

THE UNSEEN LEOPARD

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HUMAN & ROUSSEAU
Cape Town Pretoria

For Michael, Joanna and Lara

By the same author:
Unbroken Wing, Kwela (1998)

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CHAPTER 1

ON the eve of her fortieth birthday, she has the dream. Again, she is standing outside the wrecked car on the mountainside, banging on the window, trying to break in. And inside, Melissa dies, as she always does, her hair fanned across her face like a shroud.

She beats against the window in a futile tattoo, as the car fills with water, and Khaya floats up through its darkness until he is pressed against the glass, his mouth gaping red beneath dead white eyes. *Wake up*, she screams to herself, *wake up before she dies*, *wake up wake up wake up*, until the scream becomes a real scream, more of a groan, in the dark room. And she is awake.

And Melissa is dead.

* * *

She sits up, shivering, the salty sting of tears drying on her cheek. Such an immoderate dream, she thinks irritably . . . so *Gothic*, so hysterical. As if some crazed messenger in her brain is still shrieking out its news: *She's dead . . . she's dead*.

I *know* she's dead, she tells herself. Okay? Three years, already. Shall we count our dead? Mum and Dad, sixteen years gone, Melissa three. Can we be done now?

But it seems as if she'll never be done. And even if she musters a convincing show of life-goes-on (and actually, let's be honest, her efforts are not that convincing), the lamenting Greek chorus is always waiting in the wings, ready to rush in whenever she is caught off guard.

Sam falls back on the pillow and tries to induce sleep, grimly ploughing through her repertoire of well-worn methods. *Breathe in . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . breathe out . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . You are*

floating in a blue pond . . . Play the alphabet game . . . birds . . . albatross . . . yes, bloody albatross around your neck. Christ, I'll be dragging it forever, hmm, b . . . b . . . blackbird, crow – no, crane, enough harbingers of death, drongo . . . Her body is a forest of needles; each breath rattles mockingly in her ears. The light beats against her eyelids, but when she turns it off, her dream floats out of the darkness, as the child had floated to the window of the car.

Forget it. She climbs out of bed, pulls on her father's ancient navy-blue dressing gown with the braid piping and pads barefoot down the wooden floorboards, pausing to stick her head around Khaya's door. He lies like a starfish in the dim light, limbs outflung to the four corners of the world, a plastic dinosaur clutched in each hand. She carries on down the passage to the kitchen at the far end of the house. As she flicks the light switch, a squat yellow dog rises off a lumpy cushion and waddles amiably towards her.

"Frankly, my dear Mimsy, I blame it all on Dylan," Sam tells the dog, as she fills the kettle and switches it on.

Mimsy wags her tail – actually it is more like the tail wagging Mimsy, such is her delight at this unexpected midnight tea party. Richard the cat eyes them from his lair next to the fridge. He was named after a vagrant who'd traded him for some old clothes, a chicken pie and twenty rand. The animal developed rapidly from a cute hyperactive kitten to a brutish tom, until Sam and Melissa neutered him in self-defence. Whereupon he instantly became an oversized, attention-seeking glutton.

Melissa had doted on him, despite his lack of charm, and Sam often wonders whether Richard blames her for Melissa's departure. He certainly never curls up purring on her lap, or rubs against her legs.

Richard begins licking his personal effects with ostentatious contempt.

"It wasn't my fault, you know. I miss her too," she tells him now. He flicks her a disgusted glance and carries on washing.

She rummages in the red tin for a rusk, picks up the blue-

striped china mug of tea, and walks out of the kitchen. She crosses the dining room to reach the wooden deck that circles her house, pausing to grab an orange from the fruit bowl on the table, which she drops into her dressing-gown pocket. She opens the sliding door and walks onto the deck, the rough wooden boards cool against her feet, and folds herself into the hanging string chair that Melissa gave her for her birthday four years ago. The last birthday, in fact, that had felt like something worth celebrating.

“It’s for you to take on your travels,” Melissa had said. “You can hang it up anywhere, so you’ll always have a place to sit. And whenever you sit in it, you can think of me.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“’Cos I’m the most gorgeous thing you know, you old witch.”

“No, you’re not; you’re a snotty little brat.”

“Ooh, you desiccated shrew.”

“Nappy face.”

“Termagant.”

“Milksop!”

It was a favourite game. When had it started? When Melissa was about five . . . standing in the Cedar Hills garden, squealing about the carpet of caterpillars crawling up the trunk of the stinkwood tree.

“Don’t be such a milksop,” Sam had said.

“Milksop!” shrieked Melissa. “If I’m a milksop, you’re caterpillar poo!”

“Dog’s breath!”

And so on.

Later, lying in bed, Melissa said, “Sammy, what’s a milksop?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” said Sam.

For some reason, this struck them as hilarious. “Milksop, milksop, milksop!” they shouted, jumping up and down on their beds.

The one who got to say milksop always won. But you could only say it after the right number of insults – if you timed it wrong, you lost the game. They played it (she supposes now) to reassure themselves that the bonds of sisterhood were imper-

vious to any amount of insult. They played it more often, she reflects, when those very same bonds had been eroded by the weaselly teeth of envy, resentment and betrayal.

* * *

As she sips her tea, relishing its warmth in the pre-dawn chill, she is struck by a sudden realisation: It's her birthday today. No wonder she had the bloody dream. Dylan *and* a birthday. Birthdays were always bad. And anniversaries, and Christmas, and New Year, and most days in between.

Forty years old. Christ.

She stares out at the lights of Hout Bay sprawled beneath her feet. The lights render it harmless, turn it into some twinkling village – the old fishing harbour, the shanty town clinging to the slopes on the far side of the valley, the wealthy mansions, the gated communities, the cluster developments spreading like acne on every available inch of land, the few remaining smallholdings with their ponies and cows, the pottery studios and historic wine cellars and overpriced gift shops are all swallowed by the deep well of a summer's night. Like the petty antagonisms, desires and bigotries of its diverse residents. You could write any story you wished about this place in such forgiving darkness.

An owl swoops past on silent wings. From below the deck comes a squeak and scuffle, heralding the end of some small, unassuming life. Her back tingles in anticipation of things that creep up on you – perhaps the darkness is not so forgiving after all.

“In a dark, dark wood,” she whispers, remembering something that Khaya picked up at school, the way he'd recite it in a voice hoarse with terror. *In a dark, dark wood was a dark, dark house, and in the dark, dark house was a dark, dark room, and in the dark, dark room was a dark, dark cupboard, and in the dark, dark cupboard was a dark, dark box and in the dark, dark box was a . . . GHOST!*

The chant haunts her. It describes so eloquently the lengths to which people go to hide their secrets from themselves. The

house it inevitably brings to mind is Cedar Hills on a moonless night, the doors rattling in the wind, the claws of the wild pear scratching her window. Where as a young child she'd lain in darkness as thick as tar, waiting for it to suck the last breath out of her body.

She doesn't want to think about it. She doesn't want to go there . . . she wants a thorny thicket to grow up around the whole place so that Melissa can sleep there for a hundred years and be woken by a magic prince. Why did Dylan have to come here last night, and start bleating on about the Koekemoers and the Stuurmans and that whole sorry heap of history?

And launching into it with that silly sentence – what was it? *So, things are all coming together down at Elandskloof*, or something equally inane. Why can't the boy just speak English?

She should've just gone to bed before he could say anything else . . . he'd been antsy the whole evening, so she'd known something was up. She was warned. But she'd let her curiosity get the better of her.

“What's all coming together, Dylan?”

And he was off, rambling on about the Stuurman land restitution and turning the whole valley into some mega-biosphere reserve. And in the middle of this, he had dropped his bombshell: “The Department of Environment is interested in buying Cedar Hills. They're hoping to buy all the farms in the kloof.”

Well really! Buy Cedar Hills? It was monstrous.

Of course, she's glad that the Stuurmans are getting Rooi-krantz back. But does she want to hear about it? It just stirs up stuff, doesn't it? Bringing a parade of images – the tyre swinging in the coral tree . . . the sun flashing on Chrissie's brown legs as she skips, chanting *My naam is Galiema, hoe! My naam is Galiema, ha!* . . . the blood seeping out of two dead donkeys in the Koekemoers' lucerne field.

Worst of all was that crap he'd spouted about how Sam could make this Elandskloof dream come true; how it was a way to lay Melissa's soul to rest and to heal the land. Honestly. How dare he use Melissa's death to give him some kind of glory?

“Dylan, please, spare me the New Age twaddle,” she'd snap-

ped. “You don’t know what Elandskloof means to me. You have no fucking idea what Melissa would have wanted, and in fact she doesn’t want anything any more because she’s dead. If the Stuurmans are getting their land back, that’s great, but it is nothing to do with me. Elandskloof fucked up my family, it fucked up the Stuurmans, and it killed my sister.

“I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to attend stakeholder workshops. I don’t want to dig up dead old Dad and wave him around like a banner at community meetings. If they want to buy the damn place, they can make me an offer, and I’ll think about it. You can toddle off and build your New South African dream. But leave me out of it.”

Not that he was crushed by her outburst. Not Dylan. He’d just told her – what was it? Something about grief turning to poison if you keep it in a bottle. What a wanker.

Sam dunks her rusk, cursing when a piece breaks off in her tea. She fishes out the soggy morsel and gives it to Mimsy, who has laid her head on Sam’s lap and is gazing at her with adoring, treacle eyes. Sam strokes her head absently, trying to block out this conversation by taking in her surroundings. The night is paling now, its diminishing shadow already being celebrated by a cacophony of birds, and the shreds of mist that hang over the river are clearly visible. A faint glow over Constantia Nek gives the promise of dawn.

Sam drains her tea, and sets the mug on the floor. She reaches into her pocket for the orange, digs her thumb into the peel, tears off a strip, and holds it to her nose. *The smell of oranges . . .* She closes her eyes, breathing it deeply. She is back thirty years, driving from boarding school to Cedar Hills in her father’s car. On the last journey she had made there while still believing that good would always triumph and nothing would ever change . . .

* * *

She sits on the back seat of her father’s Mercedes, breathing air thick with the smells of oranges and paraffin, both of which are piled in the boot along with other supplies. She is still wearing

her yellow school dress, but she has kicked off her shoes and socks, which lie discarded at her feet. She amuses herself by trying to pick up a grubby sock between her toes and lift it onto the seat.

Her parents sit in front. Daphne smokes a cigarette in a long filter, her eyes inscrutable behind reflective green sunglasses. Her chestnut hair is tied back with a blue-and-white silk scarf. Occasionally she glances at Fergus, presenting Sam with her classical jaw line, curved mouth and elegant little nose. Each time she sees this, Sam unconsciously touches her own imperfect proboscis.

Fergus is moulded from a more robust clay than Daphne's delicate porcelain. His hair is a red-wire pot scraper; his brown eyes are set deep under bristling reddish brows. His nose, like Sam's, is generous, but (as Sam will hear throughout her childhood) a "strong nose looks good on a man". Clearly, it has no business being on a woman. Sam will also be told many times over that she is a "throwback" to grumpy great-great-grandmother Isabella, with her suspect Spanish blood, as evidenced by Sam's big nose, black hair, black eyes, black eyebrows and black moods. For years, Sam believes a throwback is something you throw back because you don't want it, like an undersized fish.

The drive takes them through small towns, past yellow-brick shops selling big white church hats and crimplene dresses and chicken feed. The towns feel sleepy to her, but with an underlying dis-ease, peering out warily at passing strangers from beneath the corrugated-iron overhangs that line the streets. Young farm workers lounge beside the "non-white" entrances to the bottle stores, whistling at the coloured girls going past in curlers. But never at white girls – Kobus Koekemoer is fond of telling her that if their farm workers even *look* at a white girl his father will hang them from a beam in the barn. He showed her one which he said was especially strong, and described in graphic detail the bulging eyes and black tongue that would afflict anyone who suffered this fate. She was steadfastly unimpressed – Kobus Koekemoer, in her eyes, is the King of Stupid.

As the road leaves the last town, something falls away from

her, as if she's just shrugged off her heavy school satchel. The road pulls them high above the rolling blue hills, layered like cardboard cutouts in dusty blues and purples, then plunges back down through a deep valley. Stone walls tower above them, embedded with smooth round pebbles and mashed-up rocks left by the vast glaciers that carved out this craggy kloof. "Enon conglomerate," her father calls it.

Enon Conglomerate, Enon Conglomerate, she sings inside her head. She wishes it were her name. It sounds much more impressive than Samantha Campbell.

They pass Queen Victoria's face, carved out by the wind in the rocks, and other gargoyle-like profiles, which seem to hector her as she passes . . . *Sit up straight . . . Brush your hair*. They pass through gates with boards reminding drivers in three languages to close them. She used to like opening the gates, but now she is content to leave this to the small brown children playing nearby.

The children look as though they were blown there by the wind. They stare at the ground when her father talks to them, as though afraid he might steal their souls if they let him see into their eyes. They sometimes smile, but their smiles seem to dangle on the end of a thread of fear. Sometimes Sam smiles back, and sometimes, if Fergus is not looking, she sticks out her tongue – if he saw her do that, his large-boned hand, hard as a shovel, would shoot over the back seat and smack whichever part of her it could reach. "Don't be rude," he'd say.

After the gates they follow the riverbed, rattling over the loose stones – every inch of the old Mercedes' German engineering is sorely tested, but Daphne refuses to go to Port Elizabeth in the farm bakkie. Then the car grinds and groans its way up and out of the valley and over the second pass – the Grasnek.

* * *

Grasnek. The shock of the name jolts Sam out of her reverie. Grasnek used to be the most beautiful place on earth, despite its humble name. Now it is the grave of her sister.

She closes her eyes, and forces herself back into the Mercedes, trying to conjure up the Grasnek that was, before Melissa died on its slopes.

* * *

On this Grasnek, Sam feels as if she can breathe properly for the first time since leaving the farm for school. The sweet mountain air makes her body sing with its lightness, and she opens the window wide and sticks her head out, closing her eyes against the warm rush of wind.

“For heaven’s sake, close the window,” her mother says, clutching the hairdo she’s just had reconstructed in Port Elizabeth, and Sam reluctantly complies. They pass a herd of rooi-hartebees, crowned with hearts of sky framed by their inward-curving horns. When they leap away they take a piece of Sam with them, so that she can feel their hearts pounding and smell the grassy scent of their brown flanks.

From Grasnek the prickly grey-green bushes on the surrounding hills look no spikier than tufts of lamb’s wool. The slopes are crowded with aloes – ‘*Allo, ’allo*, they cry happily to her, waving their long, spindly arms. Chrissie Stuurman calls her *Aalwynkop* – Aloehead – because of her wild bush of hair, but Sam doesn’t mind because she likes aloes. She waves back to them, pretending to be a queen, but secretly. Once Daphne had seen her and said, *Who are you waving to, honey?* in that voice that meant she would tell her friends about it later and laugh.

Daphne spends long hours on the phone to her Johannesburg friends, telling them how she longs for Glamour and City Lights. Fergus says City Lights kill the stars. Fergus and Sam sit on the stoep at night, and discuss the stars. He tells her the names of all the constellations, and boggles her mind with star demographics. “A million light years,” she whispers to herself, unable to imagine either a million or a light year. She looks at Orion, with his three-star sword tucked into his three-star belt, and wonders if he feels lonely up there.

Sam is well acquainted with loneliness. It doesn’t stalk her,

strangely, in the big empty sky at Cedar Hills, but it follows her every step through her child-crammed boarding school. It hunches, grinning, on the shoulders of girls like Lottie and Rosalind as they march around arm in arm shouting WE-WALK-STRAIGHT-SO-YOU'D-BETTER-GET-OUT-THE-WAY, kicking her sandwiches as they pass. Loneliness crouches beneath her bed at night, amplifying the sound of the girls' breathing around her, until it roars like a tidal wave through her ears.

The road winds down from Grasnek, crosses the Elands River again over a permanently flooded causeway and skirts the gate to Rooikrantz before finally reaching the big white boulders that mark the entrance to Cedar Hills. They bump over the cattle grid and begin the ascent up the driveway.

* * *

Cedar Hills. Captured and tamed by swashbuckling Douglas Campbell in the mid-nineteenth century; home to five generations of Campbells since. The hills have long been denuded of cedars by Douglas and his kin, who chopped them down to make floorboards and furniture. But they are still rich with fynbos, aloes, euphorbia and spekboom. Fergus told Sam that the spekboom had been the favourite food of the elephants that once roamed the kloof. There is something elephantine about this plant, with its stubby, wrinkled grey stems . . . as if some elephants, reluctant to leave, had taken root and turned into plants. She used to leave inviting little piles of spekboom by the gate, but no elephants ever came to eat it.

A koppie rears up behind the house, a jumble of massive rocks, tossed aside by the long-gone glaciers that forged the valley. Its crevices are wooded with sweet thorn and stinkwood. The house, built with thick walls of honey-coloured stone, nestles sleepily at its feet, gazing out at the northwestern hills and mountains from beneath a green corrugated roof over the wide-front veranda. Beside the house are two weeping Brazilian peppers, humming with bees. Former generations of Campbells

have done battle with heat and frost, wild pigs and badgers, droughts and floods to create some semblance of an English Country Garden – spindly rose bushes, honeysuckle, a magenta bougainvillea climbing the pillars of the stoep, rampant candytufts sprawling over all the beds, some grimly determined dahlias. But Daphne is a poor gardener and much of this is now overgrown with weeds.

It's not really a farm, because they don't grow anything on it – all the arable bits of what was once a sizable estate were sold off to the Koekemoers by great-grandfather Ian Campbell, to enable him to indulge in his fondness for brandy. But the farm boasts a sprinkling of livestock: chickens and ducks, five cats, two bull mastiffs called Bessie and Ivan and two Jersey cows called Mulberry and Mrs Moodle. Fergus calls it a piece of paradise; Daphne calls it a millstone. For Sam, it is simply the only place in the world where she can imagine living.

* * *

There is an air of suppressed excitement in the car, as they pull up under the pepper tree.

“Wait there,” Fergus calls as Sam runs to the house, fending off the slobbery attentions of Bessie and Ivan, “and close your eyes. We've got a surprise.”

She sits on the steps of the stoep with her eyes tightly shut and the afternoon sun on her knees. *A puppy . . . or a baby calf with a wet nose that I can bottle-feed.* After what seems like ten years, she hears the clatter of hooves on the driveway. *A pony.* She doesn't dare lift her head in case she's wrong.

“You can look now,” Fergus says, and she forces herself to look up.

A pony. A rich chestnut brown, with a black mane and tail, and a white star on his forehead, and two white socks. Being led by a man with a red brick for a face and a stomach that an army could quite comfortably march on.

Sam feels a dull thud of disappointment. “Hallo Oom Hen-nie,” she says politely. “Why have you brought Kobus's pony?”

A big grin splits the brick in half. “But it’s your pony now, *meisiekind*. It’s too small for Kobus, see?”

She stares, disbelieving. She thinks guiltily of all the anti-Kobus Koekemoer plots she and Chrissie have devised.

The Koekemoers named him Oneway because he only really goes in one direction – home. In the coming weeks she’ll cajole him into going out as far as she can, with him stopping every three seconds to graze, but sooner or later he’ll turn around and gallop home, with her clinging on grimly. Frequently, he will dislodge her on a passing gatepost or tree.

She’ll fall off several times this summer. But when she goes clattering down the road to Rooikrantz on her reluctant steed, she will feel as resplendent as any triumphant king in history. And although Chrissie will toss her head and mutter, “Huh. It’s just a *horse*,” Sam will be convinced she sees a rare flash of admiration in her eyes.

Sam stands in the sun that summer morning, feeding Oneway carrots, feeling his velvet nose nuzzling her hand, breathing his sweet smell. The sun is shining; her mother’s eyes are stars. She believes she will never be sad again.

* * *

“There you are! I found you! You weren’t in your bed.” Khaya stumbles out the dining-room door, clutching a bundle wrapped in his favourite flannel blanket. “Why are you here?” he demands, indignant, ever the lord who expects his castle to follow his rules.

“I wanted to say hallo to the sun. Come and sit with me – we’ll wait for it to come.”

He crawls onto her lap. “I brought them ’cos they woke up too,” he announces, opening the blanket to reveal some carefully chosen members of his plastic dinosaur collection. Their wrinkled faces stare out with enraged yellow eyes; their red mouths bristle with improbable teeth. “Shush, shush, dinies,” croons Khaya. “Shush, shush, little diny-dinies.”

Sam bends to kiss the back of his neck, breathing in his

smells of biscuit and sleep and clean cotton. He squirms. "TICKLES!" he squeals, wriggling his bony backside against her thigh.

"Look!" says Sam, pointing to the gap between Constantia Nek and Vlakkenberg, where the bruised red rim of the rising sun is just visible.

"Here comes the sun! Wow! Here comes the sun, li'l darling!" shouts Khaya, who is an avid Beatles fan. He holds up his dinosaurs. "Look, dinies," he cries, "here it comes." The reptiles snarl soundlessly at the dawn.

The sun moves higher, and suddenly the whole valley is flooded with a soft golden light. Despite the thin warmth, Sam shivers as a sudden lurch of fear makes her tighten her grip on Khaya.

He pulls away, and climbs off her lap. "Brekkie time," he says, wandering back inside, the mystery of the sunrise already forgotten. Sam watches him go, trailing the flannel blanket behind him. The dinosaurs lie discarded at her feet.

It has taken her so long to build some kind of solid place for Khaya and herself – a ragged, splintery thing perhaps, but firm enough. And now Dylan has dumped all these horrible decisions in her lap. And nothing seems solid any more.