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opening extract from

The Year the Gypsies Came

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Author's Note

There was, when I was growing up, an old Zulu night-watchman at whose feet I would sit and listen, wide-eyed, while he told me stories of his people from long ago.

In telling Buza's stories, I have taken the old night-watchman's tales told so caringly to me and have rewritten and embellished them with various other versions of similar stories told throughout Africa that I have since heard and read.

For the benefit of the reader, I have added a list of the Zulu and Afrikaans words used that I hope add to the reader's enjoyment of the story.

Prologue

My family was, in a way, not unlike the city in which we lived, Johannesburg; *eGoli* it is called in Zulu – the 'golden one'. A city surrounded for nearly a hundred miles by colossal piles of grey rock and fine yellow sand. Man-made mountains so dramatic in their shape that they resemble giant chopped-off pyramids towering over the city. Like some fabulous creation of a forgotten civilization rather than the work of sweaty gold miners burrowing like moles deep within the earth to get at the hidden treasure. Spectacular and magical, these mammoth monuments glisten over the city. But if you should feel compelled to look closer at them, to touch their shimmering forms, you will find, as you approach, that the particles blowing off them sting your cheeks. And when you reach to touch them, to hold a cluster of the gold in your hand, it will crumble and run through your fingers like sand. The illusion of a family held together as ours was is not unlike a mine dump. It is just dust.

We lived, my parents, my fifteen-year-old sister, Sarah, and I, not quite thirteen, at 99 Winslow Lane, a great old

rambling house that sat on two acres of wild and abundant garden in an older neighbourhood of Johannesburg. Winslow Lane was a street of curves and bends. Dark curves, where the homes, set against lush foliage, spoke of stillness and soft air. A road with houses on one side and bluegum woods on the other. Beyond the woods was Zebra Lake, named because of its closeness to the city zoo, which stood on the far side of the murky water. It was not unusual for me to fall asleep with the faint roar of a lion or the laugh of a hyena coming across the lake in the quiet of the night, transporting me in dreams to a tent in the most uninhabited part of the bush. For our house, while firmly planted in suburbia, stood on the edge of the wild.

In those vibrant years of the sixties my parents used a powerful formula that kept our family together. As soon as the tension between them became unbearable, they would invite a house guest to come and stay with us. As if by magic, the presence of the new arrivals eased the strain between them, and for as long as there were outsiders living with us the dust of their discontent would briefly settle, and our house would seem to shimmer.

In the spring of 1966, there was no one living with us, and the tension between my parents was left to germinate and grow like untended weeds: in the bedrooms, the kitchen, in the dark spaces behind the curtains and in the hallway cupboards. It was then that the gypsies came.

But our gypsies were not black-eyed girls in scarlet shawls with silver loops through their ears. There was no shaggy dog, no swarthy men with handkerchiefs round their necks, dancing wildly in the moonlight. They were a family of four. Wanderers, without roots, without course or direction; nomads, lost in a suburban wilderness. Yet for me they were, and always will be, gypsies. For they came to us that spring in a caravan and cast a spell over us, and changed our lives forever.

Beauty Time

Mother, Sarah and I are in Mother's powder-blue bathroom.

I think of it as Mother's bathroom and not Father's, even though he gets to use it too. Rows of her creams and lotions fill a small white cabinet that stands between the powder-blue basin and the powder-blue bathtub. Her set of electric curlers and five or six brushes of different shapes and sizes fill a basket on the porcelain back space of the toilet. Her silk robe hangs on a hook behind the bathroom door. Everything in this room is Mother's except for one small shelf that has Father's things on it. A bottle of Old Spice aftershave with what might be a pirate ship sailing across it, a ratty-looking shaving brush and a can of shaving cream that's made a rusty brown ring underneath it. I've actually watched Father put the can back right over the ring, since Mother would be angry if she saw ugly marks in her bathroom.

Sarah's sitting on the toilet with the seat down, I'm in my scuffed-up shorts on the faded blue bathroom mat, and Mother, with wads of cotton wool stuck between her toes,

has displayed herself on the edge of the bathtub. This is one of the few times lately that I get to have some of her attention – when Flaming Scarlet is drying on her nails. Mother's trapped for fifteen minutes like a bee in a hothouse, so she tells us stories from when she was young. These are her 'nail-drying stories' that we only get to hear when we are invited to be stuck in the bathroom with her. They make her smile like the cat that ate the cream because mostly in her stories everyone comes out looking stupid, except herself.

I look up at Mother from my floor position. Her hair is glossy black, in the perfect latest style that flips at the ends, her mouth painted pink as bubblegum. Beautiful as always and 'gussied up to the nines', as Father likes to say. I try long and hard to imagine that she once was, according to her, a tomboy just like me when she was my age. It makes me feel joined to her in a special kind of way, like I'll grow up pretty, just the way she says she did by the time she was fifteen, the age Sarah is now; except Mother was the most popular and one of the richest girls at school, and Sarah isn't all those things. Sarah's pretty all right, but we aren't super-rich with private drivers and crystal glasses at every meal like Mother used to have. Mother says manners are what matter most and that she could eat perfectly with real silver knives and forks by the time she was three. No true tomboy would ever eat with silver cutlery is what I believe.

Mother starts her story, her eyes moving back and forth from her nails to Sarah's pretty cheeks and hair. Sarah's hair is washed and shiny, the red colour glows like fire

around her face with flames falling loose onto her pale shoulders. She's sitting there so sparkly and bright, and me, I'm just a dark-haired pile on the floor that could easily be missed. Mother's eyes keep being pulled in Sarah's direction, and I feel a big lump starting in my throat as if a piece of rough crust's got stuck there. If Sarah knew how badly I was hurting for Mother to look down at me just now and then, she'd come over and hug me and call me 'silly billy'.

'Mama and Papa Joe refused to let me go overseas with Delia Gordon when I was seventeen,' Mother says, blowing frosted breath onto her hands. 'You've met her, girls, tall and kind of beaky-looking.'

'Yes, Mother.' Sarah sucks on a piece of her long red hair while I twirl bits of straggly blue rug thread round my finger and try to swallow the stuck-crust feeling out of my throat.

Mother waves her hands in the air so her nails dry faster. 'Well, Delia's family was fantastically rich, richer than Papa Joe was, even though Papa Joe had a Bentley – that's a fancy car, girls.'

'We know that, Mother.' Sarah rolls her eyes, then smiles sweetly at Mother so as not to get her going on the fact that it's not ladylike to roll your eyes.

'Well, Delia wanted me to go with her for a month all over Europe. She was, poor thing, no great beauty, and thought having me with her on the trip would help attract the fine men of Europe into our company. Well, horror of horrors! Mama and Papa Joe flat-out refused, no matter how

much I begged. Even Papa for once wouldn't budge. They had already planned a European family holiday with me.'

Mother paces around the bathroom as she talks. Sarah's brushing her hair, and I've given up looking up at Mother like a sick puppy and started searching for a Band-Aid in the medicine cabinet for my scratched tree-climbing elbow.

'Girls, listen, this is good,' Mother says impatiently, waving at us to sit down, nail-polish fumes hitting me in the face and making me woozy for a second. Sarah and I take our seats with our backs against the bathroom door. The curtain's about to go up and Mother's standing centre stage, green eyes flashing like GO signs.

'Only ten more minutes till her nails are dry. I've got masses of homework to do,' Sarah whispers to me, resting her head on her knees.

'Well, I was burning mad, you can only imagine. Papa went to his study and Mama went back to the sitting room to knit – I remember she was knitting a red jersey for her miniature schnauzer, Harriet; God, I hated that dog – anyway, I was so upset that I decided to run a bath to calm my nerves. I poured loads of mint-green bubble bath into the water, then went to my bedroom to change. Problem was, I felt so darn upset, girls, that I lay down and fell asleep on the bed.'

Mother sits on the edge of the bathtub and taps her ostrich fluffball slipper up and down, and blows hard on her nails.

'Well, girls' – sparks in her eyes as she holds Sarah's gaze – 'can you guess what happened?'

'The bath overflowed,' I say eagerly, like I'm supposed to win a prize or something.

'Right!' she says, looking for an instant at me, pleased as Punch and snapping her fingers so quick and sharp, like a gun popping. 'The bathwater ran *all* the way from upstairs down the twenty-five cream-carpeted stairs – remember the water was now green, girls – past Mama in her sitting room and right under the door of Papa's oak-panelled study.'

'Oh, boy!' I say. 'You must have got into so much trouble.'

'Oh, they were angry! They were hopping mad!' Mother touches her hair with her palms like she's checking to see if it's still in place. 'But they let me go to Europe with Delia.'

'They did?' I say.

'See, it made sense in the end. Why, half the house looked like a mouldy green swamp, and would take about a month to repair. Mama and Papa decided it was better if I wasn't there, what with all those workmen about whistling and leering at me.'

Mother seems happy for a second, then notices Sarah. The party's over. 'Sarah, get your hair out of your mouth. That's disgusting! Fifteen and still sucking like a baby. What would a nice boy want with a girl who uses her hair as a dummy?' She points hot Flaming Scarlet fingers at Sarah, who spits out her hair in what might be mistaken for Mother's direction.

Mother's always telling Sarah what boys want and don't

want. She says they don't like a girl telling them what to do in a firm, tough-sounding voice. Mother says that Sarah should tell a boy what she thinks he ought to do, but she should use a real soft voice on him and always make the boy feel whatever you tell him was his idea and not your own. Mother must have different rules for girls once they get married because lots of times she raises her voice harshly at Father, telling him that he doesn't make enough money and what she thinks he should do in his chocolate business like they're her very important ideas and she knows best.

The other day, when Mother was lazing on her bed with cucumber slices on her eyelids, in a deep and earnest conversation with her lah-di-dah friend Anthea on the phone, I overheard everything she said. She didn't know I was in the room because of the cucumber slices. She told Anthea that Sarah, with her brains and beauty, would not be allowed to make the same mistake that she did, and marry the wrong man who couldn't provide her with the lifestyle she was used to. 'Not if I have anything to do with it, she won't,' she fumed.

And me? I wondered as I sat crouched quietly on the side of the bed. What about me? Then as if she had read my mind Mother continued. 'Emily,' she sighed. 'Emily marches to a beat of her own. She's different. I dare say I haven't quite figured out what that beat is.' Mother sighed again patting the cucumber slices back into position.

I wanted to jump up from my hiding place and go and take those cucumber slices off her eyes, and tell her that I would dance to any beat she wanted if only she would tell me which exact beat it was.

Mother can be sweet sometimes, especially to Sarah, and sometimes to me too. When she is, it feels like her friendly moods are going to last forever, but then suddenly it's over, like at the end of a good movie when the lights have gone on and you have to get yourself out of that other place where everything felt better and unreal.

Sarah gets up off the bathroom floor. She sets her shoulders back and fixes her eyes straight ahead, like a pageboy, then quietly closes the bathroom door behind her. Sarah tries to avoid Mother's up-and-down moods. She'd rather go to her room and read a book than slam doors and make a big show. Sarah's pure and good like clear water, while Mother's like thick oil, hard to look through. When you put both ingredients in a jar, it's the oil that always rises to the top. I guess Sarah knows that.

'Sarah's got to remember she's a young lady and not a child any more!' Mother says, ripping the cotton wool out from between her toes.

I'm still sitting on the bathroom mat where I've made a blue-thread face with a sad half-circle mouth on the tile floor.

'I have a headache,' Mother says, looking down at me. 'I'm going to lie down. Pick up the stuff, Emily, okay?'

She leaves me with the sad blue-thread face and the pieces of cotton wool from her toes tossed all over the floor like bits of confetti after a parade, and patters out of the bathroom in her silly toeless slippers.

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While I'm cleaning up I wonder about the story of Mother and her trip to Europe. About how much of it happened exactly the way she says. Both Mother's parents, who were quite old when they had her, were dead by the time I was born, so I can't check with them. I remember once hearing Father yell at Mother – 'Don't try one of your manipulative bathwater tricks on me, Lil. It may have worked with your parents, but it won't work with me!' – when she wanted to go away to the beach in Cape Town with another one of her fancy friends.

After I'm done in the bathroom, I go to Father's study, where books with maroon bindings and gold writing lie dusty and unread on the shelves. These are books that Father says he's mostly kept from his college days. There are even some that he's had from when he was a boy. *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Hardy Boys* and lots of stuffy books about Roman-Dutch law. I think Father was planning on becoming a lawyer, but when he failed the exams he went into one of Papa Joe's businesses instead.

I find a dictionary that's new-looking and not dusty sticking out between the old books and look up the word 'manipulative'. It means 'someone who manages and controls cleverly'. I place one of the used-up cotton-wool balls that I spy lost in the cuff of my shorts inside the book and mark the place of the word.

Outside Father's study window two African hoopoes peck with their curved beaks for beetles in the bushes. One hoopoe is smaller and dull brown, and the other has a bright reddish crown. I wonder about beauty in the bird world, how it's always the male who's got the prettier

feathers. Mother probably wouldn't have been too happy being a female bird. I sometimes think she married Father at nineteen because his last name was Iris, and by marrying him she became a double-flower, Lily Iris. Mother likes things that look and sound pretty.

I'm still in Father's study when I hear him as he comes in through the front door. The tired slapping of his briefcase against his leg, then a thud as he drops it onto the pinewood living-room floor. Father smokes a lot and seems worried a good deal about things that I can't see or hear. He spends hours in his study going through papers that have to do with his imported-chocolate business.

Father comes from Witbank, a small coal-mining town about a hundred miles from Johannesburg. Sometimes, if he's in the mood, I'll catch him looking up from his papers and I might get him to tell me a thing or two about being a boy in Witbank. His eyes always look past me when he talks about the faded yellow kitchen where his mother baked him apricot-jam turnovers.

There's this picture of Father on the side-table next to the *riempie* stool in the living room. He's maybe sixteen and is standing behind the dusty counter in his family's mining store. Father had lots of curly dark hair then, but his eyes had the same clear and kind of surprised look to them. On the shelves behind him you can see packets of Impala Mielie-Miel, cans of Nestlé condensed milk and long strips of *biltong* hanging from hooks.

He left Witbank to go to university in Johannesburg soon after his mother died and hardly ever visited home

again once he met Mother there. Mother didn't like Witbank. She said it smelt bad from the mines and the black soot made her skin look dull.

I've often tried to imagine Witbank and the miners and the soot and the mining store but I can't. Father has never taken us there. All I can come up with is a place where everything smells either very bad or everything smells wonderful, like hot, freshly baked jam turnovers.

'Emily,' Father says as I walk past him on my way to Lettie, our black nanny, who is cooking dinner in the kitchen, 'I have a new chocolate for you to taste. Just came in from the factory in Belgium. Almond-cream soft-centres, they're quite delicious actually.' He holds a neatly wrapped dark-brown chocolate out towards me. I unwrap it and I'm about to put it into my mouth, even though I'm sure I'll like it about as much as I like all his bitter-tasting imported chocolates, when Mother glides by.

'Honestly, Bob. It's almost dinnertime. Don't you ever think! She doesn't need all that sugar, and besides it's bad for her skin.' She flashes eyes like a cat that's about to pounce at him.

Father sighs, looks over from me to her and stuffs the chocolate into his jacket pocket.

'Tell Lettie to bring my dinner to me in my study,' he says curtly to Mother. 'Frankly, I don't need to come home to be instantly attacked every night.' He marches past me and mumbles, 'Sorry, Emmie. I'm too worn out to take on the likes of your mother right now.' He hands me the chocolate from his pocket. 'Taste it later, or whenever you

please.' He turns to Mother and shoots her a hard glare, then leaves.

I feel the chocolate, soft and crumbling, already melting from the heat in his hand. And I feel myself crumbling too, little pieces you can't see that break off on the inside.

Later, even though their bedroom door is closed, the yelling wakes me in the dead of night. It's twenty-two steps from my room to theirs. Fifteen steps from my room to Sarah's. Sarah's room is closer to them so she gets to hear their yelling even louder than I can.

The fights always start with something as small as chocolates and then become something else, something bigger. I can't hear the actual words, just the sounds of anger. It comes at me from under their door and slams into me so hard that it takes my dreams away. Then, when it gets too loud in my head, I go to Sarah. I tiptoe softly, like a mouse that leaves no footprints on the carpet. Creep to her room that's as perfect as a picture book. Everything has its place. Pencils lined up straight on her desk, shoes in neat matching rows in the cupboard.

I stand at the foot of her bed. Sarah's long red hair, shining like a glow-worm in the dark, is the only part of her I can see. She's already awake.

'Don't worry, Em, it'll soon stop. It always does,' Sarah says to me, but her voice sounds far off, like an echo that comes from an empty space – a place inside her where the door's already been shut. She gets out of bed in her ghost-white nightgown, takes me by the hand and brings me back to lie next to her in a warm spot.

'It's safe in here, Em,' she whispers as she climbs in

beside me. 'The mess out there can't reach us in here, can't reach us at all,' she murmurs in a sleepy voice.

I stay very still, keep my body so tight, try to stop the sounds that reach into me through the cracks. Close my eye-holes and cover my ear-spaces with a pillow, until the loud noises that come at me stop.