

Telling a Weed from a Flower

By Kathy George

Miss Louw walked the aisles between our desks, mannish arms folded across a flat chest, narrow tweed skirt rustling against stockinged legs. We worked quietly, some of us staring into space, others feverishly writing, while the heat and lament of turtle doves floated through the open window.

The writing was going well. My fingers ached from gripping the pencil. I had the beginning down, the middle starting to take form, and the end in my head. For once I was listening to what the story wanted to say instead of rushing ahead with my own ideas, and I could smell its power. Sometimes it's like that. Sometimes you know when it's going to be better than average. Part of its success was because I'd turned myself into the main character. I was writing something from real life.

I'm in the garden with Joseph, the African boy who is our gardener. He's watching me intently as I explain the difference between a weed and a flower. My mother is a wonderful gardener; we have beds of pale blue and dusty pink hydrangeas down both sides of our long gravel driveway. Joseph is doing the weeding because our regular gardener has been struck down with appendicitis. These are snippets I feed in.

I'd been on my bike, going to a tennis lesson, when I noticed Joseph pulling out a seedling. I threw the bike down on the grass verge and stopped to explain the difference. Telling a weed from a flower isn't easy; it's a matter of recognition. And if you live in a shanty and don't have flowerbeds in the first place, you're not able to practise.

Joseph's sixteen, but it's hard to believe we're the same age. His life's so different to mine. When I look up from my desk and my studies, I often see him out of my upstairs bedroom window. In bare feet and khaki shorts he's sometimes crossing the cool expanse of shaded green lawn in front of the house. Sometimes he's bent over a flowerbed, and sometimes he's up a ladder on his long dark legs, clearing the gutters with strong arms that move easily. He seems to enjoy his work;

I hear him whistling although it's not a tune I recognise. He has a broad forehead and an angular chin. High cheekbones. A lanky frame. He's tall. He's a Zulu, and every Zulu I've ever met has a proud look about him. I'm easily distracted from my studies. It is 1971, Nelson Mandela is in prison on Robben Island, buses are for *Whites* or *Non-Whites*, and we are learning about The Great Trek, that time in our country's history when the Voortrekkers headed out into unchartered territory on their ox-wagons. It's dry and dusty work, as I imagine it was then.

'This one here—' I say now as I take the trowel from Joseph to point to a dandelion, but I don't finish because our fingers touch. Startled, I raise my eyes. He's looking down his nose at me. Drops of moisture tremble on his full upper lip, and his mouth is partly open, giving me a glimpse of his pink tongue. An earthy smell of sweat and compost curdles the air, but it's his eyes I am drawn to. So dark they are black. So black they are unfathomable, and secretive.

'This weed is easy to recognise,' I tell him over the rushing in my ears. 'See, the leaves are spiky.'

He says nothing. And I don't know if he's understood me, or if he's deliberately being insolent. In any event I cannot bring myself to look into his face again. It both frightens and fascinates me. I drop the trowel, rise from the damp grass. 'I have to go,' I tell him.

I move away but not before he sits back on his heels and raises his arm to wipe his mouth. I know he's watching as I swing myself onto my bike and pedal furiously down the drive.

This was the beginning of my story for Miss Louw. I had yet to write of the time I explained the differences between an earthworm and a cutworm. Of our hands touching as I placed the wriggling brown worm in his large pink palm, of the flash of his white grin as we watched it burrow itself into the soil, and magically vanish. Of how we gazed shyly at one another—my knees almost but not quite touching his—this boy with eyes like holes in a mask.

But Miss Louw rapped her ruler on the desk. 'Five minutes before the bell. Let's hear how far you've got. We'll start with you, Kathryn.'

I stood up. 'The Boy,' I announced. I doubted this'd be the final title, but I knew Miss Louw would want one, and this'd do for now. Someone shuffled their books together and in front of me Jean whispered to Linda—

'Quiet!' Miss Louw called.

'Telling a weed from a flower,' I began, 'isn't easy.' By the time I was at the place where the rushing was in my ears, all sound had ceased.

'That's as far as I've got.' I raised my head to find Miss Louw staring at me.

'And just as well, because that is quite enough, quite enough for—for—' she stopped to clear her throat. 'Kathryn, bring your book here.'

Stepping out from behind my desk and clutching my exercise book, I went up to where she stood at the front, stiff like cardboard.

'The rest of you can go,' she instructed, over my head, 'but these are due in two days. Remember: be creative.'

She waited while my class-mates packed up their things, until the last girl left the room. I didn't turn around. Why did the classroom have to be emptied? I wondered. What could she be going to say? How would I explain it to my friends? I focused on the small grain of dirty rice that clung to her plum-coloured top.

Without looking at me she took the exercise book out of my hands. She ripped out the pages and tore them in half, and then in half again. She handed over the fragments. 'In the bin.'

From the bottom of the dark metal container the white paper scraps stared up at me. I saw the words *mouth* and *eyes* and *secretive*.

'What does your father do?'

'He works at the bank.'

'Oh, yes,' she said, as if recalling my dad—tall, bespectacled and dark-suited. 'Well, I don't think he'd be very pleased.' And she shook her head but it seemed to be more to clear her mind than anything else. 'What came over you?'

I didn't answer. The bell went, shrieking like an alarm and startling the doves outside the window.

‘Begin again,’ she told me above their mournful cries. ‘I know you can do better.’

Then she left the room, leaving me to pack up my pencils and books, and my copy of *English Alive*.

Hours after I’ve been in the garden with Joseph educating him about cutworms, we are at dinner. My sister, Annemarie, is fiddling with her knife. She’s two years younger than me, and prettier than I am but looks aren’t everything. I know I’m cleverer, although it’s a constant battle to prove it.

‘I saw Kathryn,’ she says, ‘in the garden.’ She pauses. ‘With...with...*the boy*.’

Dad pauses with his fork halfway to his mouth. ‘And?’

‘She—’

‘I was only helping him with the weeding,’ I interrupt. ‘He doesn’t know the difference between a weed and a flower.’

Now Mum gazes at me, too. It’s her garden. But she looks at me, and then at my dad, waiting to hear what he’ll say.

But my father is used to people hanging off his every word. The fork continues its journey to his mouth. He says nothing, he chews. I do not eat. I’m mesmerised, my knife and fork motionless in my hands.

‘Strange that you should take an interest in weeding all of a sudden.’ He looks at me while he dabs one corner of his mouth with his serviette. Forking up a new load, he flattens a wayward pea with his knife.

‘We don’t fraternise with the servants, Kathryn.’ The *babotie*, smeared with chutney, quivers on the prongs of his fork. ‘And, Annemarie, please remember he has a name. I would like you to use it.’

Mum returns to her food. The grandfather clock in the hallway strikes a quarter-to-seven. A black mosquito hovers over my white arm. Outside the open French doors, the sky turns ashen.

‘What’s his name?’ Annemarie asks sweetly, from across the table.

It's a good thing I'm not sitting next to her because I want to throttle her. Scratch her. Claw at her like a cat. Instead, I sit and wait. I wait because usually we are united in our struggle against Mum and Dad. I wait because it's not like her to tell tales. Perhaps she is jealous? But mostly I wait because I don't want to admit I know the answer.

But the glint of triumph in my sister's eyes undoes me.

'His name is Joseph,' I blurt out.

'Well, then, we have something in common, this boy and I,' Dad says.

I avoid Joseph and the garden, although I can't help seeing him tending the plants when I raise my head from my studies. Can't help seeing him when I stand behind the curtain, watching as he drags the hosepipe over the lawn and squats to connect the sprinkler, his tattered khaki shirt pulling tightly against his broad back, his dark hands moving effortlessly. And I can't help noticing that every now and then he turns from whatever he's doing and lifts his gaze to my window. In history we have moved on to 1838 and the Battle of Blood River. The battle was between 400 Voortrekkers and an estimated 15,000 – 20,000 Zulus, and was in retaliation for the murder of Piet Retief's followers and some of his family by the Zulu King, Dingane. But it is, oh, so much more than this. Three thousand Zulus were killed, mown down with buckshot to maximise casualties. There was betrayal and treachery. Propaganda. These things I learn years after I've left school. The Voortrekkers, who were deeply religious, proclaimed that God had been on their side. God oversaw their triumph.

When I see Joseph again the jacarandas are in bloom, littering our tennis court with mauve confetti. I'm in the overcrowded garden shed alongside the court, scrounging between the wheelbarrow, the mildewed deckchairs, and the pile of unused pavers, searching for the tube of tennis balls.

In my agitation the knocking on the shed door comes to me faintly.

'I haven't found them yet!' I sing out.

Annemarie is impatient. She's also good at tennis, while I'm not. And this is just a little occasion to be endured, an occasion when she wants to lord it over me.

But when I eventually glance towards the door, it's not Annemarie. Joseph holds a small and battered brown suitcase in one hand.

'I am leaving now.'

I understand that he means not leaving for the day, but leaving for good.

In the doorway he's silhouetted. Although we're the same age he's much taller, and I must raise my head. In the murky gloom of the shed I can't see his eyes or his expression—his face is a black mask. I don't know or understand this thing between us, only that there is this thing between us.

'Why are you—?' A shadow looms across the doorway.

Annemarie takes in the suitcase, and the look in my eyes. The stillness of our bodies. The tangible intimacy of the moment.

'What's going on here? What does the boy want?'

I avert my eyes. 'Nothing.' I push past him. 'Nothing. He's just leaving.'

I get out on to the court and fastidiously measure up the net. It's nearly an inch too low and I go over to the handle and crank it with both hands. I tilt my head, squint in the sun, study the stuttering canvas, and avoid looking towards the garden shed. Towards the driveway, down which Joseph will be walking. Joseph and his suitcase. Walking out of my life.

'Where're the balls?' Annemarie asks. 'I thought you went to get them?'

I lose badly that afternoon, probably my worst score ever. As I serve and volley, and drive the ball down the court—into the net—I think about asking my mother to give me a lift to the bus stop, where Joseph will be waiting for the bus, but then what? What do I say to him? What *can* I say?

Many years later in another country I meet a man at the law firm where I am employed. A black man. An African. An African from my country who has been forced into exile in order to avoid being persecuted by the government. In stature

and looks, he's not unlike Joseph, although I like to think that in thought, word and deed he's quite different.

I fall deeply and desperately in love with him.

But he's not in love with me.

He's in love with the idea of a white girl lying in his bed.