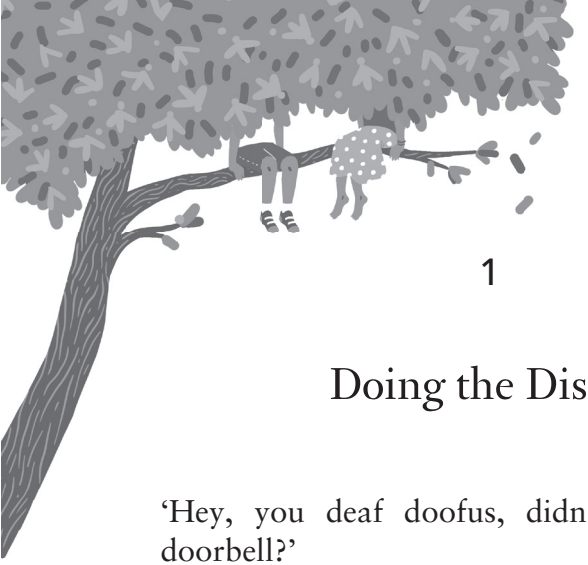


1

Doing the Dishes

'Hey, you deaf doofus, didn't you hear the doorbell?'

I clenched my teeth and squirted a green blob of Sunlight liquid into the kitchen sink.

When someone shouts at you like that, there are a few things you can do.

Option one: you can pretend to be deaf and ignore it. Which isn't a good idea if your older brother is the one shouting at you. In any case, not if you have an older brother like Donovan.

Option two: you can threaten to break the shouter's nose if he calls you a doofus again. But in this case that would be plain stupid. Donovan had provincial colours in swimming, lifted weights every day and drank those protein shakes that give you humongous muscles. To top it all, at the age of fifteen he had perfected the art of the wedgie. All the underpants in my cupboard were stretched out.

Option three: you can point out to him, in a very friendly manner, that the person who rang the bell definitely isn't looking for you, seeing that your best (and only) friend has gone to America with his parents for the December holidays. But, once again, you stand a good chance of getting a wedgie for your trouble.

Option four: you can make use of the normal pecking order and tell your little brother to open the door. But in our case the normal pecking order no longer existed. Adrian was only nine years old but he'd bought himself a position above mine. Long story short: I was currently my little brother's personal slave. If I wanted any pocket money during the holidays, I'd better make sure I didn't rub him up the wrong way.

Option five: you can leave the dishes, dry your hands and go and open the door.

Guess which option I chose.

The girl on our porch looked a little older than me. She was wearing faded blue jeans and her brown hair was tied in a ponytail. Her braces flashed in the sunshine as she smiled nervously.

'Hello? Erm…I'm looking for Donovan? Adrian…erm…invited me?' She spoke in question marks.

I sighed and called over my shoulder, 'Donovan, you have another client!'

The girl shuffled her feet awkwardly and her face turned bright red.

If my mum and dad were ever to find out what was happening in this house in broad daylight, they would need serious therapy. Fortunately they both worked during the day and were blissfully unaware of the fact that their youngest son was renting out their eldest son to schoolgirls. There's a word for that. And it's illegal.

Adrian said I was being dumb – it was just an innocent self-esteem workshop.

He was the kind of nine-year-old who knew words like 'self-esteem'. My dad said he would be either a millionaire by the time he turned eighteen, or serving his first prison sentence. My little brother was the richest nine-year-old I knew. He started his money-making schemes in nursery school – during the rugby season he got his little friends to bet on the weekend games. By the time a furious mother found out about it, he had made quite a bit of money already. Adrian was also the only child I knew who had been expelled from nursery school. Not even the fact that my mum was a lawyer could save him. Since going to primary school, he had been making most of his money by supplying the tuck shop with cheap sweets. At least, we suspected that that was how he made most of his money.

Adrian was constantly hatching all kinds of mysterious plans to make money. Dad said he preferred not to know all the details. His latest plan (Adrian's plan, not Dad's) was to rent out Donovan for kissing lessons.

Yep, girls like the one with the braces who was standing on our porch, blushing like mad, paid for the privilege to kiss my older brother.

The year before, Donovan had started gelling his hair and lifting weights and had transformed into a girl magnet. At swimming training in the afternoons, a whole crowd of schoolgirls hung around the pool to see him in his Speedos. He had broken more girls' hearts than Chad le Clos had swimming records. But it seemed the girls hadn't wised up because at least three or four had come for kissing lessons since the beginning of the holidays. They would disappear with Donovan into the shaded *lapa* next to our pool for half an hour. When they reappeared, their hair was messed up, their lipstick smudged and they were smiling like mad. I had no idea how much Adrian charged for the kissing lessons and what percentage Donovan got. Maybe Donovan played along for the fun of it, because he seemed to have girls on the brain. And pool chlorine. No wonder he had scraped through Grade Nine by the skin of his Speedos.

The girl on the porch cleared her throat and rubbed her jeans self-consciously. She looked like she wanted to run away.

If Donovan spent as much time behind his schoolbooks as he spent in front of the mirror with his hair gel and comb, I bet he would've scored at least three As. He was taking his time but I didn't invite the girl inside. My mum wasn't a lawyer for nothing – I knew what 'accomplice' meant. I wanted no part whatsoever in those so-called 'self-esteem workshops' that Adrian and Donovan were running.

Finally, Donovan showed up. His hair was gelled perfectly and he reeked of the expensive aftershave Mum had bought Dad for his birthday.

'Hi.' He greeted the girl with a broad smile and shoved me aside like a doorstop he didn't want to trip over. 'Let's go and sit outside in the *lapa*.'

The girl giggled nervously and turned a deeper shade of scarlet before they disappeared down the veranda.

With a sigh, I closed the front door and walked back to the kitchen.

Outside in the garden the pool pump was going *chug-chug-chug*.

The fridge was humming like a purring cat.



At the front gate Mr Bones was barking at the reverend's wife, who was walking past with her German shepherd.

A few minutes later, Adrian walked into the kitchen.

'Are you done with the dishes yet, Marnus?' he asked in a bossy voice while getting some orange juice from the fridge.

The three of us were supposed to take turns to tidy up the kitchen. But at the start of the holidays I had begged for an advance on my pocket money and bought myself a second-hand PlayStation Portable from Adrian. He, in turn, had bought it from one of his friends. The stupid thing broke a week later but Adrian refused to give my money back, because he said I'd bought it without a guarantee or warranty. I wasn't even sure what those words meant. The bottom line was: I had to do the dishes every day and clean the kitchen in exchange for pocket money from my nine-year-old brother.

My life sucked.

I was officially having the worst December holidays ever. I wished we could go for our usual holiday by the sea but my mum and dad had decided that we'd go to a game reserve for three weeks during the June holidays, so they didn't want to take a lot of leave during December. Besides,

my mum was working on a Very Important Court Case and my dad was hoping that this year's Christmas spending would save his sports shop from going under, which meant that him taking leave now was out of the question.

The doorbell played 'Jingle Bells' again. The week before, my dad had replaced our doorbell with one that played Christmas tunes. This was his pathetic attempt at bringing a little Christmas cheer into our house. I suspected that by June the following year, when we were scheduled to go to the game reserve, the doorbell would still be playing 'Jingle Bells', because by Easter this year no one had got around to taking the Christmas tree down.

'Aren't you going to answer the door?' asked Adrian.

He was spilling some orange juice on the table. The table I had just cleaned.

My dental bill was going to be sky-high after the holidays, because I was grinding my teeth down to stumps.

I dried my hands on the dishcloth again and walked to the front door.

Where, of course, another girl was waiting.

This one was blonde and looked about my age. But her eyes were the first thing you noticed about her – large and bright blue, with dark lashes.

'Sorry, Donovan is still busy,' I mumbled. 'You'll have to wait your turn.'

A frown appeared between her eyes. 'What turn? And who's Donovan?'

'Aren't you here for the kissing lessons?' I asked.

To the left of the frown, one eyebrow went up a centimetre or two, and she smiled a semi-smile. 'Kissing lessons?'

My face started to glow. 'Erm…forget about it. Sorry. Can I help you?'

'Will you sign my petition?' she asked and held a piece of paper out to me.

Surprised, I stared at the page. It looked like it had been torn out of a notebook. On it was a list of signatures, addresses and telephone numbers.

'Erm…I don't think so,' I said. My mum always said you should never put your signature on paper before you understand every single word that's written on it. Obviously Adrian learned words like 'guarantee' and 'warranty' from her.

'It's for a good cause,' said the girl.

'What cause?' I asked.

Her semi-smile became a full smile. 'If you want, I can go and show you.' She pointed at the dishcloth in my hand. 'Or would you rather dry the dishes?'

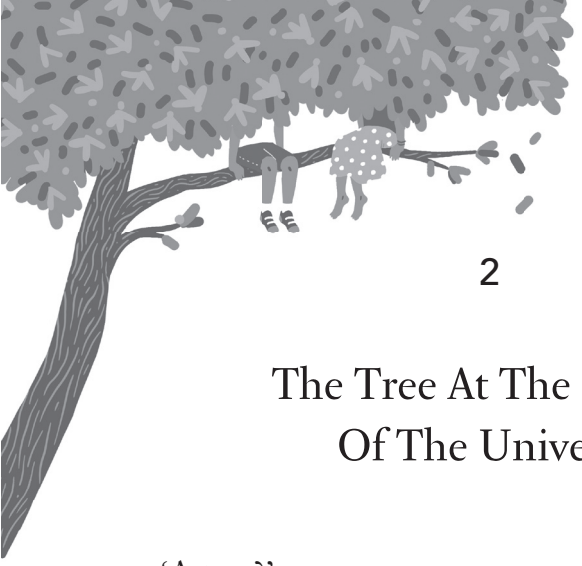
My face heated up another couple of degrees. 'Erm…I don't know…'

I was still stammering an excuse when she started giggling softly. Her face tilted forward as she tried to cover her laughter with her hand but I could see the teasing glint in her eyes.

'Come on. I'm sure the dishes can wait a few minutes. When I've shown you what the petition is about, you'll definitely sign it.'

She took my hand and pulled me in the direction of the front gate.

'By the way, my name is Leila.'



2

The Tree At The Centre Of The Universe

'A tree?'

I looked at Leila in surprise.

She nodded. 'A white karee. Scientific name: *Rhus pendulina*.'

'Pleased to meet you, tree,' I said.

The tree stood silent and slightly sad in the early-morning heat.

I ran my hand over its rough trunk. 'Is this an endangered species or something?'

'Not really,' said Leila without taking her eyes off the tree. She looked up as if she wanted to make sure that every leaf was still in its place. 'Many people plant white karees in their gardens. They don't need that much water and they grow fast.' She sounded a little like a TV presenter.

I frowned. 'So why did you draw up the petition to save this tree?'

Leila looked at me for a long time, as if she was trying to decide what she thought of me.

I wondered what she saw.

I didn't have blond hair, blue eyes, bulging muscles and a tan like my eldest brother. I didn't have a snub nose covered in freckles and an adorably cute face like my little brother. Not that I thought my little brother's face was adorably cute but old ladies seemed to think so – seconds before Adrian convinced them to part with their money by some sly trick.

My hair was brown and slightly too long and full of cowlicks that made it stand out in all directions. My eyes were green. When I was with my brothers, I was always the last one anyone noticed. Marnus-in-the-middle. Sometimes it felt like I was invisible.

Slowly Leila let out a deep breath while still staring at me intently. 'This isn't just another tree,' she said. 'This is The Tree At The Centre Of The Universe.' You could hear the capital letters in her voice.

Before I could stop myself, I burst out laughing. This girl was off her rocker. What had possessed me to walk all the way to this small park, three blocks from home, so that she could show me a tree?

'The Tree At The Centre Of The Universe?' I asked.

'Forget it.' Her eyes flashed. 'I thought… Never mind. Just drop it.'

She sounded furious, and I expected her to twirl around and walk away. But from the way she was glaring at me it was obvious that I was the one who had to buzz off.

I didn't need an invitation. With a shrug, I turned to go home. I didn't feel like making small talk with a half-crazy girl. Besides, I had to finish the dishes.

There were still twenty-three days left of the horrible summer holidays.

Yep, I counted them.

And the sooner I could get today's dishes done, the better. Then there would only be another twenty-two sinks filled with dirty dishes.

'When I was small, I always came to play in this park,' said the girl behind me. Her voice was so soft that I almost didn't hear what she said.

I stopped.

'I learned to climb trees in this one.'

I turned around but it seemed like she didn't even know that I was standing there and staring at her. It looked as if she was talking to the tree.

'Not all trees are good for climbing. A white karee has rough bark. You can easily lose your skin when you slip, so it isn't really ideal for

climbing. But this one's branches are low and thick, and they grow close to each other, which means you can almost get to the very top. It's perfect for tree-climbing.' She was caressing the trunk of the tree.

Then we heard a noise, turned around and saw a white pickup approaching across the lawn.

'That's them,' said Leila in a dark voice.

I didn't know who 'them' were. Maybe those guys in the white jackets who were fetching her to lock her up in a place for people who talked to trees?

I felt guilty about that thought.

The pickup stopped and two men got out. One of them had a clipboard with some papers that made him look very important. His shirt was stretched tightly across his tummy, as if the buttons would pop at any moment, and his forehead was shiny with sweat. The other man was tall and thin, with a sharp face and a narrow little moustache. He didn't even glance in our direction – he immediately began to study the tree.

'I drew up a petition,' Leila said to the man with the clipboard. She held the paper with the signatures out to him as if she wanted to show that her papers were as important as his. 'Almost fifty people have signed it already.'



From the tone of her voice you could hear that Leila was counting the signatures on her petition like I was counting the remaining dishwashing days.

I suddenly felt bad for not wanting to put my signature on the paper.

'Too late,' said the man without looking up from his clipboard. 'Paperwork's done.'

'But this is a petition!' said Leila. Her blue eyes flashed. 'People signed it because they don't want the tree to be chopped down. Almost *fifty* people. People who *care*. You can't just carry on.' Her voice was seesawing up and down.

The man shrugged. 'Try the municipal manager.'

'The municipal manager?' Leila asked hopefully.

'On holiday,' said the man. 'Only coming back end of January.'

It seemed like it was too much trouble for him to speak in full sentences.

The thin man started circling the tree with precise steps. He looked at it in the same way Donovan and Adrian and I looked at the last bit of Sunday-lunch pudding left in the bowl. It was as if he wasn't planning to only cut down the tree – he wanted to eat it as well.

'When are you planning to cut it down?' Leila's voice sounded like it was racing over a speed bump.

'Laying the pipe in early January,' answered the man. 'Tree must fall today.'

Leila drew in her breath sharply. Her eyes went wide. She stripped off her sandals and kicked them aside. Before I could ask what she was doing, she swung round and started nipping up the tree.

'Where are you going?' asked the man, surprised.

Leila's summery skirt was flapping around her legs. I stood there with the two men from the municipality and watched as she scampered up and made herself comfortable on a branch. Only her two bare feet could be seen dangling from the leaves. The soles of her feet were dirty and brown, like the inside of her sandals.

The red-faced man from the municipality gave me an imploring look, as if he expected me to do something.

I just shrugged.

The man sighed and produced a handkerchief from somewhere. Slowly, he wiped the sweat off his red forehead. 'That girl.' He shook his head. 'Talk to her. The pipeline. No choice. Tree's in the way.'

'The tree was here first!' shouted Leila.

'Don't worry, Mr Venter, as soon as I have my team here, one of them can climb up with a ladder and get the girl down from there,' said the thin man with the rat face. His tone of voice was threatening.

'No one touches me,' came Leila's voice from above us.

I looked up into the tree. Strips of light flashed blindingly among the leaves, almost like when the sun plays on water. An unexpected dizziness made the light swim in front of my eyes. It looked as if the tree was slowly turning round and round. For a moment, I shut my eyes tightly.

I thought of my eldest brother, who was going to spend the entire day lying beside the pool *again* and threaten to give me wedgies if I didn't wait on him with cold drinks.

I thought of my little brother, the snotty-nosed slave driver who ordered me to make his bed every morning and tidy his room in exchange for pocket money.

I thought of the doorbell playing 'Jingle Bells' and the girl with the braces who'd paid to have my brother kiss her.

I thought of my school report. In the final exams I'd scored seventy-seven percent for maths – more than ten percent better than the previous term – and I was top of my class in Afrikaans.

Mr Fourie said it was because I wrote such good compositions. But my dad hadn't even noticed my report because he was too busy giving Donovan an earful about his rotten marks and praising Adrian for his brilliant report. No matter what happened, I always disappeared somewhere between my two brothers. Always somewhere in the middle, where no one ever saw me.

When I opened my eyes, I looked down and noticed the red and white dishcloth over my shoulder. I had completely forgotten about it – I had actually walked all the way here, three blocks from home, with a dishcloth over my shoulder. It felt like the kind of strange thing Leila might do. Maybe her strangeness was contagious.

I thought of the piles of dishes waiting for me at home.

Above my head, Leila's two dirty feet were dangling to and fro among the green leaves.

Somewhere a turtle dove was cooing.

The red-faced man from the municipality was blowing his nose.

I think you sometimes do things in the blink of an eye, without thinking – things that change your life.

You ask someone to marry you in the middle of a horror movie, like my dad asked my mum.

You decide at five in the morning that you feel like ice cream, like my dad's sister, Aunt Karla, did last year, and then you're paralysed in a car accident at the crack of dawn.

Or you follow a weird girl into a tree with a dishcloth over your shoulder.