

Charmaine Pauls

He swam up to me in the pool. That's how I met Malcolm. Officially, speaking. Because it wasn't the first time I had seen him. The first time was when he had jumped from the back of the army truck, and had spoken to me through the mesh of the schoolyard. But this was the first time he introduced himself; our first exchange of names.

The filter pump or something of our school pool had broken and the temperature in Oudtshoorn shot up to forty-five degrees Celsius. With the once blue water turning mucky green, and no air conditioner, the girls were dropping like flies. Mrs. van Veenen took pity on us and arranged a swimming excursion. For security reasons we were driven by bus to the army camp to use their pool. Girls like us couldn't be taken to a public pool. The risk of one of us escaping was too big. The army pool was fenced in, and the only exit guarded.

He was on lifesaver duty. Many of us couldn't swim. Deprived children didn't grow up with pools in their backyards, or parents who were sober enough for long enough to take them to one. They made him sit in a plastic chair by the deep end, where all the girls could drool over his muscles and tanned skin. I tried not to look, but just after our eyes had locked, he jumped in and swam right up to me.

Despite the fact that I was surrounded by a group of girls from the school, and watched by the teacher on duty, he grabbed me around the waist and said, "What's your name, girl?"

His beautiful, waist-long hair was gone. Only black stubble remained on his scalp.

"They shaved your hair off," I said stupidly.

He grinned. "That's what they do to you in the army, sweetheart. Will you write me?"

He should have been repulsed by me, my stick-thin body, my flat chest and the scar on my face, but he said in my hair, "Didn't think I'd ever see you again. I'm Malcolm. What's your name, girl?"

I pulled to free myself, but his arms tightened around me.

"I'm not a girl," I said.

He tilted his head. "Well, you're not a woman. You must be sixteen, no more."

I was angry, not because he didn't look at me as a woman, or because he guessed my age right, but because I couldn't be the girl I was supposed to be, nor was I the woman.

"Piss off," I said.

"Say you'll write to me."

"Fuck off."

He just smiled.

Second Best

By that time van Veenen was at the edge of the pool. "You, mister, no talking to the girls."

His grin was broad and innocent. "Yes, ma'am. Looked as if she was in trouble. Had a cramp."

"Do you have a cramp, Molly?" van Veenen said.

"I'm all right." I shot him an irritated look.

"I think she swallowed water. Shall I get a medic?" His eyes were fixed on me with a sardonic twinkle.

"I said I'm fine," I hissed.

"Let's get her out," van Veenen said.

"Yes, ma'am." He turned me on my back and swam to the shallow end.

"Say you'll write, or I'll give you mouth to mouth."

"Why?" I kicked at his legs, but he easily ducked the assault.

"Because I don't want a Dear Johnny letter."

"A what?"

"I don't want to be dumped by a girlfriend. Men go bossies over that, in the bush."

"Bossies?"

"Nuts. Ape shit. Crazy."

The water was cool around my body, his hands warm on my waist. I tried not to think about it.

"So you want letters from someone you don't care about?"

"Exactly."

"Why pick on me?"

"You're different, sweetheart. Strong. You won't stop writing. Two years is a long time."

I wanted to ask how the hell he would know anything about me, but we had come to the shallow end, and van Veenen was waiting, her fists at her sides.

He pushed me up the steps, his hands on my bottom. "See you around, Molly." And then his muscled arms moved with powerful strokes until he got out at the deep end of the pool.

Later, when we got to the change room, there was a note under my pile of school clothes with his address. I cursed the heap of material that was marked with my name. He was an arrogant bastard.

I saw the way the other girls stared. And I heard what they said afterwards. That night, I touched the embossed scar on my face for the first time since it had been cut from my eyebrow to my cheek. Us girls were not allowed mirrors in our rooms, and after my 'incident' they took down the mirrors in the bathrooms too. The minister preached that none of us would go to hell for vanity for the lack of them, but he didn't know how the girls touched

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each other at night, or how they described each other, words forming the missing mirrors.

Until then I was happy for my scar. It had made me untouchable. It had made me fearsome. Until the day that Mal swam into my life, I thought it had made me invisible. But I guess in the real world, I was branded.