

Short story

Cinda Park

- Justin Williams

I can hear his mother in the kitchen. Humming along to *Just an Illusion* on the radio. All the sounds inside are in harmony with the children singing and running outside in the court. Then she bangs a lid on a pot. It startles me, even though James is unbothered. I hear sizzling and smell the onions and garlic browning. I go to the kitchen to see what she's making. She is starting a lovely lamb curry. I wish I could have some. I haven't tasted anything in months.

I was born in Tulbagh, the firstborn in a third generation of Bouchiers. My mom did not want to stay long enough to see a fourth. In my thirteen years, I also grew tired of Oupa's slaghuis... Always "Johannes this, Johannes that". I remember the blood and the shrieks. They never seemed to disturb anyone else. I was scared until the age of seven, before that I used to imitate the animal's sounds to distract myself. As if they were still alive. My grandfather decided to slaughter a sheep by hand one day. He wanted to show me how men were taught to "slag" in his day. He made me carry the bucket and the shears. It was almost like the sheep knew what was going to happen. He then held the sheep and told me to cut the wool off the left side of its neck. The thing was screaming for its life, but oupa's hands were fast and he cut the "slagaar" and let the sheep bleed out. I couldn't get that sound out of my head. I was meh-ing for the next week.

It wasn't long until my father (nagged on by my mom) decided to pack up the platteland for city. He wanted to be a cobbler from a young age, Uncle Petrus taught him how to make *veldskoene*. Here was his chance, he managed to find a small store space on Voortrekker Road. Oupa loaned him the deposit. The place was neglected, but it wasn't a write off, the floor was raw cement and the ceiling paint was cracking, but he was happy. So, we were too. Pa said it would take all our help to bring the business "oppie been". We had one week to get the place ready and Pa had no money to hire extra help. My mom decided we would paint the walls inside baby blue and the ceilings white. I was sweeping up the old flakes of paint as my dad scraped the ceiling, there were two layers of paint: a dirty yellow and a pink underneath it. The landlord said this used to be a hardware store before we moved in, but he didn't mention what happened here before that. My dad asked me to fetch his water. As I looked up from sweeping and a tiny splinter of dry paint went in my eye. It felt like someone rubbing sand in my eye. I was tired and used this to escape this labour. Luckily it was almost time for supper, so my dad let me go.

My father taught me how to lay tiles that week. The floor was 10 x 6m and we had three days to tile and grout all of it. Mixing the tile cement was my favourite part of the job. The smell of the mixture reminded me of soil just after the rain starts falling. He showed me at which angle I should hold the "troffel" and how much cement to apply. The sound of its teeth scratching the cement floor raised the new hair on my arms. We managed to complete everything by the Saturday, and we took the Sunday to rest. The following Monday, we opened the doors. I never saw my parents as excited as they were on the first day of business. It was the start of a new beginning for my family. My mom worked there as the shop

assistant and the self-appointed “face of the business”. Every day after school, I would be there to assist my father, handing him the right knives and threading the needles. My father always told me to pay attention because he was going to leave the business in my hands one day.

It had been four years since we moved to Cape Town. We were used to the sound of the peak traffic on Voortrekker now. Our shop’s colours have gone from baby blue; to yellow; slate and back to baby blue. Also, my mom finally got it right to disguise her accent. She was embarrassed by the sound of her *bry*. “Very classy for a plasië” Pa would joke. My seventeenth birthday was coming up and I thought of my childhood. It’s been ten years since the blood and shrieks stopped bothering me: About two weeks before I turned seven, me and Bennie were playing marbles in front of the house. My uncle Gert lived across the street. He called us over to show us some pictures. When a grown up called you, you went. He loved animals and had a new book called, “Snakes of the Cape”. The pictures looked as if the snakes could jump off the page and get us. Gert stopped touching Bennie when he heard my mom call for us. He said we could have the book if we kept quiet about this. Bennie never really played with me again after that day. I kept the book.

My high school years had two constants. My lack of friends and the sharp smell of Brummer glue that got stuck in my nose. I finished school and I had no idea what to do after. I helped out in the shop for a few months, until one day a customer told me that SAPS were looking for “jong bloed”. I went to go fill out the forms and, a few weeks later, passed all their tests. I worked on the police force for six years before the doctor told me about my cancer. He told me it was in my bones and that there was nothing he could do. I always

thought there was a better chance of me dying on duty, rather than getting sick, but here I was.

I thought back to '81 when I first started patrolling Elsie's River. The sky was dark grey with a mixture of low clouds and smoke from burning tyres. Rossouw and I were on foot. As soon as they heard our vans coming, people dropped everything they were doing and ran inside. In front of Cinda Park court sat a boy of about six years old. He was so into playing marbles, he only noticed me when I was two meters from him. I stopped and before I could tell him to go in, he asked, "Wil uncle skiet?"

"Jamesie! Kom in hies!" His mother came rushing down

I froze and she said, "Sorry Meneer!" and threw him upstairs. I saw him a few more times on my patrols. This boy reminded me of how innocent and unaware we were that day. It's been fifteen years since Gert gave us the book about snakes. It should have had him on the front cover.

My sickness was starting to take its toll. I was put in a back office at the station and then put off work. I was losing weight fast. The last seven months really butchered me. My left cheekbone was crumbling, and my eye decided to hang itself. My face was collapsing, and they had to operate to try and save the eye. I was very weak and *brandmaer* by then. I heard them say they "lost" me during the operation – felt nothing. When I realised I was dead, I didn't feel too shocked. I cried for my parents. They still had the shop, but grief was taking up most of their time now. It was only two years since Gert hung himself, they say his note contained an apology to his wife and the family, as well as Bennie and another boy in our hometown's initials.

Until one day, I thought of James. I went to Cinda Park Court to look for him. He was nine now. That first day never left my mind, he didn't panic even though all the adults were running. It was as if he knew what was going to happen before it did. I didn't know how to let him know I was there. Still, I went. I visited their flat more than once. The cotton doilies reminded me of ma. I guess we're all the same in some ways. It was only after the third visit that I noticed he could see me. Just like the first time we met, he wasn't aware of *what* was approaching, but he knew he wasn't alone. He knew I was there, but I didn't show my face. He left the room before I could. The next day I came back, but his mother was knitting in the living room. He told her there was a one-eyed man in the room, but she got irritated and told him to go play outside. He ran downstairs to fetch Aunty Lily - a *boerboel* of a woman. She looked like she could beat anyone in a fight. He brought her because he knew she would be able to see me. She came in wildly, panting. Once she relearned breathing, she told Rina to listen to James. She said she also saw *something* the other day. It hurt me that I was a thing now, but it felt good to know that I have been seen.

I stood in a corner trying to dodge them, I know I could have gone through a wall, but I was in shock. "Daar staan hy!" shouted James. The aunty saw me too, but his mother didn't. She started cursing me with the Lord's name. Aunty Rina still couldn't see anything. Lily told her to look over James' left shoulder. I am still not sure how it works, but then she saw me too. "Die bloed van Jesus!" she screamed. I was terrified. It was as if she had seen a ghost. I eventually stopped shaking, I tried to tell them I don't want to hurt anybody. That may have looked like an attack and upset them even more. Aunty Lily decided to get a pack of salt from a cupboard and was going to cast me out with it. She performed her ritual and I

acted as scared as I could, ran out and over their balcony. I screamed as I jumped, and they thought I hit the ground.

All I do is wander Voortrekker Road. Dogs don't howl anymore, and people walk right through me. There's a surprising number of people who can see me. None of them want to, they either act like they don't see me or start cursing me. I feel my time is near, but I am hopeful that I could get through to someone before it ends.