

The Calamitous Consequences of Small Things

When I was younger, I never thought my parents could be responsible for terrible things. Now that I'm nearly thirteen, I know that it's true. Sam says Mom and Dad don't always mean for stuff to go wrong, but adults should be better at being adults.

"It's the butterfly effect," he said. "Something small and seemingly inconsequential can have huge, calamitous effects at another time or place. That's what happens when our parents do stuff. A drop in the ocean here means a tidal wave over there."

Sam is the world's know-it-almost brother – his head is always in one book or another. He knows so many facts, words, and numbers, honestly, I don't know how there's enough space in his brain. He wins all of the academic prizes at school – though that's not saying much, because most kids at Hillbrow High are morons more interested in zol and beer.

Recently he won an international spelling competition. He spelled faster and better than thousands of spellers but was disqualified when the judges realized he was South African. He said half the world has put something called "sanctions" on South Africa because we treat black people like shit. Which is a pity, says Dad, because the award money would have come in handy. Dad had been laid off at the time, so money, as usual, was a problem. It made him ratty and difficult which made Mom ratty and difficult. And before you knew it, just like Sam said, something small turned into something big.

One night, we were eating dinner and people started shouting in the alley below our third-story apartment building window. This wasn't strange for downtown Johannesburg – someone was always shouting or crying or fighting – but our alley seemed to be the place for this. Mom says when I grow up, I will live in a nice, quiet house with a garden just like the one Moira Hopkins from my class lives in and I can't wait.

Anyway, a woman shouted, “Don’t! Don’t!” while a man screamed, “Slut! Whore!” We all looked at each other, knives and forks midair, like in a movie. When the bins fell over, Dad jumped up, knocking over his chair on the way to the window.

“Graham, no,” said Mom.

Dad’s got a bad temper and he’ll get into a fight at the drop of a hat. Sometimes he gets into arguments with Sam and I get so scared. Once they fought about an alarm clock. Dad chucked it at Sam’s head, so Sam hit him back and Dad got angrier. They started fighting and I stood in the doorway screaming at them to stop. Eventually, Mom filled a bucket of water and poured it on them.

“Like Dogs,” she said. “That’s what you do to dogs”.

The woman’s screams had faded to groans and lots of people in our building, including Dad, had their heads out the window, yelling. Suddenly Dad said, “This is ridiculous! I’m not having this!” and marched off to the front door.

I ran after him. “Please, please don’t, Dad,” I said. “Rather drop a bomb.”

In the past, when people gathered in the alley to drink and shout, keeping us up all hours of the night, Dad would fill plastic bags with water and drop them out the window. It’s not right to drench people in the middle of the night, but it’s the last resort when they won’t stop. We don’t like them, but Dad’s bombs do work.

I held him as tight as I could and after a while, he ruffled my hair. “All right, Ronnie, don’t get your knickers in a knot.”

He went off to make a bomb and Mom got on the phone with the police. “You need to come...what? Why’re you asking if she’s black? It makes no difference, for God’s sake. He’s going to murder her!”

“Let’s go check it out,” said Sam and ran to the bathroom. I went after him feeling shaky and lightheaded – it was crazy that somebody might die. He jumped onto the side of the

bath, I climbed on the basin and together we looked out the window. It was gloomy but not enough so you couldn't see the woman lying on her side, her leg at such a funny angle., it made me feel queasy.

“Jesus,” said Sam. “Who even does something like that?”

The man walked away from her and straightened his shirt. Then, with a splat, Dad's bomb hit the ground.

There was silence for a moment before the man started howling, “My eyes, my eyes!”

He rushed around in circles, palms pressed into his face and after a while, he bent over and vomited. Then he fell on his knees into the vomit and put his forehead in it. Can you imagine falling into your own sick, getting your hair in it and when you sit back up, it drips into your eyes and your mouth? It's so disgusting, just writing it down makes *me* want to puke. But let's face it: he deserved it.

While this was all happening, it sounded like Mom and Dad were having a fight about the fight and I thought, oh no, not another one. Mom told him he better hope the police don't catch him throwing those bombs because one day if today wasn't the day, he would get into deep trouble for it.

Eventually, the man staggered off to who knows where and some domestic workers who live in the servants' quarters on the roof of our building went down to the alley to help. Mom called Oom Kris in the flat below ours and convinced him to drive the woman to the hospital. He said he would only do it if she paid him.

“Fucking racist,” she muttered, giving me the money to deliver to him.

Mom hardly ever swore. The surprise must have shown on my face because she gave me a don't-say-another-word look and shooed me out the door.

A few weeks later, at dinner (again), the buzzer rang. It was Mom's revolting tuna fish pie and I was telling her why I couldn't eat it. Sam had read me parts of a study that found tuna was not good for pregnant women because of something called mercury. Mercury, Sam said, basically turned babies' brains into a pussy mush. Mom told me that since I was not pregnant, I would be fine to eat the pie.

"Yes, but you do realize," I said, pointing my fork like Dad does when he's on an important point, "that my babies will absolutely be retarded because of all the years of tuna fish mercury stored in my body. You'll only have yourself to blame for the legless, deranged grandchildren that will be *put upon* this family."

"Ronnie, don't use that kind of language about people. It's disrespectful. I don't know where you learn to talk like that."

"Everyone else does," I said, pushing the beige bits of tuna around my plate.

"It's the 1980s, not 1552. Let's progress for God's sake."

"Have you forgotten which country we're in?" asked Sam.

Mom ignored him and asked Dad about a story in the newspaper. He said he couldn't tell her because it'd been blanked out.

"Stupid government," he said, fork in the air. "Keeping us in the dark. Unless that wanker, P.W. gets a grip on the country, the sanctions will bring us to our knees."

I was going to say something but sometimes I get tired of Dad's political talk. According to him, wankers are everyone, everywhere and it's always got to do with people being either black or white – it never ends. What about people that are black *and* white at the same time? Nobody ever talks about them. If everybody was like that then we wouldn't have all these complicated problems. At school, I once suggested we should aim for this mixture and got sent out of the class. There's no pleasing people, as Mom always says.

I began clearing away the dishes and Dad answered the door. It was a cop. He announced himself as Warrant Officer Visagie and Dad led him to the lounge. His black lace-up boots stopped in the middle of his calves making his trousers puff and he had a very straight blonde mustache like the end of a thatch roof.

“I’m here, Mr. Taylor,” he said in a strong Afrikaans accent, “to investigate a complaint someone lodged about a homemade chemical bomb thrown into the alley a few weeks ago.”

My heart sped up. What if Dad went to jail? He’d get fired from the new job he’d just got and then who would pay the rent? I’d also never get a walkman or the Madonna shoes I’ve been asking for. I gasped and Dad turned around with scrunched-up eyebrows – now I was in proper trouble. It was time to get out of there as fast as I could.

“Sammy, there’s a policeman here!” I hissed and jumped on his bed.

“Huh,” said Sam, looking up from his book. “Get off my bed with your shoes. Jesus, man.”

He pushed me off the bed and I hit the floor with a thump. Normally I would’ve screamed and run to Mom, but there was no time for all that.

“Dad threw that thing into the alley that time with the poor woman and now a policeman’s come about it.”

“Oh fuck. Does he know I’m here? Flip, I better hide.”

He leaped off the bed and tried to squeeze into the bottom of the cupboard. It was so silly – in other circumstances, I would’ve pointed and laughed my head off.

“Don’t be an actual idiot man, you’re far too big for that.” I grabbed his hand and pulled him into the middle of the room. “You’ve got to act natural. Anyhow, he isn’t here for you.”

Sam had been called up to the army like all the boys in their last year of school. You only get out of it if you are blind or one-legged says Dad, and Sam’s limbs and eyes were in tip-top condition. He hasn’t sent his papers in and it’s past the deadline, so Mom and Dad were

trying to work out a way to get him out of it but the stupid government seems to have all the loopholes covered. That's why he's shitting for the police – it's a criminal offense to dodge conscription and they go looking for the people who haven't sent their forms in. That's what happened to Darren downstairs and now he's been shipped off to the border.

Sam sat down on the bed and looked at me. "Dad's been chucking those things for years. Why's now suddenly a problem?"

"The policeman said that one had chemicals in it."

"What?" said Sam. "Not water? Since when's he done that?"

"Dunno. Shall we go listen?"

We crept along the hallway and crouched behind the bookshelf.

"The man's eyes are very badly damaged, Mr. Taylor," said the policeman.

We couldn't see Dad's face but we could see Warrant Officer Visagie's large round one.

"I don't know anything about it," said Dad almost laughing. "Besides, these dirty hobos get so crazy down there, you don't know if it's made-up nonsense."

"That's the thing Mr. Taylor, it wasn't a crazy hobo."

Dad stepped back and now we could see his face.

"He's a white man with a job in the defense force. He's not happy for this to go uninvestigated."

"Well," Dad said. "Do you know it could have been him attacking a woman down there? My wife saw it. She called the police."

"We are aware of that incident and it's being handled."

"He should be thrown in jail. The sooner the better before he does it again."

The policeman sucked his lips. "There are different laws for these people."

"What people? Assaulting a woman is still fucking illegal, you know."

Sam and I looked at each other and we both mouthed, “Oh shit!” Dad was beginning to lose his rag with the cop. This was not good.

Dad’s eyes flicked out to the side and we knew he knew we were there. We scrambled back to our room like rats. We were going to get it now. As we shut the door, we heard Mom trying to smooth things over with the policeman.

“Flip, Dad’s in crap,” said Sam. “He could get into real trouble for this, Ronnie. This isn’t some darkie who can be ignored.”

“I didn’t know he was white!” I whispered. “Everybody was shouting, the guy vomited *and* put his head in it!”

I didn’t know what my point was and nor did Sam – he gave me a what-the-hell look. I was unable to let go of the puke aspect of that night and I’d retold the story several times. Mom says I’ve hung on to that part because of my trauma about the battered woman. It’s my brain’s way of coping, she says. And it’s true. Whenever I start thinking about her, my thoughts switch to the horror of the vomit, quick as can be.

We heard footsteps coming down the passage so both of us rushed to our beds and picked up our books. Mom came in with her hands on her hips.

“I know you two were listening in to Dad’s talk with the policeman and you should know that you are making him look very poor indeed.”

Mom has a posh way of talking and when she says *indeed*, it’s a bad business. Mom went to snobby English schools that Dad teases her about and when she’s angry, she talks extra fancy. She walked out, her skirt swooshing behind her.

“And if you want to appear normal Veronica Taylor, you should try to read your book the right way up,” she said from the hallway.

I ended up at court with Mom because Sam had something on and she didn't want to leave me at home on my own. It was *the* most boring day of my whole life. We sat on hard benches forever, waiting for Dad's turn with the Judge. This was the third time he'd come—twice there'd been a postponement. Mom said she was beyond sick of the whole mess.

People came in, one after the other, hour after hour, while lawyers argued and the Judge grumbled. There was a lot of talk about Pass Laws and Disturbing the Peace. I'd heard about Pass Laws many times and when I asked Mom about them, she said they were rules for black people. When I asked her what kind of rules, she said, "Not now, Ronnie."

Dad had applied for bail with money we didn't have, so he borrowed it from Nanna. It made Mom and Dad fight even more than usual. Night after night they argued about bills, Sam going to the army, and almost everything else. It was terrible. Dad had gotten us into a lot of trouble according to Mom, and we were all paying the price.

Finally, it was Dad's turn with the judge. His charge was attempted murder and how did he plead? Even saying the word "murder" gives me the jeebies, same as "switchblade" or "slaughter". Dad said he wasn't guilty and his lawyer went on for a long time about the woman in the alley. The other lawyer went on even longer about the man's eyes and something else I couldn't grasp. It was not like television at all. In fact, if this was ever on TV, everyone would go straight to sleep and never wake up.

After a while, I leaned against Mom's arm and as I started a dream, the Judge banged his hammer.

"What happened?" I asked Mom, yawning.

"The Judge let Daddy off but he has to behave and follow some rules."

"What kind of rules?"

"Not now," she said, standing up to leave.

What was wrong with everyone? There were so many rules I wasn't allowed to know about when *God Knows*, I had to follow enough of them.

Outside, Dad smoked a cigarette while Mom fluffed around in her handbag. It was getting dark and I wanted to go home. I was hungry and cold from spending all day in that dumb wooden cave and Mom said she was sick of my whining.

Then, a black woman on crutches stopped in front of us. The bandage on her leg went from her toes up and under her dress – I'd never seen such a long one. She was young and pretty, but very skinny.

"Mr. and Mrs. Taylor," she said. "I'm Doris Shabangu. I wasn't allowed in court but I'm the person...that man..." Tears welled up and she brushed them away. "I wanted to say thank you for..."

Oh shit! It was the woman who was beaten up in the alley!

Dad looked at her and carried on smoking his cigarette. Mom's jaw was almost on the floor. I wanted to say something but couldn't think of one thing.

"You should be careful who you hang around with," said Dad and walked off. Mom grabbed my arm and followed.

"Mom, let's invite her over or something," I said, tugging back my arm.

Her grip tightened. "Rons, we've had enough for one day, ok? Another time."

When would another time be? We didn't even know how to contact her. About to argue, I caught a glimpse of Mom's face. Bags rested like heavy sacks under her eyes and her neck was ropey and thin. I don't think I'd ever seen Mom look so tired.

I let my arm relax and allowed her to pull me along.

Before we turned the corner, I looked back. Doris Shabangu hadn't moved. She just stood there watching us walk away, swaying on her crutches.

A few months later I was sitting on our little balcony when Sam came out and sat down next to me.

“Rons, I’m going away next week. The army.”

I dropped my bag of crisps. The thing is, you can love someone and also not like them sometimes – that’s how it was with Sam. He could be a sicko – he used to break the legs off my dolls and laugh – and I’d break the wings off his model airplanes to get him back. But he also played football with me in the hallway which drove Mom mad – but he’d always take the blame. On the nights when the fights were bad, he’d let me crawl into bed with him even though there was no space and, I knew about the boy he’d told off for being mean to me.

I started to cry. “But Mom and Dad said they wouldn’t let that happen. How could they?”

He put his arm across the back of my chair. “That guy Dad dropped a bomb on a few months ago? He’s a big shot in the department of defense.”

“But I thought you’d got off because of your diabetes!”

Dad paid off someone to fake a medical report for a sickness where if you eat sugar, you die.

“Ja, well, they worked out I’m not diabetic one bit.”

“But you are! You have to be! You can’t leave me here on my own.”

Some people got killed in the army. Darren from downstairs hadn’t, but when he came back, he was so weird, that his parents sent him somewhere so he could “cope”.

“It’s how it is, Ronnie. I’m being stationed close to the border. At least I’ll see some action, I guess.”

He smiled. It was thin and fake – I may only be twelve, but I’m not a moron.

I didn’t know much about the border, but I knew it had something to do with guys having to fight for Apartheid. Sam says Apartheid is stupid and would be the end of all of us.

“But what if you don’t come back?” I yelled, feeling squirmy and strange.

“Well,” he said. “Let’s hope I do.”

Later that night, I sobbed on my pillow and Mom came in. She stroked my hair and hummed softly.

“What if something happens to Sam? Or he comes back like Darren?” I said, writhing around.

“Shush, darling. Don’t say that.”

“But Dad shouts about it all the time.”

“He doesn’t mean it. Sometimes his temper makes him say and do silly things.”

“Like when he drops the bombs.”

“He doesn’t always think straight,” sighed Mom.

“I wish that night hadn’t happened. Then Sam wouldn’t have to go to the army. It’s all Dad’s fault.”

“That’s not the way to think about things.”

“Well, it is actually. It’s called the butterfly effect. It’s the calamitous consequence of a small thing... that...gets big... damn, I can never say anything like Sam does.”

“All right, love, calm yourself. I know what you mean,” she said.

That night, I dreamt of war and sad Doris Shabangu.

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Dad hasn’t dropped a bomb since all the trouble. Now, when people shout and drink in the alley, he goes out and doesn’t come back till the early hours of the morning.

“Ronnie,” said Mom. She sat down on my bed and pushed a wisp of hair behind my ear. “Are you ready?”

I closed my diary and made sure the letter from Sam was safely stored in the back. It was dog-eared and stained from the number of times I’d read it and I hoped the plastic I’d covered it with would save it for years to come. I knew each word by heart and when I’m feeling off, I can recall it instantly in my mind, like a magic trick. Maybe I’m getting some of Sam’s brains after all.

Howzit Rons,

It’s hot here and the food is utterly diabolical – that means seriously crap. Our sergeant is a real clutch plate but the guys in my battalion are pretty cool. A few things have gone down, but I’m ok.

Mostly, we spend long periods moving from one place to the next. Slow. Slow. Slow. We wait around a lot and do drills in the heat.

How are Mom and Dad? Hope you’re surviving.

I miss you big time, you little snot head. Kick a soccer ball down the hallway and piss Mom off for me.

Love your big boet,

Sam.

xx

I looked at the photograph of him on my bedside table. He looked handsome in his army uniform – strong and kind of cool. I never realized it was possible to miss someone so much. If there was a competition of who could miss someone the most, I would win and I’m not even lying.

I got up and smoothed down my dress – Mom insisted I look my best. I followed her to the lounge. Dad was sitting on the couch watching television. He wore an itchy-looking suit I'd never seen before and his eyes were bloodshot.

“Come on, Graham, let's go.”

He got up, switched off the TV, and went to the front door. They stood and looked at each other a while, him in his too-small suit, her, thin and pale in a black dress she hadn't worn in years. When they hugged, it was long and slow. I got a funny feeling seeing them pressed together like that – they seemed so delicate.

“It'll be ok,” said Dad.

I wondered if a butterfly effect ever went in the opposite direction. Could the biggest, most horrendous thing happen and something tiny and good come of it? And then grow and grow into something huge enough to change all the bad? I hadn't read about such a thing and wouldn't know what it would be called. But I had to believe that it existed. It felt like everyone's life depended on it.

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