

# Manor House



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**T**HE VORSTERS fascinated us. Their house was near ours, blindingly white through old oak trees. Wherever my sister and I went, that house shimmered right into our games and secret conversations. Actually, the Zevenfontein manor house was almost a mile away. It was big and grand and old. And it was mysterious in a way which made our home seem commonplace. The Vorster children were different too; everything about Zevenfontein seemed different and far more exciting than anything pertaining to us and ours.

I am thinking back on the late twenties when I, Albert van Rensburg, was a skinny boy, staring into mirrors with bright, inquisitive eyes to see whether I was really I. And there was my twin sister, Berta: a loose-limbed, robust child with freckles and a dazed expression in the eyes. Our farm, called Jonkersdal, is old—just as old as the neighbouring Zevenfontein (a name meaning seven fountains)—but our house is comparatively new.

My grandfather bought Jonkersdal, and both he and my father became winefarmers, wealthy and corpulent. Our neighbours had been at Zevenfontein for over two centuries—one of the few South African families who still owned the original family seat. Their house was one of those gabled Cape-Dutch homesteads, painted, photographed and written about for generations. You could see pictures of it in books, on calendars, on exhibitions, and almost every celebrated traveller seems to have stayed there. We had not the advantage of having lived in the same house for two centuries. And it mattered. It mattered more than other people can ever understand. We looked at the Vorsters with awe, and were they to have donned eighteenth-century costume for everyday wear, Berta and I would not have been in the least surprised.

There were four Vorster children: an eldest son called Abrie, followed by a girl called Rina, a boy called Frans and a baby girl called Kato. We were almost the same age as the eldest son. He was tall and dark and lived in trees most of the time. Rina was always running or trying to drown the ducks. Frans sat quietly and covered himself with mud, slowly and methodically. Kato was still a baby. Berta and I had veneration for Abrie (we usually felt the same about things), but we hardly knew the boy, or any member of his family for that matter. There had been occasional Sunday-afternoon meetings (hatefully formal, requiring uncomfortable hot clothes, tea and chocolate cake) when despair came over one, and flies buzzed frantically, maddeningly against sun-baked windowpanes. Abrie came only once to visit us, and a few times we saw him at his house, briefly, and then he was gone. His name was always being mentioned, but he was nowhere to be seen—except in trees. I felt miserable when I saw him in those trees, for I could never get there myself. I was a victim of polio at the age of four; my leg was strapped in an iron contraption, and I walked with difficulty. At the period to which I am now referring, I was still badly crippled. Berta, of course, could climb the most exciting trees, but she was a girl.

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One day we were under some big oaks. Above us there was a rustling movement, and there was Abrie. He was wearing a pair of old shorts and his hair was unkempt. Berta and I started uncomfortably, and then we realised that they were *our* trees. Abrie was in one of *our* trees. We looked up at the two dark eyes peering down at us. Then, suddenly, Berta rushed to another tree and quickly, cleverly, climbed right to the top. I was immensely proud of her, particularly when I saw Abrie blink with disbelief. Berta sat: very proud on her branch, her bloomers torn, one plait undone. Then Abrie glanced at me again. Maybe there was something hopeless about me; maybe he saw the yearning in my face, for with an abrupt movement he climbed and slithered down so rapidly and assuredly that it seemed as if he plunged down. I recoiled as he landed in front of me, and forced myself to look into his sunburnt face with an effort which made my hand tremble on the crutch. A pain shot through my shoulder. I had never been so close to him, and it was rather like coming face to face with one of the wild creatures of the veld. He was smiling at me. Suddenly flooded with warmth and trust, I smiled back. His eyes held mine, questioningly.

"You must climb," he said as he put his arms round me—flinging the crutch aside like a loathsome object—and helped me to the tree.

"What are you doing!" Berta screamed from high up.

"Shut up!" Abrie shouted back fiercely. He pushed me against the tree. "You have strong arms. Pull yourself up. Come on, now. . . ." And he pushed me up against the trunk while I began to haul myself up, my bad leg swinging shamefully. He was beneath me all the time and whenever I faltered he pushed. His touch was firm and strong. My arms ached with the strain and I seemed to have lost control of my sound leg as well, but I kept moving and at last, yes it was true, I sat in the top of the tree. I thought my heart would burst with joy. I gazed at Abrie who sat near me. He was panting, like a puppy I had at home. I called out to Berta:

"I'm high up in a tree, high up! Berta, I'm as high up as you are!"

She said nothing, but she smiled, and wonderingly she looked at the strange boy by my side who sat with his face turned away, silent.

It was odd and yet exciting to sit like that without speaking. I felt a need to talk, to talk to the boy beside me—after all I had never climbed a tree before, at least not such a big one. But he was staring across the veld, far away to the peaks of the Simonsberg. Berta was also watching him. We sat and waited, being far too shy and reserved to break in on this silence which the boy obviously wanted. Or was he shy too? It seemed improbable. My throat felt dry with suspense, and then far away we heard a voice calling: "A-brieeeee!" I thought he took no notice, but then he turned his brilliant eyes on me and said softly:

"I must go." He stared at me and I flushed. "It'll be more difficult to get down. But you must *learn*. Come on, I'll go first and carry your weight."

Nobody had ever taken my affliction so casually. I even felt grateful for the curse on my body; if it had not been for it, Abrie would probably never have paid any attention to me. I knew that he was not supposed to like other children.

He helped me down, at times carrying my full weight on his shoulders. Fortunately I did not weigh much. At the bottom he caught me and held me while Berta, who had descended more rapidly, brought my crutch. I leaned against the tree when he released me, and he stood and looked at us, a frown on his forehead.

"Come and have tea—at home," he suggested suddenly. "And leave that *thing*. . . ." He motioned to the crutch. "I'll carry you." He came to me, turned, and I hoisted myself on to his back. He caught my legs and plodded doggedly homewards, Berta skipping lightly beside us.

The boy's spell was such that we followed him without question. I think both Berta and I would have followed him anywhere at any time. We made a shortcut through the vine-

yards and rested three times. The boy never spoke, but he watched us closely, his face impassive, though his eyes were eloquent. He was even staring at Berta, who tried to be nonchalant. A farmhand came up to us.

"So there you are! Your mother is looking for you. . . ."

"I have brought these children to tea. Carry the lame boy, please."

I was handed over and had to adapt myself to a new smell. The hefty young man carried me effortlessly, glancing askance at Berta and Abrie. Abrie's lordly manner was a surprise to me, but the white man carrying me did not seem to mind. He smelt of horses, hay and leather.

We passed through a white wall, walked under a pergola covered in purple bougainvillea, and emerged in front of the familiar house. On the *stoep* stood the boy's mother—a small dark woman. "Ah," she exclaimed on seeing him, and then looked at us with amazement.

"I found them in the wood," Abrie informed her calmly. "They have come to have tea with us. You *did* make pancakes, didn't you?"

I had never before realised that she had such a gentle face. She smiled shyly.

"Of course, dear. But I wish you would tell me where you are going. I always worry so. I called through the megaphone. . . ."

"I heard you, Mummy." Abrie turned to the man who was still holding me. "Koos, give him back to me."

"Let Koos carry him inside, dear," Mrs. Vorster suggested.

"No, Mummy, he is *mine*. I found him." Abrie held out his arms. I was handed back, Koos grinning and winking at me. We followed the mother into the paved entrance hall which had an elaborate glazed screen at the far end. We entered a lounge on the right, the *sitkamer*—a large room with a high ceiling on beams.

"The Van Rensburg twins are here," announced Mrs. Vorster as we entered, and nervously Berta and I regarded the

people in the room. My eyes seemed out of focus after the bright sunshine. Abrie lowered me into an easy chair, and Berta sat down on the arm beside me, smoothing her dress with slow movements. The children in the room stared at us. At the table sat a thin proud woman: Miss Vorster, their aunt. She rang for more cups and Mrs. Vorster began pouring tea. The girl Rina came over to have a look at us, her pale blue eyes gleaming in her hard little face.

"You leave them alone," Abrie said menacingly as he sat down on the carpet at our feet.

"I'm just looking."

"Well, I'm just telling you. I found them in the wood."

"Babes in the wood?"

Abrie ignored her. "Mummy, the lame boy climbed a tree!"

"Did he now?" Mrs. Vorster said vaguely. She seemed an extraordinarily dreamy woman. "But how can he . . . I mean. . . ." She stopped, confused.

"I *made* him," Abrie said proudly.

The aunt gave a slight smile. She was serving delicious-looking pancakes from a silver dish. I smiled happily; I had indeed climbed a tree. Then I concentrated on the cup in my hands, terrified in case I should drop it. I always dropped things. Already I had spilt some tea into the saucer and it was bound to drip nastily when I lifted the cup.

"Your dress is dirty," Rina said triumphantly to Berta who involuntarily smoothed it again, blushing. "Dirty, dirty, dirty. . . ." Rina chanted.

"Now dear," the mother said gently, "come and have another pancake." But Rina was too fascinated with us. I looked down at Abrie's face glowering at his sister.

"They are *mine*. You leave them alone or I'll hit you!"

"Pooh." She pulled a face.

The small boy with a serious face and sturdy legs walked over and said sweetly: "More?" He carried our plates to be refilled. There was honey in the pancakes and we ate as if we were famished. We adored pancakes but never had them except

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in winter. The telephone was ringing and the aunt answered it. She returned to say that our mother was looking for us. She began to talk to Mrs. Vorster, but I found it impossible to listen to what they were saying as Rina was walking round and round and round us, Abrie's eyes never leaving her. She frightened me.

That room seemed to me the most beautiful I had ever seen. There were old mirrors, an enormous oil chandelier, a love seat, candelabra, a gabled armoire with pretty silver fittings, a musical box on slender legs, an *escritoire*, chairs, a couch, pouffs and a big round pedestal table on which the tea things were laid out. The huge carpet and brocades added to the richness of the room. I stared up at the massive beams supporting the ceiling. There was an iron hook in one. I thought it would be nice to tie a rope to it and swing to and fro, but the grandeur of the room made me ashamed of such a scandalous idea. Abrie, who occasionally turned his head and looked at us, followed my gaze upwards.

"All that is yellowwood," he said with pride. I looked at him questioningly. Surely wood was just wood. The aunt spoke up: "Yes, precious yellowwood—as precious as stinkwood. Isn't it beautiful? Those beams were cut in Knysna and brought here by ox-wagon, two hundred years ago. . . ."

"Two hundred years. . . ." sighed Abrie blissfully. "How do you like that, Albert?"

I did not know what to say. Age, centuries, beauty. . . . I had been too preoccupied with myself and too involved with the passing of my eleven years, particularly since my illness, to give much thought to past or future.

"Surely," the mother said, "they have stinkwood and yellowwood in their house as well."

"My dear Julia, their house was built thirty years ago by Theuns van Rensburg," the aunt murmured, almost testily.

"Oh well." Mrs. Vorster sighed as if a great weariness suddenly came over her. "I can't see that it is of any consequence. The South African pride in age and forebears seems to



me such a clear indication of cultural inferiority." She saw her sister-in-law stiffen and added hastily: "Ag, Gertruida, I'm only joking. I know nothing about the subject." Then, turning her head in our direction, she said softly: "But it is rather alarming that a house should keep the people who live in it in a kind of bondage. . . ."

"All this is going to be mine." Abrie waved his hand airily and proudly. That he had a very possessive nature was already clear to me.

"And mine!" shouted Rina, halting at last in her restless circling of us. "Father has said that we'll all get an equal share."

"Children, I think you should go and play. It is so lovely outside." The mother rose and gathered her needlework together. A Cape Coloured maid entered and collected the cups and plates. She moved with the quiet assurance of one who was a member of the family. I discovered later that she was a descendant of one of the Zevenfontein slaves.

"Mies Julia," she said to Mrs. Vorster, "you must please go to the kitchen right now—if you want any lunch today. This new creature, Siena, is just making a mess. I wish you'd talk to me before you engage these young fly-by-nights."

"Oh, Maraai, I thought she was so good. Mrs. du Plessis sent her—said she's an excellent cook. . . ."

"You have a kind heart, Mies Julia, and a strong imagination," Maraai said quietly, stacking the crockery on a large brass tray. "But you are too much in a dream; you've always been. Now please go to the kitchen and see what she's up to."

Reluctantly the mother left the room. There was a faint smile on Miss Vorster's face.

"And outside all of you!" Maraai turned to us children, her arms akimbo. "Such a nice day, and here you sit like a lot of roosting fowls."

"Don't you dare speak to me like that," Rina said angrily. "I'll do as I please." She sat down decisively on a pouff and glared at the maid. Maraai ignored her.

"Come," said Abrie rising. He picked me up and I held on to

his neck. Berta followed us outside, on to the wide stoep paved with Batavian tiles. We sat down on a bench flanking the stoep and I gazed down the steps made of tiny bricks up at the gigantic camphor trees.

"You mustn't mind Maraai," Abrie said after a while. "She always speaks like that. She's very kind. I don't know what Mummy would've done without her. Rina hates her, of course, ever since Maraai locked her up in a cupboard. The maids love locking her up because of her temper. Just teasing. You mustn't mind Rina either. She's a little horror, though."

"She's very pretty," Berta said, agreeing entirely with him.

"Is she?" Abrie stared away in space. "I hate her. I hate her." The suppressed odium in his voice surprised me, coming from one who handled me so gently. "I don't like girls," he added.

"But they are not all like Rina," I exclaimed, only too conscious of my sister's presence. Berta was looking away uncomfortably.

"Aren't they?" Abrie said vaguely. He stood up abruptly. "Come on, let's go to the swings." As he bent to pick me up, Rina appeared in the wide entrance door with its elaborate fanlight.

"Why don't you let him walk," she called out as she came up to us. "I'd like to see him do it."

"But you know he's lame," Berta said with concern.

"He walks sometimes, doesn't he? Come on, little lame Albert, show me how you do it!"

Abrie released me and turned to face his sister. His body hunched forward with rage. "I have warned you to leave us alone. . . ."

"But I want to laugh a bit." She sat down on the edge of an ornamental flower-pot and fingered her hair with light bird-like movements. I gazed at her with terror, and then to my shame I felt my eyes sting with tears.

"You are a very cruel little girl," Berta said with a calm that surprised me. But, after all, she was with the Vorsters at *their*

house, and she was at a loss how to conduct herself in this awkward situation.

"*Little girl*, indeed," Rina snorted. "I'm bigger and stronger than you. We haven't got freaks in *our* family. . . ."

At this, Berta advanced slowly. Abrie and I watched her fascinated. She could not have been so overawed after all. Rina's foot, in a neat black shoe with a strap, which had been swaying to and fro in an irritating manner, hung still and she sat tense as Berta came up to her. Then Berta slapped her face.

There was a stunned silence, Rina momentarily too overcome to move. But then, with the shriek of a bird, she leapt forward, her hands clawing in Berta's hair. The next moment Abrie had flung himself between them and separated them while Rina cursed and yelled. She gave a vicious kick which caught Abrie in the groin, and as he doubled up with pain, she ran inside shouting blue murder.

There was a long silence. Abrie sat where he was with his head bent. Berta straightened her hair fussily and looked at me inquiringly. We both started up as the aunt came out.

"What on earth has been going on, Abrie? Have you and Rina been fighting again?"

"Miss Vorster, she kicked him here." Berta pointed down.

"Oh, she did, did she. . . . Boetie, are you all right?"

"It's better now." Abrie stood up stiffly and came slowly towards us. "Someday," his voice trembled, "I'll probably kill her. . . with my *bare hands*. . . ."

"Now don't talk like that," the aunt said with forced severity. I could see that she loved the boy. "Abrie, don't you think the twins should go home now? I'm sure their mother must be worried." She turned to go inside, but stopped to give us another scrutiny. Glancing at Abrie, she smiled at us. "Do come again. Abrie must like you very much." Still smiling she went in.

Abrie sat down near us. Berta had resumed her seat next to

me. Again there was one of those silences that Abrie seemed to create deliberately. But this time there was nothing pleasant about it. Something *had* to be said. I wondered whether he was still in pain and what it must be like to be kicked right there. One of our grooms had told me, after a kick from a horse, that it was excruciating agony and that it left you as weak as a baby. But he was grown up, and we were still boys. I felt closer to Abrie, our maleness a sudden bond—a bond which tempted me to identify myself with him. Later I was to spend a good deal of time pretending that I was Abrie.

The boy began to speak, looking ahead in the direction of a clump of pampas grass next to an ornamental pool: "I wonder why one is forbidden to hit a woman. They are really so much stronger than men in many ways. . . . Aunt Gertruida was telling me the other day of how women fought for the vote. She called them militant suffragettes. . . ." He puckered his nose as he said the last difficult word. "They did the most extraordinary things in England—those women. Stopped at nothing." Berta seemed pleased at these remarks, although she did not have the vaguest idea what a militant suffragette could possibly be; it sounded like the name of a fierce animal—maybe in the depths of the Australian bush. After seeing a picture-book of some of Australia's weird animals, our own South African fauna seemed commonplace. However, I wanted Abrie to tell us about his fights with Rina (it was obvious that they occurred frequently), but after his reference to the fierce ladies who fought for the vote (not that I knew what that meant, either) he said no more.

"Does Rina often fight with you?" I encouraged. Abrie turned his glowering gaze on me.

"Rina is all right," he said to my surprise. "Many people think she's very pretty—my father does. He loves her very much. She only really listens to him." His eyes swept to the path. "There he comes now—"

Mr. Vorster (Oom Willem) was approaching along the path

to the left. He was dressed in khaki; a pipe was stuck in his hatband. I noticed that there were grease stains all around his hat, and a little hole, like a burn.

"Well, well, well," he sang out as he approached. "And who have we here?"

We had politely come to our feet, I standing on my sound leg. "We are the Van Rensburg twins," Berta said eagerly, also wanting to be adored by this man, like Rina.

"Do sit down." He glanced at me, then returned his gaze to Berta. "I know, young lady, Did you think I'd already forgotten your pretty faces! How are your parents? Your mother? I saw your father in the village yesterday."

"They are all very well, thank you, Oom," I piped up, also wanting to be liked by this handsome man.

"That's good." Mr. Vorster sat down beside Abrie, took his pipe out of his hatband, fished tobacco from a rear pocket, and filled the pipe with slow deft movements. I liked the shape of his hands. There was an extraordinary likeness between father and son.

"And how's my boy?" he said, resting his hand on his son's knee.

"I suppose I'm all right." Abrie looked at us. "I found the twins in the wood and brought them back for tea. Can't they come over often? Can you fix it?"

"But of course, son!" He paused. "I've thought about it before, but you know I believe a man must choose his own friends, not have them forced on him."

"Well, I've chosen them. I wish Berta wasn't a girl, but I'll try not to think about it."

"You needn't worry about it—yet!" Oom Willem laughed, and then a spasm went over his face as he closed his eyes.

"Are you sick?" Abrie looked at his father in that curious intent way of his.

"Oh, I don't know. . . . Feel a bit odd. Headache—" All the Vorsters, as I discovered later, had an aversion to discussing

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their bodily ailments. I could smell Oom Willem's khaki as the sun warmed it, a delicious fragrance, disturbingly mixed with a slight odour of perspiration, leather and tobacco.

"How old are you twins?" Oom Willem lighted his pipe with soft sucking sounds.

"We are eleven, Oom," Berta replied.

"Well, then you are just a year younger than Abrie. Hey, son, the grand age of twelve! And Rina is eleven too—my, how you are all shooting up!" He glanced at a pocket watch which glittered in the sunlight. "Good Lord, it's noon already." He stood up, stretched with the grace of an animal, and again I noticed a frown of pain on his forehead. As he turned to go inside, he said: "Abrie, ask Koos to take the twins home in the donkey cart. Or are they staying to lunch?"

"Oh no, Oom, we must go!" Berta stood up, not because she really wanted to leave, but we'd had quite enough excitement for one day.

"Right. But come again soon. Koos can always fetch you and take you back. Just phone us. Cheerio." He walked inside, the hobnails of his boots striking the tiles with a faint ringing sound.

"I'll call Koos." Abrie leapt over the edge of the stoep and disappeared in the direction of the stables.

With the harmony of thought which was ever between us, Berta and I looked at the beautifully kept garden, the hedges, flowerbeds, rockeries, fountain (a nude boy holding a dolphin), the trees: oak, camphor, pine; flowering shrubs, exotic plants, lawns. . . . The trees threw lace-like shadows on the walls which gleamed with a dazzling pearly quality in the glare of the sun. Some of the window-panes shimmered pink, almost mother-of-pearl. Bees, butterflies and dragonflies flashed their wings, and a drowsy peace began to lull us. We were tired, and all the magnificence was too much.

I recall that moment with clarity. Who could believe that it would all go to ruin? That the garden would become a wilder-

ness of weeds, the paths overgrown, the walls flaking, the entire house (famous as it was) dilapidated, the broken shutters flapping in the wind?

Abrie took us to the cart which was waiting beside the wine-cellar. To my disappointment, he would not ride with us.

"Ag man, come along," Koos urged. "I don't want to come back all by myself!"

"No, not now. I have something to do." He turned to me. "I'll come and fetch you quite soon. *Tot siens. . .*" and he dashed away. Berta stared after him. I understood the expression of her eyes.

The donkeys started up and trotted briskly through an avenue of ragged bluegum trees. The farmhand glanced at us, wanting to talk, but seemed at a loss what to say. I saw that he was aware of my leg, and that it embarrassed him, so I nudged Berta to make her say something. She began to chat to the lad about their wines and about *vaaljapie* (a crude type of new wine), and he responded delightedly. By the way he glanced at her and smiled, cocked his eyebrow, and by the new richness in his voice, I knew that he liked girls. This made me look at him carefully.