
 SANDRA JENSEN

WAR

Apart from Religion, school was torture. Lines of white chalk scraping into my head. I always sat at the back where on good days I could see Hillbrow Tower out the window piercing Johannesburg's sky like a pin. Today was a crappy day and I didn't care if I could see it or not. We had netball later and I hated netball. Miss Hadley was telling us about the Boer War. I hated the Boer War. I wish we had Religion, it was the only subject I was good at. I felt fidgety. I wanted to go home but my brother Mark wouldn't be home yet and my mother's boyfriend Louis might be there. I practised my peripheral vision and stared at the blackboard and the window at the same time. I tried to look like I was concentrating on the war. In the corner of my eye I saw the tip of the Tower winking at me. Winking was a sin. I crossed my legs. I tried to listen to Miss Hadley but all I could feel was the warm place between my legs. Think about something else, I told myself.

—Hillbrow Tower is the tallest freestanding structure in Africa, Mark had said, sounding like he'd built it himself when he'd only read it out of his *Guinness World Records*. I wondered if the building was a cheat, that long pin making all the difference. I tried to remember exactly how high it was. I couldn't, my head was stuffed full with other things.

Pretoria had surrendered and thousands of Boers were dying of horrible diseases. I put on a sad face but Miss Hadley wasn't looking. My thighs were slippery with sweat. I slid my hands between them. The Boers finally met with Kitchener in Klerksdorp. Thank God we didn't live *there*.

We lived in Randburg, surrounded by square bungalows, pink bougainvillea bushes and nail-clipped lawns. Across the road was a grocery shop selling Outspan oranges and ladyfinger bananas. Next door, a German delicatessen stank of smoked meats and vinegar. Black servant women wore white aprons and white hats and smiley faces and black men in overalls raked the short grass gently like it was hair. Alsatian dogs barked behind 'Beware of the Dog' signs. Persian cats padded around rooms that smelled of Windolene and Sunlight soap.

Our house didn't have a cat or a dog. Not anymore. I had a dog once. His name was Bottle. A picture of Bottle with his broken back fell in my head before I could stop it. Anyway, our house needed renovating like all the other houses my mother bought. She did a lot of renovating. This one had an empty swimming pool in the back and an empty aviary in the front, as big as the servants' quarters. —Who on earth would want to keep

birds in this country? my mother asked the estate agent. I secretly hoped we might.

Everything was going horribly wrong with the war. Boer Commandos' wives and children were sent to concentration camps. Food, bullets and hope were nowhere to be found. The Bushveldt Carbineers shot eight Boer POWs and a Reverend. I wanted to tear my clothes off. I was stuffed into green flannel panties and knee-high white socks that left ridges down my calves. Everything itched. I timed how long I could stare at Miss Hadley and not blink. She spoke without moving her upper lip. I gave up after three minutes. No staying power, Grandma Pie said. She was right. I'd have surrendered ages ago. Or been thrown out for lowering grooming standards. I'd dribbled Fanta down the front of my pinafore at break. My pinafore was the same colour as my face. I felt pretty until I looked in the mirror. Piggy eyes stared back at me. My eyelashes stuck together in clumps. I had beige hair.

We were in the middle of the Treaty of Vereeniging. I put my textbook on my lap, drew up my pinafore slowly and put my right hand down my panties. My forefinger found the place. It moved up and down – secretly, silently – while the Treaty went on and on. I wondered what radio programmes the Tower was transmitting, and then I wasn't wondering anything at all, my finger going faster and faster and then I was too close. I couldn't be sure I'd not cry out. Jan Smuts had finally got everyone to sign so I put my hand up.

—Kimberly?

—May I go to the toilet?

—You've been once already, can't you wait until the bell?

—It hurts bad Miss.

—All right then. And go to sickbay and see Nurse.

I finished off in the toilet cubicle, holding myself apart with one hand, rubbing the swelling in the middle with my finger until I was raw, flushing the toilet to cover the sound of my breathing, until the sharp flood pierced through me, rising up like a burst tap until my head filled up with purple and for a moment I was not me. For a moment I felt good, and then it was over, and then I felt very bad. I washed my hands. I didn't look in the mirror. I knew what I'd see. [continued]