

Buttercup

A more experienced man would have seen right away that she was trouble. But as I trudged up the grey, stone steps with my books, and as the morning sun caught that mane of golden hair above me, I thought she was a goddess. She was certainly very different from Sannie Bezuidenhout back in Tweebuffels. For a start, as I was to discover, she smelled different.

Tweebuffels is pig country, and Sannie and her four brothers got up at 4 every morning to do all the things that make pigs look like they do on calendars and bacon packaging. The hand that Rosalie Thorensen waved at me looked softer and cleaner than Sannie's had ever been in those heart-pounding minutes behind the school bicycle shed.

A more experienced man would also have recognised the expression on the face of her short, dark friend. I didn't. It's the kind of mistake that gets you bitten by jealous dogs.

"Hello" said Rosalie in the husky drawl that was to turn me inside out every time I heard it. "What faculty are you in?"

"Errum, I'm..errum..I'm in Engineering." I heard someone say in a squeaky voice. One of the heavier books was slipping out of my paralysed embrace. Close up, she was beautiful. There was no room for a sixth sense amongst the tatters of the other five. The nursery rhyme about the spider and the fly wasn't in the curriculum at Tweebuffels Pre-Primary, so it goes to show how important good basic education can be in later life.

"Is it? Tha's nice...she trailed off, her lazy blue eyes lingering all over me. I shifted the books protectively across the darns in my last clean khaki shirt. A sound from the dark presence at her side might have been a snarl or a snort. The goddess spoke again.

"D'you play rugby? I mean, like what team are you in?" Again, the sound from her bristling guardian.

I thought about my five outings for Tweebuffels High second team and started to answer, but then something told me she was talking of a different kind of team. Perhaps it was the blue and white Varsity rugby badge pinned to her sweater, or the sight of some of the rugger fraternity making their swaggering way down the steps towards us. If my lack of boots had embarrassed Tweebuffels High, it would not endear me to the inner circle on campus.

"Aaarr, I don't play anymore," I gargled, "Married to the books." This last witticism accompanied by a ghastly smirk. Her blue eyes looked genuinely regretful.

"Is it? Tha's a pity - you've got the body for it. Such wide shoulders....." And then the cream of tertiary manhood descended on us in a jostling avalanche of patchy beards, artificially faded jeans and in jokes. Somebody patted Rosalie's bottom and I fancied I heard a snarl from her protector as they were swept up and away. I stood there a long time, watching them go and just as I was sadly turning away, that perfect face looked back and smiled at me. Just once. But then, that's how many times the hangman pulls the lever.

Much later, I was in front of the cracked mirror Mrs Buchanan had grudgingly supplied with the room, when Gawie came in. His timing was never good.

“What the hell do you want?” I growled “Don’t you ever knock?”

“Why should I?” he answered placidly, “I live here. Remember? Why’ve you got your shirt off?” I didn’t like the way his eyes narrowed in sudden interest.

“Mind your own business.” I said. I wondered if he’d notice Sannie’s picture turned to the wall. Sometimes Gawie was quite quick.

“You got to watch yourself, ouboet. These big city women eat ous like you and me for breakfast.” As I say, he was quick for a plattelander. I used a couple of words I’d picked up on campus. Gawie chuckled and got out the bread and the coffee from our secret store. Ma Buchanan didn’t allow cooking in the room, so I joined him in the usual singsong to drown the roar of the Primus. It helped to ease my embarrassment.

In the next month, I found out that Rosalie Thorensen was in Fine Arts, that she had no real boyfriend that I could identify, that she was constantly accompanied by Beulah Barovsky and that I couldn’t stop thinking of her and those few sentences she’d uttered at our first meeting.

I analysed every word and phrase, experimented with alternatives and drew a half dozen conflicting conclusions. The little time I found for such diversions, I spent, with Gawie as an amused spectator, on elaborate plans to contrive another meeting. Nothing ever materialised.

Both of us were hanging on by the skin of our teeth to keep pace with the workload. Tweebuffels and Pofadder weren’t places you returned to report failure. There’d been too much sacrifice back there in the dust.

I’d almost resigned myself to just watching her go by in the hopes that she’d look at me. It would have at least been something. I suppose it’s hard to smile and wave from the front seat of a speeding sports car, or to pick out one lonely figure amongst the hundreds about you. I suppose she would have had to listen carefully to all those clever jokes, or miss the point and not be able to laugh in that delighted head back way she had, one hand over her mouth and golden hair swinging, so that they all laughed with her. It made me want to laugh too, even though I couldn’t hear the joke.

In the end it was on those same stone steps that I found her, one overcast day, sitting alone. I’d been running for a tutorial I’d missed before, but the sight of her stopped me in mid-stride and I sank down beside her without thinking.

She didn’t look at me and I was afraid to stare at her so we just sat like that, side by side, staring out over the hazy suburbs below. I stole a sideways glance at her, and a great cold hand squeezed my heart when I saw that she was crying. Not like Sannie had cried when I

left, in great bellowing sobs and shoulder-shaking grief. But as still as the stone steps, with an occasional silent tear rolling down her cheek.

For just a moment I wondered where her bodyguard was before I reached across and dabbed at a tear with the cuff of my jersey. It seemed a safe enough thing to do without being savaged by Beulah, wherever she was lurking.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, stricken to see her like this, but sure of myself for once. “Is it something I can help with?” I wished I had a clean handkerchief. In fact, any handkerchief would have been a start. She turned to me and despite the tears I was stunned by her beauty. If she was wearing any makeup, it certainly didn’t dissolve and run like the trading store stuff poor Sannie was experimenting with. Perversely, I hoped her trouble was enormous.

“I lost my ring.” She sniffed. I looked at her fingers. They were full of rings. They all looked expensive.

“Which one?” I asked, disappointed. Scenes had been flashing through my mind where the van Schoor physique and intelligence were pitted against rather more dire threats. Still, if this was conversation, I was at least talking to her.

“The plain gold one.” she husked “I left it on the studio windowssill and it was g-g- g-g-one! I can’t find it anywhere!”

I looked up at the Arts building, half concealed in Autumn by scarlet Virginia creeper. At an open window, I could see the curtains stirring. “Maybe the curtains swept it off the sill.” I suggested.

At that, her eyes registered a brief, wan hope, but then two huge crystal tears welled up and she squeezed the incredible lashes tight shut and bit her lip. I imagine it was an appeal like that which put paid to the last sabre tooth tiger’s hope of retaining his fur coat.

“Don’t worry, Rosalie” said some impetuous idiot - using my voice “I’ll get it back for you.” I stood up and nodded confirmation, looking down at her tear-streaked face. I seemed to be impossibly tall at that moment and I knew that my shoulders were unbelievably broad. It was worth anything to see her slowly stand on tip-toe and reach up to put her arms around my neck. When she kissed me softly and breathlessly, I know that we both actually left the ground.

Then she was gone, her skirt swishing against the bushes beside the steps. Just once, she turned and smiled, her head on one side. I sat down again, because I couldn’t remember where I’d been going in the first place. It was a long time before I wandered back to the room

Gawie came in much later and sat on his bed, looking at me.

“And now?” he said, “What’s with the stupid grin? And what’s that stuff all round your mouth – what have you been eating?” He peered closer and reached out a finger to sample

it. I brushed his hand aside and sat up. In the mirror over the sink, I surveyed the lipstick. I turned on him defensively.

“This my parochial friend, is the beginning of a new life for me. It’s the seal of approval from Rosalie Thorensen.”

“It looks more like Clifton Climax from Revlon,” said my insensitive roommate. “It also looks like bad news. What brought this on?”

I told him. He drew an imaginary square on the table with his finger. “You have a problem, ouboet. You didn’t ask her which window. If it was one of these two sides, it’s somewhere in all that creeper. If it’s this side, Buttercup’s got it! “

“Buttercup?” I hadn’t thought of that. The Zoology lab was below the studio on that side and Buttercup’s pond was the logical place for anything to land. Tame old Buttercup lay there, most days, like a weathered log, a speculative eye cast up at the laboratory windows whence she could expect an occasional windfall in the form of botched dissection material, hastily jettisoned before Professor Fremantle could freeze the perpetrator with his wintry gaze and add to the stock of memorable one liners attributed to his ascerbic tongue.

“Lend me your bicycle – or give me a lift. Come on, before it gets dark!” I commanded. Gawie settled for the latter.

Together, we peered through the head-high mesh. Designed to protect rather than contain athletic crocodiles, it had clearly failed on at least two occasions. The words “Property of Gucci Inc” were painted in yellow on her placid, leathery back and someone with a felt-tipped pen had drawn a passable zipper around the edge of her permanently grinning mouth.

Buttercup lay at the bottom of the pool, immobile and nearly invisible in the gloomy water. Almost at once I saw a glint in the murk. Buttercup stirred slightly and I thought the glint moved too.

“It’s there, Gawie, look!” I hissed “Rolling around on the bottom. I’ve got it!!”

“Not quite, ouboet,” he said evenly. “I’d say possession was nine tenths, wouldn’t you? Mind you, it’s only about a meter deep. I reckon you could whip over the fence, fish it out and be back out here if you really move yourself. Buttercup won’t even notice.”

“I looked at the two meters of shadowy menace. “I’m not going into that filthy water, Gawie! You must be mad!”

And that might have been that. If I hadn’t seen Rosalie Thorensen pass by with a gaggle of friends, Beulah in scowling attendance. And if Rosalie hadn’t seen me and blown a kiss that made me grab the fence for support. Beside me, Gawie sighed and scratched his neck.

“OK, man. Let’s do it. I mean why don’t you? I got an idea.” He was very quiet as we freewheeled back to the room.

Next day, we were back with the sunrise. It was Sunday, with nobody about to see us unpack. Ten sweaty minutes later, I was decked out in an evil-smelling rubber wetsuit and gasping for breath through a defective breathing hose. For some obscure reason, Gawie insisted I wear the flippers. "In case you need a dash of speed in the water." he said seriously, murmuring after a final survey "Hail the conquering frogman comes."

The flippers made it difficult to climb the fence difficult, but clutching Gawie's noose, I felt marginally better. According to the plan, it was for putting over Buttercup's snout. I peered anxiously at Gawie through the cracked and smeary face-mask and he gave me the thumbs-up. He'd argued that someone was needed to hang onto the other end of the rope. Which, of course, was outside the fence.

Somewhere I'd read that crocodiles were deaf. I hoped so because the hammering in my chest was enough to wake those in the Pretoria Zoo. I sucked in a great draught of foul air and leaned over to where I could dimly make out my long, pointed target. There was hardly a tremor as I dangled the noose and then with a gentle tug, slid it over Buttercup's muzzle and pulled it tight. Triumphant, I turned and gargled at Gawie.

"Pull, man! Pull the bloody rope!!!

He did, and the pool boiled as Buttercup reacted indignantly. Unspeakable things churned to the surface and I shut my eyes and mouth quickly and stepped into the water. I crouched, scrabbling about on the slimy bottom. When my terrified fingers found the ring it seemed large and abnormally heavy, but I grabbed it, bobbed back to the surface and flung it on the grass. There was some sort of brass and rubber plug attached to it.

Although Gawie was hauling manfully on the rope, I hardly had time to claw my way over the fence before Buttercup erupted, hissing and snapping at the rope around her tail. Anyone could have made the same mistake. Crocodiles are actually pointed at both ends, so to speak. Gawie and I lay there panting, watching the water drain out of the pool. The smell was indescribable.

There was quite a crowd round Buttercup's pool watching four Zoology students offloading a long stretcher-like contraption from a campus truck. Sticking out of the ends and sides were unmistakable bits of crocodile. I got a glimpse of the familiar artwork around the toothy end.

One of the students was holding forth "Aah yes, It's most important to introduce the female to the male and not the other way round. The males get very territorial, so in this case, we swapped them for a while before trying to mate them."

I also saw Rosalie. She was clinging to a pipe-smoking Lothario in corduroy but she detached herself to run over and show me her ring.

"Hello! Listen, don't worry about the ring. It was so sweet. Monty took it and had a teeny diamond set in it for me for a surprise. Isn't it lovely?"

Eyeing the glittering gem, I murmured something appropriate. She pecked me breathlessly on the cheek and skipped back to Monty.

Watching Buttercup waddle eagerly to her new lover, I thought I could see a certain similarity. Except that he still had a length of rope around his tail.