

## ‘We Hope He Will Be Dead by Tonight’: Shared Estrangement in the ICU of the Universitas Hospital

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### ABSTRACT

This article recounts the week in which the author and his four sisters spent waiting for their father to die, and suggests that intimacy or friendship viewed as ‘shared estrangement’ – a friendship or intimacy not rooted in sharing common ground – might provide a lens through which to consider the nature of the deep bond that developed between the author and his siblings during that week. Raising the possibility that the relationship between author and his sisters could in some ways be read as a *queer* one, not least because it demanded an openness to alterity and requires attention and care, mutual trust, and, bizarre as it may sound, even betrayal, the author suggests that a deep bond slowly developed between the siblings during the week being described, not *despite* the profound differences between the siblings, but partly *because* of it.

**Keywords:** friendship, intimacy, auto-ethnography, death

### FOUR SISTERS AND A BROTHER

I saved this picture on my laptop under the name ‘Family Zoo’ (Figure 1). It must have been taken in the winter of 1967 at the Pretoria Zoo.<sup>1</sup> My mother still has her own teeth, which means it was taken after my father was disbarred from the legal profession for misappropriating Trust funds – after the repossession of the large house in Messina, the house with the field of bright yellow and orange Namaqualand daisies in the front garden – but before we moved to the second house in Oriibi in Pietermaritzburg – the converted army barracks house with its communal bathrooms and toilets down an open corridor.

On the far right stands my oldest sister, Marie-Luise, who became a reborn Christian in my final year of high school when we lived in a town called Pietersburg (renamed Polokwane after the advent of democracy) during a period of several years when my sister had struggled on her own and lived with my parents. Marie-Luise, who can talk the most awkward silence into submission, and who is always quitting smoking but still sucks on each cigarette as if it is life itself. Marie-Luise, who designed and made the handful of new shirts with which I was packed off to Stellenbosch University in 1984, including the white linen shirt with the flowing sleeves and the hand-made wooden buttons of different sizes that shouted: *armblanke moffie*<sup>2</sup> from Pietersburg.

On the far left stands my second oldest sister, Antoinette, who was reborn a few years later after she stopped seeing Willie, her hairdresser friend-but-maybe-boyfriend with his flowing shoulder-length hair and clanging copper bangles on his wrist, who had in 1983 berated me for taking them to see Pieter Dirk Uys’s play *Paradise is Closing Down* at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, demanding to know why I had brought him ‘to this moffie

<sup>1</sup> After I shared a draft of this piece with my four sisters, Anna-Marie pointed out that the picture was *not* taken at the Pretoria Zoo, but in Burgerspark, situated in the city centre of Pretoria between what was then called Jacob Maré Street, Van der Walt Street and Andries Street (renamed in 2012 to Jeff Masemola Street, Lilian Ngoyi Street, and Thabo Sehume Street respectively). The Park was first established as a botanical garden in 1874 by the then President of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR), Thomas Francois Burgers. The history of the park is recounted by Carol Hardijzer in an article on *The Heritage Portal*.

<sup>2</sup> *Armblanke* is a term used to describe poor white Afrikaners, and was widely used in the first half of the twentieth century by supporters of apartheid, who argued that the introduction of apartheid policies were necessary to “uplift” *armblanke*s by shielding them from economic competition by black South Africans. *Moffie* translates as ‘faggot’ or ‘fairy’, although mostly used as a derogatory term to insult gender nonconforming gay men, the term is also ironically and self-affirmingly used by some gay men.

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**Figure 1.** The author, his mother and his four sisters. 1967. Copyright: Author.

play'.<sup>3</sup> Antoinette, who is a stickler for rules, gets advice directly from God, and sometimes shares humorous videos and conspiracy memes on our sibling WhatsApp group. During the trip the five of us took to Prague, Lviv, and Budapest in 2012, I jokingly dubbed Antoinette 'Scary Spice'.

Between Antoinette and my mother stands my middle sister Anna-Marie, who when I was four years old for several weeks got me to do all her chores by telling me gentlemen did everything for ladies without even having to be asked, and that she was willing to give me a chance to prove that I was indeed a gentleman. Anna-Marie, the big game hunter who – after becoming a judge – appointed my ailing 70-year-old mother as her judges' clerk, one of her many schemes to save other people from themselves and from those around them, which in this case was from my father. Anna-Marie who I sometimes jokingly call Racheltjie de Beer<sup>4</sup> and who after my father died organised an inheritance swop: she receiving the rifle that had belonged to my namesake grandfather and had been bequeathed to me and me receiving some of the jewellery my mother always wanted her to have because 'there is nothing wrong with making an effort to look pretty'.

In the pram, hidden from view, lies my youngest sister Trinkka, who was reborn in 1985 in the first year of her studies towards a law degree at Stellenbosch University and who married a partially sighted man at the age of 24, a man who called me on a Friday evening in 2011 to ask me to drive with Trinkka from Cape Town to Plettenberg Bay the next morning because, he said, my sister needed me as she was going to tell our other sisters that she is a lesbian. Trinkka, who is relentlessly generous and kind, and seldom expresses anger, but told me out of the blue (but not really out of the blue) a few months after my father had died that she had forgiven me for sometimes being ashamed of her and pretending not to know her when we were both studying at Stellenbosch.

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<sup>3</sup> Pieter Dirk Uys Uys is a South African playwright, actor, and comedian, best known for his character Evita Bezuidenhout (also known as Tannie Evita, Afrikaans for 'Auntie Evita'), a white Afrikaner socialite and self-proclaimed political activist, who satirises South African politics and society. The character was inspired by Australian comedian Barry Humphries' character Dame Edna Everage. Martin Doyle described *Paradise is Closing Down* in *The Scotsman* as a 'hard, searing and relentless investigation of (South African) whites through the bottom of a bottle, in which their bitchiness is played out on each other against a background of racial tension ... one feels that his extraordinary method of investigating apartheid by concentrating on the people who are part of the problem rather than part of the solution, is perhaps the most powerful way it could be done.'

<sup>4</sup> Racheltjie de Beer is the hero of an Afrikaans folktale, based on the true story of an American girl, Hazel Milner, who saved her two younger siblings from a blizzard by sacrificing her own life. In the version of the story written by Afrikaans author Eugene Marais around 1920, Racheltjie saves her younger brother from certain death and sacrifices her own life when they get lost in a snowstorm, by laying him down in a hollowed out ant hill, and covering him with her warm clothes and her body.

I am, of course, the dishevelled boy with the protruding ears (which my mother unsuccessfully tried to fix by taping them to my head with large pink plasters) and the ill-fitting hand-knitted jersey standing in the front on the left. The only boy among four sisters. My brother born a year before me having died three days after his birth, a fact I was unaware of until Annie-Marie told me about my phantom brother in my grade 11 year at *Pietersburg Hoërskool*, the week after my father was sent off to the *Staanvas* rehab clinic in Pretoria to treat his alcoholism for the first time. Anna-Marie, who often tells the joke (a queer joke perhaps) about me being the only boy among four sisters (we joke, therefore we feel). The joke goes like this: ‘Yes, we are four sisters and one brother – but we have not decided who the brother is yet.’

I must have been 4 years old when this picture was taken. My face gives away little. I am already learning how to keep secrets.

## ON SHARED ESTRANGEMENT

When I told my then boyfriend, Lwando, over dinner that I wanted to suggest in a piece I was writing on slow intimacy that my relationship with my sisters was in some ways a *queer* one, or one of queer friendship, he gave me that look he often gives when I am about to leave the house in an un-ironed shirt or a tracksuit top, a look that says I am pushing my luck. Knowing my sisters well, and knowing queer theory even better, he reminded me that there was hardly anything queer about my sisters or our relationship. ‘It’s a stretch. The facts do not match the theory.’

But I don’t tell Lwando that I have an ace up my sleeve. I have been reading Tom Roach’s *Friendship as a Way of Life: Foucault, AIDS, and the Politics of Shared Estrangement* (2012), a queer exploration of the paradoxes and ambiguities of the friendship between two French public figures – the famous philosopher Michelle Foucault and the less well-known novelist and photographer Hervé Guibert. Guibert was a transgressive, unflinching writer whose books interwove fact and fiction in ways that would be familiar to readers of the work of the late Afrikaans writer Koos Prinsloo.<sup>5</sup> One critic cannily praised Guibert’s work for ‘its breath-taking indiscretion, tenderness and gore’ (Sehgal, 2020). Others accused him of betraying everyone, notably his own parents whose skeletons he uncovered in his lightly fictionalised novel *My Parents* (1986). Guibert had befriended Michelle Foucault in 1977, and they fleetingly became lovers. (Reading about this period one gets the impression that all the queer intellectuals in Paris – at least the male ones – knew and fucked each other, or knew and hated each other – sometimes hating and fucking each other at the same time.) Some years after Foucault died of an ‘undisclosed illness’ in 1984, Guibert wrote what became his most scandalous and well-known book *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (1990) in which he revealed his own HIV status and also, obliquely, that Foucault (called Muzil in the book) had died of an AIDS related illness.<sup>6</sup> At the time, this ‘breath-taking indiscretion’ caused an uproar among French intellectuals, but today it is difficult not to see Guibert’s ‘betrayal’ as a radical act of friendship which humanised his friend and revealed that he was more complex and fascinating than his public persona suggested. It helped to make Foucault, for a while at least, the darling of queer social sciences academics working in the global North.<sup>7</sup> The year after *To a Friend* was published, Guibert chronicled, in the public eye, his own surrender to AIDS. He died on 27 December 1991, two weeks after a failed suicide attempt, at the age of 36.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Koos Prinsloo was a gay, award-winning, Afrikaans short story writer, who died of an AIDS-related illness in 1992. A selection of Prinsloo’s short stories (translated into English by Gerrit Olivier) was published in 2022 under the title *Place of Slaughter and Other Stories*. In a postscript, Olivier praises the ‘astonishing creative freedom’ in the use of narrative modes displayed in Prinsloo’s original collection of stories title *Slagplaas* (Place of Slaughter), which was published in 1991. According to Olivier, ‘amidst the violence and the suffering [in *Slagplaas*], it also is an uncompromisingly desolate and elegiac work’.

<sup>6</sup> Guibert’s betrayal of his friends’ trust in *To a Friend*, went beyond the revelation about Foucault’s HIV status. As Sehgal notes, Guibert ‘aired his friend’s laundry with ruthless efficiency, his closet full of “whips, leather hoods, leashes, bridles and handcuffs,” his love of “violent orgies” in San Francisco’s bathhouses’. The ‘betrayal’ of friends and family also a characteristic of Koos Prinsloo’s work, while bathhouses also feature in several of them.

<sup>7</sup> In the mid-1990s I decided to make Foucault’s work on sexuality and identity the centrepiece of my PhD dissertation after reading James Miller’s *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (1994), in which the biographer made much of Foucault’s closet full of whips, and his love of violent orgies in San Francisco’s bathhouses, and argued that his exposure to the sadomasochism community as well as psychedelic drugs like LSD during stays in the USA influenced his later political and philosophical works.

<sup>8</sup> The most comprehensive and thoughtful analysis of Guibert’s work and life available in English, can be found in Ralph Sarkonak’s book, *Angelic Echoes: Hervé Guibert and Company* (2000). This book partly informed my discussion in this second section of the essay. Additionally, I also relied on Guibert’s *Cytomegalovirus: A Hospitalization Diary (Forms of Living)* (2014) in which he offers an autobiographical narrative of the everyday moments of his hospitalization because of complications of AIDS, as well as *The Mausoleum of Lovers: Journals 1976–1991*, (2001). To this must be added a fifty-eight-minute video-diary, *La Pudeux ou l’Impudeux* (described by one academic commentator as an act of ‘self-mourning’) in which Guibert documents himself undergoing medical treatment and suffering from the increasingly painful symptoms of HIV-AIDS. It was only shown

Tom Roach explores the profound but complex intimacy of this friendship between Guibert and Foucault, a friendship characterised by its 'conversations at once casual and serious', its 'narcissistic betrayals, and the telling of secrets typical of the life of gay bars', and the 'braiding together of life's daily rituals – including illness and death' (185), to make his case for 'friendship as shared estrangement' (2). A call, as I see it, for the emergence of yet unseen forms of relation across lines of identity, experience, and beliefs: a relationality, as Roach puts it, which exceeds commonality (12). This is a vision of friendship and intimacy that demands 'an openness to alterity' and thus encourages an active practice of friendship that requires attention and care, mutual trust, and, bizarre as it may sound, even betrayal, 'guided by an ethics of discomfort' (123). Friendship as shared estrangement embraces 'a relationality in which friends can only recognize each other as such in concomitance with a recognition of their own finitude, the continuous possibility that they may betray one another, and an openness to irreconcilable strangeness' (Halse, 2014: 288).

Lwando is probably right. There may well be nothing queer about the relationship between me and my sisters. But I want to hold out the possibility that the rather queer idea of intimacy or friendship as 'shared estrangement', a friendship or intimacy not rooted in sharing common ground, provides a lens through which to consider what comes next.

A glorious betrayal which is also a radical act of friendship. This is what I am aiming for here.

## IN THE ICU WAITING ROOM

In July 2022, three months before the Slow Intimacy conference takes place, I still have no idea what to talk about at the conference. I had promised to participate months earlier, but now I find that I have nothing to say. In my usual scholarly writing on South African Constitutional Law, it is easy to hide behind court judgments and rights rhetoric, and to write about my own pain and anger, if at all, by retelling the stories of vulnerable litigants fighting for their rights. But as the emails demanding the submission of an abstract pile up, I write to my friend Lou-Marié (one of the organisers of the conference) and offer two possible topics for my presentation. Perhaps, I write to Lou-Marié, I could write about intimacy and queer spaces.

I am thinking of the time in Paris in the mid-1990s when I met a boy from Ivory Coast in a bar called Banana and how he did not want to believe I liked him because he had a shrivelled left hand and how we spent the night whispering to each other in my bed in a dodgy hotel (the whispering was necessary because I was not allowed to entertain a gentleman caller) until I smuggled him out of there at dawn, and how he had wanted to go from the bar to a nightclub called Queen but I did not want to go as it would be far too expensive, and how I did not see at the time that he wanted to go there to show me off and that my reluctance to go was probably read as a confirmation of his anxiety about his arm. And then there is the story of Sean from Singapore who I met on the boat from Mykonos to Turkey and finally kissed when we walked home from a bar in Goreme where a drag queen in a Burka sang 'I will Survive', and who emailed me 25 years later out of the blue to tell me that I was the first man he ever kissed.

In the end I ditch this idea, worrying that while I have a lot of stories to tell, I might not have anything to say, and that such a piece would turn into just another older white guy writing nostalgically about his cruising days. Instead, I opt to do a piece for the conference about the week in December 2003 that my four sisters and I spent together in Pretoria waiting for my father to die, and about how I had learnt to love my sisters during that week. But a few weeks before the conference I had not written one word. I don't know how to write about any of this – underqualified (or unqualified) to write about intimacy, let alone death, slow or otherwise. Despite the ever more urgent demands of the organisers as the conference draws near, I don't send an abstract – I don't know what I want to say. Was it really true, as Trinkka sometimes claimed, that the week we waited for my father to die was the best week of our lives? Or did we make up this story too, to soothe ourselves, to soothe each other? What do I even know about my sisters – even now – and what do they know about me?

And, in any case, I realise that I can't remember much of what happened that week, apart from the funny parts (or, at least, our mutually invented version of these funny parts). I remember these parts because the five of us retell them sometimes when we get together and the wine is flowing, and I invariably joke about *that* play we still have to write one day, the play about the week our father almost missed his own funeral because he was too

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on French television shortly after his death, and is 'mostly remembered for one of the film's final scenes, in which Guibert stages a mock suicide'. Koos Prinsloo died in 1994. Like Guibert, he was 36 years old when he died.

stubborn to die. It is only after I read *Friendship as a Way of Life* that I begin to think that it might be possible to write about my sisters and the beauty of our shared estrangement.<sup>9</sup>

After completing a first draft, I tell Lou-Marié that my piece will probably be a failure, but that I will try to make sure it is at least a spectacular failure. The melodramatic ending of this piece is my attempt to honour this promise.

But before I get there, let me do the safe part. The basic facts. Trinkka calls me on Saturday 13 December 2003 while I am having lunch with Marcus (my boyfriend at the time) and other friends in the lush garden of a restaurant near *The Point* shopping centre in Sea Point in Cape Town to tell me that *pa* had had a massive stroke, that he is in a coma in Universitas Hospital in Pretoria, and that she is going to book us on the next available flight to Johannesburg, instructing me to pack a bag and hurry to the Cape Town airport. Marcus and I were planning to go clubbing at *Detour* that night with our usual gang of queer friends, so I am not keen to fly to Johannesburg that very night. But my younger sister seldom tells me what to do, so I don't object by suggesting that we might as well wait another day to see which way this is likely to go. Not that I considered the possibility then that my father might pull through and recover. What I worry about is this: what if it takes weeks for him to die and I am forced to spend all that time with my sisters in Pretoria? It is not as if I could talk to them about white supremacy or queer theory, or about the practical difficulties of arranging a threesome when you and your boyfriend have radically different tastes in men.

Trinka and I arrive at the hospital around nine o'clock that Saturday night. Anna-Marie, Antoinette and Marie-Luise, who drove all the way from Plettenberg Bay in Anna-Marie's fancy judges' car, arrive after midnight. For now, we all stay with Anna-Marie, in a *rondavel*<sup>10</sup> in the backyard of Professor Elize Botha's house in Brooklyn where Anna-Marie stays during the week while performing her duties as a judge, before flying to Plettenberg Bay on weekends to spend with her long-term girlfriend (now wife). Professor Botha (who later became chancellor of Stellenbosch University) and her husband had already left for Hermanus for their December holiday, so I do not sleep in the *rondavel* with my sisters, but in Professor Botha's single bed in the stuffy and impersonal room on the upper floor of the double story house.<sup>11</sup>

On Sunday 14 December we get to speak to a doctor who tells us with pursed lips that it is not looking good, but that it is too soon to say how things will turn out. He touches his face when he says the last part, which is why I know he is lying. Nothing much happens for a day, then another, more senior doctor with better professional insurance (a man as handsome as any not-yet-gone-to-seed former *Afrikaans Hoër Seunskool* head boy)<sup>12</sup> calls us to his office and shows us my father's brain scan. Black spots (or were they white spots?) covering the entire one side of his brain. My father's heart had stopped for almost 15 minutes before he was resuscitated, the doctor explains, which meant it would only be a matter of time before he died. It could be days, or it could be weeks. On the morning of Wednesday 17 December the five of us agree to switch off the ventilator that keeps my father alive, and to start organising the funeral.

But my father does not die. At least, not immediately. He had been smoking heavily since he was fifteen years old (always Gold Dollar Plain) and for many years had polished off a bottle of Richelieu brandy almost every night. Being brain dead was not going to kill him off that easily.

It is with the help of an extra shot of morphine that my father finally succumbs in the early morning hours of Thursday 18 December. We bury him on the afternoon of 19 December in a desolate face-brick NG Kerk in Pretoria North, in a service presided over by a thin-lipped and disappointed *predikant* who never met my father, and who struggles to remember his name. (His name is Pierre, *dominee*.)<sup>13</sup> At the funeral I deliver a diplomatic eulogy in which I attempt to say something about my father that is both true and kind, or not untrue and not unkind.<sup>14</sup> I read from my handwritten notes, quoting John Lennon ('Life is what happens to you while you are

<sup>9</sup> I am also struck, at this time, by Halse's discussion of Roach's idea of shared estrangement, and particularly by the following remark (88): 'To be queer is always already to be in some way unknowable, and thus the basis of queer relationality must be predicated upon a certain unease, a certain distance.'

<sup>10</sup> A single-room round dwelling with a pointed roof that is usually made from thatch.

<sup>11</sup> Professor Elize Botha was an influential academic specialising in Afrikaans literature, who often championed the work of Afrikaans writers critical of apartheid (including Koos Prinsloo), while remaining a highly respected figure within the Afrikaner establishment. Years later I would pore over the selection of letters Professor Botha wrote to various Afrikaans literary figures, compiled by Heilna du Plooy and published as *Gespreksgenoot – 'n Brieweboek*, to check (without success) for any mention of her bedroom or any other details about the house she and her husband shared for so many years.

<sup>12</sup> *Afrikaans Hoër Seunskool* (Afrikaans Boys Highschool) is an elite Afrikaans boys' school in Pretoria, known for producing a large number of Springbok rugby players. The Springboks is South Africa's national rugby team, and four time winners of the Rugby World Cup.

<sup>13</sup> A *predikant* refers to a minister of a church parish, usually of the Dutch Reformed Church, while a *dominee* is a more informal term for a predikant, also used as a form of address.

<sup>14</sup> The phrase is borrowed from Phillip Larkin's poem, 'Talking in Bed', from his *Collected Poems*, edited by Anthony Thwaite (1988), at p. 129. I bought a copy of this book in June 1997 in London at Foyles bookshop in Charing Cross Road, shortly

busy making other plans') and Dylan Thomas ('Rage, rage against the dying of the light') to make the point that while my father had not always lived wisely, he lived fully and burnt brightly. But mostly, I hide behind jokes. ('Do you remember the time *pa* was asked by a colleague at work why he was laughing to himself, and he answered that it was because he was happy that he had such a brilliant mind.')

So much for the facts. But one should not conflate the facts with the truth. Or with any version of the 'truth'. As Antjie Krog writes in *Country of my Skull*:

The word truth makes me uncomfortable.... the word truth still trips the tongue... I prefer the word lie. The moment the lie raises its head, I smell blood. Because it is there ... where the truth is closest (36).<sup>7</sup>

What I have not told you is that when the five of us – Marie-Luise, Antoinette, Anna-Marie, me and Trinka – are finally all standing around my father's bed, curtains drawn around the bed, at two o'clock in the morning, on that first night, we hardly say anything. And we don't look each other in the eye. My eyes are mostly on the machine that monitors my father's heart rate. My body is there next to the bed, but I do not feel I belong there. As so often, an imposter. I wonder if my sisters are also thinking, and feeling guilty for thinking – as I do – that it would not be the worst thing in the world if he died. (But this is not true, exactly. What I really think is this: thank goodness he is going to be dead soon.) What I am also thinking as I watch my father lying there is this: he cannot talk. And then, with some wonder: he cannot talk *back*.

If this had been a movie or a play, we would all have stood there carefully arranged around the ventilator near the head of his bed, looking sad or angry or confused. We would have talked very little, and then only in platitudes, nevertheless revealing far more about our feelings and the nature of our relationships than we had intended. But for now, what we mostly do is *not* to look, or to pretend not to look – at each other; at the body on the bed. It's then that I first think: 'This is like the setup at the start of an Ibsen play'. Not that I know any Ibsen plays, but I vaguely remember seeing an Afrikaans version of *Hedda Gabler* on South African television more than a decade before the unravelling of the apartheid state, a play I watched because my favourite Afrikaans actress, Sandra Prinsloo, played the title role. (When I wrote the previous sentence, I suspected that I might have invented this memory, or might have conflated this memory with another memory of another play I saw on television in which Sandra Prinsloo spoke on the phone for ninety minutes to somebody we never hear or see. But apparently *Hedda Gabler*, with Sandra Prinsloo in the lead, was broadcast on the SABC television in 1983.)<sup>15</sup>

In the play or the movie, the one I am imagining me and my sisters are in, we would start squabbling the next morning, old resentments would be aired, dark secrets would be revealed, somebody would stare into the middle distance and make a speech about how one of us ruined their life, or – as a character in the movie *Withnail and I* said about Chekov's plays – would start 'moaning about ducks going to Moscow'. This is what I imagine when I phone Marcus on the Sunday morning (he is on his way to have lunch with his mother in her two-bedroomed house in Westridge, Mitchells Plain) to tell him that he does not need to fly up for the funeral. It's awkward I say, 'as you can imagine'. We have no idea when he will die and when the funeral will take place. And Antoinette, I say, has probably not yet forgiven me for coming out of the closet to my parents when I was 27 years old during a family holiday in the windswept face brick house in Struisbaai on Boxing Day in 1993 ('my Boxing Day surprise', I later joke), 6 weeks before her wedding, and for bringing my then boyfriend, Neville, to the wedding, and for the fact that Neville is an Indian man and the only black guest at Antoinette's wedding at the Police Gymkhana Club in Pretoria, a year before legal apartheid formally ends.

The few times I had previously told this particular coming-out story – despite my nagging worry that 'coming-out' sounds like 'confessing' – I told it as an amusing family anecdote, making much of how I had hidden behind Vikram Seth's 1,000-page novel *A Suitable Boy* the entire holiday, and of my father's response to my announcement: 'It does not come as a surprise at all.' What I had never mentioned, and what I don't tell Marcus now, is that my mother had smiled when I told her that Boxing Day that I now had a boyfriend, and had asked to see his picture, and had started to weep quietly only after she realised that I was not dating a white man.

But we are not characters in an Ibsen play. We are five siblings – four sisters and a brother, but we are still deciding who the brother is – waiting for our father to die. We don't fight, and, at first, we do not talk much either. Mostly, so I tell myself at the time, we are bored. We spend the first day, Sunday, in the ICU waiting room of the Universitas Hospital in Pretoria. Together, but apart. While my sisters make small talk to pass the time, or whisper into their phones, I hide behind my book. I am mildly resentful that Anna-Marie had told me the previous evening

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before cruising a skinny Chinese student who told me a few hours later – while we were lying naked in bed – that he did not believe my claim that I was a South African living in Cape Town. Too white.

<sup>15</sup> This was adapted by Stephan Boucher from the Afrikaans translation of André P. Brink, and filmed as a TV movie for the SABC, directed by Boucher, with Sandra Prinsloo as 'Hedda Gabler' and Ernst Eloff as 'Jürgen Tesman'. See [https://esat.sun.ac.za/index.php/Hedda\\_Gabler](https://esat.sun.ac.za/index.php/Hedda_Gabler).

that there was not enough space in the *rondawel* for all of us, and that I had to sleep in the main house, in Professor Tannie<sup>16</sup> Elize Botha's bed. I am reading Samuel R Delaney's bulky *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village* (1988). Delaney, a queer black science fiction writer, writes about having a lot of sex with strangers in public places all across Manhattan, places even I would never have dared to try out. (I had already checked the toilets outside the ICU at the Universitas Hospital on Sunday morning to see if they were cruisy. They were not.) While I am reading about Delaney having sex with two burly black men in the back of a truck close to the legendary Pier 45, Antoinette asks me what my book is about. When I show her the cover, she frowns and says: 'Dis 'n bietjie erg' ('It's a bit much'). But she giggles while she says this, seemingly more embarrassed than disapproving. I am relieved, then, that I had not brought along the copy of *Weifeling* (1993) (translated as 'Hesitation'), Koos Prinsloo's last volume of short stories published shortly before his death, which I had found the previous evening on a bookshelf in Professor Botha's house and was planning to re-read for the third time. That terrifying book is filled with rage and with vengeful acts of betrayal – which is why I had often thought of it by a different title: *The Book of Love*. It was probably vanity that stopped me from bringing the copy of *Weifeling* to the hospital. I was embarrassed by my lack of originality and imagination, which led me to draw parallels between my own situation and that of the narrator (who is and also is not Prinsloo) of 'The Story of My Father', a story within a story in which the narrator foreshadows the day when he will tell his own father that he was dying of AIDS ('Well, is there a surprise waiting for him' (Prinsloo, 2022: 225)), suggesting that this act of revelation will not, or not merely, be an act of revenge, but also an act of acceptance and reconciliation (Olivier, 2008: 237).<sup>17</sup> After I test positive for HIV in 2008, many years after my father's death, I wonder for the first time whether my decision not to bring that book to the Hospital had more to do with shame than with vanity.

While I hide behind my book, I listen with one ear to my sisters' conversation. They are not talking about the hospital or the ventilator that keeps my father alive. Instead, they reminisce about the past. Trinkka tells the story of the time the yuppie with the sharp haircut and the red tie came to our door in the Grobler Street house in Pietersburg to complain that our dog Baster had run in front of his car (a silver BMW), and had damaged it. This is the story of how my father, drunk, but not yet angry drunk, had shaken his head and said the man's version of the accident sounded unlikely because we had taught Baster basic road safety tips, taken directly from the Grade 4 *Gesondheidsleer* (Life Skills) syllabus: when crossing the road, look left, look right, look left again, and then walk briskly over the road. How he told the man about the *audi alteram partem* rule (the legal rule that requires one to hear the other side first), how he whispered into the dog's ear, and told the man afterwards that the dog had told him that the man was lying and that he had been speeding, and that, in any event, blood was thicker than water, so he believed the dog. I am smiling now too. Trinkka looks pleased. She gives me an encouraging look and rests her hand on my shoulder. I close my book. (What I only wonder much later, when I edit this piece, is whether the man's sharp haircut and suit – in Pietersburg in 1979 – might have signalled that the man in the BMW was gay, and whether my father's response was not as funny as we had always thought. Give the fucker his due, he could be funny, and he could be cruel, often at the same time.)

On Monday afternoon the head nurse we mockingly call *Matrone* behind her back (*Matrone* is a 'coloured' woman, and far more formidable than Anelise van der Ryst, the actress who played the original *Matrone* in the Afrikaans soapie *Sewende Laan* (2000-2023)) gives us our first dressing down for 'making such a racket' and for 'having no respect for the ill' (what she means is: for the soon to be dead), and tells us that if we thought it was all a joke we should take our party somewhere else because 'there are people dying in there.' *Matrone* is intimidating, and, more importantly, we all need a stiff drink – so we do take the party to *tannie* Elize's *rondawel* and drink every drop of liquor available there, and it is then that I remind my sisters of the *Baardskeerdersbos Orkes* and their song *Sannie se Ma kan Engels Praat, parlez vous*, ('Sannie's mother can speak English, parlez vous') and we all shriek with laughter, remembering how my father – drunk and self-pitying – played this song on repeat in the days before my mother's funeral, launching occasional precision strikes at each of his children to touch them where he thought it would hurt most. (It is then that he says to me, and being honest about it for the first time, that he cannot accept that his son sucks cock, and I turn away, embarrassed by my father's lack of originality and self-control.)

On Wednesday morning, we finally make the decision to 'pull the plug', as Anna-Marie had said drunkenly the previous night. Without knowing it, we had been rehearsing our excuses for this decision since at least Sunday

<sup>16</sup> *Tannie* is a form of address loosely translated as 'aunty', used by a younger person when addressing an older woman as a form of respect. In some contexts it is also used to describe a narrow-minded, straight-laced (Afrikaans) woman

<sup>17</sup> As Olivier (337) points out, at first the story is one told by the narrator for the amusement of his lover on the night they celebrate the second anniversary of their meeting ('And see how he laughs, my lover, laughs at me and my family. We really always are so funny to him'. But soon the tone of the story changes, the narrator's scorn for his father ('my poor, poor, oh so spurned, oh so obstreperous, oh so lethally sorrowful and disgruntled, poor ancient fucking old father' softens ('My father's voice settles into my belly. Slowly but surely my heart breaks.', and the narrator contemplates the day he would be able to write his father a letter to tell him how afraid he had always been of him, but how he had recently been 'rewiring his heart and his head' in order not to be afraid anymore.

afternoon. The story is this: our father would not have wanted to have lived if he could not have a full life, and a full life would, at least, require him to be able to read the newspaper or sneak off to the bathroom to top up his drink from the brandy bottle hidden in the toilet cistern. Marie-Luise is the one who takes things in hand, 'because we can't stay in this godforsaken *rondavel* for ever'. She had been on the phone on and off for the previous few days, taking orders for a video her and her husband's business is hawking. According to the advertisement in the *Huisgenoot*, the video would teach even the most ham-handed person how to construct a realistically looking rocky water feature out of plaster of Paris. But during a lull between calls, she phones a man at AVBOB<sup>18</sup> and tells him that my father's funeral was 'tentatively scheduled for Friday' afternoon. And then, after listening to the AVBOB man's response, she shakes her head in irritation and says: 'Ag, no man, I told you, my father is not dead yet. But we hope he will be dead by tonight.'

'Tell him we are carefully optimistic,' I say.

'Ask him if it would be a fire hazard if we placed some newspapers for him to read in the coffin,' Trinkka jokes.

Marie-Luise says: 'Sjoes! I need a cigarette.'

Hearing the laughter, *Matrone* arrives on cue to shame us into silence. Like children, which we are again, only for this one week, but still, like children, almost happy children, we only hold in our laughter and our sniggering until *Matrone* disappears behind the swinging doors of the ICU unit. '*Dis bietjie grim hier*' (It is rather grim here), says Anna-Marie, sounding just like my late mother. Driving home to Brooklyn in Anna-Marie's fancy judges' car to freshen up for the long night ahead, Antoinette gives me a stern look and tells me that God had told her that I am struggling. '*Pierrie, die Here het vir my gesê jy kry swaar.*' 'You must ask Marcus to come. You need him here, we need him here.' The CD of Joan Baez's greatest hits is playing on repeat and for the third time since Sunday I hear her sing that she and a man who must be Bob Dylan both know that memories bring diamonds and rust. I squeeze Antoinette's hand. She squeezes back. At the traffic light a homeless man offers to wash the car window with his dirty rag, but Antoinette shoos him away, then turns to Marie-Luise to ask her if she has enough cigarettes to last her through the night. We drive the rest of the way in tender silence, my hand lightly resting on my second-oldest sister's hand, until Anna-Marie turns the car into the driveway of the double story house in Brooklyn.

Then I think: it is about now that my father would have cracked a joke.

When Anna-Marie opens a beer and says '*kêrels, dit gaan dalk 'n lang nag word*' (guys, we might have a long night ahead of us), I leave my sisters and walk towards the main house. It is the first time that I notice the dead patches of the otherwise green lawn. The December heat rises from the slate tiled *stoep* in the fading light. In this kind of house in white suburbia in South Africa there is usually a swimming pool in the back garden, but as I write this, I have no memory of such a pool. I do remember the sound of ice clinking in glasses, my sisters' laughter, and further away the sound of a weed eater humming in complaint. I take a deep breath, watch a large Hadedah<sup>19</sup> shit on Professor *Tannie* Elize Botha's back stoep. I shoo the bird away, shouting. (Shouting like a girl, my father might have said.) As the Hadedah lazily turns away from me and flies off, I shout again: 'Do you know whose stoep you are shitting on? Do you have no respect?' Except, Hadedahs only speak Afrikaans, so I shout it in Afrikaans. '*Weet jy op wie se stoep kak jy nou? Het jy geen respeke nie?*'

Who am I shouting at?

I take out my phone to call Marcus, thinking that I had never met his father, who had died about a year after we had met. I was the only white person at his father's funeral, and as I awkwardly tried to make small talk with the funeral goers who all seemed to be members of the same congregation of the New Apostolic Church, I realised that through my presence I was outing Marcus to the members of his congregation. I wonder now why we never spoke about it. Then I hear his voice, neutral but friendly. 'Please come,' I whisper. 'It is not as bad as I had thought it would be.' I love him fiercely for years longer than was good for either of us because, just then, he says yes, he will book a flight for early the next day.

It is almost dark now, my sisters' laughter drifting from the *rondavel* where the lights have been switched on. Before I walk back towards the light, I pause, take a deep breath, and, for the first time since my father had a stroke, I feel tears welling up.

But I do not weep for him.

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<sup>18</sup> AVBOB is an abbreviation for Afrikaanse Verbond Begrafnis Ondernemings Beperk, and is currently Africa's largest funeral services and insurance company.

<sup>19</sup> A Hadedah is a large (about 76 cm long), grey-to-partly brown species of ibis native to Sub-Saharan Africa. It is named for its loud and distinctive three to four note 'haa-haa-haa-de-dah' call – from which its onomatopoeic name is derived.



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