Rich Girl, Poor Girl

Lesley Lokko

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Extract

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Prologue

London, England, 2007

Rain was falling in sodden, misty sheets from a darkly tearful sky; all the light seemed to have been sucked out of it. It was eleven o'clock in the morning but the December day felt as though it was already creeping to a close. The young woman sitting in the back of the car shivered, wrapped her pashmina around her shoulders and pressed her nose against the glass. They swept past the British Library and the interminable building works along the Euston Road. The old arches were still there, she saw as they turned left and drove under the bridge. But not the old gasworks. Everything had been torn down to make way for the new terminus. St Pancras to Paris in a couple of hours. She winced involuntarily. Thinking about Paris brought on the usual sharp stab of pain. That was where she'd seen her last – where they'd all seen her last. But it was better not to think about that. Especially not now.

Her stomach was in knots by the time the driver pulled up outside a small, rather shabby building on Camley Street. *Inner North London St Pancras Coroner's Court*, the building announced itself. *By Appointment Only*. She stared at the door. She'd never been to a coroner's court before. Or to an inquest, for that matter. She'd been called to attend as 'an interested party', the lawyer told her over the phone. Not as a witness or a suspect, of course . . . it was simply routine, something that had to be done. Nothing for her to worry about – for any of them to worry about. She'd wanted desperately to believe him.

'Shall I wait for you, miss?' the driver asked, turning his head.

She nodded slowly. 'Yes, please. I don't know how long it'll take. Will you park somewhere near? I'll ring you when I'm finished.'

'Very good, miss.'

She opened the door and stepped out, unfurling the umbrella. She looked up at the sign again. Behind her, the car pulled slowly away. She squared her shoulders, took a deep breath and walked up the steps. It was just over six months since the terrible events of that night. She couldn't believe the nightmare was about to begin again.

1

Milton Gardens Estate, Hackney, London, England, 1993

Why did they call it a 'garden', sixteen-year-old Caryn Middleton wondered crossly as she wheeled her bicycle across the forecourt of Baberton House. There weren't any flowers. There wasn't any grass. Just a bare patch of dirt that the council occasionally swept clear of discarded toys and the odd needle, left over from when the drug dealers from Gascoyne used to hang around outside the flats. But not any more. They were all gone now. She remembered the night her mum had gathered the residents of Baberton and Cheney and held a vigil to keep them out. She'd been so proud of her. Her mum, knocking on people's doors, organising things, explaining what she thought everyone should do and say. She'd sounded so proper. In charge. They'd sat outside for three nights – everyone, all the residents, even those who didn't talk to each other, holding hands, forming a tight protective cordon around the estate. The council sent the police round to watch out for trouble, but there hadn't been any. Not a single fight. The dealers had slunk off after the third night, deciding it was *too much fucking trouble*. She'd heard at school the following week that they'd moved to another estate further down the road. She'd watched everyone coming up to her mum, hugging her, laughing, thanking her for making them bother. She thought her heart might burst with pride. Her *mum*!

It hadn't lasted, of course. For a few brief, giddy days it looked as if Alice might pull herself together. She rushed around the flat, singing at the top of her voice, cleaning, polishing, dusting, a whirlwind of nervous, excited energy. There was food on the table, bubbling pots on the stove and when Caryn came home from school, her little brother Brian had been bathed and fed. She even helped Caryn with her homework. It was bliss; it made her feel normal, like everyone else. Although she'd never

have dared say it out loud, least of all to Alice, it was tiring being the only responsible one in the whole family. It felt wonderful to know that *she* didn't have to make sure Brian had eaten or that there was enough milk in the fridge or that the electricity meter was topped up. For a few days, she was just another normal teenager with normal concerns.

Then Alice crashed again, of course, and it all came to an end. Soon she was back in her dressing gown, spending most of her time in bed. There were days when she came out of her room only for food. It was hard to tell what was wrong with her. *Depression*, everyone said knowingly. The bathroom was full of little orange containers with white lids. The pills were supposed to make Alice feel better. They never did. Watching her, it was clear to Caryn that the problem wasn't just that Alice sometimes felt sad. It was much more than that. One of those deep, unsolvable, grown-up problems. Alice was different; she was lonely. Although she occasionally spoke to a few of the other women in Baberton, she was like a fish out of water on the estate. She'd been an art teacher once, long ago, before they all moved to London. They'd lived in Colchester then but Caryn couldn't remember any of it. She couldn't even remember her father. He'd run off with the sixteen-year-old daughter of the couple who owned the pub around the corner. 'Can you imagine . . . sixteen years old! Same age as you, darling,' Alice often said until Caryn begged her to stop. It made her uncomfortable to even think about it.

Her eldest brother, Cameron, left home as soon as he could and there wasn't anyone else to ask what life had been like before. Her middle brother Owen technically lived with them, but was barely ever at home. She minded, but in a funny, distant sort of way. She felt as though she didn't really know them. She didn't think of them the way she thought about Brian, her little brother. She loved Brian more than anyone else in the world. Brian was born after they had moved to London. He had a different dad – Mike. Mike was a builder and came round occasionally. Caryn liked Mike. He was funny and smiled a lot and gave her a fiver every time he came to see Brian. He was brown, even in winter. His dad had come over from Jamaica, he'd told her. That was the reason everyone said Brian looked Italian, or Spanish . . . or Greek. Not quite as pale and English as the rest of them. Caryn loved the look of him: golden skin, curly brown hair . . . everyone said he'd be a heartbreaker, just like his dad. But Mike couldn't do much about Alice, unfortunately. He said she needed proper help. He said she was 'gone in the head'. 'Gone where?' Caryn longed to ask. There were days she wanted to go there too. But she couldn't, of course. Who would look after Brian? It was a

good job Caryn had learned how to cook and take care of the house, she'd heard Alice say to Mrs Fields, their neighbour, once, on one of her better days. *My darling little Caryn. I don't know what I'd do without her.* Hearing it ought to have made Caryn feel proud, but it didn't. It just made her feel uneasy, as though she was being given something she didn't want.

She pushed open the door to the lobby and dragged the bike in. The lift was broken. She kicked open the door to the stairwell and began the long climb to the eighth floor, the bike grinding along on the stairs behind her. She sighed. There were weeks when nothing seemed to go right.

2

'Avonlea', Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe, 1993

The wind dropped to a gentle whisper as Nic Harte quietly led her horse away from the stables and across the dirt track, heading towards the road. The msasa trees that lined the driveway had stopped their frantic midday shimmer. Now, in the cooler late afternoon, everything was still, quiet, waiting for dusk when the temperatures dropped and the inky darkness rolled in. Beyond the track and the dreamily swaying trees lay rolls of corrugated white-blonde maize fields, stopping just before the swell of the hills. As soon as she was past the end of the driveway and out of sight of the main house, she vaulted easily on to Simba's back and kicked her heels into his flanks, feeling his immediate response under her thighs as he surged forwards and broke into a canter. Away from the house and the thick, angry air of the argument with her stepmother, Nic felt the tightness inside her chest finally begin to ease.

They galloped alongside the narrow track, still in the shade of the msasas, sending up a cloud of sandy dust in their wake. At the edge of the maize fields she turned left, heading towards the hills, cutting through the long, dry-season grass. The stalks rushed at them as they followed the winding, two-lane path along which the villagers walked, their heads occasionally breaking through the thick yellow bristles as they moved between the farms and the outlying villages.

Then, just as suddenly as they'd plunged into it, they emerged from the grass and began to climb. Simba slowed down and began to pick his way through the rocks and small boulders that marked the beginning of the hills. They climbed steadily for a while, the only sound in the world their breathing; hers soft and shallow, Simba's deep and impatient. His neck was flecked with ridges of foamy sweat where the bridle rubbed against the swell of his muscles. Of the six horses stabled at the edge of the farm, behind the servants' quarters, Simba was her favourite.

Halfway up the hill she reined him in and turned to look back at the house, half hidden in the rolling yellow grasslands that lay prostrate before the ridge of white stone hills. To the left of the house and the farm were the scattered mud huts and flimsy lean-to shacks of the workers; tiny, insignificant dots in a landscape that had been tamed, swept and cleared to make the huge, ten-thousand-acre farm that her father had started, almost as a hobby, some thirty years earlier. It was the biggest estate in the area – Avonlea, named after the green fields beside the river Avon, which was presumably where her father had spent most of his childhood. Nic wasn't exactly sure where he'd grown up. Jim Harte wasn't the sort of man to say. She – and most other people – knew next to nothing about him. Except, of course, that he was one of the richest men in Zimbabwe. RhoMine, the sprawling network of companies her father owned, was the country's largest private employer. A powerful, driven and utterly ruthless man with a fierce and notorious temper, he was an easy target, the sort of man everyone loved to hate. Not that Jim Harte would even notice, or care. He didn't give a damn what other people thought of him.

Still, as everyone would say (behind his back, of course), success had come at a price. Even Jim Harte wasn't immune to tragedy. His first two marriages had ended in deaths. Jane, his first wife, had committed suicide. It was rumoured he'd driven her to it; whispers of affairs; an illegitimate child; a broken heart. Nothing was ever proved; no bastard child ever surfaced. Shaun and Patrick, Nic's older half-brothers, were the only sons to carry his name. Eventually the rumours died away. Jane was buried at the bottom of the estate in the pretty rose garden that the gardeners tended every day. Nic had never once seen her father visit her grave. Shortly after her death, he married Sarah Parker, Jane's best friend from boarding school in England. Jane and Sarah had been inseparable at school and when Jane left England, Sarah had come out to Rhodesia as often as she could. She was present at Jane's funeral – inconsolable, Nic had heard people say. But she never returned to England. Six months

after Jane was buried, she married Jim Harte. Three years later, she too was dead, killed in a hunting accident. She left behind a two-year-old baby girl as well as the two stepsons she'd inherited. Jim never mentioned her name, either. All traces were carefully removed from his various homes.

Molly, his third and current wife, was practically a teenager when she married the forty-six-year-old, twice-widowed businessman. The insecure, mousy daughter of an English aristocrat, whom Shaun, Patrick and Nic detested on first sight, she seemed bent on dividing the already fractured family even further. Almost as soon as she moved in, she packed Shaun, Patrick and Nic off to boarding schools – first in Harare, then, further away, in England. As far away as possible. She and Jim had a daughter, Jessica, who was now four, on whom Molly absolutely doted. Nic liked Jessica; or at least she *would* have liked her if she'd been given half a chance. Molly never left Jessica alone with her. She claimed she didn't trust Nic with her precious daughter. Nic overheard her telling her father one day that she was afraid Nic would hurt Jessica. Nic's mouth had dropped open incredulously. Hurt Jessica? Why on earth would she do that? She'd waited outside the kitchen, her anger mounting, for Jim to defend her – and of course, he hadn't. He'd grunted something Nic couldn't hear and walked out.

All in all, Molly's presence didn't exactly make for a harmonious home. But Jim wasn't the kind of father to whom you could complain – after all, he was hardly ever there. And when he was, they'd all learned to keep their mouths shut. All three were terrified of him. Especially Nic. She knew, somehow, that she reminded him of Sarah, her mother. Something about the way his lips tightened involuntarily when she walked in the room; a look of exasperation and something dangerously close to contempt when he met her eyes. He couldn't help or hide it and Nic had long since taught herself not to care.

She nudged Simba up the last section of the path and stopped in front of the enormous smooth-faced boulder that jutted out from the bluff. It was almost four thirty in the afternoon and the shadows were elongated and inky black against the ground. She threw the reins around a nearby tree stump and scrambled up on to the boulder, keeping a wary eye out for snakes. They too liked the warmth. The heat of the day had warmed the white, lightly speckled surface of the boulder and she lay back, palms down, lightly touching it with her bare arms. The late winter sky was a deep, luminous shade of blue. She closed her eyes briefly, feeling the sun

pleasurably on her eyelids. She fished in her pocket for her cigarettes. In a few days' time she'd be packed off back to school in London. Shaun and Patrick were so lucky. They were older than her, and freer too. They'd long since left Eton, where Jim had sent them more for the social contacts he seemed to think they'd develop than anything else. They both now worked for RhoMine. University wasn't an option. A complete waste of time, Jim had decided. What was the point of having sons if they didn't follow in your footsteps? There was nothing said about daughters. No one seemed to know what Jim had in store for her, least of all Jim. She had another two years to go at the exclusive girls' day-school he'd sent her to in London . . . but then what? No one seemed to know or care. That was what the argument had been about. What Nic was going to do afterwards. Molly couldn't have been less interested if she'd tried.

'What d'you mean, "afterwards"?' She'd glared at Nic whilst continuing to bang pots and pans around the kitchen. She was in a rage with the servants, as usual.

'When I finish my A levels. I was thinking about doing—'

'You'd better start thinking about your behaviour *at the present moment*, my girl,' Molly said dismissively. 'I'm sick and tired of getting letters from your headmistress about how rude you've been in school. Why are you always such a problem?'

'I am *not*!' Nic glared straight back at her. 'Besides, what do you care?'

'I don't.' Molly spat the words out decisively. 'I *don't* care. That's the point. Oh, go ahead and get yourself expelled yet again, Nicola. I don't know why we bother, honestly I don't.' She turned away to scold the maid who was holding out a pan. 'No, Mary . . . not the red pot. The *blue* one. Jesus Christ. Don't you understand English? *Blue*, not red. Give it here!' She turned her back on Nic and bore down upon poor Mary, the latest trainee cook in a long list of servants whom Molly sacked only every other week.

Nic stared at the back of her head for a moment, thick angry tears forming behind her eyes. It was always this way. 'Go to hell!' she said angrily, turning on her heel.

'Nicola! How dare you speak to me like that!' Molly's shrill voice followed her into the hallway. 'Come back here, you ungrateful wretch!'

'Fuck you,' Nic muttered under her breath, slamming the front door behind her.

'Nicola! Come back here this *instant*. Just you wait—' But Nic was already gone. She ran towards the stables – anything to get away from Molly's semi-hysterical voice and the list of threats that would surely

follow. *Just wait till your father hears about this! I'll make sure he sends you back to England without a penny! Let's see how you get along without any pocket money!* And so on and so forth. But what the hell had she done wrong, anyway? All she'd wanted to know was whether there was any chance – even the *smallest*, slimmest chance – that she'd be allowed to do what she'd always longed to do. She wanted to be a writer. Go to university and do nothing but read. And write, of course. But the likelihood of that happening seemed more and more remote by the day. Was this what it would be like for ever?

She lay in the sun, smoking, watching the blue smoke rise lazily away from her, dissipating quickly in the warm, late afternoon air. Just like her future. Gone before she could catch it.

3

34 Hortensia Road, Fulham, London, England, 1993

'To*ry*!' Her mother's voice floated up the stairs. 'Are you there? Supper's ready.'

Tory Spiller was silent for a moment. Then she swung her legs out of bed and stood up. 'Coming,' she mouthed to her reflection in the mirror on the opposite wall. She opened her door.

'Tory?'

'Coming . . .' Tory repeated, louder this time, walking slowly down the stairs. She could hear her father clearing away his papers in his study. He always left the door open. He appeared just as she reached the bottom.

'Hullo, darling,' he said, taking his pipe out of his mouth. Tory looked warily at him. She was still learning to read the signs. There were days – even now, over a year later – when all the light was gone from his eyes and his fingers shook. 'Finished your homework?' he asked, giving her a quick smile.

'Yes,' Tory said cautiously. His voice was steady, usually a good sign.

'Smells good, doesn't it?' He followed her down the hallway to the dining room. Tory nodded. All things considered, they'd had a pretty good week, she thought to herself as she pushed open the door. It had

been Susie's nineteenth birthday on Saturday. Would have been, she reminded herself. Her mum had baked a cake. Tory had watched her face anxiously, hoping she wouldn't cry. She didn't.

'There you are!' her mother smiled at her, a little too brightly. 'Hope this tastes all right. It's a new recipe.'

'Some wine, Gilly?' her father asked, picking up a bottle from the sideboard.

'Just a drop,' her mother said, bringing the casserole out of the oven. Tory frowned. It was all a bit too cheery – now, that *wasn't* a good sign. She'd learned from bitter experience that a few days of bright, polite conversation usually signalled a breakdown of some sort, from either of them. She'd come upon her father once, his face pressed against Susie's coat, which still hung in the cupboard under the stairs, making the sorts of animal noises she'd heard on wildlife programmes. It had frightened her so much that she turned and fled back up the stairs, wishing desperately that there was something she could do to lessen the pain. There wasn't. 'It'll pass,' the school counsellor told her in one of their infrequent sessions. 'Just be patient with them. And kind.' She was, but sometimes it felt as though she was being asked to be patient and kind and strong for everyone else. No one seemed to take much notice of her. She winced. She hated herself for even thinking that way.

'How about you, Tory?' her father turned to her, a bottle of red wine in his hand. 'Would you like a glass, darling?'

'Oh, John . . . no,' her mother murmured automatically. 'She's only—'

'I'm seventeen, Mum, not twelve,' Tory said, regretting the words as soon as they were out. Susie was seventeen – *had been* seventeen. When it happened.

There was a short silence. Her parents looked at each other. Then her father slowly poured her a glass. Tory couldn't drink it.

The rest of the meal passed in almost total silence. As quickly as it had emerged, the cheeriness was gone. That was another thing the counsellor told her to watch out for – quicksilver changes in mood. *It's only to be expected*. Everything, it seemed, was to be expected. As soon as she could, Tory excused herself from the table and went up to her room. She leaned across the bed and picked up the phone. She *had* to get out of the house.

Ten minutes later, she ran quickly downstairs and stuck her head round the door. 'Mind if I just pop out for a bit?' she asked. 'I'm going to meet Jenny.'

'Oh, gosh . . .' Her mother slowly shook herself awake. 'No, but don't be late, will you? Will you phone if—'

'Gilly, she's only going round the corner,' her father rebuked her gently. Tory squirmed.

'I won't be late,' she said, and closed the door. She leaned against it for a moment and closed her eyes. *When* would it pass? The sight of the two of them, staring at the empty place where Susie used to sit, chewing their food without really tasting it, despite her mother's attempts to throw herself into cooking as a way to forget – how much longer could it go on?

Jenny was waiting for her on Fulham Broadway. Tory pulled up the hood of her anorak as she ran across the road. It was drizzling lightly; she'd forgotten to bring an umbrella.

'Hi,' Jenny said as she drew near. 'You're late.'

'Sorry,' she shrugged. 'Long dinner.'

'Gloomy?'

'A bit.'

'Well, I've got just the thing to cheer you up,' Jenny said, slipping an arm through hers. 'Come on. You'll see in a minute.'

'Where're we going?'

'The Lamb and Flag.' She stopped and peered at Tory in the drizzle. 'Haven't you got any lipstick with you? You don't *look* eighteen.'

'I forgot. Sorry.'

'Here.' She fished a lipstick out of her coat pocket. 'Slap a bit of this on.'

Five minutes later they were safely in the pub. With two half-pints of lager and a bag of crisps in hand, they made their way to the back. 'So how's this supposed to cheer me up?' Tory asked, looking around the smoky room.

'Look over there,' Jenny said, nodding in the direction of the jukebox. 'D'you see who I see?'

Tory looked. Her heart sank. Julian Hill and Chris Parker. Jenny had a massive crush on Chris, although quite how *that* was supposed to cheer Tory up was lost on her. 'You could've *told* me,' Tory whispered as they made their way over to them.

'Why? You'd've just changed your mind about coming out.'

'I wouldn't.'

'You would.' Jenny walked over to Chris. 'Oh, *hi* . . .' she gushed, pretending to be surprised to see him. Tory stifled a yawn. It was always

the same. Both sides played a funny little game in which each tried to pretend they had very little interest in the other. It seemed pointless. She'd asked Susie about it once, a long time ago.

'Why don't you just say you like him?' she asked, watching Susie apply eyeshadow, mascara and lip gloss before meeting her boyfriend Rob. Tory liked Rob. A lot. He was good-looking and cool, and all of that, but he was also clever and funny and he was always nice to her. He and Susie made the perfect couple, everyone said so . . . even their parents.

'Cos,' Susie said firmly.

'Cos what?' She'd been genuinely puzzled. It all seemed ridiculously complicated.

'Just because. You'll find out one day. Now, scram, will you? I've got five minutes to get dressed.'

'Sorry?' She blinked at Julian, coming slowly back to the present. Had he said something to her?

'What d'you want to listen to?' he repeated, watching her closely. She recognised the look. The Look. It was The Look that everyone gave her whenever she appeared a little withdrawn or preoccupied. She knew exactly what they were thinking. *Imagine what it must be like to have a sister who's been murdered.* They all did it. Teachers, relatives, friends . . . even people she didn't know.

'Oh, I don't mind,' she said mildly. 'Anything. Whatever you like.'

'Um . . . wh . . . what about Simple Minds?' he asked, a little uncertainly. That was the other thing. Everyone still walked on eggshells around her.

She shrugged. 'Yeah. Whatever.'

Don't You Forget About Me. The haunting music flowed over them. Bad choice. They listened to it in silence, each not knowing quite what to say. She looked across the table at Jenny and Chris, who were holding hands under the table and talking softly to each other, oblivious to everyone else. *Don't You Forget About Me.* The pain that hovered just underneath her ribcage intensified for a moment, bringing a film of tears to her eyes. Suze. Sometimes she missed her so much it hurt to even breathe. She turned her head carefully away from Julian. She couldn't bear to see The Look.