

# A SPORT OF NATURE



A NOVEL

NADINE  
GORDIMER

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A NOVEL BY

*Nadine Gordimer*



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# A SPORT OF NATURE

**For Oriane and Hugo**

*Lusus naturae*—Sport of nature.

*A plant, animal, etc., which exhibits abnormal variation or a departure from the parent stock or type . . . a spontaneous mutation; a new variety produced in this way.*

—Oxford English Dictionary

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## *A SUNCRUSH FOR MY SWEETHEART*

Somewhere along the journey the girl shed one name and emerged under the other. As she chewed gum and let slide by the conveyer belt of balancing rocks, the wayside halts where black children waved, the grazing buck sloping away to the horizon in a blast of fear set in motion by the passing train, she threw Kim up to the rack with her school panama and took on Hillela. The brown stockings collapsed down her legs, making fine hairs prickle pleasurably. She would dig sandals and a dress out of her suitcase and change without concern for the presence of other women in the compartment. She was going, each time, to her aunt, one of her mother's sisters, in whose home she was given every advantage. She was coming from the Rhodesian girls' school to which, she would say when asked why she didn't go to school in South Africa, she was sent because her father had grown up in Salisbury. She was not the only child whose parents were divorced or parted or whatever it was they were. But she was the only Hillela among Susans and Clares and Fionas. What sort of a name was that? Didn't know, couldn't tell them. What she did tell them, without a moment's hesitation, was that anyway she was always called by her second name, Kim. As the years passed, not even her teachers called her anything but Kim. No-one remarked when she went with the other Kims, Susans, Clares and Fionas to the Anglican Church on Sundays, although in her school record 'religious faith' was filled in as Jewish.

Olga met her at the station. Later, it was at the airport; Olga must have told her father it was ridiculous to subject her to that two-day hot and tedious train trip. Or maybe Olga paid for the air-ticket; she was generous: she would say, never to the child herself but to company while she ruffled the child's fringe or put an arm round her—Oh this's the little daughter I didn't have.—

The room was made ready with a rose in the summer holidays and in winter freesias or jonquils that smelled like Olga's embrace, towels thick as sheepskin coats, and a fluted dish of her favourite Liquorice All-Sorts. There were some things that were hers: holiday clothes left behind each time when she went back to school, books, trinkets fallen out of favour. Her

absence was more permanent than her presence. There was always the sign of some other occupancy of the room. Olga stored out-of-season clothes in the cupboards; other guests who slept in the pretty bed forgot things; books that Olga didn't want on display downstairs but didn't want to throw away made a jumble-sale assortment on the bookshelf. One holiday, a photograph of the girl's mother in a Victorian plush-and-silver frame stood beside the Liquorice All-Sorts. The face was composed in a way the girl had never seen: hair scrolled like a parchment roll from either temple and again from the forehead, lips a lovely shape shiny as liquid tar. The shape was not disturbed by a smile. The eyes were the only feature that matched any recognizable living reality; they were the eyes of a woman seeing herself in a mirror.

Her mother ended at the shoulders. They were squared in a jacket with shoulder-tabs and revers.

—Was she in the army?—

Olga was watching the girl the way she watched people she brought together in careful selection for the harmony and interest of her dinner parties, and she laughed as at the reward of some original remark outside the usual pleasantries. —Ruthie in the army! That's what we wore, in the Forties. The last word in fashion. You had to look glamorous in something that suggested a uniform. That jacket was dark red—I remember it as if it were in front of me. And see the ear-rings. She *would* have her ears pierced. We thought it was old-fashioned or common: grandmothers had floppy lobes with holes in them, and young Afrikaans girls from the *plaas* wore those thin gold circles. But Ruth paid Martha to do hers. That was our old nannie; when we were quite grown up she still used to come to help with the washing. Ruth sat down to the table one lunch-time with cotton threads hanging through little crusts of blood on her ears. Ugh. We squealed and made a fuss, of course . . . she must have been fourteen.—

They looked at the photograph politely, together. (It was about this time that Olga would take her eldest son, Clive, and Hillela to art exhibitions.) Hillela did not come out with anything else unexpected.

—It's for you to take back to school. Isn't that an enchanting frame I found—

It was standing there in its place on the bedside-table after the girl left, and was there when she came back each time for other holidays. Her mother was not dead. She lived in Mozambique and never visited. The child had asked questions once or twice, when she was young enough to believe adults gave you answers worth hearing, and had been given an

oblique reply. Her father said her mother had 'made another life'. Olga, deciding when the child was 'old enough to know the truth', told her her father had forbidden her mother to have any contact with her. Her mother lived with 'another man'.

The man to whom he was an other, then, must be her father; yet she called her father 'Len' as someone might for whom *he* was another man.

Len was a rep. A title of profession to her, like doctor or professor, although she found she had to explain to other girls this meant he represented firms that sold hotel lines. And what were 'lines'? Really—was there anything those kids did know? *Lines*. Different kinds of things that hotels and restaurants need. Bread-cutters, food-warmers, slicers, trays, fish-fryers, even plastic flowers, mirrors, pictures for decoration. There had been a time, she must have been very small, when she had played and slept and eaten beside him in his big car with all the boxes of samples, catalogues and order-books piled up in the back. He had made her a nest in there, on rugs stained with cold drinks and icecream she spilt. —A Suncrush for my sweetheart.— She sat on bar-stools in country hotels. He bought her sweet orange-coloured drinks. He washed her panties in the hotel basins while she fell asleep watching him.

—I remember those dorps, with Len.—

—Oh you can't! Really, Hilly? But you were only three or four.— Olga rearranged her social commitments in order to spend time with her sons and adoptive daughter during the holidays. On summer mornings she oiled herself, spreading her toes to get at the interstices and twisting her neck, over which a string of pearls bobbed, while the four youngsters played waterpolo in the pool. When they came out to dry off and her attention slid from her *Vogue* or Hebrew grammar, there were those interludes of shared physical well-being that melt the inhibitions between generations.

—He used to talk to people in a language I didn't know. And there was the boy who carried the boxes in and out, I didn't understand what he was saying, either. Of course Len was speaking Afrikaans, and the native boy whatever his language was. So English was ours. Len's and mine. I'm sure I thought only we could talk it. And the wife of one of the hotel owners once gave me an Alice band for my hair, it had Minnie Mouse on it.—

—When was that?— Mark looked at his cousin and saw a stranger in their midst, now and then, sometimes with a resentful curiosity, sometimes with envy of experiences not shared.

—Oh, when I was little.—

Olga impressed the discipline of her smile on her second son. —I said. Three or four, that's all.—

—And she used to travel about with Uncle Len?—

—For a short while. It was before he went back to Rhodesia.—

Brian stretched out his small hand and clasped Hillela's ankle, claiming her. His face appealed to his mother. She acknowledged him with a chummy tilt of the head.

Jethro came across the lawn that day carrying a tray of fruit juice and hot scones. His waiter's flat feet and the rubber soles of his blanched tackies on the dense clipped grass gave him an endearing bouncing gait. The girl broke the water, having won by the length of an outstretched hand a race against the boys. It seemed she emerged for him. Jethro's home was in Rhodesia and every time she returned from school she had the aura of an emissary. —They teaching you so nice to swim there.— He put down the tray and stood shaking his head and smiling at the dripping, heaving girl.

Through water-matted lashes she saw the face magnified like some dark friendly creature bumped against in the deep. —I'm in the first team. (Blew her nose in her fingers, and Olga's forehead flickered a frown.) We beat Marandellas and Gwelo last term.—

—And Bulawayo? You not going to Bulawayo?—

—No, I still haven't been to Bulawayo.—

Olga kissed a damp cheek as she handed her a glass of juice. —Why don't you pretend you've been to Bulawayo, darling, for heaven's sake. It means so much to him. He thinks of you children as his own.—

Olga took Hillela with her to the hairdresser as if she were a sister—one could hardly say that Olga, who was the one with strong family feeling, had sisters: Ruth in Lourenço Marques somewhere, Pauline someone she had grown away from, their interests so divergent. At eight or nine the salon—as it was referred to by the man who did Olga's hair—with its chemical garden-sweetness and buzz of warm air from the dryers, fuzz of sheddings on the floor, made the child drowse off as a little animal curls up, recognizing a kind of safety. All was comfortably ritualistic, pampered, sheltered in the ideal of femininity constructed by the women entrapped there. Olga gave her money to go out and buy sweets; she tripped back quietly happy in anticipation of the soothing, sucking comfort to come as she lolled, humming or whispering to herself in the company of ladies deaf within their second, steel crania.

Fashions changed; she was older. Olga's hair, pulled with a crochet hook through holes in a rubber cap, was being tinted in streaks while her

nails were steeping in tepid oil. Olga was still learning Hebrew (made fun of her attempt to speak it on her visits to Israel) but instead of her grammar was now reading a manual about isometric exercises a friend had brought from New York. Every now and then her concentration and the pressure of her elbows against the steel tube frame of the chair she occupied, the empty shape of her shantung trousers as she pulled in abdominal muscles stiffly as a bolt drawn, showed she was putting theory into practice.

It was the time when beautiful girls, by definition, had hair as long and straight as possible. When Olga and her sisters were adolescent, on the contrary, curls had been necessary, and they had suffered the processes that produced them. Hillela had curly hair like her father, but of course she would want to look like everybody else; boys instinctively are attracted to what they don't even know is the fashionable style of beauty. Olga was paying for Hillela's hair to be heated and ironed straight.

*Hillela no longer falls asleep at the hairdresser's.*

*A jaw with a well-turned angle on either side, a slightly prognathous mouth and the full lips that cover with a tender twitch the uneven front tooth; it has defied an orthodontist who made conform perfectly the smiles of Clive and Mark. The cheekbones lift against the eyes at the outer corners, underlining them, aslant. All right so far. But it's difficult to meet the eyes. They are darkness; there is a film to it like the film of colours that swims on a puddle of dark oil she has seen spilled on the earth at a garage. They react under their own regard as pupils do under an oculist's light; but doubly: the change observed is also experienced as a change of focus. Nothing can be more exact than an image perceived by itself.*

*The face is small and thin for the depth from the cup at the base of the collar-bones to the wide-set breasts. In the trance of women gazing at themselves in the mirrors they face, she is seeing herself. The mirror ends her there.*

On Saturday afternoons when there were no sports meetings the songololo made its way to one of the parks in the city of Salisbury. In traditional school terminology imported from Europe the procession of girls was known as a crocodile, but the boys of their counterpart school dubbed them collectively by the African name for the large earthworm in its shiny hoops of articulated mail that is part of the infant vocabulary of every white

child in Southern Africa, even if it never learns another word of an African language. The boys' image was based on accurate observation. The brown stockings the girls wore gave their troop the innumerable brown legs on which the *songololo* makes its undulating way round obstacles. So it was the girls flowed round people on the pavements, and over pedestrian crossings. In the park the image broke up joyfully (the littlest girls), cautiously (the solemn, hand-holding ten-year-olds), slyly (the adolescents skilled in undetectable insubordination). The first stage on the escape route was the public lavatories. *Miss Hurst, we have to go.* The teacher who accompanied the *songololo* sat on a bench and read, looking up now and then to enjoy the luxury of huge shade under a *mnondo* tree that came down over her like a Victorian glass bell. She was the only one who saw the gigantesque beauty of the park, in one season its storm-clouds of mauve jacaranda, in another the violent flamboyants flashing bloodily under the sun, or the tulip-trees and bauhinias that in their time shimmered, their supporting skeletons of trunk and branches entirely swarmed over, become shapes composed of petals alive with bees as a corpse come alive with maggots. The adolescents were excited by the humus smells, the dripping scents of unfolding, spore-bearing, dying vegetation in clumps and groves of palms, man-high ferns and stifling creepers where the sun had no power of entry and leaves transformed themselves into the pale sticky cobra-heads of some sort of lily. The darkness sent the girls off giggling urgently to that other dankness, of *Whites Only, Ladies, Men*, housed separately from *Nannies*—for the black nursemaids sent to air white infants in the park. When the girls at last came out of *Ladies* the boys from the counterpart school were already emerged from *Men*, and pretending not to be waiting for them. Disappearing into the fecundity of municipal jungles, there the girls wore the boys' cheesecutters, wrestled in amorous quarrelsomeness, smoked, throwing the forbidden cigarette pack in forbidden pollution into the gloomy, overhung ponds, swatted mosquitoes on one another as an excuse for fondling, and—one or two who were known to be 'experienced'—managed to find a spidery hideout to *vrey*. Like *songololo*, a Zulu word foreign to English-speakers, this Afrikaans one was used by every English-speaking adolescent. To *vrey* was to excite each other further; sexually, with kisses and limited intimacies. There were indiscretions less private than *vreying*. Dares, too, provided heightened excitement. Hillela once led a move to tuck the school dress up into pants and wade in a green bog of water-plants and slime. The boys were challenged to follow. Their narrow grey trousers wouldn't roll up beyond mid-calf; somehow, one of them was

overcome by boys and girls as the vigorous big ants on the ground on which he fell would overcome a beetle or moth, and his trousers were taken off him. He was pulled slithering to join Hillela and his distress caused his flesh to rise. The other boys, and some of the girls, almost forgot the danger of shrieking with laughter. They pelted uprooted lily pads on the poor blind thing Hillela saw standing firm under baggy school underpants. She came out of the water at once, pulled down her dress, dragged stockings over her dirty wet legs, and burst from the thicket, not caring if her bedraggled state were noticed. She did not speak to her friends for the rest of the afternoon, but apparently had ready, loyal to her peers, her answer to Miss Hurst's question about her wet stockings. She had slipped and fallen; very well, then, she had permission to take off her stockings. Just this once.

Just this once. By such narrow margins the group of girls who had grown from juniors to seniors together kept the status of trust that was traded in return for their taking over irksome small responsibilities from the teaching staff. A clique of senior prefects had discovered how to open, without breaking, the glass box that held the key to the dormitories' fire escape; they slipped out regularly at night to go to parties. A foolproof line of supply and use of *dagga* was established; brought in by and bought off one of the black kitchen workers, it was smoked in the lab, where there were stronger odours to disguise its fragrance. The group shepherded little ones to Sunday school in town and took turns to disappear (someone had to represent the senior presence to the bible-class instructor) and meet boy-friends at a vacant lot. They were educating themselves for their world in Southern Africa in the way the school helplessly abetted, teaching them at morning prayers to love thy neighbour as thyself before they sat down for the day in classrooms where only white children were admitted.

Now and then one of these school-worldly girls went too far; for example, the one who went for a ride on a motorbike down Jameson Avenue during her turn to slip away from Sunday-school duty. She was seen by a parent as he came out of a Greek shop with cigarettes and the Sunday paper; seen in her school uniform with her spread thighs 'clinging to the back of a boy'. The headmistress floundered embarrassedly through all the moral props; feminine modesty, the honour of the school, bad example to the innocent Sunday-school charges, and then, in a complicity both she and the girl understood perfectly, let her off just this once (with the punishment that would satisfy everyone: docking of half-term holiday) because the transgression was one accepted within their recognized code of virtues and concomitant vices.



Among the privileges granted to the senior girls was permission to go in mufti, in groups of not less than four but unaccompanied by a teacher, to a Saturday-afternoon cinema. The housemistress had to be told the title of the film to be seen; it was supposed to be an educational film, but there was not much choice in the few cinemas of Salisbury in the late Fifties. The housemistress had to approve Elvis Presley and James Dean. At the cinema the schoolgirls met a wider circle of boys than that of their counterpart school. Although Hillela's hair, once out of the care of her aunt's hairdresser, sprang elastically back to ripples again, she was as sought-after in the popcorn-smelling dark as anyone else. The cinemas were always full on Saturdays, right up to the back rows, which blacks and coloureds were allowed to occupy. There was the day she was struggling back through the crowded foyer at intermission with five icecream cones for her friends, and the tall boy with the sallow face and strange blond hair asked so nicely if he could help her. When they reached the row where her friends were sitting, he handed over the cones and disappeared to wherever his seat was. But she knew he had been looking at her, before, a number of times, while she had played her part: of not being aware of him. Then he began to smile at her when he saw her queueing for tickets, and she even waved casually back. Arriving for a James Dean she was to see for the second or third time, she said, Where're you sitting? preparatory to asking if he wouldn't like to sit with 'us'.

He had promised to keep a seat for a friend; wouldn't she come along with them, instead? His friend did not arrive, or did not exist. He did not shift his leg towards hers or take her hand. Now and then both had the same reaction to the film and instinctively would turn to smile at one another in the dark. The look of him, that had attracted her attention for some weeks, took on a strong bodily presence beside her. She did not expect this one to touch her, was not offended that he didn't. When the lights went up she was glad to see his face. She liked particularly his eyes, a greeny-grey with hair-thin splinters of yellow sunburst in the iris, whose charm was that they seemed too luminous for his sallow skin and tarnished curly hair—like lights left burning in a room in daylight. His name was Don; he was an apprentice electrician. It was considered a catch to have a boy who was no longer at school; a grown-up. He spoke with an unfamiliar accent—Afrikaans, perhaps, but different from the *Boere* accent from South Africa that was made fun of at school. He explained that his family came from the Cape; they had lived in Salisbury only for the last five years. He had passed his matric in Salisbury; they discussed the subjects he had taken, and those she was studying for a more junior exam, now. He said