. Outside the rain has stopped, and the sky is a brilliant sea-blue. A pied crow squawks as it flies overhead.

He enjoys these daily walks to Eikestad Mall. He does not see another person on the roads beside a homeless man, smelling of beer, who is rummaging frantically through a dustbin. Outside the entrance, a girl wearing yellow rubber gloves is arguing with her boyfriend on the phone.

‘Babe, I told you. Woolworths isn’t selling hot food anymore... Of course, I fucking checked!’

Her voice reminds him of Paige, a girl he knows from back home. They had a brief, intense sexual relationship for a while last year. She played in the same provincial hockey league, and after a match one Saturday, she walked up to him outside the changing rooms and said, ‘Are you free later today? I could come over to your house.’

After confirming that she wasn't joking, he said his Mom was out for the day, and she could come over any time she wanted to. On the drive home, he started fantasising about her, he couldn't help it. He thought about the way her hockey dress clung to her body, and the way her breasts looked in a sports bra. He had seen them once when the teams had been forced to take an ice bath after training. A lot of the guys on the team joked with each other about how hot she was, or how much they wanted to fuck her. William had always just admired her skill on the field. She was insanely good. Probably the only person he knew who was going to make it to the top, captain of the national team one day.

When she arrived at his house, she had changed out of her hockey gear. Her hair was damp, and she smelt faintly of perfume.

'Would you like coffee or something?' he asked.

She smiled and said: 'I didn't come here to drink coffee, you know.'

He realised that he was slightly terrified of her. The only other person he'd slept with at that point was his best friend, Lauren. It had been a painful experience for both of them, awkward and over too quickly. Their friendship wasn't the same after that, probably never would be.

He sometimes writes long emotional emails to her about how he's finding life at university. How beautiful the mountains look at sunset, or how weird he feels walking past old slave cottages and white colonial buildings. Since the lockdown, his emails have taken on a new melancholy tone.

I miss you, he types. I can't remember the last time I physically touched someone. I'm so worried about my Mom. Lauren is studying at Tuks like most of his other school mates. He never sends the emails, they pile up one by one in his drafts folder.

Anyway, William thinks the sex just worked with Paige because they didn't know each other well. She told him he was the first person able to make her come.

'Don't get a big head now,' she said, which caused them both to laugh.

He struggled to concentrate in class or execute drills during hockey practice during that month. He kept thinking about her lying naked on his bed, or the way he could make her wet with just his touch. It ended when she told him that she was in love with someone else at school.

'We had fun though, didn't we?' Paige said.

He wasn't even that sad about it, although he did miss the sex. He spent a few nights after that worrying if he was incapable of intimacy. That was back in high school, when he had the time to worry about those sorts of things.

His concerns at the moment are far more primal: when was the last time I ate? Did I sanitise my hands after paying at the till? When will Steven be calling me, to deliver the inevitable bad news?

\*\*\*

He slowly fills his trolley: a jar of peanut butter, a loaf of bread, two beef lasagnes to warm up (one for him and the other for

Sinethemba), a bag of bananas for his health. William doesn't stock up with food so he can use this daily walk to the shops as an excuse to get outside. When he gets back to res, he'll listen to his lecturer's podcasts and make notes from the slides they've uploaded, his Physics textbooks laid out in front of him for guidance. In the afternoon, he will make a peanut butter sandwich to eat while he talks to his mother on the phone. Before bed, he will do thirty push-ups and finish another novel. Tonight, he will devour *The Secret History*.

William was top of his class in English at school but always knew he would study something to do with science, probably out of some sad devotion to his father. He could never be a surgeon though, he knew that for sure. Once during hockey practice in grade 8, Kyle had flicked a dangerous high ball which hit Tim directly on the mouth. Tim wasn't wearing his gum guard and spat out two of his teeth onto the green AstroTurf while blood streamed down from his nose. William had to sprint to the edge of the field to be sick.

He'd been walking off that same field a few days later, when his coach pulled him aside nervously, and said, 'Shit, Will, I'm so sorry man. There's been a terrible car accident.'

His mother was inconsolable that evening, crying out like an animal, shaking all over her body. Feeling sick and panicky, he had phoned his aunt, Beth, who told him to crush up two Valium's and dissolve them in a glass of water. At fourteen years old, William didn't know adults took pills for things like anxiety or depression. Scanning through his parent's bathroom cabinet, reading labels like: 'Prozac' and 'Xanax', he realised suddenly that his childhood was over.

The next morning, he walked into the kitchen to fetch his Dad's favourite wine glass from the cabinet. It must have held some sentimental value for him because he never drank from anything else, but William had never asked about it, and now he would never know. After long days at work, his father would sip the red liquid, dark like blood, and talk excitedly about the miracles he'd performed in the operating theatre. Other nights he drank quietly, and William knew not to press him for details.

That morning, William took the glass and smashed it against the counter. It shattered into uneven pieces which fell all over the tiled floor, glistening in the sun like diamonds. On the windowsill outside, a pair of doves cooed softly to each other. He watched the shining pieces for what felt like a long time, breathing heavily. Eventually, his mother came downstairs and swept up the glass with the grey plastic dustpan they kept hidden under the sink.

\*\*\*

At ten past four, his mother calls him.

'Hello my darling, how has your day been?'

'Same as yesterday,' he laughs. 'How are you feeling?'

'Well,' she says. 'I'm getting used to the side effects and my fingers are healing quite nicely.'

He breathes out slowly, imaging his mother's cracked hands, dry and bleeding. He knows she's being strong. Cancer patients taking oral chemotherapy have so much to endure: nausea, diarrhoea, mouth sores, insomnia, the heavy weighted blanket of fatigue.



He clears this throat. 'I'm glad. How's Steven doing?'

'Same as always,' she says. 'Drinking up a storm and complaining about the government.'

'He hasn't run out then?'

'Of booze? Heavens no, he's well connected with the black market.'

William laughs. 'Of course, he is.'

'And your course work? How's the online teaching?'

'Challenging, to say the least, it can never compare with face-to-face class. One of our lecturer's kid keeps running in while we're on Zoom meetings, which is pretty funny.'

'I wish you could come home,' she says, her voice cracking at the end. 'I hate to think of you all alone, trying to cook for yourself in that god-awful kitchenette just due to your bizarre concern about infecting me. This illegal booze coming into our house is probably more dangerous for my health!'

He pauses, trying to gather his thoughts. Steven had been the one who convinced him it wasn't safe to return. In the beginning, with all the fear and uncertainty circulating on campus, he hadn't known what to believe. Some people didn't display symptoms for the first ten days. Maybe he was already infected? Or he'd contract it on the flight home, at the airport, during the Uber ride there. How could he ever forgive himself? Dr Mkhize is always very clear during his state address: people with underlying illnesses are the most vulnerable and in need of our protection.

'Sorry my darling,' she says. 'It's the medication making me cranky.'

'I wish I was there too,' William says. 'You know I do.'

She says she loves him, Steven is calling, and she has to go. He wanted to tell her about the birds, he only remembers now. They are still there outside his window, he can see their reddish-orange breasts even in the fading afternoon light.

He will tell her about them tomorrow.