

Miss McConkey of Bridgewater Close

A new short story by Petina Gappah, winner of the Guardian first book award, 2009

Petina Gappah
The Guardian, Saturday 5 December 2009



Schoolgirls in Harare, Zimbabwe. Photograph: AP Photo/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi

When I saw her yesterday, Miss McConkey looked vital and frail at the same time, like a cross between Doris Lessing and poor, murdered Cora Lansquenet. She stood in the queue for the only cashier inside the OK supermarket that replaced the Bon Marché at Mabelreign shopping centre. She carried her head as she always had done, slightly tilted to the left, and her hair, all white now, was pinned into a large bun at the top of her head. When I was a little girl, her hair reminded me of Mam'zelle's at Mallory Towers. Not Mam'zelle Rougier, who was thin and sour and never any fun, but Mam'zelle Dupont, who was plump and jolly. Her eyes, unlike Mam'zelle Dupont's, which were never still and sparkled and gleamed behind her lorgnettes, did not twinkle behind her round glasses. For all the time that had passed, I would have known her anywhere, and besides, you can count on all eight fingers the number of white people left in the whole of Mabelreign, from Sentosa to Bluff Hill, from Meyrick Park to Cotswold Hills.

She took an inordinate amount of time to get her things onto the counter, sugar, and pasta, tomato puree, a packet of onions and two cans of condensed milk, Mazoe orange crush, a loaf of bread, a crate of eggs, seven packets of candles and three packets of Irvine's Chik pet food. "That will be seventy five billion three hundred million and six hundred thousand dollars," the cashier said.

She took out four bricks of notes, unpeeled some from one and handed over the rest. The cashier took the bands off the bricks and put the money through a money counter.

When the whirring sound stopped, and the red button blinked to indicate the amount, the cashier said, "It's short by five hundred million."

"That can't be," Miss McConkey said. "Your machine must be broken. I have just this minute come from the bank."

The cashier counted out the money, spreading the notes in little heaps of billions and millions across the counter. By now the line of shoppers holding their shopping, mainly the packets of candles that had been rumoured to be available only at the OK in Mabelreign, were murmuring mutiny. The counting continued. The machine was not broken.

"Do you have enough?" asked the cashier.

"What?" said Miss McConkey.

The cashier scowled and sighed and said, "Money. Do you have enough money?"

"More money," Miss McConkey said.

"Pardon?" said the cashier.

"More, not enough. Have you more money?"

"Have you more money?" the cashier repeated loudly.

"There is no need to shout like that," Miss McConkey said. "Wait."

She rummaged in her bag to find the notes she had unpeeled, but these with the others failed to add to seventy five billion three hundred million and six hundred thousand dollars.

"Maybe you can go back to the bank and ask," suggested the cashier.

"It's closed now, isn't it," said Miss McConkey, "and what's the use?"

"We can take some off," the cashier said.

She reached for the pet food.

"I'll decide, thank you," Miss McConkey said.

"*Kanotofidha imbwa mari kasina*," said a voice behind me.

I moved forward to the till.

"I know her," I said to the cashier in Shona, and in English, to Miss McConkey, I said, "I would be very happy to help you pay for your groceries."

"No, thank you," Miss McConkey said without looking at me.

"Miss McConkey," I said.

She looked at me then.

"You live in Bridgewater Close," I said, "At number seventeen. I know your house, and I can always get the money later."

I ignored the mutters coming from behind me and continued, "You were my headmistress at HMS Junior." Then I told her my name. She looked blank, and no wonder, I had given her my real name. I told her my school name.

"Of course," she said. "You were in Kudu."

"You have a good memory," I said.

I gave her the money for her groceries, paid for mine, and after a tussle, she agreed that I could carry her bags to her car. Her car was parked on the other side of Stortford Parade, facing the market and the church. It was a yellow Datsun 120Y I remembered, the car that made my heart beat as I saw it drive past.

"I was not headmistress for long after you got there, was I?"

She looked straight into me, and I was a child again, the old fear gripped my heart, and I thought that she must know that it was because of me that she no longer stood on the stage in the hall, flanked between the two merit boards and all of HMS Junior, from KG1 to Grade 7Blue answered with one voice and said, "Good Morning Miss McConkey."

☪

We were always the first at the things that mattered to my parents. So it was no surprise to anyone when my parents moved to Cotswold Hills, when I was seven, the year that the white people who ran our country opened up the areas that they had closed to the blacks.

My father worked for a bank in town. Our family was the first in the street to own a car, a yellow Citroen called *bambadaty* in the township because of its crouching frog shape. I was the first child I ever knew to get on an aeroplane, to Victoria Falls, not to see the waterfall but my father, who worked there briefly for six months.

For years after that, my mother kept the tickets stuck prominently in the photo album, next to a picture of us standing by the Air Rhodesia plane. When visitors asked to see the photo album, and they asked what the tickets were, my mother, in a voice that worked too hard to be casual said, "Oh, these are just plane tickets from the time we went to Vic Falls." She made sure to call it Vic Falls because that is what the captain had said when we landed, "Welcome to Vic Falls," he said, "on this bright and sunny day," and she never called it anything else after that.

Shortly after the plane ride, but long after he bought the car, we moved out of Specimen and into Glen Norah B, to one of the smart flats that were a street from the township, where we were not the first to have a car, but we were the first to have both a telephone and a television. My father was not content to live in the African townships, in Mbare and Highfield, Mabvuku and Glen Norah; nor for him the African suburbs of Westwood, just one road from Kambuzuma, or Marimba Park, ten steps removed from Mufakose. On Sundays after church, he took us for long drives along Salisbury Drive and pointed out Borrowdale, Cotswold Hills, Marlborough and Mount Pleasant, Highlands, Avondale, Bluff Hill, places whose very names evoked wonderful lives that were closed to us because the Prime Minister had decreed that not in a thousand years would black people ever rule Rhodesia.

We moved in the year of the internal settlement. The houses were quiet on undusty streets. There were trees, flowers and lawns everywhere. There were green hedges, and low gates with signs on which a silhouetted dog snarled at a man with the words "Beware of the dog, *bassopo lainja*". Milkmen deposited bottles of milk with gold and silver tops outside, and no one stole them. In our living room with a fireplace and a maroon fitted carpet, we watched television adverts for Solo, the margarine for families with an appetite for life, for Pro-Nutro, the balance of nature, and Sunlight for that fresh, sharp clean. That Christmas, my parents had a party for all our relatives. My father danced my mother around and around while David Scobie sang "Gypsy Girl". All the guests cried *enke enke enke* so that by the time I went to sleep that night, I knew all the words to the song and the *tanatana tanatana tanatana* of the chorus wove its way into my dreams.

☪

In January I started at my new school. It was called Henry Morton Stanley Junior School but everyone called it HMS Junior. On the morning of my first day, I met Miss McConkey. "I can't pronounce Zvamaida," she said, as she wrote my name down. "Has she no other name?"

As it happened I did, my second name, Hester, named for my father's dead sister, a name I hated. I was lucky, I suppose, Lucia in Grade 3Red did not have any name other than Chioniso, so her mother plucked Lucia out of the air of Miss McConkey's office. She sometimes forgot her new name and got into trouble.

I left Zvamaida behind in Glen Norah, and Hester took her place, a Hester who missed the old school, where the voices of children in unison could be heard chanting the twelve times table, or "*Sleep baby mine, the jackals by the river are calling soft across the dim lagoon where tufted rows of mealies stand aquiver under a silver moon.*"

In March, all the five black children who had started school on the same day were called to Miss McConkey's office. A missing book had been found in the bag of Gary in Grade 5Red who was Garikai at home. One of us had been found to be a thief and a liar, she told us. She gave a long talk about standards, and when we looked down at our feet, in the manner of respectful African children trained not to look adults in the eye, she talked about the importance of not being shift.

Gary's theft came to define our relationship to one another. Until more black children

joined the school much later, the five of us were linked by the hard fact of our colour, but separated by the greater gulfs of sex and age, and above all, by an urgent need to show that we were not all like each other. We wanted white friends, they had all the nice things, they had different things on their sandwiches, like Marmite and polony and cheese. *They* went to South Africa on holidays, and brought back Smarties. *They* knew all the Van jokes and what you got when you crossed a kangaroo with a ball of string, what was black and white and red all over, what the biscuit said after it got run over, why the one-handed man crossed the road. For Christmas, they didn't get clothes from the Edgars red hanger sale that they wore to school on Civvies day, they got annuals, like Misty and Jacky, and the Beano and Whizzer and Chips. They got Rubik's cubes, and yoyos, and Monopoly and Ludo. They could hold their breaths for two widths underwater, and sometimes, like Evan Smith, for two lengths. They had their own hockey sticks, tennis rackets, and cricket bats, and did not use the old worn ones belonging to the school. Their mothers got their name tags from Barbour's; they did not sew them on with uneven hands. And their fathers' radios did not say *nditaki nzvee kwaAmato wandiona*, or have the Jarzin Man's exhortations to shop at Jarzin *kune zvekudya zvine mitengo yakaderera*.

The only white children who befriended us, at least in that first lonely year, were the misfits and outcasts, the children whose company everyone else shunned. Gary took up with Keith Culverton whose family was large enough to be African, whose two dogs were said to have rabies, and who often came to school dressed in the big shorts of his older brother. After Ian Moffat's mother caused a scene at the school when her husband ran off to live with Miss Adamson, who taught Grade 5Red, Ian Moffat turned from the humiliation and became friends with Vusani. And when Antonia de Souza dropped the baton and made Kudu come last at the inter-house race, no one would play with her because she ran like a spastic (and besides, said Stacey Collins, she was not really European, just *Portuguese*) she talked mainly to Lucia who had made Eland come first in the same race but was only given the shared cup long after we had forgotten that it was she who had led Eland to victory.

I had Lara, Lara Van Tonder, the only Van in a class addicted to van jokes, fat Lara whom everyone began to call Blubber after Mrs Crowther told us about whales. She was too fat to run or swim and when she walked fast her breath came quickly in little hisses. Lara liked me to brush her hair a hundred strokes in the school playground, and she made me count each one. "If you brush it enough, at least three times a day" she said, "it will become golden, like Pauline Fossil's." I did not believe this really, but I did it anyway, because Lara had a pool at home that she could not swim in, so she sat with her legs dangling in the pool, while I splashed and picked up coins from the bottom of the pool, and I was happy because we were just like Darrel and Mary-Lou in Mallory Towers.

☪

Miss McConkey lived two streets away from our house, in Bridgewater Close, and she often passed me in her Datsun 120Y. I made sure to straighten my shoulders when I saw her car, or when I walked past her house to take the short cut home. One time, as I walked down Pat Palmer with no shoes on and enjoyed the hard heat of the road under my feet, I saw her car and hid in the ditch until she passed.

At school, I saw her every day at assembly, and in the corridors when she saw us walking in clusters she said, single file, children. Only in the third term, as Prizegiving Night approached, did I see her frequently. It was the school tradition, we were told, for HMS Junior to celebrate on that night the discovery of David Livingstone by HM Stanley. There was a poem that the school recited, a long and active poem in which there was a Livingstone and a Stanley, lots of concerned people in England wondering what had happened to Livingstone and lots of natives doing dances and naming all the places Livingstone had discovered.

The star was Keith Timmons, the captain of Roan. He was Stanley in an explorer hat and declaimed, in a voice loud with concern: "Oh, where is Dr Livingstone, Dr David Livingstone, who went away to Africa to tread the track unbeaten?" Then twenty

children, who were supposed to be the people in England said: "We haven't had a letter for so long, perhaps we'd better send Mr HM Stanley, just to see if he's been eaten."

"And sing with me in chorus," said Stanley, "while the natives do a romp-o." The five of us, the five black children, were to be the chorus and in loud voices, we chanted, "Nyasa and Zambesi and Cabango and Kabompo, Chambese and Ujiji and Ilala and Dilolo, Shapanga and Katanga, not forgetting Bangweolo!" We danced and stomped and beat our drums like our lives depended on it. Lucia and I added a little flourish by trying to ululate like we had seen our mothers do. "Well done children," Miss McConkey said. We were the finest natives that the school had ever seen, she said.

☪

It was my uncle Gift who changed everything. He had fought in the war as Comrade White Destroyer, and returned with little patience for what he called *diehard renegade elements*. He worked in the Department of Youth Affairs and Employment Creation, and he told his boss about our poem and his boss called someone at the Herald, and Miss McConkey was in the news and then she was not the headmistress any more. There was another headmaster, a Coloured man called Mr Marchand and the teachers, said my parents, would not work under him so they would go to South Africa. Uncle Gift said there was no place for people like that in the country, but my mother was worried about the white teachers leaving because she wanted me to have a good accent.

I was never called to Miss McConkey's office again because she had no office. She stayed on, teaching the remedial class for the slow learners, until there were no white teachers left at the school and only a sprinkling of white children. I became so afraid of Miss McConkey that I took to going the long way home, down Pat Palmer and into Cotswold Way, and thus managed to avoid Bridgewater for the rest of my life at HMS Junior. When I left to go to secondary school, she was still teaching the remedial class, never knowing that it was I who had changed her life forever. I did not see her again until yesterday, when she ran out of money in OK.

☪

I carried her bag of groceries for her and walked her to her car.

"Out there then, are you?" she said.

"I live in Australia now, Miss McConkey," I said. "In Melbourne."

I thought she would say something more and waited, but she said nothing as she got into her car. She closed the door and said "You make sure you come and get your money."

"Yes, Miss McConkey," I said.

"You run along now," she said.

"Goodbye, Miss McConkey," I said.

She started her car without another word, and drove into Stortford Parade, past the Polyclinic that used to be the veterinary surgery, and past Wessex Drive. I watched her until her car turned left into the Harare Drive, the old Salisbury Drive along which my father had driven us a lifetime ago. I watched her until she disappeared from my view.