

In Search of Tommie Zoë Wicomb

TS knew precisely when it first came to him, the conviction. So powerful a feeling it was, like fresh blood rushing rudely through his veins, roaring in his ears, that he knew instinctively. Besides, how else could one know such a thing?

Had there really been no forewarning, or, later, a stray question left simmering through the night? Well, no, none that he could think of. What he remembered was that it had been such a long winter, waiting and waiting for the sun to return while the wind howled, heaven clutching for dear life its old grey blanket of sky. And the rain, that thing that people had prayed for in the summer of drought, just bucketing down in a vengeful rather than bounteous way, so that people – those upcountry dominees on television – surely learnt their lesson with praying. And how, by the way, did you turn prayers round? Would reversing the words not be like praying to the Devil? TS didn't want to think about that old mincing couple, the bickering faggots, God and his Devil; things hadn't come to that yet, although his mother still went on about making his peace with God before it's too late. As if that would have made a difference. No, it was just the rain, unseasonable weather for November, which drained him, made his chest wheeze so that there was nothing to do but stay indoors. It was then that TS started his reading programme in earnest. Talk about meeting up with the truth in books! There the man was, the vark who had begotten him, skipping cool as a cucumber off the page.

No wonder TS had for so long avoided reading. Because, why, it takes you into adventures just as if you have packed a rucksack and set off blindly, without a map, and not even knowing where you're heading. He ought to have remembered that from school, because, although Joe called him an innocent philistine, it is the case that he had in fact spent some years at high school, that he had read, or struggled to read if truth be told, the great guys. But now that things had taken such an unfortunate turn, when there was so little time left, so little energy for striking out with a real rucksack, he had become addicted to heading off into stories. Let's blow, says the book, and off they go, whoops-a-daisy and hee-yah into the great unknown.

Next thing, you'll be reading poetry, Joe laughed, then the shit will hit the fan. That's the kind of thing Joe said, and then you had to work out what he meant, because Joe could sometimes talk like the guys in the Bible, in riddles, some of which eventually made sense, and others that didn't, because why, people say all sorts of things. Joe himself may not have worked out what he wanted to say; in other words, he could bullshit like the rest. But when Joe said, You must read this Hallam woman's book, could he have known what it would bring? But he, TS, should've remembered that the old guys with beards spent their time predicting the future, never mind what's going on here and now – those Josephs of old in their amazing Technicolor dreamcoats. But his Joe, and he knew Joe wouldn't be his for much longer – and who could blame him? – his Joe was the very one to decide that TS needed to change things, to do something different, a programme, he said, that didn't sap his energy. That was the first bolt of lightning. He knew in a flash what the reading programme was all about: the books were a substitute, were meant to replace Joe, and TS had to lie down there and then as the blood, the bad blood, drained from his head. Of course he didn't let on that he understood. No point in spoiling the times they still spent together, because Joe was a scream, and still they had a good laugh. Joe was not to be blamed; he'd done his bit, had come and gone just as TS himself had over the years come and gone. Together they had a history, and that is something grand, something

to be grateful for, because why, just think of those unfortunate people who flit through lives remembering no one. He and Joe didn't talk about the drugs that are paid for; TS just knew that Joe would always be there in some way or other. The days of head-over-heels were in any case in the distant past, and Joe had always wanted children. Perhaps he would find a woman.

For TS the idea of reproduction was horrible, the thing that dogs or pigs did; he had never had anything to do with women. There was his mother, of course, but he did not like women's bundled-up softness. Or the crying. What he remembered about girls, even Pumla who was his best friend in primary school, was the black dogs' eyes, lolling in liquid for no reason at all.

His mother, a veteran crier, did the same eyes when she talked about his father, the vark. A gentleman, she said, from way up north, a university man who had studied in England, and then her voice would become weird, strangled, so that TS felt responsible for her pain. Actually, he was responsible. It was his arrival that drove the father away, but how could he care about the vark who went off to reproduce himself elsewhere with no care in the world? But, no, he was not allowed to say anything bad about the man. Oh no, his mother would protest, a gentleman he was, an educated man whose first responsibility was to learning. Since she sheltered behind a veil of tears, she was naturally hazy about the details, but what she knew was that when the man went to do some important business overseas, he got an English woman pregnant, so of course that was a new responsibility.

TS had to laugh at his mother's story, her use of the posh word, *ensnared*, which was what she thought the English woman got up to. The word reminded him of visits to his grandparents in the Transkei where he helped his grandmother make snares for wild animals. He didn't like the skinning, the sound of Gogo's fist kneading the skin free from the carcass of deer or rabbit, while he, TS, held a leg. But Gogo's wild meat stew with a hunk of stiff pap, that was something to remember; they ate and told stories that never mentioned the vark.

When TS thought of that father, ensnared, skinned, swallowed by England, finished and klaar, his mother's broken voice after all these years made his blood boil. As a teenager he had taken to mocking her. Poor man, he'd say, twice ensnared, which he knew would break her heart all over again, but what did he care, how could a person care about women's stupid tears? All her life, she wailed, she had remained faithful to her Tommie, a highly educated man, by now a doctor of some kind, so that TS knew that such nonsense could only be brought to an end by being brutal.

Never again, he said, do I want to hear about that fucker, that fraud, that vark.

His mother wept. Her Tommie would never have used such language. TS kept his hands clenched in his pockets. He smarted at carrying the name of the vark who went about making little varkies, and solved the problem by using his initials. And that was that. Once his mother knew not to talk about him, the man was easily forgotten.

TS turned out to be a good name, especially when he met his first lover at Strandfontein where he spent hours staring out at waves crashing on the sand. That was where Richard found him. Richard drew on the sand with his big toe the name TESS. Embarrassed, TS dragged his own foot across to erase the writing but really he didn't mind at all. Richard was too touchy, sensitive as they say, and he was no spring chicken; he would have died anyway.

When Joe came along a couple of years later he seemed especially pleased with TS's name.

Ah, the poet, he said, and putting on a sad, pensive look, with finger held to his cheekbone, intoned: I grow old, I grow old, Shall I wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled? Dare I eat a peach?

Just like Joe, turning anything into a rhyme, although the words did ring a bell. Only a moffie would worry about eating a peach, TS said, and that made Joe laugh.

You should check the poof poet out, Joe said, and TS didn't say that he knew, that it had just come to him: the guy's poems were in the old school anthology.

So, for many, many years TS had not even thought of the vark father, not until this woman's book. It took some time for Joe to persuade him to read a book by a woman. An exceptionally lucid style, Joe said. That was how Joe talked, like the schoolteacher that he was. TS laughed. Yes, he, TS, was a bigoted, sexist pig; he would have no truck with a soggy book – how else would a woman's tears translate onto a page? But Joe insisted that he'd find the story interesting. The woman was a fiction writer, but the book he recommended seemed to be semi-autobiographical, about an absent father. It was the author's name that persuaded TS, or so he said. Chris Hallam could pass for a man. And on the dust jacket there it was: Hallam – that was what they called her.

TS had to confess that he was absorbed from the start, although at first he mistook the tingling sense of recognition for a new symptom of his sickness. What he admired was the cool, matter-of-fact way in which Hallam described the man's failings as a father, scarpering when things got difficult, her own bewilderment at being a black girl in an English town, her mother's garbled story of a wife and son in Africa. TS could not imagine the writer woman crying as his mother did. He studied the photograph on the dust jacket: a slim woman, with short, frizzy hair and big, strong features. A blood relative for sure, no question, and TS all but felt the fresh blood gallop through his veins as he focused on the very grain of the image. The woman looked like him, the same brow, the same mouth. Was that why Joe wanted him to read the book? But Joe said, no, he hadn't looked at the photograph, and when he did, said he could see no resemblance. Which is why he didn't tell Joe that he had written to her. The father from the Venda described in the book, a man who spoke passionately about education, was unmistakably his own vark father; TS knew it in his bones, and, besides, the dates matched perfectly.

The blurb spoke of the woman's other fictional works, including a volume of poetry. She was undoubtedly the daughter of the ensnarer – in other words, she was TS's sister – and he felt a surge of pride for her robustness, the rude health that exuded from her prose. He must have let on in some way, as Joe warned that it was a fictionalised autobiography, something about its postmodernness, which he supposed accounted for the jumping about of the story, the fact that he was not always sure of what was going on. But in spite of that there was the knowledge, the certainty, so that he read the book several times. Just to make doubly sure.

It was only correct that he should write to her; it was the civil thing to do, for was the book not at some level a quest to find her African family? He kept the letter simple; he knew that the author, or Chris as he thought of her now, was a no-nonsense person who would cut through the crap, go straight to the heart of things. Come to South Africa he wrote, after congratulating her on an exceptionally lucid style, I have reason to believe that we have the same father. Some would say that he had no reason whatsoever but, given that there was so little time, given that he would succumb sooner or later, he would not be held back by the unreasonable demands of reason. Enough for him that the woman struck a chord, that her research on the vark, minimal

as it was, was spot on. Besides, if she came, he would get his mother involved, get her to persuade Chris of old Tommie's identity.

Lately he was finding it easier to tolerate his mother; he didn't know how or when it happened, but the crying had definitely stopped. Come home, Mama said, that Joe won't be able to look after you for ever, and it pleased TS that she finally acknowledged Joe. She was old-fashioned, belonged to the bad old times. Keep away from white boys, she used to say, it will only lead to trouble. Now when his mother claimed that she could nurse him back to health, TS didn't mind. She was after all a nurse, even though she had spent most of her working life in children's wards.

It was almost six months later that the woman replied, and, to tell the truth, TS had more or less forgotten about her. For a while he checked the post box twice a week anyway, and, to speed things up, he told his mother, which turned out to be necessary, since she needed more preparation than he imagined. First, she returned to her old ways by bursting into tears, and said in her churchgoing voice that she knew her Tommie would return somehow, even if it did mean turning up in a book. Then she laid into the author woman, whom she was sure was a schemer like her mother. See how history repeats itself, his mother sobbed, once again a strange girl turning up like a bad penny, this time to ensnare her only son. That threw TS.

But she hasn't even written back, he protested. And please don't start your crying nonsense, he shouted. Which made her cry harder. Was speaking to a mother in such a disrespectful way not evidence of the girl's bad influence? TS had to be tactful. He needed her help, needed his mother to be nice to Chris, convince her with the first-hand stories that he had thus far prevented her from telling. Ever since he could remember her eyes would grow moist, dreamy, and she would start up with: Now your father again, I remember the time when ... Then he had to be firm, hold up his hand as if to push back down her throat the story that, like so much poorly digested dinner, rose, ready to be spewed.

No, Mama, TS said, Chris will want to hear your memories, the stories about your Tommie. He felt momentarily guilty as his mother composed herself. He worried that she might disgrace herself with weeping, that the sophisticated English writer would pity and despise her. It was clear from the book that Chris did not especially admire the man, so that his mother's sentimental stories might grate. On the other hand, she would of course want to know about his life in Africa, her own African roots. Why else would she have written the book? And then TS remembered that she had not replied.

He explained to his mother. For all the man's carefree times in London, your Tommie must have spoken about us back here in Cape Town, and that is exactly why Chris would want to come. To see you in the flesh; to hear about her father from your own mouth.

Again he felt guilty as his mother brightened up, smiled serenely, and said, If you think that's what's needed, my child, then she must come and we'll cook her real African food, offal and trotters with pap. And for her the special treat of brains tied into the little pouch of tripe – you know, the honeycombed part of the stomach.

But no one eats that kind of food these days, TS protested.

It was also your father's favourite, she said, so that's why the English person will enjoy it. TS warned that Chris might well be vegetarian.

Nonsense, she said. And I'll make a whole bucket of ginger beer as well, seeing as you can't take hot drinks. We'll have to get this place fixed up nicely, at least fresh paint for the front room.

Then she stood up and briskly tied her apron strings as if it were time to get on with the preparations. TS threw his arms around her, not least to steady himself, for a strange wobbliness – perhaps a new symptom of his sickness – seemed to invade his body. She was his old girl, his mama all right. Had he not always relied on her, in spite of her crying, to get on with things, to get things done? As the wobbliness subsided he wondered if he had done the right thing, not telling the writer woman about his sickness. A difficult one that was. She may not want to have anything to do with people like him, and be really angry that he had not told. On the other hand, she was educated, civilised, and telling might seem like piling on the pressure, playing for sympathy.

Chris Hallam could not say why she had taken so long to reply to TS's strange letter. The memory of her dad, the man who had actually raised her, could have been the reason. When he was alive, she would never in a million years have risked hurting his feelings by going traipsing after the biological African father who had deserted her. But her daddy had died of a heart attack two years before, which may well be why she got round to writing the book. She thought of herself as decisive, but whether to write to this TS or not – that she could not decide. For all she knew, he was a fruitcake, or worse, a fraud. He had offered no reason for his belief, and, besides, she felt no burning desire to meet her African relations. To find out whether he was genuine she would have to get into a correspondence that could turn out to be a costly mistake.

Chris had learnt her lesson from a visit to Kenya organised by the British Council a couple of years ago. For months afterwards there were embarrassing begging letters – please would she be so-and-so's friend – and much as she understood that poverty brought with it such humiliation, it was hard to believe that even the two guys who had behaved so professionally as hosts barely waited for her to leave before writing their begging letters. Please would she sponsor them, which meant finding them places at university to study creative writing or medicine or law, any discipline would do it seemed, and then pay their overseas fees which, they pointed out, were impossibly expensive.

She had not been able to eat for weeks. The letters remained on her kitchen table. Frozen by embarrassment, and guilt, she could not reply. It was she, the metropolitan with her cool linen trousers, silk shirts and leather handbag, who had robbed them of self-respect, who turned them into no more than the beggars on the street for whom she found fistfuls of coins and tattered notes. How could they be expected to believe that neither she nor anyone else she knew could afford the exploitative overseas fees? She too had to take responsibility for the shameful recruitment of students in Africa. Now there was the South African claiming kinship, and the further shame of thinking him to be fraudulent, but what else could she think? What if her reply were to set off the indignity of a second letter, this time begging for God knows what. She did not tell her mother about him.

It was an invitation to the Book Fair in Cape Town that brought a decision. That was a valid reason for going to Africa, and perhaps she would fit in a visit to TS and his mother. Shortly before her arrival Chris wrote a brief note to say that she might have a day to spare, that she would be in touch. There was no point in being too encouraging.

But TS was more than happy. The letter was admirable, brisk, entirely in character. Why should the woman get excited about meeting the family of a man who had let her down as only the old vark could?

His mother started cleaning and painting. TS protested; it was quite unnecessary, but helped all the same, and for all his exhaustion and wheezing found the work surprisingly pleasurable. She made cups of revolting OXO, left to cool and so develop a greyish-blue film that surely was the colour of a corpse. Drink up, his mama ordered, it gives you energy and refreshes the blood. Together they rested outside, in the weak sunlight trapped against the wall, where he became adept at pouring the foul drink into the earth.

Chris had never in her life been so cold. The Cape Town wind howled every day, driving in the rain at a punishing angle, and there was no central heating to be found. She wore her coat indoors and asked for hot-water bottles. On the two occasions that the rain stopped, the days were sunny, summery, but the buildings would not thaw and she shivered indoors. People were friendly, hospitable, but she was disappointed by the division of Cape Town into white, black and coloured cities, no different she imagined from the bad old days. People said that Johannesburg was different, a proper cosmopolitan African city, but the prospect of being even colder was not something she relished.

Then there were the embarrassing tours to the townships, and that made her decide. No need to do anything so shameful when she had genuine, ready-made access to people, although her literary hosts thought it unwise for her to go to Langa on her own. Chris may have been a sissy about the cold, but she certainly was not going to be put off by nonsense about the dangerous townships. Wasn't that also what people said at home about Brixton or Toxteth? She called TS to arrange a visit.

With only a day's notice, TS and his mother were pleased about their early preparations. A pity that the English woman could not stay long enough for something to eat, but once she'd been, once she'd fought her way through the mad drivers, she could come again. When Chris drove up in her rented car, TS and his mum hastily folded away the blankets they'd wrapped themselves in.

It's too cold for ginger beer, the old woman shouted above the television, we'll have coffee and koeksisters. Then, dunking her koeksister in her coffee for a dangerous length of time, she said: You are an angel sent by God. You've brought this family together, and see, Tommie, she's as pretty as an angel too, your coloured sister. **(Don't indent next line)**

TS held up a bony hand. Huh-uh, he said, no Tommying, okay? Don't take advantage. He tilted his head theatrically to examine Chris, and said she shouldn't mind his mama, that she was of the old school.

Chris was puzzled. There was no attempt on their part to find out whether what could be no more than a hunch had any basis in fact. There would after all be very many such men of the same name who went abroad. But they offered no information and asked no questions. Did they have any photographs? she asked.

The old woman had had one, her most precious thing, but it disappeared many years ago. She shook her head sadly. Why would anyone steal her picture? Chris must know that there was nothing, she clapped her hands emphatically, nothing at all that people wouldn't steal these days. Terrible it is, even in this respectable part of Langa.

Chris's own attempts to tell what she knew of her father seemed to be of no interest to them. She didn't like to say that she had never seen a photograph, that her own mother had destroyed all evidence of the man who had let her down so badly, but they didn't ask. Instead, the old woman said, that Chris looked so much like her Tommie, a certain look across the brow that came and went, a fleeting something, but

definitely the same eyes, just like her boy, although TS was of course a proper black African.

Chris frowned, stared at TS, who raised his eyebrows in a camp gesture she was unable to read. These people were crazy or plain crafty; there really was no resemblance, but it was too embarrassing to say, especially with the mother so genuinely thrilled, and thanking her for putting her Tommie in a book.

A real gentleman he was, very educated, no wonder the English ensnared him, the mother said, upon which TS held up his hand again.

No Mama, he scolded, don't take advantage. You promised not to speak like that.

Then the old woman asked Chris to stand up and walk across the room. Her Tommie had a distinctive walk, which sadly had not been passed down to TS. Chris was adamant. There were surely limits to indulging a proper black African lady. Oh no, she said, I can't do that; it won't be any use. I'm five foot four, small like my mother, and he was tall, wasn't he?

Oh yes, very tall, dark and handsome, but he used to hold his head like you do, a little to the left side. What did he say about your being so light-skinned? Instead of saying that she did not remember her father at all, that he had left when she was three, Chris said, Actually, I'm not usually so pale; I go quite dark in the summer, but the thing is we haven't really had a summer this year. I mean – there hasn't been much summer as yet. Later, in August perhaps ...

What possessed her to talk such nonsense, to capitulate to these crazy people? It was as if she had walked onto a stage to deliver learnt lines from a surrealist script. Whatever would she say next?

The mother wittered on about Tommie's cleverness, his ambitions to be a doctor, not the sort who could do anything about sickness, which was more the pity since they could do with help in that house, and she nodded towards TS. But TS, who seemed to have lost interest in the visit, had turned his attention to the television. Chris wondered if he was disappointed in her. She had deliberately dressed down in an old grey jumper and frumpy skirt and, instead of a handbag, carried her keys and purse in a Woolworths plastic bag. Perhaps she did not look exploitable. Well, if she didn't look the part, so be it, and she rose briskly, thanking them for the coffee and cake sisters, at which the old woman laughed and made her repeat after her: koeksisters, which sounded no less silly a name for a doughnut. Next time, she said, it will be nice tripe and trotters, proper African food.

Chris fished out her keys. Well, she said, short of tests there'll never be any way of knowing for sure—

Oh no, my child, the old girl interrupted, don't say such things. It's enough that you're here. That is proof enough for us.

TS looked up from the television, smiled, nodded, and Chris wondered what their next move would be. What on earth did these people take her for? It was downright insulting. Would they also wait until she'd left the country?

Then TS swung to his feet, and, grabbing a jacket hanging over the chair, said briskly, Let's blow. Without a word to his mother he led the way.

And where, Chris said after shutting the door, are you blowing to, and how will you get there?

We, he corrected. We're going to Sea Point. You've got wheels haven't you? We're going to see Joe.

Chris did not know why she gave in. They drove in silence, except for the directions, which he gave wearily, sullenly, as if it were she dragging him about town against his will.

Joe came to the door fastening his belt, tight under a bloated belly. He buttoned up his cardigan. The place is in a mess, he said. He threw his arms around TS, which triggered a coughing fit.

Are you looking after yourself, he asked, taking your medicine? It's orange juice for you darling, he said, as he opened a bottle of red wine.

Of course, that was it: the poor guy was ill, probably dying. Chris chided herself for not having realised, for not paying attention.

Let me introduce you properly, TS smiled. This English woman, he boasted, is your famous writer, Chris Hallam, and now, wait for it – and he paused dramatically – she just happens to be my sister.

Joe winked at Chris. That's African talk, he said, all sexy black women are his sisters. What a little skelm you are, TS, getting up to all this behind my back.

But TS said, No, really, look, I found this just yesterday. And from his jacket pocket took a photograph that once had been severely scrunched up. See, it's our father, yours and mine.

Not the guy you call the vark, Joe shrieked. Pig, he translated. Chris won't want to have anything to do with your porker.

The man in the photograph was slim and tall like TS, and, as the mother said, had passed on his eyes, the entire brow area, to his son. TS stood over Chris, jiggled her shoulder excitedly. Never mind the pig business, that's another story. Come on, he said, triumphantly, you didn't think I'd have proof, did you, hey?

Joe laughed, shook his head in disbelief. The guy's no oil painting, that's for sure. You'll be pleased to hear, Chris, that you look nothing like him. Ou TS here's gone crazy; the varkies have jumped clean out of their pen.

But Chris said, Hmm, well, let's see.

Hunched over the photograph, she stepped to the window. The light was dying. On the choppy sea spread before her, a pale moon lapped at the crest of the waves. Was it the tenderness of the light that made her straighten up and turn around?

Ye – es, she said, looks like my mum's picture – same guy – taken not so long after this one, I'd guess.

She placed a hand on TS's shoulder and drew him close.

What the hell, eh, she laughed. Just as long as you make sure, my brother, that I don't have to eat authentic African offal.