Glass

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## Linzi Glass

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The author wishes to acknowledge the following references:

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Summary: In Johannesburg, South Africa, in the late 1960s, twelve-year-old Emily, who longs for affection from her quarreling parents, finds comfort in the stories of a Zulu servant and in her friendship with a young houseguest who has an equally troubled family.

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For my extraordinary daughter, Jordan, the song of my soul, and my father, Harold, whose kindness knows no bounds

Last night the gypsies came—
Nobody knows from where.
Where they've gone to nobody knows,
And nobody seems to care!

—FROM "GYPSIES" BY RACHEL FIELD



## Author show of B

here 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 Afrikaans and Zulu words used that I hope add to the enjoyment of the story.



My family was, in a way, not unlike the city in which we lived. Johannesburg, called *iGoli* in Zulu—the "golden one." A city surrounded for nearly a hundred miles by colossal piles of gray 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. For 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 neighborhood 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 blue gum 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 early years, my parents used a powerful formula that kept our family together. As soon as the tension between them became unbearable, they would invite a houseguest to come and stay with us. As if by magic, the presence of the new arrival eased the strain between them, and for as long as there was an outsider living with us, the dust of their discontent would briefly settle, and our house would seem to shimmer.

When I was nine, Paul, a radical student with a terrible stammer, stayed with us for a whole summer. He lived in our outside rumpus room, which he painted in psychedelic swirls of orange and purple—the look of the early sixties—and where from under his door often came the sweet scent of burning incense. I once ventured uninvited into Paul's room after school, and there, to my amazement, sitting on top of him, stark naked, was his girlfriend, MoonRay. "Wh...wh...wh..."

was all he managed to get out before I slammed the door shut and fled.

When I described what I had seen to Sarah, she blushed deeply and told me that what Paul was probably doing was, "probably push-ups, Emily, probably push-ups."

Paul was followed by Rocco, a moody artist who was dating Anthea, a divorced friend of my mother's. Rocco lived in our garage, where he sculpted abstract figures from pieces of old scrap metal. He and Anthea would have loud, passionate fights that invariably ended up with one of them storming off into the woods. Rocco's relationship with Mother's friend lasted less than a year, and he moved out of our garage once they broke up.

Several less interesting houseguests followed. But 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, in the kitchen, in the dark spaces behind the curtains, and in the hallway closets. It was then that the gypsies came.

Were it not for our proximity to the lake and the woods where they were camped, we might never have encountered them. It was from beyond the lake that they came into our lives. From where, I do not know; no one ever asked. It did not seem to matter at the time. They simply walked into our world from across the road. Weary travelers carrying the fates of our lives in their dank pockets.

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 around 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 camping trailer and cast a spell over us, and changed our lives forever.

## Deauty 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 washbasin 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 scuffedup shorts on the faded blue bathroom mat, and Mother, with wads of cotton 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 color 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 like 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 around 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 vacation 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 in the medicine cabinet for a Band-Aid for my scratched tree-climbing elbow.

"Girls, listen, this is good," Mother says impatiently, waving 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 center 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 sweater 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-paneled 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 moldy green swamp, and it 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 pacifier?" 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-de-dah friend Anthea on the phone, I overheard everything she said. She didn't know I was in the room, on account 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," Mother 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 daresay 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 heat 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 page boy, 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 anymore!" Mother says, ripping the cotton 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 from her toes tossed all over the floor like bits of confetti after a parade, and patters out the bathroom in her silly toeless slippers.

