

André

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PHILIDA



PHILIDA

A Novel

ANDRÉ BRINK

Vintage International

Vintage Books

A Division of Random House, Inc.

New York



A VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL ORIGINAL, SEPTEMBER 2012

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The Cataloging-in-Publication Data for *Philida* is available at the Library of Congress.

eISBN: 978-0-345-80504-1

Cover illustration © Joe McLaren

Design © Suzanne Dean

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v3.1

This book

is for my wife

KARINA,

with love and gratitude,

for more than I can ever say

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Acknowledgements

Other Books by This Author

I am indebted to the University of
the Western Cape for awarding me the Jan Rabie/
Marjorie Wallace Bursary in 2010 for the research
and writing of the novel.

I am
God knows
A free fucking woman

Antjie Krog

PART ONE
~
COMPLAINT



On Saturday 17 November 1832, after following the Elephant Trail that runs between the Village of Franschhoek, past the Farm Zandvliet to the small Town of Stellenbosch near Cape Town, the young Slave Woman Philida arrives at the Drostdy with its tall white Pillars, where she is directed to the Office of the Slave Protector, Mijnheer Lindenberg, to lodge a Complaint against her Owner Cornelis Brink and his Son Francois Gerhard Jacob Brink

Here come shit. Just one look, and I can see it coming. Here I walk all this way and Grootbaas know that is bad enough, what with the child in the *abbadoek* on my back, and now there's no turning back, it's just straight on to hell and gone. This is the man I got to talk to if I want to lay a charge, they tell me, this Grootbaas who is so tall and white and thin and bony, with deep furrows in his forehead, like a badly ploughed wheat field, and a nose like a sweet potato that has grown past itself.

It's a long story. First he want to find out everything about me, and it's one question after another. Who am I? Where do I come from? What is the name of my Baas? What is the name of the farm? For how long I been working there? Did I get a pass for coming here? When do I leave and how long did I walk? Where did I sleep last night? What do I think is going to happen to me when I get home again? And every time I say something, he first write it down in his big book with those knobbly hands and his long white fingers. These people got a thing about writing everything down. Just look at the back pages of the black Bible that belong to Oubaas Cornelis Brink, that's Francois Gerhard Jacob's father.

While the Grootbaas is writing I keep watching him closely. There's something second-hand about the man, like a piece of knitting gone wrong that had to be done over, but badly, not very smoothly. I can say that because I know about knitting. On his nose sit a pair of thick glasses like a bat with open wings, but he look at me over them, not through them. His long hands keep busy all the time. Writing, and dipping the long feather in the ink, and sprinkling fine sand on the thick paper, and shifting his papers this way and that on top of the table that is really too low for him because he is so tall. He is sitting, I keep standing, that is how it got to be.

In the beginning I feel scared, my throat is tight. But after the second or third question I start feeling better. All I can think of is: If it was me that was knitting you, you'd look a bit better, but now whoever it was that knitted you, did not cast you off right. Still, I don't say anything. In this place it's only him and me and I don't want to get on his wrong side. I got to tell him everything, and that is exactly what I mean to do today, without keeping anything back.

He ask me: When did Francois Brink first ... I mean, when was it that the two of you began to ... you know what I'm talking about?

Eight years ago.

You sure about that? How can you be so sure?

Ja, it is eight years, I tell you, my Grootbaas. I remember it very clearly because that was the winter when Oubaas Cornelis take the lot of us in to the Caab to see the man that was hanged, that slave Abraham, on the Castle gallows. And it was after we come home from

there, to the farm Zandvliet, that it begin between Frans and me.

How did it begin? What happened?

It was a bad day for me, Grootbaas. Everything that happen in the Caab, in front of the Castle. The man they hang. Two times, because the first time the rope break, and I remember how the man keep dancing at the end of the rope round his neck, and how his thing get a big and stiff and start to spit.

What do you mean, his thing?

His man-thing, Grootbaas, what else? I hear the people talking about how it sometime happen when a man is hanged, but it is the first time I see it for myself, and I never want to see it again.

And you said that when you came back on the farm ...?

Yes, that was when. We first come past the old sow in the sty, the old fat-arse pig they call Hamboud. The Oubaas say many times before that he want to slaughter her because she is so blabby useless, but the Ounooi keep on saying she must stay here so her big arse can grow even bigger and fatter. And afterwards, when we get home, we come past the four horses in the stable, and the two good-for-nothing donkeys, and then the stupid *trassie* hen that Ounooi Janna call Zelda after her aunt that *skinder* so much, the hen that don't know if she is a cock or a hen and that can never manage to lay an egg herself but always go cackling like a mad thing whenever some other hen on the farm lay one. And then in the late afternoon when we are all back on the farm where we belong I first go to Ouma Nella, her full name is Petronella, but to me she is always just Ouma Nella.

And what happened then? ask the tall bony man, beginning to sound impatient.

So I tell him: Then Frans take me with him, away from the longhouse, through the vineyard where the old cemetery is. Down to where the bamboo copse make its deep, dark shade in the elbow of the river, that's the Dwars River that run across the farm, and there I begin to cry for the first time and that is when Frans –

You mean *Baas* Frans, the tall bony man remind me.

Yes, Baas Frans he take me to where the bamboo copse close up all around you, and when he see me crying, he get so hot that his thing also jump up, just like the dead man on the gallows, and that is when he get onto me to ride me.

Behind the dusty thick glasses the man's deep eyes seem to be looking right into me as he ask: Yes, and what did he do then?

I can feel myself going blunt inside, but I know I can't stop now, so I bite on my teeth and I tell him: He do what a man do with a woman.

And what would that be?

I'm sure the Grootbaas will know about that.

He say: I want to know exactly what he did.

He take me.

How did he take you? I have to know all the particulars. The law demands that I must find out everything that happened. So that it can all be written down very precisely in this book.

I tell him: He *naai* me.

The tall thin man with the bald head give a cough, as if his spit is now dried up. After a while he ask: Did you resist?

Grootbaas, in the beginning I try to, but that is when Frans begin to talk to me very nice

and tell me I mustn't be scared, he won't hurt me, he just want to make me happy. If I w
let him push into me, then he will make sure to buy me my freedom when the time is right
that is what he promise me before the LordGod of the Bible, he say he himself will bu
freedom for me. But I remember thinking, how can it be that a thing like freedom can hu
one so bad? Because it was my first time and he didn't act very gentle with me, he was to
hasty, I think it was his first time too.

And then what happened?

When he finish, he get up again and tie the *riem* of his breeches.

It is just as well the man don't give me much time to think, because the questions sta
coming again and they getting more and more difficult.

Philida, I want to know what happened *afterwards*? ask the man with the ploughed field o
his forehead. Did you ... I mean, were there any consequences to the intercourse you had
the bamboo copse?

I don't know about that intercourse thing and the consequences, Grootbaas.

This thing you did in the bamboo place. Did it *lead* to anything? He getting very red in th
face. What you did together in that bamboo place ...? Did anything happen inside you –
your body?

Not right away, Grootbaas. Only after he lie with me a few times, I start to swell.

How many times?

Many times, Grootbaas.

Two times? Three times? Ten? Twenty?

I fold my hands around my shoulders. And once again I say: Many times, Grootbaas.

Unexpectedly he ask: Was he the first man that was with you?

I just shake my head because I don't feel like answering. I already told him *mos* it was m
first time.

He change the question a little bit: Have you had a lot of men?

I tell him, It's only Baas Frans I come to complain about.

Look, if you have a complaint, you've got to tell us everything now. Otherwise you'
wasting our time.

Once again I say: It's just about Baas Frans that I am here.

Did he hurt you?

No, Grootbaas. It was a bit difficult but I can't say it hurt me too bad. I had badder thing
happen to me.

Then what are you complaining about?

Because he take me and he promise me things and now he is going away from me.

What did he promise you?

He say he will give me my freedom.

What did he mean when he said he would give you your freedom?

He say he will buy me freedom from the Landdrost. From the Govment. But now instead
buying my freedom he want going away from me.

How is he going away from you?

They say he want to marry a white woman. Not a slave or a Khoe but one of his own kin
So now he want to sell me upcountry.

How do you know that?

I hear him talking to the Ounooi about it. They want to put me up on auction.

Why would they want to do that?

Because they want to take my children away from the farm before the white woman comes to live here.

What can you tell me about your children?

That's *mos* why I am here, Grootbaas.

How many children do you have?

There is two left, but there was four altogether.

What happened to the other two?

I think by myself: Now it is coming. But after a while I just say: They die when they are small. The first one didn't have a name yet and the second one was Mamie, but she only lived three months, then she also went.

Who is their father?

Frans and I made them.

Baas Frans?

Baas Frans.

He keep on asking: And the two who are still alive? Where are they?

One is at Zandvliet where we made them. She's Lena. My Ouma Nella look after her. The last one is this one I bring on my back with me.

For some time he say nothing more. Then he get in a hurry and he ask: When did the other two die?

I don't look at him. All I can say is: When they was small. One was only three months old.

And the other one?

I have nothing to say about the first one.

Why not?

He die too soon.

He look hard at me, then he sigh. All right, he say. What can you tell me about this one you brought with you?

I don't say anything. I just turn sideways so that he can see the child in the doek on my back.

I tell the man: He is my youngest. He was born only three months ago. His name Willempie.

And you say it is your Baas Francois's child?

Yes, that is the truth, before the LordGod.

Can you prove it?

I ask him: How can I prove a thing like that?

If you cannot prove it I cannot write it in my book.

The Grootbaas must believe me.

To believe something, he says, does not make it true.

Grootbaas, I say, there are things about you that I also cannot see, but I believe they are there and that make them true.

He laugh and I can hear it is not a good laugh. He ask: What you talking about?

It is getting more difficult to breathe, but I know I have no choice and so I ask: Will the Grootbaas give me permission to say it?

He say: Look, we're getting nowhere like this. So all right then, I give you permission.

I nod and look straight at him and I say: Thank you, my Grootbaas. Then I shall take the permission and say to the Grootbaas that I am speaking of the thing on which the Grootbaas is sitting.

Are you talking about my chair?

I am talking about the Grootbaas's *poephol*. That is, his arsehole.

I see him turning red first and then a deep, almost black purple. He pant like a man that climb up a steep hill.

Bladdy meid! he say. Are you looking for trouble?

I am not looking for trouble, Grootbaas, and I hope I won't find any.

For God's sake, then say it and have done with it.

Then I shall say it with the permission the Grootbaas give me.

Well, what is it?

I just want to say, that thing the Grootbaas is sitting on: I never seen it and with the help of the LordGod I hope I never will. But I know it is there and I believe it, and so it is true. And it is the same with my children. I know Frans made them.

Very slowly he get up from his big, beautiful chair with the armrests that I can see carved very carefully by hand. Now he is trembling. And he say: Meid, your cheek will land you in more trouble than you have ever been in.

My Ouma Nella always tell me that will happen to me one day. But I only say this to the Grootbaas because you ask me and you give me permission.

What the hell do you expect of me now? he shout.

I can only ask the Grootbaas to do the right thing that Frans promise me.

Baas Frans.

Baas Frans.

The trembling man move his books and papers aside, put his long feather pen on top and get up.

Willempie start wailing and I smother him with my breast.

Is that all now? I ask.

What makes you think it's all? ask Grootbaas Lindenberg. We haven't even started. All you have done is to lay your complaint. We still have to investigate. Now we must wait for your Baas to come and make his reply.

I feel my chest go all tight. So what do I do now? I ask.

We will let your Baas Frans know. You can wait here in the jail behind the Drostdy until he comes.

My whole body feel numb, but I can see there is no way out.

He call one of his helpers, the ones they call the Kaffers, who do all the dirty work here around the Drostdy, to take me to the jail at the back.

Once again I ask him: What do I do now?

You don't do anything. You just wait until your Baas comes. The Protector will send a messenger to your farm.

When we go out on the back stoep I ask the man who is come to fetch me: What do I do about food? That can take a long time.

They will look after you here in the cells, say the Kaffer. He look like a Khoe man and he

face is wrinkled like a sour plum.

Thank the Lord God, I am now taken to a cell with five or six other women. They are friendly to me and make room for me and give me some of their food. From that first day the women share with me all of the little bit they got. There's dried fruit and aniseed bread and sometimes a few fresh apricots or early peaches or a dried fish. In the beginning I feel scared because I got no idea of what is going on and what can happen to my child. But I soon find out that they look after me well in that place. Once a day the Khoe man with a face like a sour plum come to take me round the big white building to the backyard to stretch my legs. It is a long wait and I soon get tired of having nothing to do except to think, but it give me a good time to make sure what I want to say if the day come.

What keep on going round and round in my head is everything that happen to bring me here where I am now. Was it really worth all the trouble? Because it wasn't just the long walk, and not knowing, and feeling scared, and wondering about what is going to happen. It was the being here.

Because it's not just deciding to come and complain, and then to walk to this place and get it done and go back home. I know only too well what it take and that's a lot. Everything that ever happen to me is here in my two hands, and for all I know it's for nothing. It's not much of a life I had at Zandvliet, with the beatings and the knitting and the working day and night and always doing what other people tell you to do and everything else. But it's all I got, it's all I am and all I can ever be. It's my whole blarry life. Because after this, coming to Stellenbosch to complain, it may be over for me. If this do not work out it's to hell and gone for me. But there is nothing else I can do.

What have I got at Zandvliet? You can't really call it a life. It's not clear like day or night or like sun and moon, it's somewhere in between. If I can be sure of Frans, that can make things different, but I'm not. Today, there's nothing sure about anything for me. But this little chance I got to use, otherwise it may be gone for ever. I mean, you can say the law give me the right to come and complain. But if you ask me, it's not the law that speak the last word in this land. It's everything that happen behind the law, and around the law. That is what matter for the big men of the Caab. Ouma Nella already told me about slaves that went to complain with the whole law in their hands, and then afterwards, when they get back to their Baas they get beaten to death or they get hanged upside down or they get starved to death, and there's no cock that crow about it, no dog that dare to bark. There's many ways to kill a cock or a dog or a slave. Even Ouma Nella tell me to stay out of it, but for once I do not listen. Because no one can tell me to let go, not even she. For once I cannot listen to her or to anybody. Now it's heaven or hell for me. To hell I refuse to go. And to the kind of heaven I got to know at Zandvliet, their kind of heaven, I swear to God, I will not go either. Not now. All I got is to sit here in the cell and wait, with the baby on my lap.

Philida's Thoughts wander back to the Secret that did not drown and the Promises left unfulfilled

At Zandvliet it all begin. Almost as far back as I can remember, it always been the farm, nothing but the farm. I remember an earlier time when we were still living at the Caab. But mostly I think about the farm and its people, its early people and later people, all the way from the beginning to today.

I remember my Ouma who always been there. And everybody that come afterwards. All of this Ouma Nella tell me. She got stories for everything, and many of them come from a long way back. Because Ouma Nella keep her ears open for everything that sound like a story. And she talk to everybody. I often hear her talking even to God. Most people, the Oubaas and them, go down on their knees when they want to talk to him. But Ouma Nella can speak any time she want to. She speak to God the way others speak to a man you know well and don't have quite trust, because she keep saying he's a bit of a cheat and he'll tell a lie if it suit him.

My head remember this and that and lots of other stuff as well, but the thing that really remember is my body. Everything leave its mark there. Some you can see, others you can't see, but they all there. Burns and cuts and bruises. The scrape marks on my knees and my elbows and my heels, all kinds of marks. The beatings and the falls, the icy water of early winter mornings, mud on my feet, chickenshit or rotten figs between my toes, I remember Frans' hands on my body, on my shoulders and my back and my buttocks, my feet in his hands, I remember him hard and swollen between my legs, and I can hear him talking softly in my ear: Come and lie with me, Philida. My body will make yours happy. It will be good for you, you'll see. I shall buy you free, I shall go to Stellenbosch and speak to the Landdrost, I shall walk all the way to the Caab if I have to, and pay whatever they ask so you can be free, then you can walk everywhere you want to. With shoes on your feet.

That I remember specially well. The shoes on my feet. What he say about the shoes he promised me from the very first day. Because he knew, as I knew, as the whole world know, the man or the woman with shoes on their feet, they cannot be slaves, they are free, shoes mean that they are not chickens or donkeys or pigs or dogs, they are *people*.

I remember walking, with my two narrow feet, walking and walking and walking for days on end. Along the old Elephant Trail that go back to the time before time, when they say big herds of elephants used to trek past this place, first from deep inland and over the mountains where the village of Franschhoek is nowadays, and then past Zandvliet to Stellenbosch, and from there across the Flats to the Caab, all those years since that time before time, when there was no people yet, just the track that seem to move along on its own below my feet, farther than far. It's a road that come from the beginning of the world and don't ever really end. Yet at the same time you may say that it's a road that start this morning before sunrise from the sands of Zandvliet in the grey dust. That is the farm, it's Zandvliet. That's the place they bring me to when I was nine years old, they tell me. I was the knitting girl, with fingers as thin as twigs, but as clever as hell. And I had no choice, otherwise Nooi Janna would have stripped the skin off my arse; Oubaas Cornelis taught her everything about flogging. With

thong, a shoe, a *kierie*, a switch or a sjambok, if you wouldn't listen, and Nooi Janna never had a soft touch. Not in the Caab where the Oubaas had the wine shop and the big cellar, not among the mountains at Zandvliet when they came to live here.

Zandvliet, in the shadow of the mountains that blue off in all directions – to the clouds and the cliffs of Great Drakenstein, or the heights and caves of Simonsberg opposite. Mountains on both sides, further and further away, blue and pale blue and paler blue, like old bruises getting fainter on your body. Mountains that echo with cries and calls, of the bateleur eagle and the brown bustard, the thin shrilling of the lark like a twine of cotton among the other birds, a shy tacking stitch. The noisy screams of the hadeda, like messy red and purple and green stitches on a new cloth, the crows like dark patches in the bright sun, black threads in a field of white or blue, or a peacock yelling like a thing that know all about death, but so beautiful with its bright feathers when it open up like the rising sun, growing as stiff as Frans's thigh when the lust grow in him, always the birds, or the bats at dusk, the owls at night tearing your innards out in shreds with their hoots and hoos. All of them calling out Zandvliet, Zandvliet, deep into the secret places of your body until you learn at last to know where you come from. Because their sound is like thin twine or yarn through your head and your stomach and your ribs, reminding you that this is where you belong, this is Zandvliet. Zandvliet is sand, it is stone, it is deep earth covered with white grass and green grass and grey grass and longing and anger and happiness and vines and wheat and rye and oats and misery and joy and weeds and once again vines.

Zandvliet go back very far, and Ouma Nella love telling the stories of the place, for days on end, and especially nights. Often she go back to the woman called Fransina, who lived here long before Oubaas Cornelis bought this farm, before we came here from the Caab, the white people on their wagons, along the road from Klappmuts, past Simondium and Stellenbosch, and the rest of us on foot, we the slaves, barefoot across the Flats and along the valley and over the mountain, following the Elephant Trail, three days' walking, four days, and the little ones – I was nine, remember – sobbing snot and tears because our feet are bleeding and the Oubaas refuse to stop or rest except for a few hours' sleeping at night, he is always right there beside you or behind you on the big black stallion, the riding crop in his hand to spank you on whenever he think you are malingering, bleeding welts on your back and your dusty bare buttocks, nine years old, and at that time there's some even younger children walking too, all the way.

Even before that time, long before Fransina is working here on the farm, as the story go she must have been about the same age I am now, and then she run away, she and the slave Klaas run off together, the name of the Baas on the farm in those days is Marais, and they run away because Fransina cannot take it any more, all those beatings from the Ounooi, who beat her every day. With anything she can lay her hands on, *rieme* or knotted *entjies* or quince switches or even a piece of firewood. Every single day she got beaten, at sunset to punish her for what she done wrong during the day, at sunrise for what she will do wrong in the day ahead. And yet she meekly take whatever came her way, she was a slave after all, what happen to her is the will of the Lord. All she care about is her children, her two girls Philippina and Emma, they are all she got, those two daughters she got from her previous Baas, Dominee Schutte. He make her lie down for him and break into her night after night, and that is how Philippina happen, and later Emma, two pretty girls. What make her lie

down for him, is that the dominee promise with his big white hand on the open Bible promise her before the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, that he will free the children she give him from between her legs, so that is how she give him Philippina and Emma. The same way that Frans later promise me also that he will free our children, he promise it before God even though he didn't have his hand on the Bible. But when the time come the dominees forget all about his promise and he sell Fransina and both her daughters to Baas Izak Marais. And after all the trouble Fransina had with her Nooi, and all the beatings, there was an auction in Stellenbosch one day and the Nooi sell the two girls to a farmer from deep in the inland, somewhere in the Sneeuherge, and no one even know for sure where that was.

Fransina will never see her children again. So that is why she run away with Klaas, after another bad beating in the farmyard, first by the Nooi and afterwards by Baas Izak too, with a piece of wood and a *riem* and a *kierie* over her head and neck and shoulders, wherever he can reach; those people was just as bad as Oubaas Cornelis who come later.

So Klaas and Fransina run away, outlawed and banished as the Landdrost say, they want to go to the Sneeuherge where the two girls was taken after the auction, but they got no idea at all of where that place is. They only get as far as the Steenbras River, where they got to live on fish. First there on the Steenbras River and afterwards at Saldanha Bay, where they sometimes find vegetables in somebody's garden. After a while there come another runaway, Afrika of the Caab, and he take them to two other slaves, Philander and Fleur, that was living near Stellenbosch for some months, stealing and breaking into houses and so on. For a while it was all right, but then they steal two sheep and they got caught by a commando just as Afrika was skinning one of the sheep. All of them off to the court.

Klaas was tied to a pole behind the Drostdy and there his back was beaten to shreds with canes and then he was sent to Robben Island to do hard labour for ten years. Afrika, Philander and Fleur was burnt with irons and their legs was put in chains. But there was one good thing: when the Landdrost hear about Fransina's children he only send her to the jail for six months. Afterwards she don't have to go back to the De Villierses, but I don't know what happen to her after that. Anyway, that is how I got here. Because when I hear that Frans Brink is going to sell me in the interior, and my children too, little Lena who is only two, and the baby here at my breast, Willempie, I decide no, they not going to do that. Because where is Fransina's Philippina and Emma today?

So for me Zandvliet is the place where Fransina and them once lived. But Zandvliet is more than Fransina. It is also the birds and the little bushbuck and the trails of snakes and the tracks of meerkats, it's porcupine and aardvark, it's the jackals in the night, it's the sun shining through the ears of a hare, it's the dry cough of a leopard on cushion feet.

But what to me is most special about Zandvliet is Kleinkat. How it start is when Langkat get six kittens and the Ounooi say they must all be killed, we already got too many of them on the farm. Not in eight weeks' time as it usually happen, not tomorrow or the day after but right now, today. And it is Frans who must put them in a bushel basket to drown them in the Dwars River just down from the longhouse. I tell him he cannot do it, not to Langkat's babies, because Langkat is my cat, the Ounooi say so herself the day I knitted her the red and-blue cardigan, the pretty one with the double moss-stitching, so she say I can keep Langkat for myself, and so the kittens is also mine. But then Frans say she told him to drown the litter in the Dwars River and all he can do is follow orders. I go and stand before him and

ask him if he always do what his ma say. He just pull a face and say, What else? I ask hi again must he always do what his ma tell him, can't he just say no? Frans say, She is my m I tell him those kittens also want to live, don't they? He ask me, How can I say No to her? I don't listen to her she will tell my pa.

I ask him: Are you a slave then who must do everything she say?

Her word is her word, he say and he pick up the basket. I can hear the little sounds the making inside and I grab the basket too.

He say: Give me the basket, and he try to pull it from my hands.

I grab it back and we pull it this way and that way. The basket fall. Inside, the kittens a screaming and mewling in thin little voices like needles in our ears, and the lid begin to sl off. Frans dive closer to grab the basket and push back the little ones, but one of them, th smallest one, the little grey-striped one, she jump out. I pick her up and put her in the pock of my apron and hold her tight.

Philida! he say, and his voice sound like crying. Give it back! I'm going to get into ba trouble.

Then it's *your* problem, I say. I'm keeping this one. I'll make sure the Ounooi won't get he

Philida, you a shit. Give it back!

You a shit too!

I'm going to tell my ma!

This time I say: Let me be, dammit! And I promise him: Look, I won't tell anybody. Nobody will ever find out.

When Frans see he won't catch me, he stop.

You promise before the LordGod you won't tell anybody?

I promise before the LordGod.

Then it's all right, he say, you can have the little one.

Before he can change his mind, I run off and rush to Ouma Nella's room where I cannot hear the other kittens outside mewling and crying for help when he drown them.

For a whole day I stay just there looking after the striped kitten and Ouma Nella give some milk to suck from her finger and then all is peace on earth again, as the Ounooi always say.

It's only four or five days after that, as I sit outside our room with the little one on my lap that Frans come back to me. He is standing out of the way.

You still angry with me? he ask.

It's not you I'm angry with, I tell him. It's the big people. Thank you for helping me keep the kitten.

He say: You better make sure nobody ever find out about her.

From that day Kleinkat is our secret. And oftentimes Frans come to play with us if I don't have knitting to do or if I can slip away when we sure that Ounooi Janna won't see us. And from playing with the kitten he and I also start playing together. Like we played when he was very small and I look after him and change his nappies and get him to be quiet, the way Ouma Nella showed me. Those games go on until Frans is no longer a baby. And it's always the two of us together, with Kleinkat, but often without Kleinkat too, in the deep shade of the bamboo copse.

It's only after the day they hang the skinny man in the Caab that I know everything is no

different, and for ever. Because from that day, whenever Frans come to sit with me and we go off on our own, behind the longhouse, or to the deep well in the backyard, or of course to the bamboo copse, it happen over and over that, when I think of that day, I *sommer* begin to cry. I was never a cry-baby-tit, not even when the Ounooi took the strap to me, over my dress or on my legs or on my bare bum; I clench my teeth and swear to the LordGod I won't cry, I won't cry, even if they beat me dead. But those days I find that the tears come by themselves, just like that. Every time I see that thin man hanging by his neck, the crying start all over again. And the pee also, down my knees, no matter how hard I try to keep it in. That is when Frans put his arms around me and start to rub my back, my back and my arms, and at first I try to stop him, but soon I no longer try, and I can feel his arms moving all over my body, first my back and my arms, then down across my stomach and between my legs and between my buttocks, everywhere, while I just cry and cry, and his hands keep moving. And after some time I no longer cry, and I just let him do whatever he want, now I can feel his hands pushing into me, into the deepest deepness of myself, and then he begin to shake like a sheep that got its throat cut, and then I know that this is it, he is *naaiing* me, and I cannot and will not stop him any more, I just go on crying in his ears, no, no, no, crying no, no, yes, yes, yes, and then I no longer know or care what is happening. That is how it happen every time from that day on. If I start crying he will push himself into me, until I no longer care any which way, I just do whatever you wish, you are the Baas, just push into me, I no longer want or wish anything, just stay inside me, just keep on, don't stop.

And from this beginning what happen for us is not just the thing in the bamboo copse, but everything we do, everything we say, everything we think about. It is the thing, Ouma Nel tell us, that we call love. And not just because it make his thing stand up and push into me but because we want to be together, he and I, and because he care for me and I for him, and because the world can only happen for us because we are together.

And I think that is why, when we are together and he move into me, that he keep saying Philida, I shall care for you, I promise you, I shall make it worth your while, I shall make sure that you're made free, I'll talk to Pa, and to the Landdrost, and to everybody in the whole wide world, from Zandvliet all the way to the Caab, I promise and I promise and I promise, from now on you are mine, for ever, for us there will never be a slave and a baas any more, just you and me, I promise and promise and promise, from now on we shall both wear shoes, for ever and ever, amen.

And every time Frans start telling me these things, I have questions that must be answered. How can such a thing ever happen? All these things you promise me, how can they come true? You are white, I'm a slave and a *meid*.

That is when he start explaining, over and over, how those Englishmen that are baas in the Caab, they may be bad, but they are not just bad. Remember, they brought their law with them, he tell me over and over, and what that law say is what must happen, not just in the Caab but in Stellenbosch and Paarl and Worcester and everywhere in this land and even over the sea. And what that law say is that this thing about baas and slave is wrong and it must stop, and soon there will be a day when everything will be different.

And will we all wear shoes then? I ask him.

Then Frans say, Yes, that is how it will be. Shoes on our feet so that we can go where we please, we can walk all the way to England if we wish. I shall go and talk to the Landdrost.

Stellenbosch, he say, and to the Council of Justice and to the Govment. The world will be very different place from today, you'll see, we must just be patient and bide our time, yo and I and everybody.

And Kleinkat too?

Yes, Kleinkat too, he say.

*Francois remembers his Childhood with Philida and the Stories about the early Days of Zandvliet before
MaJanna married into the Brink Family*

Yes. To Philida I would promise anything, ever since we were children. She was the first person I really wanted to be with. By the time I was about eight, so she must have been eleven or thereabouts, I already had the habit of filling a wooden barrel in the kitchen with hot water from the hearth so that she could take a bath while I kept watch at the outside door, because I didn't want anybody to see her without clothes. As if that could make much difference! Her poor little dresses were just rags and tatters. Philida with the cut and bruised feet, barely a toe or nail unscathed, covered in dust and dirt and chickenshit and cowshit, but I still remember how carefully I used to hold them in my hands and rub lard on them and how much she liked it. Such small, thin feet, but she could run like a steenbokkie if she wanted to. What I wished above all else, and what I kept promising her for years and years was to give her a pair of shoes. I'd have loved to make her a pair with my own hands, it's a skill Pa taught me, one of the few things I can really do properly. I'm not big and strong like some of my brothers – KleinCornelis or Lodewyk, who are like tree trunks in the dusty yard. I myself always prefer to be indoors rather than out, and from the time I was only a couple of hands tall Philida taught me to crochet and make quilts. But then Pa decided that was too girlish and it was time to move outside. I learned to manage the fields and the orchards and especially the vineyards with their hermitage and hanepoot and steen grapes and muscadine and a bit of shy cabernet. I have to attend to all of this while my pious brother Johannes Jacobus spends his Friday evenings at an address on the Kreupelsteeg in Amsterdam where he habitually drains a *borrel* before spending a sedate hour with a plump prostitute whom he casually mentions in private letters to me, not sparing me any details, such as his insistence on wearing his bladdy home-made socks knitted by Philida to ward off the cold. To our parents he presumably pretends to be gathering information which may be of use in future sermons to his congregation once he is back home.

In those early days, before I was forced to work outdoors, I saw Philida the most, because she was the knitting girl. But we never got as far as shoes. For she was a slave child and slaves and shoes had nothing to do with one another. That was why I kept on promising to buy her freedom one day, so she could get those shoes she wanted so badly. I'm sure she never cared as much for freedom as for shoes. And I swear – I really swear – that was what she wanted for her. How could I know that PaCornelis would once again put his foot down? He set Petronella free so many years ago already, the old woman in whose room Philida still sleeps. So why couldn't he do the same for Philida?

Or perhaps I should have known it all along, he's my father after all. Still, I never thought that he'd find it so bloody difficult to agree to buy the freedom of a slave girl. She was always so small, with those narrow little feet, what difference could that really make to Pa? One skinny girl less on the farm, there have always been such a lot of them around, always under one's feet.

But the real problem wasn't the shoes or the work. The problem was MaJanna. When she met Pa, she was the widow of Oom Wouter de Vos, who was an important man at the Caa and MaJanna always reckoned that Pa could never stand in the shoes of such a man. He was a Brink and everybody knew, she said, that the Brinks were rather ordinary people. All we have is money. Not class. Which is why MaJanna decided right from the beginning that her children should marry well one day. If MaJanna hadn't been in such haste to get her children's future settled, I might still have stood a chance of putting in a word for Philida. But then she set her sights on a white girl for me and all I could do was to say Yes and Amen to everything. And now Philida is stuck with Lena and Willempie, our children, my slave children, apart from the two who died early, little Mamie and the one she does not want to talk about, the baby, my four children and hers, so what can I do now?

It will bring shame on the family, and MaJanna would like for our farm to be counted among the best in the Drakenstein. Look at how it began. Conceived and born in sin, to say it outright. For in about 1690, when the farm was first handed out by the Governor, there were stories doing the rounds. It had been given to two young men, a Hans Silberbach and a Call Louw. Silberbach had fourteen cattle and more than two hundred sheep and a blunderbuss and Louw had no more than a blunderbuss to his name. Both had to make their way through the world weighed down by shadows. Silberbach got married to a freed slave woman, Ansel who'd been deported from Java after murdering her white lover. On the neighbouring farm someone called Arij Lekkerwijn moved in with a young Frenchwoman, Marie de Lanoy. But somehow things between the neighbours turned sour and for some dark reason Silberbach bashed in Lekkerwijn's skull with a piece of firewood and he was forced to run off into the deep interior with a price on his head. A stain of blood on the farm, right from the start. Which is why I said it was conceived and born in sin. And it may be that this event kept hanging over Zandvliet like a black cloud. But in all that darkness Kleinkat was here like a small ray of sunlight.

In this Chapter Philida's Thoughts continue to dwell on Zandvliet and the House of Ghosts and Cats in which she lives with her Ouma Petronella

It is because Kleinkat is with us that I know something is still good on the farm. Whether I'm alone in the longhouse or with Ouma Nella in her room, or when Frans is with me, I know that there's always something special, something different about her. Sometimes I think she must be one of the greyfeet that go about in the dark, for often when I hold her in my arms, I can see her lifting her little head to stare over my shoulder, and then I know she can see things that no one else can see. Or while she's lying quietly on the bed, half asleep, she would suddenly sit up and start playing. Not the way other cats play, jumping and charging and grabbing at things, but as if she's really playing with another cat, like one of the little ones Frans was supposed to drown. I tell you, she can play like that for hours on end, with something that isn't there, that little striped thing. She will wriggle herself into my arms until she fall asleep. Otherwise she'll suddenly run away, her back straight, her tail all stiff and stretched out, walking about in circles on long, straight legs as if she don't recognise anybody and don't belong here, and her eyes – that start off a deep blue, then turn yellow, then green, then greener, then grass-green – they look as if they come from somewhere else, somewhere very far from here, further than all the farms of Drakenstein, on the far side of the world itself, the other side of England, the other side of the whole world.

Sometimes when I'm working, knitting or something, she go outside, and when she come back I can smell the garden on her. She smell of green grass, and of the sun, she smell of birds and their feathers, and of the young wind, her little feet smell of buchu. Then she come to lie against me, or she get hold of a piece of knitting and unravel it, and many times it lead to a quarrel with the Ounooi, a bloody awful quarrel that leave me with my tail on fire and make me feel I can murder the cat, but the moment I pick her up and I see her staring right into me with those grass-green eyes and I smell her little buchu feet, I forget all about the trouble; as long as Kleinkat is here with me the world is the best of all places to be in. One day, I know I'll no longer be here, I'll be far away in a place of my own, a place like Zandvliet but different, with Frans and Kleinkat, and our children, just us, free for always and always, and with shoes on our feet.

Of course Zandvliet will still belong to Oubaas Cornelis Brink, it's a white man's farm, and we are only the hands that work here, the feet that tread the grapes in the big vat, or churn up dust on the wide yard around the longhouse, we are the backs that bend until they feel like breaking, we are the necks that get throttled, the stomachs that get hollow from hunger and mine are the hands that keep on knitting and knitting and honest-to-God never stop knitting, and then stop for a moment to unravel a piece that went wrong, or to pick up a fallen stitch, morning and noon and night. Knitting and knitting and knitting, longstitch and plainstitch and purlstich and tacking stitch, and unravelling everything when you drop one or make a mistake with your in-and-over-and-through-and-off, and doing it all once more from the beginning if there is one wrong stitch in it, even if the day burn out into night and you

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