

Helena Smith



Vogue Talent Competition

My autobiography

When I was eleven we sat down for dinner and my Dad said “how would you like an adventure?” The adventure was going to Malawi for two years. None of us had heard of Malawi. My brothers went to look it up in an atlas while I cried copiously. Then I went down the hill in the dark to the community centre. There was a rehearsal for the village play in which I was playing “Barbara Cahoun, not spelt Colquohoun” in “the Happiest Days of Our Lives”.

My best friend was Lorna. We had been inseparable since we were a year old. Lorna and I considered ourselves superior and made long and complex lists of the people we hated, and the degrees to which we hated them. Instead of spending our stolen pennies on sweets in the traditional Scottish pursuit of rotting our teeth we had begun to take bus trips into town. We bought identical black pumps and two tubes of sticky sweet lip gloss. We bought clip-on earrings with dangling stars, mine in silver and Lorna’s in gold. When we ran down the hill to the youth club on Tuesday evenings the stars would jump up and flip into our ears. In Malawi our letters to each other got less and less frequent, and then stopped altogether.

We lived on a hill overlooking a town called Zomba. Our house was long and low with a beautiful garden with purple jacaranda trees, red frangipanis and an overburdened avocado tree. There were crowds of vervet monkeys in the trees. The rooms of our house were big and cool with burglar bars on the windows and we slept beneath wafting white mosquito nets. My feet were always red from the polish on the floors.

There was a cool quiet period before I started boarding school. Although I felt shy in a new way I made a friend called Rachael. We planned elaborate theatrical events together. Zomba was a green and rambling town, elegantly decaying. Children, oblivious to the fact that most of the parents were having complex extra-marital affairs, spent weekends outside in the outdoor swimming pool surrounded by sugar cane and framed by Zomba plateau.

Boarding school made me thin and unhappy. I was deeply homesick and longed for the weekends when I went home and depressed my family. Once when Dad was taking me

back for another dreaded week at school in our lime green Mazda, a man in rags screamed and ran at the car. He threw himself against the window and punched it as if he was punching me. For a second we stared at each other and then the man was hurled away by the momentum of the car. Dad was roaring with anger and fear, but I felt safe in the car, safe between my two plaits and in my too big school uniform. I thought of how the man hated me, of how I stood for everything he hated.

I worked with complete determination at school and was put in the A stream. Things became easy for me, and Rachael and I were the centre of life in our dorm. I was the archetypal schoolgirl – I got into scrapes with authority and revelled in the camaraderie of my friends, of which I had a constant, constantly changing supply. Rachael went back to England after a year. Her leaving was accompanied by the ritual sobbing of assembled girls. Even those we didn't know and those who we hated gathered in the car park. They signed Rachael's school uniform and hugged her and cried, and then Rachael was driven away. In my role as her best friend I was suitably distraught. Rachael went to Shropshire and we wrote increasingly long letters, scrawled over up to twenty-five pages. Our parents complained about the postage and we had to cut back.

I was on the edge of adolescence with fun and gossip-filled days at school and weekends spent in Zomba in the pool, on the plateau, with friends. My adolescence was a darker time, a feeling intensified by a move back to a darker colder climate. By the time I was sixteen my old utter confidence in my own abilities had gone. The days of being a schoolgirl in Malawi have a claim as being the happiest days, if not of my life, then of my childhood.