

# Little Villains

I was twelve when a girl named Natalie broke my nose with a bat. It sounds ruthless, and when retelling the story to people, I let them imagine that it was. I let people imagine a lot about my life. It's a lot more fun that way. I tell the story differently, depending on who I'm telling it to. Sometimes it's the sweet story of a disastrously clumsy goof who stood too close to the batsman and got her face rearranged. I like telling it this way the most. People visibly ease into their laughter and the air changes between us, the imagined tension that my mind has invented dissipates. Sometimes my recollection is of a hopelessly awkward sitting duck, a casualty of the cruelty adolescence foments. I tell it this way to very few. I'll meet a person and, when they speak, their words ram the springs of my stomach, tugging on my instinct like a toddler at his mother's hem. I know in that moment that they are familiar too, with having to force a smile while sinking below the surface of the waves. Of watching your will wash in and out with the tide, moon by troubled moon. I tell them this story leaving out the farcical drama of that day. I don't make them comfortable by making them laugh. In this retelling, they find comfort in the realization that they aren't alone. And that, in turn, comforts me, but it's never the full truth. The real truth is that the day Natalie broke my nose, she freed me.

It was a sunny day, the kind which, when you wake, immediately tricks you into thinking it might be a good one. Even as a child, I was deft at calling the sun's bluff, and as I dressed into my school uniform, my mind was already at work amplifying the dread balled up in the shadows of my stomach. No one knew it yet but me, that that ball had teeth and was eating away at my insides. My mother had many jobs when I was young. Some of them made me feel ashamed around my peers, whose mothers stayed at home and always looked perfect and picked them up not a minute past last bell. Their lunches were always packed full, but neatly, with brand name snacks and chocolates and energy drinks with the fancy spout. I envied them, and it annoyed me. That year my mother sold fresh cut flowers. She had a kombi with the seats removed and she would break her back delivering all over, often into the night, and much to my alarm, alone. My Yiayia would watch my sister and I at her house, which

was close to my school, and my mother would cut and arrange and package and deliver flowers from a big fridge in our garage. She would pick us up at night in that kombi, the carpets still wet from water that had slushed out of buckets, and because there were no seats we knelt on our knees in our school uniforms, our long socks soaked at the knees, clutching our backpacks at every turn. In summer heat, the sun on the roof of the combi would cook the flower water into the carpets, and the windows would steam up. I started asking my mother to drop me off a block away from school when a boy called Troy started taunting me, telling me my mother was a whore that made money fucking men in the back of her kombi. My mother obliged me, as she always did, but Troy had already moved on to teasing me about the way my school uniform constantly smelled weird. Like hot, stale flower water.

I was late for school that day, and even though this was a regular occurrence, still I burned with shame as I walked past my classmates and took my seat. I hadn't learned yet to forge a field that I could disappear behind. I was achingly present in every glaring moment of torment and everyone could see it. I felt it when teachers looked at me. The slight tilt of their heads, the pity in their voices, not only did it solidify my suspicion that I was different, it amplified it. I doodled the lyrics to my favourite songs in the margins of my planner because I couldn't draw, and it annoyed me. I forged my mother's signature on a field trip form and handed it to my teacher, who added it to her pile even though it was two days past due. I tried not to look at the clock on the wall so that time would go by faster. It didn't. A bell rang and I held my breath when my peers got up to change classes, realizing that they were headed towards the lockers to change into their PE clothes. I had forgotten mine.

Mevrou Emslie was both our Afrikaans teacher and PE coach. She never liked me, and I understood why. I was at the bottom of both of her classes, and she could tell I was doing absolutely nothing to change that. She sighed deeply when I informed her I had no PE clothes and did the head tilt.

"We're playing rounders today, so I suppose you can do it in your dress. You can start off as catcher."

She knew I couldn't catch a ball, and it was my turn to sigh. My mother never

bought school uniforms that fit us, they were always two sizes bigger and it was assumed that we would grow into them. I placated myself with the knowledge that I would be alright in the heat in my billowing dress and took my position on the field. I squinted into the sunlight and prayed that for the next forty five minutes my classmates would ignore me, the only one wearing a big, red dress amongst a sea of white shirts and shorts. The sun beat down on my face and I closed my eyes for a moment, inhaling the smell of freshly mowed grass and wondering why it was that I had never liked it, what with the way writers went on about it in books. It only ever reminded me of my father, and thinking about my father made me want to scream. Mevrouw Emslie yelled something onto the field and I opened my eyes in comically bad timing . I saw red, followed by the brightest ray of sunshine, and lastly, the green of the grass beneath my head. I couldn't smell it anymore. She had been yelling at me to move. I was, once again, in someone's way.

I'm not from the school of thought that a child should be coddled. I'm grateful that my mother raised me with the help of her own mother, and her sister, who both indulged me by finding my performances entertaining, but never gave in to me in the end. There isn't much in this world that I find intolerable, in fact I'm told by my peers I have a "saintly" patience. But a spoiled child is something I have no patience for. A pampered child grows up to lack a certain lust. An appetite vital for survival in today's ugly social order. Before that day, I would spend hours in teenage chatrooms with girls like me, teenagers with similarly bad luck of sticking out, the perfect targets for adolescent animosity. They wrote about how they wished they weren't invisible to their peers, how they longed to fit in. I called them my friends, but I never told them how my wishes differed. I would have given anything to be invisible.

I must have looked a sight on that field. From afar, everything that followed my collision with the bat must have looked like a holy experience. Mevrouw Emslie put a towel underneath my head and my classmates circled around me, dressed in white cotton, their faces white with sunscreen. I put a hand up to my

face, and felt the warmth of flowing blood, and saw the looks on the faces surrounding me. They lifted me up and carried me off the field and the last thing I remember was my reflection in Mevrouw Emslie's sunglasses as she stood over me. The red stream from my face had met the red of my dress, and made such a beautiful mess.

I hid in my room for weeks after that, the curtains drawn day and night. My mother rubbed herbal ointments around my eyes, which were both black and swollen shut. I lay restlessly in the dark and waited for my face to heal, for my eyes to open to a point where I could read enough to pass the time. On the seventh day flowers arrived for me, not the kind my mother sold, but the big fancy basket kind with the bow, and a big card. I opened it and saw it was filled with signatures. My classmates had signed their names alongside little messages scrawled in pen, but I couldn't bring myself to read them. I had two weeks left to be invisible and I meant to savor every one of them.

I drink now. A bit. My mother hates it but, she never says anything. She's told me many times about how, as a baby, I wailed to the devil if I didn't have my blanky. How she fished it out the trash and had to wash it thrice before giving it back in order to stop my shrieking. She knows better than to say anything. But she worries. She worries herself with every little thing, and I worry about her. We worry each other in circles, we live off of the sheer momentum the cycle creates. I will spin us both into the sun if I can't have a drink to shut my mind down for a night every once in a while and she knows that. I promised I would buy her her dream house, that it would always have fresh flowers in every room. She lives there now and I make sure there are. In every room my mother walks into she deserves flowers.

My first morning back at school, she made me my favourite breakfast. Two fried eggs over hard on buttered white toast. Not so hard that the yolk paled to a dull crumble, but cooked enough that the yolk wouldn't bleed yellow into the bread underneath. I couldn't manage more than a few bites, but I knew she had tried and she knew that I had too. I had surpassed the amount of time off school

that my doctor's note had recommended, to the point where my going back now seemed even more awkward and uncomfortable. I had been in denial for weeks thinking that after the humiliation I had gone through I would simply just...never return. But that morning I had to face my insensibilities and put my uniform back on, the skin around my eyes now a sallow, faded aubergine.

The car ride was made bearable when my sister gave me control of the radio and as I turned it up, learned that my absence had been long enough that the top ten had changed. We pulled into the school parking lot to Sheryl Crow, instead of the sound of frantically squealing wheels, and I almost felt like maybe I had picked just the right day to come back. I took a deep breath into the most far-reaching limits of my lungs and let it out as I stepped into the grounds. Confused to be met with smiles as I opened my locker, I was even more confused to find notes, dozens of them, spill out into the corridor. I was used to getting notes in my locker, but not this many at once. Those had been more along the lines of "Suck it,nerd", and other such elegances, but as I opened these, I found little scribbled messages of support.

I hurried to my class and moments after I took my seat, Troy leaned over to my desk, his arm extended for a high five. "Dude, you should have seen how hard you took that bat to the face. Your nose was like, backwards in your face.I've never seen so much blood."

I returned the hand gesture, but my laughter was nervous. I readied myself for the verbal misfortune I was sure he would end on as a punchline. I was used to being the punchline of his jokes.

"It was legend, dude. You're a freak, but you're a tough little freak."

He smiled, and I sat back in my chair trying my hardest to make sure no one could see me do the same.

I started opening up my curtains while the sun was out, and missing school less. I was excused from PE for the rest of the year, and in that period took up guitar lessons. I learned Sheryl Crow songs to play for my mother and she said I was even better than the radio. She was lying, but I welcomed the lie.

Every week at school felt like another weight dropped from my shoulders. I

moved from my desk at the front of the classroom to the back, where Troy and his friends had begun their daily ritual of saving me a seat. I carved the lyrics to my favourite songs into my desk with my locker key, because I was a tough little freak, and paper was for nerds.

At breaktime, we gathered on the steps of the courtyard and traded items from our lunchboxes. Natalie shuffled past us, eyes focused on her feet, desperate to avoid being noticed. It was easier for me that way. Had our eyes met, maybe I would have done the the right thing, the brave thing. Perhaps I would have walked up to Natalie and given her an awkward hug and said "I know it was an accident". We might even have been friends.

I pretended not to see Troy get up from the bench, and I closed my eyes when he heartily kicked his soccer ball at Natalie's head, but I heard it. The artlessness of her yell caught in her throat, the thud of her books as they met the concrete. The familiar laughter of our peers echoing through the atrium almost prompted the acrid taste of bile in my mouth. I muzzled it by reminding myself that they weren't laughing at me. I was free.

