# DEBBIE GO HOME

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It was too late to do anything or hide anything. There was the front gate clicking and Jim de Villiers walking up the path, one hour before his time. The room was strewn with papers and pins, and there was Janie in the new white dress, that cost more than any dress had ever cost in that house, or in most other houses that they knew.

Janie was in a panic because she saw her father walking up the front path, an hour before his time. She was a docile child, and obeyed her father in almost everything. Now she and her mother were deceiving him, and they were going to be caught in the act. She wanted to run, hide, cry, anything but stand there and wait.

Mrs. de Villiers saw that her daughter was in a panic, wringing her hands and wanting to run and hide. "Stand still", she said sharply. "It was my doing, and I'll take the medicine. And don't talk unless your father orders you to."

Then Jim de Villiers opened the front door that led immediately into the combined living, dining, sitting room of the small house. He was angry at once. It didn't look good to see your daughter in a panic because you got home unexpectedly. It didn't look good to see your wife standing on guard, assuming already that you were going to attack her and her daughter. It didn't look good anyhow to see that you had stumbled on a secret that wasn't meant for you. What if one of his friends had been with him! That would have been a fine thing to see.

He put down his hat and his lunch tin, and then he looked at the scene, daughter being fitted by mother into a dress of some stuff all shining and silver. Then because no one would speak, he had to say, "what's all this about?"

"It's a dress, Jim," said his wife. Some other time he could have laughed, not now, with the whole thing hanging over him. But she didn't wait for him to laugh or not laugh. She went on as though she had learned a speech in the minute that it took him from the gate to the door.

"It's the first Debutantes' Ball," she said, "and it's going to be next month in the City Hall. Our girls are going to be received by the Administrator and his wife. I didn't think you'd like it, Jim, so I thought we wouldn't tell you."

"Why didn't you think I wouldn't like it? "he asked, purposely obtuse, "I've nothing against a ball."

She didn't answer him, so he said, "who's organising it?"

"The Parkside Mothers' Club, Jim."

De Villiers sat down. "The Parkside Mothers' Club, eh? But what about the Parkside fathers? Are you making fools of them all?"

"They don't all hold your views, Jim."

"They don't," he agreed. "If they did, we shouldn't be outcasts in the country where we were born."

He returned to his attack. "Why did you think I'd be against the ball?" he asked.

He watched her stonily, and he looked at his daughter too, but she didn't look at him.

"Shall I tell you why?" he said, and when she didn't answer, he said again, "shall I tell you why?" So that she replied unwillingly, "yes, you tell me why."

He went to the job with satisfaction. "You've got some high white folks to receive our girls," he said. "They'll smile at them and shake their hands, and the Administrator will talk a lot of shit about the brotherhood of man and the sisterhood of women. But if one of our girls went to his house next week, it would be to the back door."

He looked at his daughter and said to her angrily, "haven't you got any pride? Why can't you be what you are, instead of what the white people think you ought to be? They don't think you're good enough to shake hands with them, but for the sake of this brotherhood shit you're allowed to shake hands with the Administrator. I suppose you're proud of that."

He continued to look at Janie, but she would not look at him.

"Talk to me, Jim," said his wife pleadingly, "I got her into this."

The girl came to life.

"You didn't," she said. "I wanted to be presented from the time I first heard."

"Shut your bloody mouth," her father shouted at her. "You don't belong to the Parkside Mothers' Club, do you?" He turned to his wife. "I'll talk to you," he said. "You want our girls to be received by the Administrator, do you? Received into what? Into a world where they take away your vote and your house. Do you need a white Administrator to do that? How can a white man receive you into our kind of

world? And why the hell should he?''

His anger was overpowering him and he stood up. ''Who made him Administrator?'' he shouted. ''The Government, the same bloody Government that took away our votes and our houses, and can make me a black man tomorrow if they feel like it. So you get their man to come and receive our daughters at a ball''.

He rounded on his daughter. ''Wait till your brother gets back from the university,'' he said. ''Tell him you're going to a Debutantes' Ball, and a white man is going to welcome you into the world that he and his friends have made for you. What do you think he'll have to say?''

He put his head in his hands in such a way that his wife called out ''Jim, Jim,'' and took a step towards him.

''Don't touch me,'' he said. ''It's you who's driving me mad, licking the hand that whips us. Making me ashamed of all coloured people''.

Mother and daughter watched him anxiously, but he suddenly pulled himself together.

''Where did you get the money for the dress?'' he asked. ''From what I give you?''

''No, Jim. I sewed for it.''

''How much was it?''

''Four pounds.''

He spoke to his daughter. ''Take it off'', he said. ''And never put it on again''. He sat down again, trembling a little.

Janie looked at her mother.

''Go to your room and take it off'', said her mother. ''And stay there till you're called.''

When her daughter had gone she said, ''Jim, go and lie down.''

''Lie down? What for?''

''You're sick.''

''Yes, I'm sick all right, of all this belly-creeping to the same people that take away our rights.''

She shook her head at him.

''Why are you home early?'' she asked.

She knew him well. He could never hide anything, it all showed in his face. Something was badly wrong. When something was wrong, all the heart went out of him.

''There's trouble at the factory,'' she said.

He put his head in his hands again, this time covering his face. She went and stood by him, and said to him, ''have they put you

off?''

He shook his head. ''Not yet,'' he said.

''When will they put you off?''

''We don't know. It's not certain yet.''

''What's the matter? Is the market bad?''

''No.''

''Jim, I can't hear you, speaking through your hands like that.'' She took his hands away from his face, and knelt down by him, holding them.

''Are they dissatisfied, Jim?''

''No.''

''Do they say you're too old?''

''No.''

Baffled, she searched his face. He had brought bad news but he couldn't tell.

''Jim, you must tell me. I *must* know.''

Then it came, seeming to tear at him as it came out.

''It's a new law,'' he said hoarsely. ''A new law. The Industrial Conciliation Act.''

''What does it say, Jim?''

''It says the Minister can reserve any occupation. So we may have to go. We. We. The coloured men.''

She jumped to her feet. ''The wickedness,'' she said. ''O the wickedness!''

She had no more to say, nor he, until she asked him again, ''why did you come home early, Jim?''

''I was sick,'' he said. ''Just plain sick. I seemed to bring up all the food I ever ate. The boss said, what's the matter, Jim? I said it just made me sick to hear there was such a law.''

''The wickedness,'' she said. ''O the wickedness!''

''The boss said, Jim, it's not my fault. I said to him, you're white, aren't you. So he went away.''

Suddenly he shouted at her.

''I suppose you think I did wrong. I suppose you think I should of got down on my belly and licked his hand.''

''No, Jim, I would never have wanted that.''

''But you want your daughter to shake their hands, and curtsy to them, and be received into their bloody world!''

''That's why!'' she said. ''There's many a hard thing coming to her as well. I'd like her to have one night, in a nice dress and the coloured lights, dancing before the Administrator in the City Hall. We get kicks aplenty. I wanted her to have a

boost. And for one night the young men will be wearing gloves, and bowing to her as gentlemanly as you like, not pawing at her is some dark yard."

"It was good enough for us," he said.

"You never pawed at me," she said. "But don't you want it to be better for her? Don't you want her to begin where you left off?"

"Where I left off?" he asked. "Where did I leave off? With a law that took away my job, and a law that took away my vote, and a law that's going to take away my house, all because I've a coloured skin? Can't you see it's going to be worse for her?"

"That may be," she said. "That's more reason I want her to have just this one night. Jim, go and lie down. I'll bring you a cup of tea."

He got to his feet.

"All right, I'll go," he said. Then perhaps he thought he was being too obedient. He said, "you go and comfort the debutante."

He went into their bedroom and shut the door, and she sat down and put her head in her hands too, not so much hopelessly, because she was never hopeless, but because she couldn't see a way out of this hopeless mess. She sat there thinking for a long time, till a voice said to her, "what's got you down, Ma?"

"Nothing's got me down," she said, "not yet. Johnny, how long have you been home?"

"Quite a time," said Johnny, "quite a time."

He was a gum-chewing nonchalant, and one of the militant students at the university.

"How many things have you heard?" she asked, "One or two?"

"Two."

"What are they?"

"The lost job," he said. "And the lost ball."

"And the lost mother," she said, "who doesn't know what to do. But it's your father I worry about."

"He hopes too much," said Johnny. "He knows what the world is like, yet he goes on hoping. And when the blow comes, it knocks him down."

"Don't you hope?" she asked.

"I hope?" he said. He laughed with worldly wisdom. "I hope for nothing," he said fiercely, "nothing, nothing, noth-

ing. I hope for nothing that I won't get my own way." He laughed again. "You ought to be pleased that I'm that way," he said. "What does the Bible say? Blessed is he who hopes for nothing, for he shall not be disappointed."

"The Bible doesn't say that," she said.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"How would I know? But even if the Bible doesn't say it, it's God's own truth."

"Johnny, you've got to help. You can think what you like, believe what you like. But you've got to help me to get Janie to that Ball."

His face turned ugly.

"To be received by the Administrator," he said. "Not me."

"I know what you say," she said. "That he's white. I know he's white too. But the night of the Ball he's the Administrator, he's not white any more, he's got no colour."

"He's always got colour for me," said Johnny, "a dirty stinking white. And I'll help no sister of mine to shake his hand! Can you see the sense of it? It's not the ordinary people we're allowed to shake hands with, only the big shots. How does that make sense to you?"

"It makes sense to me," she said pleadingly. "He's the Administrator, he belongs to us all." She waved him quiet. "Give me a chance to speak," she said. "I know we didn't elect him or appoint him," she said, "but in a way he's above all colour. But that's not my argument, Johnny . . ."

"I know your argument," he said. "You want her to have one night, one night of magic and romance. You want her to go in a shining silver dress, like the Duchess of Musgrave Road." He parodied her argument without pity. "She'll get kicks, poor little girl, and they'll take something more away from her when she grows up, and they'll call her a tottie and think that she'd sell herself for a bottle of gin, but this one night—just this one night—let them treat her like a queen."

The boy was pouring it out hot and strong, till he looked at his mother, and saw that she had put her head in her hands again. He lost his enthusiasm at once, and said to her, "why should I help you for that?"

She didn't lift her head, but she said to him, "because I'm your mother, because it's your mother wants this one thing, this one harmless thing."

There was a knock at the door, and she said to him in a whisper,

"I can't face a visitor, make some excuse." Then he saw that she was afraid of weeping. He opened the door, and went out quickly, but in a minute he was back. His mother was wiping her eyes, and she said to him, "who was it?" "Someone wanting the Tomlinsons," he said.

He stood and looked at her, and remembered a thousand acts of love. He went to her and said, "don't cry, Ma, I'll do it for you. This once, and never again."

"I shan't want it again," she said. "Only this once."

He threw his eyes up to heaven piously. "Only this once," he said in a false high voice, "let her be treated like a queen."

She blew her nose and laughed.

"Tell your father I'm making the tea," she said. "I hope this won't get you into trouble with the Unity Movement, Johnny."

"That would no doubt cause you grief and pain," he said.

"I can't say that," she said, "but I don't want trouble for you."

"I'll look after myself," he said, chewing his gum. He went to his parents' bedroom and knocked on the door. His father said "come in," and there he was lying on the bed.

"Have a cigarette, dad."

"Thanks, Johnny, don't mind if I do."

"Smoke while you can," advised his son cynically. "Ma's told me about the job. Has it got you down?"

"Yes, son," said his father apologetically. "For the time it's got me down."

"It's because you hope for the best and fear for the worst," said his son. "I expect the worst, so when it comes, I don't take it hard."

"You were lucky," said his father defensively. "I was brought up in a world where we always hoped for the best. But you live in a time when no false hopes are left. I was a Smuts man, don't forget."

"Smuts," said Johnny contemptuously. "Who was Smuts?"

"Johnny," said his father, "You see me down now, but I want to be up tomorrow. I want to speak at the union meeting. Will you help me with a speech?"

"A hard speech?"

Jim de Villiers considered it.

"I want a fighting speech," he said. "I want to stand up for our rights, but I don't want to blackguard the whites. I don't want trouble, Johnny."

"You don't, eh? Then why don't you let Janie go to the Ball?"

Jim looked at his son. "I don't get you," he said. "Are you wanting Janie to go to the Ball?"

Johnny chewed his gum. "*I* don't want her to go to the Ball," he said carelessly. "But her going to the Ball is the price of a speech."

His father sat up on the bed. "Do I hear you right?" he asked.

"You hear me right," said Johnny. "It's the price for a fighting speech, free of all hatred, bitterness, resentment, full of shit about freedom and the rights of man. No one will give you a better."

"Why are you doing this, Johnny?"

Johnny chewed his gum. "Because Ma said to me, I'm your mother," he said. "And your mother wants your sister to have a night as a queen."

He looked at his father with expressionless eyes.

His father said, "I don't understand you, Johnny."

"You don't have to understand me," said Johnny. "You just have to tell me, is she going to the Ball?"

"I don't understand you, Johnny. It was mainly because of you that I said she couldn't go."

"Now it'll be mainly because of me that you'll say she can go," said Johnny.

Jim de Villiers lay down again. "You beat me," he said.

"I beat lots of people," said his son. "Just tell me, can she go, so I can get on with that speech."

De Villiers sat up again.

"All right, she can go," he said, "on one condition. Tell me how you justify it."

"Rock-bottom necessity," said Johnny. "If I boycott American food, and I'm dying of hunger, and everywhere around me is American food, then I eat American food."

"You eat American food so you can go on boycotting it," said de Villiers.

Johnny smiled against his will. "You're getting better," he said. "Listen, Dad, I can't study in a house of weeping women."

"Was your mother weeping?"

"As near as she gets."

"Son, don't tell her we bargained for it."

"O.K. I won't. See you again."

He went to his room which was no more than a bit of enclosed verandah, and sat down at his small table to think about the speech on freedom and the rights of man. Then on second thoughts he got up, and hauled some posters out from under his bed and put them against the wall where they could be seen. They were all headed DEBUTANTES BALL. One said, DEBBIE GO HOME, and another, ornamented with a bar of music, asked WHO STOLE MY VOTE AWAY? The third one was his own, but his friends thought it was too learned, for it said, WELCOME, SPICK LITTLE LICKSPITTLE. When he had put them up, he sat down at the table, but his thoughts were not on the speech, they were on his mother's entrance.

Then she burst in, with her eyes shining, and she would have embraced him if she had not suddenly seen the new decorations.

"I suppose you came to thank me," he said.

"I did."

She sat down in the other chair, and looked at the posters.

"You can't do that now," she said.

"Why not?"

"You can't," she said. "You can't give with one hand, and take away with the other."

"I gave you your share," he said hotly. "That's my share there."

"You can't do it," she said. "If you take your share, mine's worth nothing. Do you think that's fair?"

"I can't help it," he said. "We fixed this up long before I knew you wanted Janie to go." When she said nothing, he went on, "what we're doing is an important thing. You can't just stop because your sister's going to a ball."

"I understand what you're doing," she said. "I understand what you want, you and your friends. But don't you ever let up? Don't you ever have mercy on anyone?"

"Mercy," he said, with a sudden flight of fancy, "it's like a door of a cage. Open it once, and everything's gone."

"Do you know Hazel's going to the Ball?" she asked.

"Yes," he said defiantly.

"What about Fred?" she asked. "Is he acting the same way as you?"

"Yes."

"The world's mad," she said. She stood up and rubbed her brow with the back of her hand. "Brother against sister,

husband against wife. You know what Christ said."

He looked at her with annoyance. She took an unfair advantage of him by talking religion. He could sneer at white people's religion, but not at hers.

"Go your own way," she said. "But let me teach you one thing about giving. When you give, give with your whole heart. Don't keep half of it back."

She went out and closed his door. As all his attention had been on her entrance, now it was on her exit. He heard no doors opening, no voices speaking. The house was quite silent. When he could stand it no more, he followed her, and found her sitting in the living-room, in the evening dark.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She answered him in a matter-of-fact voice. That was her way, that was why you had to live your life with her to know what she was.

"I'm thinking it out," she said.

She didn't ask for help, he knew she wouldn't ask for any. A spiritless husband, a day-dreaming daughter, a tough son, they weren't much use to her.

"If it'll help you," he said, "I won't let Janie see me."

She considered his proposition. "How will you do that?" she asked. "You know where the cars will stop, outside the main foyer. Where will you be, inside or out?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he asked. "All I'm saying is, I won't let Janie see me."

"Is Fred doing the same for Hazel?" she asked.

He could not help admiring her cleverness.

"That's Fred's business," he said.

She got up and he saw that she was intending to kiss him, so he waved her away.

"Don't thank me too much," he said harshly. "She'll see all the others."

But she kissed him all the same.

"Give the kiss to Fred," she said. "Now I'll go and tell Janie the news."

At Janie's door she turned and gave him a smile.

"You'd better get on with your father's speech," she said.