**December**

– A Coming of Age Story in Three Parts –

PART ONE:

Between the ages of about 12 and 20, my Decembers were set in a small seaside town, in the Eastern Cape. That would have been true for hundreds of other privileged pubescents, whose families made the annual pilgrimage to *Kenton-on-Sea*. Among them were those of us who schooled in Makhanda, formerly Grahamstown. For years, we called it ‘The G-Spot,’ without any real understanding – either of the city or the pleasure-point.

Kenton was a place where that guy from geography, or your cousin’s girlfriend’s sister, could feel like your dearest friends. Where high school untouchables felt a little more within your reach. Only to have the social hierarchies restored when the summer was over.

It was on a sunny mid-morning in Kenton, calves hanging from the top-bunk, that my uterus first shed its lining.

Blood soaking into *Rip Curl* boardshorts.

Set to an *Off-Spring* soundtrack.

*The Kids Aren’t Alright.*

Soon after, I found myself perched on the edge of a toilet seat, learning that pads peeled off like scrapbook stickers. That they had wings, but not the freeing kind. That they weren’t designed with swimming or sand or seawater – or my December pussy – in mind.

PART TWO:

In Kenton, clubbing started early, thanks to a venue named *Neptunes*, which hosted an under-eighteen ‘disco.’ An insult to Donna Summer and Diana Ross and everything real Disco stood for. Kenton’s other nightclub, Jeremiahs, was technically for adults only. But if you came up from the beach, you could scale the wire fencing, bypassing the bouncers, which most of us did.

Once inside, the air was warm and wet and heaving, indistinguishable from the inside of our mouths.

Teenagers moved through the room glossed in a constant sheen. The stick was perfume and tears, sweat and vodka shots, that afternoon’s ice-cream, remnants of thirty seconds with a girl in the parking lot. In my days, before Facebook or Instagram or Snapchat, partygoers would clamber to be photographed by *Thunder.Com*, who would post the images to their website. All red-eye. No filter.

I was about thirteen when my cousin and I first went to Neptunes. I wore denim shorts and a plaid crop top. Inside was all strawberry lip gloss and EGO deodorant. When the slow songs descended, a looming man-shadow walked over to me. Looking back, he was probably just a nervous boy, no more than sixteen. Still, I ran home crying. I’d never been asked to dance before.

As Decembers came and went, I grew into nightclubs —  song lyrics taking root in my amygdala. Back when Kanye was harder, better, faster, stronger. When Britney was Mrs Lifestyles of the rich and famous (You want a piece of me?) When Chingy liked the way we did things *Right Thurr*.

On the dancefloor, I discovered how to mimic, how to play, how to invite and to rebuff. Often without words. I tasted alcohol and tobacco, both off someone else’s tongue. And amid all this learning was also a defiant attempt to unlearn: to suspend an acquired distrust of strangers, of touch, of men, of dark rooms.

Once, aged fifteen— during the time of kissing strangers, one of whom drew blood from my lip but never spoke a word — I took a break from the dancefloor, to re-organise my drenched hair, and feel the cold against my wet skin. I joined the human debris, scattered across the parking lot. Like a wishful fishing net, I flung into the air the name of every underground hip hop artist I’d listened to over the past year, eventually hooking a young smiley-faced boy on the next bench. In his car, we stared silently at the dashboard, absorbing *Mos Def* and *Dialated Peoples* and *A Tribe Called Quest*. He left me with his *De La Soul* compilation as a keepsake, decorated with scrawled handwriting. Pulled from another time, when we used to burn CDs, it lived in my collection for years: an intimate remnant of a person whose name and face I couldn’t remember. But for that month of teenage parties by the sea, I’m sure his face would have been everywhere, wedged with the sand and salt, between the toes, and in the crevices of my ears and eyes.

A few more Decembers passed, with a drivers’ license and legal ID to show for it. These summers were for the girls. I remember driving late nights on dark roads, from one seaside town to the next, chasing lights and thump. Four sets of nineteen-year-old eyes would glint from the backseat. Somehow the music and our singing would distract me from the weighty responsibility of their lives.

We spent our days changing in and out of damp swimsuits. Quick showers in-between. Once, while towel-drying our legs, a girlfriend caught a glimpse of my bush –  fully-grown, freshly washed, and perfectly fluffy — She literally screamed. That was when I first started taking scissors to my pussy, snipping dangerously close to the skin, for others’ protection.

By now, stepping into nightclubs had become a visceral experience. I felt it immediately in my body, as I still do sometimes —  like a fist to the gut. The bass plunged to my stomach, something dark and erotic and dangerous. Because the speakers, with all their velocity, took away our voices, each subtle movement was amplified. Every glance, every touch from a stranger, was swollen with potential —  for hostility, or pursuit, or pleasure. Boys dressed in slung jeans and baseball caps, pinned you to the wall — first with their eyes and later their bodies. In the toilets, girls readjusted their hair, trying to forget the stories still haunting the second cubicle. I remember always sitting longer than usual on the toilet seat, drip drying without toilet paper, wiping leaky eyeliner from my cheeks, reducing my heart rate.

Decembers were also a time of sexual debut; when everyone was ‘all- talk’ about the Five Bases. Few of us seemed to notice the embedded baseball analogy, the casting of sex-as-sport, the schoolyard competition, where penetration was the final frontier, and everything else just a pitstop. In the early 2000s, much of this politics would have gone over our heads. Like most teenagers, we just wanted to be part of the game, not to be picked last. The bases drew touch-points from our mouths across our chests, to the in-field between our thighs. An adolescent confessional, full of prayers and secret desires. The play was full of nervous laughter, and false starts, heady infatuation, and flailing attempts to ‘play it cool.’

It’s easy to forget that there was a once a time when no-one we knew had cars, or places of their own: when we struggled to find discrete spaces to touch and be touched. In Kenton, word travelled about which houses were ‘safe’ for this. At night, we dove from dancefloors into strangers’ houses and back again. Once I left a hot-pink thong on the bare mattress of some-or-other holiday-maker. A delicate floral ruin. I returned to the club with one of those secrets that spills out your eyes.

When long nights came to their end, there was only one way back to town. Up a road, bordered by dunes. This was where the evangelists pitched their tents, dishing 2am coffee and pizza, at no cost, just a strong dose of Jesus. Where teenagers huddled in the dark talking in tongues.

PART THREE:

Now Decembers are for Jo’burg. Shopping aisles are still filled with pictures of holly, and mistletoe, and other misplaced botanical references. There’s still a sea of culinary abominations: fruit cakes and mince pies and roast gammon served in 30 degree heat. On the news, swells of people wash up on beaches, and roadsides, and emergency rooms.

December still tastes like blood and salt.

Bodysuits are back. And I’m back to awkwardly clipping them between my thighs like a baby grow. Trying to scooch things to the side when I pee, then remembering how that never worked. I’m also back to ripped baggy jeans. Except I didn’t have to fall off a skateboard, or rub them against a cheese grater, to achieve the effect. I’ve grown into what *Fergy Ferg* once called my *lovely* *lady lumps*. And, ask my December Pussy, my love is like *Woh.*

Around the festive table are choice friends, and second-hand books.

Fewer presents, but gifts overflowing:

Give me chocolate dripping from my chin.

The smell of buchu and a well-timed splif.

Give me slow afternoons, floating naked in your pool.

Chlorine-soaked lips floating to the surface

Give me Al Green, Etta James

And cool brass

String me up with the paper chains

For my well-earned

Adornment.