

I write hundreds of scenes that never make it into my novels. Sometimes, I write scenes that feel flat or cold, but sometimes I head in the wrong direction entirely. When I began Forgive Me, I knew I wanted to write about South Africa, and I had a lonely white girl in mind, a girl who would be forever changed by her relationship with a South African ballet dancer. This is one of my early false starts. You can see, around Chapter Three, how the narrative starts to fall apart.

Eventually, Joyce Nyembezi became Thola, and Suzy grew up to be Nadine. I also left a list of possible titles I was playing with...

Possible Titles?

Jambo Guest House

I made a mistake

How is your heart

(Bukowski)

Waking at 3am

(Stafford)

Chapter One

I wrote my first letter to Joyce Nyembezi when I was in sixth grade, not knowing, of course, that she would grow up to seduce my husband and ruin my life. Miss Sussbaum passed around a list of starving children who needed pen pals, and I signed up.

The children, Miss Sussbaum said, lived in mud huts in Africa. They didn't have clean water, and ate flour mixed with water for dinner. They slept on the ground with ants.

It was another dreary day on Cape Cod. Outside the windows of the classroom, I could see the frozen pond, and a few misguided seagulls. The trees were bare, and the gazebo--which in summer would be thronged by pink-skinned visitors eating ice cream cones—was abandoned and covered with snow. Someone had hung a mitten from a branch.

Miss Sussbaum explained the tremendous benefits of our heartfelt letters and a few pennies a day. We would save whole villages, buy cows, clothing, and schoolbooks. “Take responsibility for a life,” urged Miss Sussbaum, and because I desperately wanted her (or someone) to like me, I followed instructions.

After school, I went to Room 201 of the Lobster Motel and watched television. We lived in the apartment behind the office, but 201 had a double bed to sprawl on. I had picked up an order of calamari from Stevie on my way home, and I ate carefully, conscious not to leave any traces in the room. Years ago, a guest had called Mr. Franklin in Florida after finding my Cabbage Patch Kid in his bathtub. My mother had almost been fired, and now I wasn't allowed in the guest rooms. Luckily, I had taken the universal key to Aubuchon Hardware and had a copy made. I knew it would come in handy when I grew breasts and had dates and parties. And friends.

My mother worked in the office until seven, so I had plenty of time to rehearse my plea and clean up the calamari. In our apartment, I hid the takeout container in the

bottom on the trash can, piling coffee grounds and soup cans on top. The apartment was a mess, as usual.

It wasn't even an apartment, if the truth be told. We lived in two adjoining rooms, which had once been the Family Suite.

My room had a kitchenette with a mini-fridge, two twin beds, and a writing desk. I kept an eye out on large garbage day, and had picked up two bookshelves and a poster from the musical "Hair." I also had a flying squirrel named James who slept in my closet all day. On my bulletin board, where I should have tacked up pictures of friends and birthday party invitations, I had affixed old postcards and photos of models with fancy hairstyles. I had tried to cut my own hair, and the bangs had turned out badly. Though I convinced my mom to buy me a bottle of Aqua Net, it made no difference. Generally, I woke early, tried to mash my hair into something attractive, gave up, and wore a Red Sox hat.

My mother's room was disgusting. She was a complete slob, and she smoked. I tried to forgive her, but it was hard. Her clothes were all over the floor and the bed, and no matter how many times I collected them, there were always dirty glasses around. She did not have any pets.

When my mother walked into my room, weary as usual and carrying takeout chicken, I pounced. I told her about African children in dire need, announced that it was time I took responsibility for something. I promised to stop eating Cheese Doodles, sucking my thumb, and slouching. I described the ants and the paste for dinner. I told

her I would be a whole new person, a more appealing daughter in general, if I could just adopt a starving African.

My mother had taken off her shoes, and lay across my bed. “How much?” she asked.

“So much,” I said. “Mom, I’m not kidding, this will change everything.”

“How much does it *cost*?” she said, balancing the chicken box on her soft stomach and opening the flaps.

“Pennies a day!” I crowed.

“How many pennies?” she said, reaching for the television remote. “Leg or thigh?”

“Thigh,” I said. My plate was balanced on my knees, ready. I had washed our utensils in the sink and laid them out on the foot of my bed. We generally ate dinner together, watching the news. After the news, she left again. I held out the Adopt An African brochure, where I had highlighted the details. “Eight dollars a month.” I said.

My mother scooped out mashed potatoes and frowned, calculating. “It’s that or a new winter coat,” she said, finally.

“How can I buy a new winter coat,” I said, “Knowing that a child is *starving*?”

She shrugged, and bit into her drumstick. “Suit yourself, Suzy Q,” she said.

After the news, my mother stood up and rubbed her eyes. She took off her clothes and dropped them on my floor. She opened my closet door and James flew out.

“Fuck!” she said. James landed on my shoulder, blinked.

“Why don’t you stay home tonight, mom?” I said. I tried not to sound needy.

“Right,” she said, and then she picked up my can of Aqua Net and left.

Miss Sussbaum had told us to include a letter to our starving African along with our money. After feeding James and watching television for a while, I got to work. I had some hotel stationary, and the African wouldn't know that the Lobster was a rundown, cheap motel in the wrong neighborhood of Cape Cod. For all the African knew, I could be living in the Plaza, like Eloise. James flew around the room, and then rested on the top of my head.

“Dear X,” I wrote, as I didn't yet know that my African was Joyce Nyembezi. “I am writing you from my penthouse suite. I live at the Lobster Motel, which is a high rise building near many exclusive shops like Bloomingdale's and Gimbels. My father is in sales, and my mother makes the yummiest brownies. I don't eat them, though, because I'm trying to watch my figure. I wish I could send you some of my mom's brownies and her chocolate chip cookies, too, which are to die for.”

I felt guilty, all of a sudden, writing to a starving person about brownies. The letter seemed all wrong, so I took another tack: “It's winter here and very cold. We have snow, which is actually rain drops frozen into white pieces. You are so lucky to have sunny weather all the time. You don't even need a winter coat, or to worry about bronchitis and your skin drying out.”

My African had plenty to worry about, I knew, like yellow fever and cholera, but I was trying my best to stay positive. I concluded: “I have blonde hair and blue eyes. I like to wear the latest fashions, and my father always brings me presents (like fur coats) when he goes on business trips. I am very thin (like a model) but can eat whatever I want. I have lots of friends and we like to go ice skating and drink hot chocolate. I hope

you can buy something great with the money I'm sending, like pencils for school or a book. Books are very important, so be sure to read lots. Thank you, Suzannah Magsen."

I folded up my letter and put it inside a Lobster Motel envelope, which had "Wish you were here!" written on it, and a big red crustacean. I put the letter on the bedside table, and then I put on my headphones, so I wouldn't hear my mother come crashing in. Then I watched some more television.

In the morning, my mother was in her bed by herself. She didn't like to be waked up in the morning, but this was an emergency. "Mom," I said, poking her shoulder.

She rolled over, and I tried to close my nose against the smell of smoke in her hair. She was still wearing her jeans and shiny blouse, but the blouse was buttoned wrong. "Wha?" she said.

"Mom, I need the money."

She sat up and opened one eye. "What money?" she said. "Jesus, what time is it?"

"I need the twenty-four dollars for the African," I said.

"Twenty four..."

"Mom," I said, "We have to pay the first three months up front. I'm going to be late for school. Please."

She opened the other eye. "I'm sorry, Suze," she said. "I don't get paid until Friday."

It was Tuesday. "Mom," I said, "please."

"I don't have it," she said, and then she lay back down and pulled the covers over her head.

I walked to school, my letter folded carefully in my L.L. Bean backpack. The backpack was embroidered with the name “Dr. Yantzee”; it had been half-price. I hadn’t complained when my mother brought it home. My shoes were dorky boat shoes from the thrift store—left by some rich person on their way back to New York in August; my coat was too small and had a bunch of grapes appliquéd on the back. Look at me: the heavy girl with hair she cut herself. The one you ignore because it’s too sad, really, to get inside her skin. The one who wears elastic-waist pants, who sinks like a turtle into the folds of her hooded sweatshirts. Look at me, trudging through the snow: I didn’t have a chance.

At the doorway to the sixth-grade classroom, Miss Sussbaum had set up a giant lunchbox made of cardboard. She had pasted cutout faces of African children and various foodstuffs on the sides (cherry pie, an orange, half a grilled cheese sandwich). While my mother had been shaking her ass for a free drink at Grumpy’s Pub, Miss Sussbaum had been carefully working with scissors, a full container of Elmer’s glue at her side. I imagined she cleaned the orange tip of the Elmer’s with her unpainted thumbnail, making sure nothing got clogged or messed up.

“Good morning,” said Miss Sussbaum, standing by the lunchbox with her hand on her hip. How I longed to look up at her, to smile and slide my lobster envelope into the box! Instead, I looked down. “Do you have anything for an underprivileged child?” said Miss Sussbaum.

“I forgot,” I said.

“Oh Suzy,” said Miss Sussbaum. She paused, and then said, “Well don’t forget tomorrow.”

The day passed in the usual miserable manner. My locker was taped shut with masking tape, and one of the rich girls yelled, “Eew!” when I brushed against her in the lunch line. I ate my meatball sub and tater tots alone outside, my hands red and raw with the cold. After lunch I almost didn’t go back, but I didn’t want Miss Sussbaum to worry, and I didn’t have anywhere else to go.

I went straight to the office on the Lobster Motel after school. My mother was sitting behind the desk, reading *People*. “Hey,” I said.

“Hi, sweetie,” said my mother. She had pulled her red hair into a ponytail and tied a scarf around it. She wore too much eyeshadow, and her lipstick was leaking. She looked much older than her thirty-six years.

“Your hair looks nice,” I said.

“Really?” she said, touching the scarf. “Ramon found this in Room Seven.”

“Gross, mom!”

“What?” she said. “They’re not coming back. They’re Japanese.” Her eyes took on the faraway look. “I wonder what they were doing here in January,” she said. “From Japan.”

“Seeing the sights,” I said. We looked out the front windows of the office, at the empty parking lot, the gray snow.

I had taken a book about Italian Cooking out of the school library, so I walked to the grocery store and got the ingredients to make manicotti for my mother. We didn’t have an oven, so I cooked the noodles, stuffed them with ricotta, and poured Ragu on top.

My mother came into my room and said, “What’s that?” She held a slim paper bag in her hand.

“Manicotti,” I said. I had laid napkins on the bed, and clean glasses on the bedside table.

“Where’d you get the food?”

“Cronig’s,” I said.

She put her hands on her hips. The scarf—it was cream-colored, with oranges printed on it—had fallen halfway down her ponytail. “With what money?” she said.

“I charged it.” I picked up two manicotti and placed them on her plate. “Here,” I said.

“I don’t think you understand, Suzanne,” said my mother.

“Just eat,” I said. “Come on, mom. You don’t look good.”

She slid a bottle of red wine from the bag, and unscrewed the cap. “Give me a glass,” she said. She filled the glass and sat down on my bed. She did not take the plate I held out to her. “Where’s that flying rat?” she said.

“Flying squirrel,” I said. “He’s asleep.”

“For the love of God,” she said. She took a long sip, put down the glass, and pressed her hands to her eyes. Then she took them away, and clapped. “Suzy,” she said, “I do not make enough money for willy-nilly grocery shopping.”

“Mom, some ricotta and noodles!”

“You need to listen,” she said. She patted the bed, and I put down the plate and went to sit next to her. “We are not making ends meet,” she said. “I owe Cronig’s

already, and I owe a few other people, too. You can't spend any money. There's plenty to eat here..." she waved her arm. "Cereal," she concluded.

I nodded. "I'm sorry," I said.

"It's OK," she said. She reached for the television remote. "It's not like you need a big fat dinner," she added.

"I'm sorry," I said again. She nodded and patted my knee. She drank the wine that must have cost as much as ten plates of manicotti. I didn't ask about the African.

"Is this about money?" said Miss Sussbaum, when I passed the giant lunchbox again without a contribution.

"Oh no!" I said. "No, I just keep forgetting."

"Hm," said Miss Sussbaum.

School was abuzz with news of Cory Gladstone's birthday party. Her father ran See a Seal Boat Tours, and the party was going to take place on the boat, which was docked for the winter. During math time, Cory passed me a note on yellow legal paper. The front read, "You're invited," and the inside read, "NOT!"

After school, I wanted calamari, but I knew that I couldn't charge it. Instead, I stood around in front of Captain Kidd and tried to catch a whiff of something good. It was freaking freezing, but I didn't want to go home. Finally, I went inside.

The front room was wood-paneled, and there was a roaring fire. Stevie was behind the bar. "Suze!" he said.

"I can't order anything," I said. "I'm on a diet."

"Just came in from the cold?"

“Yeah.” I stood by the door, as if I was about to leave.

“Sit down,” said Stevie. “I’ll make you a diet hot chocolate.”

“I can’t,” I said.

“It’s on me,” said Stevie. “Come on, I’m lonely.” I looked at Stevie, trying to see if he was joking, or making fun of me. But his old watery eyes were kind. He had been a commercial fisherman, but had lost his boat in Hurricane Bob. The insurance had let him buy out his father-in-law, and now Captain Kidd was his. My mother had tended bar here, before the Lobster Motel gig, and Stevie was maybe my only friend.

I sat on a barstool. There was a giant mural of pirates on the wall, and it looked faded in the winter light. “How’s school?” said Stevie, topping my hot chocolate with Reddi-Whip.

“Fine,” I said. I shrugged. “Not the greatest.”

“Kids can be cruel,” said Stevie, contemplatively. “Got a boyfriend yet?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Oh, really?” said Stevie. “Well, what’s his name?”

“James.”

“James.” Stevie smiled. “That’s a solid name. What’s the last name?”

Everyone knew everyone in Woods Hole, so I gave James the last name of my favorite person. “Drew,” I said.

“Drew?” said Stevie. “I don’t know them. Have any sisters?”

“No. They’re new. They just moved here.”

“Oh,” said Stevie, placated. “Scientists?”

“Yeah,” I said. The Marine Biological Laboratory was the only place where new people came to work in Woods Hole. Otherwise, everyone had been around for generations. My mother had grown up in town, run away at sixteen, and returned at twenty-three with me in her arms. She told me that my father had been a sailor. He had sailed all around the Carribean, but then his boat capsized at sea.

“Well, tell this James to treat you right,” said Stevie. I promised him I would.

That night, my mother didn't even watch the news. She went straight to her room and slept. I ate cereal, and James had peanuts and an orange. He liked to go outside and fly around, but it was too cold.

I heard my mother in the shower around ten, and then she went out. In theory, she was supposed to be around in case any late night travelers arrived at the Lobster Motel. But none ever did, so she thought it was safe to go to Grumpy's Pub. Or maybe she didn't care. She told me once that the only fun she ever had in her whole life was at Grumpy's Pub. That made me feel bad, but nothing I did around home ever turned out right, not the manicotti, and not the time I stuck glow-in-the-dark stars to her ceiling and she made me scrape them off with a butter knife.

Miss Sussbaum didn't say anything when I passed the giant lunchbox on Thursday. All day, I paged through the books about Africa that Miss Sussbaum had gathered from the library. Africa was a huge place, and though the crop information didn't interest me, I loved reading about the different cultures. In Kenya, for example, the Masai wore beautiful beaded bracelets, and in Botswana, Bushmen wove giant

baskets of colored straw. It occurred to me that perhaps I did have talents, but just hadn't discovered them yet. Maybe I was awesome at making beaded bracelets, who knew?

I thought the Africans were beautiful, too, with their dark skin. My skin was light, but I had thick black hair and too-big eyebrows. I think my father (the sailor) must have been Italian or Portuguese. My mother said she couldn't bear to talk about him, so I didn't know. Some of the African women were stocky, too, like me. No matter how many Ding Dongs, I was always going to be a big girl, as my mother called me. I wasn't fat, no matter what Kenneth Greenburger wrote on my locker.

That night, I thought about my African friend while I was trying to fall asleep, alone in the Lobster Motel. Maybe I could visit Africa, and bring my friend food and books. Maybe she would want to hear about James, how I had found him abandoned in the Family Suite. My African friend could come visit me, too, but it would be better in the summertime. I could show her how to steal a rowboat from the beach and row way out beyond the waves, where everything fell silent except the wind and the cries of birds.

On Friday morning, my mother was not in her room. I checked the coffee can in her underwear drawer, but it was empty. I was very upset and not sure what to do. James could tell: he flew into the window and whacked his head. I almost started to cry, realizing that I would not be able to send the money to my African friend, and thus she would have nothing to eat and I would be alone. I tried to get a hold of myself, reminding myself that there were no ants in my room, and that cereal, even Special-K, was better than paste.

I took a long shower, and took my best jeans out of my drawer. The Japanese lady's scarf was in a ball on my mother's floor, so I threaded it through my belt loops. I

put on some of my mother's lipstick, and I still had time before the bus arrived. My mother was going to get fired, I knew it.

I gathered all the empty beer cans and the full ashtrays. My arms were full of my mother's waste when she walked in the door. She looked serene. "Hi, Suze," she said. She walked past me to her bed and lay down. She stretched out her arms as if she were making a snow angel. "Hmmm," she said. "I'm so glad to be *home*."

I took the cans outside and threw them, one by one, into the dumpster. It was snowing lightly, and the flakes covered my coat with a pearly film. The school bus came moving slowly up the street, and turned on its blinker.

I thought about going back inside the Lobster Motel. I wanted to yank my mother out of bed, and kick that expression off her face. The bus turned into the parking lot, and I knew that my mother would get away with it again. No one would try to check into the Lobster, and find the desk empty, my mother peacefully sleeping in her bed. Miss Sussbaum would think I didn't care about all her hard work cutting out African faces and slices of pie. And somewhere, my friend would run to the mailbox (or the mail hut, or wherever the letters came in from American schoolchildren) and there would be nothing for her. She would watch all the other kids ripping open envelopes, reading aloud and laughing, planning visits and rides on the See a Seal Boat. She would feel the hot sun on her forehead and she would feel a hunger that would never be satisfied, no matter how much calamari she ate.

Chapter Two

I was shocked to come home from school on Friday and find an envelope on my desk. Inside, my mother had put forty dollars and a lollypop. I ran into the office, where my mother was reading an old *National Geographic*. “Mom,” I said, holding up the envelope.

“You’re dripping on the carpet,” said my mother. I took off my boots and moved toward her. She looked up from her magazine, and I hugged her. She smelled of smoke and shampoo.

“I told you you could adopt your orphan,” she said. Her tone was sarcastic, but she was trying not to smile. “Look,” she said, pointing to the magazine. “All about alligators. Very interesting.”

“Where were you last night?” I asked.

“Did you know, for example, that some alligators have eighty teeth?”

“Mom...”

“Eighty teeth,” she said. “That’s a lot of teeth.”

“You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“I counted,” said my mother, “and I only have twenty-eight.”

“Be careful, okay?” I said. “And it’s creepy here alone.”

“Then again, I had my wisdom teeth out forever ago.”

“Thanks for the money,” I said.

“You’re welcome,” said my mother.

The weekend passed slowly. We went for a walk on the beach, but the wind was so loud we couldn't hear each other talk. It was frightening, wind that loud. We went to Captain Kidd's for hot chocolates, and we ate cereal and watched TV. Nobody checked into the hotel. On Sunday night, my mother went out again.

I wore the scarf through my belt loops again on Monday, hoping it would bring me luck. I didn't want a boring African, or one that was too young to confide in. My letter was worn by now, but as I walked into school I touched my pocket and felt it there. The front hallway had been washed and waxed for the new week, but muddy footprints had already started to mar the shine.

For the most part, I was ignored, which was better than being noticed. There were other losers, of course, but connecting with them didn't seem like it would make my life any better. Once in a while, someone who had been a loser would get new clothes or get skinny and be sort of popular, and there was Carrie Donahoe, who got huge boobs between fifth and sixth grade. But for the most part, there wasn't any hope of someone like me being happy. I was realistic. All I could wish for was a nice Pen Pal--one who would write me back--and seeing Miss Sussbaum smile.

I hung my coat up in my locker and pushed my hair behind my ears. The uneven bangs I could do nothing about, but I knew Miss Sussbaum didn't like baseball hats in the classroom. I had put my letter and the check in a manila envelope from the front office.

At the classroom door, Kenneth and Steve were having a fake fight, pulling at each other's sweatshirts. "Excuse me," I said, and Kenneth said, "Let Fattie by." They stopped tussling and I walked in the door.

The giant lunchbox was gone.

Miss Sussbaum was at her desk. I carried my manila envelope to her. “I remembered,” I said breathlessly. “I have forty dollars, and I wrote a letter to the African.”

“Oh, Suzy,” said Miss Sussbaum. “I mailed the package over the weekend.” She looked at me, then, and though I didn’t say a word, she must have known.

“I’m so sorry, Suzy,” she said. She bit her lip. Her brown hair curled around her shoulders, falling on her beautiful lime green sweater. In her ears, she wore pearl earrings. “You had all last week to remember...” she said.

I blinked rapidly and nodded, thinking again about my African, letter-less in her dusty home. “Okay,” I said.

“I’m really sorry, Suzy,” she said.

“Okay,” I said again. I went and sat at my desk, and Kenneth kicked me.

A few days later, I was watching TV and eating French fries when my mom pushed open the door. “There’s someone here to see you,” she said.

“What?” I said. It was only four, but it was dark, and I had changed into my Garfield pajamas.

“Your teacher,” said my mother suspiciously. “Miss Sussen-something?”

“Sussbaum,” I said. I jumped up and ran to the mirror, trying to brush my hair flat. “Tell her I’ll be there in a minute,” I said, stepping out of my pajamas.

My mother stood with her arms folded across her chest, looking at me.

“Tell her!” I pleaded. I pulled pants from my closet and found a pair of my mother’s clogs to wear. I exchanged my pajama top for a sweatshirt.

I rushed into the office and was struck by the sight of my mother talking to my teacher. They were around the same age, I guessed, but looked like they had come from different worlds. My mother was wearing a low-cut top and hoop earrings, her jeans (as usual) too tight. Miss Sussbaum wore a long corduroy skirt and a sweater set. She fiddled with a gold chain around her neck nervously as my mother talked. My mother sounded course, loud, and dumb.

“Oh hi, Miss Sussbaum,” I said, stepping into view.

“Suzy!” said my teacher, standing. She looked relieved.

“What did you do with the forty dollars?” said my mother.

“It’s in the coffee can,” I lied.

“I’ve felt just awful about that misunderstanding,” said Miss Sussbaum.

“It better be in the coffee can,” said my mother.

“It’s okay,” I said to Miss Sussbaum. “Really, it is.”

“It’s *great!*” said my mother. “Forty dollars for an orphan...sounded like a ripoff to me.”

“Suzy,” said Miss Sussbaum, her voice quiet and kind, “I hope you don’t mind, but I put the word out amongst my college friends.”

“What?” I said.

My mother was blissfully silent.

Miss Sussbaum took a breath. “My friend Callie’s sister lives in South Africa. She teaches ballet,” she said. “She’d be happy to get you a pen pal from one of her classes, if you want. A South African girl.”

“Really?” I said.

“For nothing,” Miss Sussbaum added. “For free.”

My mother smiled.

“I don’t know what to say,” I said.

“Here’s Callie’s sister’s address,” said Miss Sussbaum, holding out an index card.

I could see her beautiful cursive writing, and I knew that I would put the card in my shoebox.

“Thank you,” I said. “Thank you so much.”

“Just send your letter to Callie’s sister,” said Miss Sussbaum, “and she’ll give it to one of her students.”

“Sounds great!” said my mother, too heartily.

“I will,” I said, “I promise.”

Miss Sussbaum flashed a smile, pulled on her long wool coat, and was gone.

After the news, my mother took the forty dollars (I had hidden it under my pillow, saving for a bus ticket somewhere better or at least some Devil Dogs) and went to Grumpy’s Pub. I let James out of the closet and fed him an apple. He jumped from my bed to the lamp to my shoulder as I wrote a note to Miss Sussbaum’s friend. I put the note and my original letter in the manila envelope, and I addressed it carefully. South Africa!

On Monday, I stole five dollars from the coffee can and I mailed the letter at the Woods Hole Post Office. Orla Thompson stamped the envelope all over and threw it into the bin behind the desk.

The letter reached Callie's sister, and she gave it to Joyce Nyembezi, the smartest girl in Guguletu Township. Too smart, as it turned out, but I was happy, for a while.

Chapter Three

It's hard to imagine a letter leaving the Woods Hole Post Office--a red brick building on Main Street with a tiny window above the door shaped like half a pie--and ending up in Joyce's slim hands, the hands I now know so well. The hands that caressed my Goddamn husband, pressing into the tense muscles of his neck, that spot he'd always beg me to rub. But that's beside the point, and I am trying not to focus on negative thoughts these days, trying to think about my personal accomplishments and not the hands of another, sexier woman, or let's face it: a better woman in general, touching my husband, when he was young, when we were all young, and that enough should have sustained us.

Orla Thompson had been the Postmistress for decades. Her gray hair was cut like a cadet's, and she wore the postal uniform proudly. She was privy to everyone's secrets, back then before e-mail. It was 1985, and people still wrote letters. Who knows what she thought when I dropped off an envelope bound for Cape Town, South Africa. From what I remember, she didn't give it much notice at all.

I imagined my letter going in the postal truck to Boston, then to Europe, and all the way down the African continent. The letter was marked "Private," for though we could get any mail in America without interference beyond a smirk from Orla, in South Africa life was different. The Afrikaaner government was in power, and information was regulated. Cape Town was—and is—an astonishingly beautiful place, full of lush gardens and homes with sea views. But even behind guarded gates, the whites were starting to get nervous.

The Afrikaner government was terrified that the blacks would rise up and take control. For years, the Afrikaners had developed South Africa, creating farms, industry, vineyards, fortunes, families. They believed that blacks in control would lead to chaos and ruin. To keep rebellion in check, they kept a careful watch on blacks who spoke out against the government, and although they were still keeping overt violence under wraps, dissidents had begun to disappear from their homes, dying in prison of suspect reasons. In the cities, life was still normal, for the most part. NEED A CHARACTER TO MAKE THIS REAL.