

SHE LOVES ME, Yeah

South Africa, 1968

Linda sat by herself at break time looking out over the netball courts where the sun lay in merciless sheets over the tarmac. Behind her the six- and seven-year-olds played in the big, fluffy flower bushes. They hopped in and out, crushing the pink and white blooms underfoot, until a teachers came past and screamed that they were not allowed in there. The girls and boys scattered like spilled beads.

Linda was nine. There were no more boys in her class now. They had gone on to the big boys' school by the river. Linda was sorry. She remembered Simon, all red and freckled, always making jokes; Ian, pale and dark-haired — gone now. Last year she used to watch them swarming about in the playground and think about Ian falling and being hurt. She liked to imagine him with blood on his head. She saw herself stroking his hair. She had barely spoken to him but still she dreamed of his head on her lap, his quick, irritable eyes half-closed, his face pale, pale, pale under the beating sun, like a soldier.

Sometimes she thought about war — the big war and that American one — and she worried. Sometimes when a plane went by overhead she had the idea that they might not know that the big war was over and be coming to drop bombs. There was a wastepaper basket in her parents' room where Ma threw her face tissues, smeared with lipstick and foundation and thick, white face cream. It had a picture of two soldiers on the side: a man in silver armour lying

under a tree, an arrow through his side, and another man standing by a horse. This was how Linda imagined the soldiers in that American war, sad and young, hot sun on their tin suits. But Daddy said it was quite safe. The big war had been over for more than twenty years and even Vietnam, which had been going on for almost half her life, was very far away. Down here in Africa they were quite safe, Daddy said, absolutely, perfectly safe.

At school, without the noisy careless boys, things seemed to get slower and more dangerous. There were more silences to be filled, more details to be noticed, smaller differences to be remarked on. Today some of the girls in Linda's class stood clustered into a knot near the music block. They leaned in with their heads close together, hissing to one another like angry geese, snatching sideways looks at Pauline Anderson. Linda caught scraps of it as she walked past to sit on the step. ('Disgusting, my mom says it's disgusting!') Trudy's mother had heard about it from someone at the doctor's and she'd told Trudy and Trudy had told everyone else in the class: 'Disgusting,' they hissed under the bright clear sun. 'It's ten years since she had the last one! Shame on her. She's old! She should know better, that's what my Mom says.'

Prissy little Pauline walked alone in her spotless uniform: white ankle socks, the regulation blue shift neatly belted at her waist, short brown hair pinned back on one side of her head. She was pretending not to know what they were talking about. Only last week, she'd been one of the popular ones so it was probably hard for her. Linda was neither popular nor unpopular. Linda kept her mouth shut and their eyes off her. She couldn't afford to stand against these

puzzling, volcanic furies; they rose and fell without warning, always swarming about looking for a new object. What was this all about? Why was it so disgusting? It only meant that there was another baby coming. Linda didn't want to ask because not knowing might make her disgusting too.



Ma came to pick Linda up from school and they stopped off at Ouma's house on the way so that Ma could have her dress fitted.

Ouma's house was like some long, dead animal. The door was its mouth and from there the corridor ran right through to the end like a spine, with rooms opening off one either side. The left side belonged to Ouma: the unused front room, the long living room, Ouma's bedroom, the pantry. Everyone else lived on the right. First Auntie Adele looking out on the street, then Pops, then the bathroom, then Esther in the kitchen, banging pots and pans over the old coal stove, then Esther's bedroom, opening out onto the porch. The others left Ouma alone in her side of the house. She was always there, perched on the edge of the sofa in the living room, waiting for someone to come by. She even slept there sometimes. It was the biggest room; it was the centre of the house. Ouma sat in it like a heartbeat, listening to the muffled sounds of her family all around, watching as they walked past, always on their way to somewhere else, calling out to them as they went: 'I've got a nice little piece of lamb for supper now!' or 'Don't forget your raincoat, my angel!'

It was funny to think of Ouma and Pops married. Linda hardly ever saw them together except when Ouma came in to Pops' room to bring him cups of tea or sandwiches. They looked like figures from two different sets of toys, even their names were from different vocabularies. Pops was tiny and rat-like, thin with dry, shiny-pink skin and no hair. He stayed in bed most of the time because he wasn't well. He sang songs and did tricks; Ouma didn't. She sometimes sang but only to get a child to sleep. She didn't know any jokes. But she smiled when you wanted smiling at.

Sometimes when Linda stayed overnight, Ouma would let Linda come into her bed and lie in the shade of her broad back. Ouma was three times as big as Ma and yet she could sleep balanced right on the very edge of the bed all night without falling onto the floor. She could knit a fancy pattern and talk at the same time; she could keep her keys down the front of her dress without losing them; and walk on the outside edges of her feet. Linda watched her now, sitting on the edge of the sofa, her great grey knees spread open and straining at the edges of her skirt so that she could lean forwards and work. Ma turned to and fro in the half-made dress rimmed with pins and white tacking while Ouma's hands travelled along each seam, letting out or pinching in the cloth as she needed to. Ma was talking about how they'd put up the price of bread again and Daddy thought that would mean trouble.

'I don't want to frighten you but I think you must lock the windows at night, OK Mommie?'

Linda lay on the carpet and studied its pattern. You could still see what a wonderful thing it had been once. There were leaves and grapes and curling gold patterns on a maroon background, dripping red roses, plumed birds, dull and worn down to a stump but still there, a storybook carpet. Linda scratched against the weave with her finger; little tendrils of dust caught at her nostrils. She sneezed: glory dust. Ma looked over and said,

'Don't put your tongue on the carpet Linda. It's full of germs.'

Suddenly Linda saw that the carpet wasn't that beautiful after all. It often happened like this. Just a glance from Ma and the light changed and Linda saw things differently. Linda thought that Ouma looked a little sad then.

'I wish you'd let me buy you a vacuum cleaner,' Ma said, and now Linda saw the spiders on the picture rail, the beginnings of dust balls under the sofa.

'Turn a little,' Ouma murmured through the fur of steel pins in her mouth as if she hadn't heard. Linda got a sour, unkind feeling in her stomach. Ouma was so big; she didn't want to feel sorry for Ouma. It was all the wrong way round.

'Little more,' said Ouma and Ma lifted her arms and turned; the silk shift swung like a bell around her thighs. Light shone in through the leaves of the loquat tree in the yard, covering her from the top of her yellow perm to her gold-thonged sandals with the fake red and green jewels. She looked like an angel, thought Linda. One day she, Linda, would be like that too, though it was hard to believe. Last week she'd been watching Ma put on her lipstick and Ma had said, 'I'll show you how to do this for yourself when you're a bit older. You've got a

difficult mouth - no Cupid's bow and too much on the lower lip - but I'll show you how you can make the best of it.' And Linda smiled and put it straight out of her mind because it seemed so foreign to her now, but one day she was sure she would want to know about such things.

'Keep still Baby,' Ouma said, through her mouthful of pins.

Ow,' Ma snapped, rubbing at her leg, 'you scratched me.'

'Sorry,' said Ouma humbly.



In school assembly Mrs Gerber liked to read a passage from the Bible after she'd made the announcements for the day. Then they would all stand up and sing a hymn and say the Lord's Prayer and after that they would be allowed to march out, single file, following their teachers back to their classrooms.

'Today children,' said Mrs Gerber, beaming at them kindly and distantly from the stage, 'today I am going to read to you from the book of Genesis about the story of Abraham and Sarah. Do you know the story of Abraham and Sarah children? I'm sure you older girls do. Abraham was the father of Isaac who was the father of Jacob whose twelve sons gave their names to the twelve tribes of Israel...'

Linda shifted around a bit in her patch of space. It was going to be very hot later, already her legs were sticking with sweat, picking up tiny pieces of grit from the wooden floor. There wasn't much room to move. Her class made up

two of the rows towards the front of the hall, looking over the heads of the babies; behind them stretched the rest of the school. Year by year they would move through these rows like a ripple until they got to the top of the school. The Standard Five girls were allowed to sit on chairs, their shoes pressing into the backs of the Standard Four girls.

'... so you see God made a covenant with Abraham. Does anybody know what a covenant is?'

The girl behind Linda leaned in and whispered very quietly, 'Can I play with your hair?'

Linda kept her head straight to the front as if she hadn't heard. The hands came anyway, lifting the weight of Linda's ponytail away from her neck, fingers combing gently through her hair, accidentally making needle-pains in her scalp now and then. There were certain girls who always wanted to do this, little hands clutching and stroking in the dark as they watched films or listened to stories. They weren't even girls she liked much, or girls who talked to her at other times; it was just a kind of compulsion with them, like chewing gum or picking scabs. Sometimes they undid the ribbon and elastic on her ponytail and then Linda felt in a kind of panic as if she was falling down, coming unravelled. She hated it. If the teachers saw you talking or fidgeting they would dart in from their seats along the side walls, or they'd pull you out of line afterwards and then you were in trouble.

But the teacher wasn't looking at Linda. There was a current running through two rows of their class, something electric and barely suppressed. The

teacher knew it and was watching for the place that it would erupt; the leaky place.

'... And God said to Abraham, "As for Sar'ai your wife, you shall not call her name Sar'ai but Sarah. I will bless her and moreover I will give you a son by her; I will bless her, and she shall be the mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her".' Mrs Gerber's kind, gravelly voice floated out over their heads. 'Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is *a hundred years old*? Shall Sarah who is *ninety years old* bear a child?" '

Someone started giggling in the row behind Linda; others were shuffling and nudging each other, all bare arms and legs, and shoes knocking against the wood. Linda turned her head carefully to find where Pauline sat.

' "And Abraham said to God..." ' Suddenly Mrs Gerber broke off in her reading and peered down into the hall. 'What is it girls? What's going on down there? Mrs van der Merwe could you ...?'

Their teacher picked her way along the row until she came to Pauline. She hauled her up, limp and sobbing, like a drowning bird, and took her outside. Now they would all get into trouble, Linda thought.

'Dear me,' said Mrs Gerber, 'Face the front please everyone. Face the front and pay attention. You're not at the circus.'



For some reason Linda had the feeling that Ouma was a bit sad that day. When she opened the door to them she seemed to be sagging more than usual inside her big, flowery satin dress. Ma was brisk, glancing at her watch just after she kissed Ouma's cheek.

'I can't stay long today Mommie,' she said. 'I've got the carpenters coming this afternoon and the traffic is terrible.'

'Just a few minutes, that's all I need,' said Ouma, shuffling ahead of them in her slippers. From the front room came the bright blare of Adele's transistor radio.

'Did the man come to fix that window then? I told him to come.'

Ouma nodded. 'Are you hungry my chookie?' she said smiling over at Linda, 'You want to go and get a sandwich from Esther in the kitchen?'

Linda shook her head. Ma stepped out of the dress she was wearing and put on the half-finished one, zipping it up as she walked across the room to inspect the window. She lifted away the curtains and frowned.

'He hasn't painted it!'

'Ag my darling, it doesn't matter,' said Ouma. 'No one can see it.'

'It does matter,' said Ma irritably. 'I paid him to do a proper job. I'll tell him to come back and finish it properly. You've got to keep an eye on these people, you know that Mommie!'

Ouma sighed and seemed to shrivel a little more. She sat down on the sofa and rubbed at her knees, veined and swollen from the rheumatism. She smile weakly at Linda.

'Pauline Anderson's mother is having another baby,' Linda said. Both Ma and Ouma were looking at her now. Linda examined their faces for signs of disgust but there were none.

'That'll be a big gap. Almost like me and Adele,' Ma said.

'Anderson?' Ouma frowned with the effort of remembering, 'Anderson? Isn't that Hennie le Grange's daughter? The one who was chasing after Lawrence like that before you were married?'

Ma waggled her eyebrows like she did when she didn't want Linda to hear something. 'A new baby, eh?' she said. 'That'll be exciting for Pauline.'

'It's not,' said Linda. But Ouma and Ma were busy on the dress again.

Linda went to sit on the window ledge. Imagine, she thought, if Pauline's mother had married Daddy instead of Ma, would she still have been Linda, as she was now? Perhaps she'd have been herself but just a bit different: Pauline on the outside and Linda on the inside, or a bit of both all the way through, like some kind of two-coloured ice-cream? It was almost too difficult to think about. Pauline's mother seemed nice enough: tall, with dark eyes and a soft voice. She might be all right if you didn't know anything else, or if bits of you were like Pauline, but she was nothing like Ma.

Linda slid off the window-ledge again. Sighed. Scratched. Lay on the floor. Wriggled round onto her stomach. Ma threw her a warning look:

'Try and sit still for a minute, Linda.'

From Adele's room came the sound of the record player going at full blast:

'I wanna hold your ha-a-a-a-aaand. I wanna hold your haaaaand...'

'Can I go and talk to Auntie Adele then?'

'No,' said Ma.

'Why not?'

Adele was exciting. She had a candle in a wine bottle on her mantelpiece and a box with a hundred different kinds of beads. Once she'd been over to the petrol station across the road and got a can of petrol to put in her room because she liked the smell. Sometimes she wore a coloured band around her head.

'She's supposed to be studying for her exams,' said Ma. 'Though how she can work with all that row ...' and then to Ouma squinting down at the hem. 'You can take it up a little bit more I think.'

'More?' Ouma shook her head. 'You'll get a cold on your kidneys my darling.'

Ma rolled her eyes and laughed. 'Get with it Mommie!'

Linda looked away.

'I wanna hold your ha-aaand...!'

Sometimes Linda wished for a mother who wasn't with it. She thought it would be nice to have one like everyone else's: a mother who wasn't always in a hurry, who didn't go out to work but sat at home knitting cardigans, darning socks, making cakes and bread for her children; a mother who would never dream of wearing trousers or mini skirts, whom no one looked at twice in the streets. Sometimes it made her throat go tight when she saw other children in their hand knitted cardigans, wearing their mothers' thoughts around their shoulders all day. But Ma would never be like that. She was always in a hurry

and machine knitted was so much neater she said. 'What a life!' she said. 'What do they talk about at the end of the day?'

Esther stood in the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron, 'What must I buy for tonight?' she said to Ouma.

'Shall I get Esther to fetch us some nice pork chops?' Ouma looked over at Linda, pretending a certain casualness. 'Linda always enjoys a nice little chop, don't you my angel?'

'For heavens sakes Mommie! I've told you, we're going in a minute!' Ma snapped. 'The traffic...'

There was a silence. Ouma took another pin out of her mouth and slid it into the cloth at the hem.

'Why don't you leave Linda here with me? She can stay the night. Would you like that my chick?'

'I don't know. She has school in the morning ...'

'Esther can walk her over. It's only five minutes from here.'

'Do you want to stay, Linda?' said Ma. They were all looking at her now: Ouma, Ma, Esther.

'Stay with your old Ouma tonight?' Ouma smiled, soft and wobbly as oil. 'We've still got some of that *melktert*, haven't we Esther?'

Esther nodded. She shifted her weight onto one foot. She pushed one finger under her head cloth and scratched at her scalp, waiting for them to make up their minds. Krik-krik-krik-krik-krik went Esther's nail on her head.

'You can have a nice piece of *melktert* for dessert. Or Esther will make you some jelly, won't you Esther?'

Esther nodded without smiling.

'Do you want to stay?'

Linda clenched her teeth. Outside the wind was rising. Sometimes, when she was at home and it was really windy, she climbed the tree in the front of the house and sat as high in it as she could. Whenever the leaves fell back to rest, the wind would dive in and clutch at her as if it would pick her up and fling her for miles. She imagined how it would go: out across the town, past the hospital where people climbed the front stairs with stiff flowers and others sat waiting shabbily at the back, past the university, over the patch of green with its marked out benches, past the black church and the white school and the powder house that the Dutch built and the rugby ground where they sometimes played cricket, past the ugly little modern church where people got married and brought everyone there to see it, and beyond even this to the farms with their fields of grapes, laid out in solemn rows and given so much space, where the people walked barefoot on the dirt roads and women tied their heads in little rag clothes and the children walked miles to the two-roomed school because this was how it was; this was how it was.

For Ma, Ouma must have been that other kind of mother, Linda thought. Ouma would always have been there; never criticising, never busy when Ma needed her, always making time. Linda had that hot and scratchy feeling again.

'Linda?' said her mother.

'No,' said Linda suddenly, and she turned and buried her face in her mother's skirt like a baby. 'No. I don't like it here. I want to go home. I want to be with Ma and Daddy.'

Ouma watched her with soft eyes. Even this, thought Linda, even this won't make her not love me. What is the point of love like this? Anyone could have it.

'So what shall I get then?' said Esther, still standing, expressionless in the doorway.

Ouma jumped as if she had forgotten about Esther.

'Ag,' she said slowly, 'just see whatever he's got cheap.'

© Vicky Grut, 1996 [3,700 wds]

Published in Sarah Lefanu (ed.) 1995, *How Maxine Learned to Love her Legs*, Aurora Metro Press, London.