

DANIEL BROWDE

the
relatively
public life
of
jules browde

JONATHAN BALL PUBLISHERS
JOHANNESBURG & CAPE TOWN

For my grandparents

*and for Lum,
whoever you are.*

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[I]

chapter one

*In which we meet a young storyteller
who feels the need to lie about the subject of his book*

It had rained earlier that evening. The air coming down off the dark slope held the smell of pine needles and wet earth. A few paces from where I stood – on the patio at the rear of the house – I could see the beginning of some stone steps, slick and puddled after the rain. The steps rose quickly and curved into the darkness. I'd been here before, so I knew what I'd find if I climbed them: the heavy palisade fence that marked the edge of the property; the enormous rocks beyond the fence; and the view, back over the house, to the lights on the Brixton ridge. I considered these steps. I knew the climb would probably do me good. But I stayed where I was, held by the faint sounds of the dinner party still going on inside. I looked up at the stars and I tried to enjoy them, to take them in.

I'd been out here less than five minutes when a thickset man in a panama hat appeared in the kitchen doorway and lit a cigarette. With his hat and cigarette he made a neat silhouette against the rectangle of yellow light. This was one of the more well-known guests, a sculptor who had recently returned from mounting a show in the United States.

He must have seen me looking at him.

'Taking a breather?' he asked.

I nodded. 'Yup.'

I was standing in what I imagined to be the beginning of the shadow, at the far end of the bricks.

'It's lovely out here,' he said.

I said, 'Aah, it's great.'

And for a few seconds, that seemed like it was going to be it. I tried to think of something to add, but before I could think of anything he left the doorway, took a few steps towards me and told me his name, as if I didn't already know it.

I'd spoken to him once before, and told him so – not to prove a point so much as to establish a truthful context. He'd given a talk at the Johannesburg Art Gallery and I'd stayed behind afterwards to ask him a question. He nodded neutrally at this information and asked if I often went to the JAG.

'Now and then,' I said. 'When there's something on.'

I told him about my girlfriend, Thenji, and explained that this was how I knew our hosts, Diana and David. Diana was an established painter who for reasons of her own kept a studio in the same run-down building in Fordsburg as Thenji had hers.

He said, 'And you? Are you an artist too?'

I hesitated for an instant. Sometimes I do think of myself as a sort of artist, usually when I'm overtired, but how are you going to *say* you're an artist, especially to some famous sculptor?

I said, 'No, I'm not an artist.'

I said, 'I work at a newspaper, as a subeditor.'

Often people don't know what that is, a subeditor, but I could see he did. He even seemed quite interested to hear this, and nodded again, this time just once, abruptly, as if a fly had landed on the end of his nose. He had finished his cigarette and was half looking around for what to do with it.

I told him the name of the newspaper I worked at.

'That's probably the best paper we have,' he said distractedly.

Watching him, I realised I could still feel the effects of the wine I'd drunk during the first part of the meal.

'Do you want an ashtray?' I asked. There was a square metal ashtray on a heavy wooden bench at the far end of the patio.

He smiled.

'On that thing over there,' I said, nodding towards it.

He walked over and mashed his stompie into the ashtray and came back. I felt a small sense of accomplishment then, to have been of use.

The sculptor put his hands in his pockets and asked me if I enjoyed working at the newspaper.

I told him that I liked the repetitive, meditational aspect of the job,

and also the fact that my workday only started at two in the afternoon.

I saw his interest pick up a notch. That always happened when I told people about the two o'clock-start thing.

'So I have my mornings to myself,' I said. Which was what I *always* said at this point. Some conversations have you, instead of the other way around.

'What do you do with your mornings?' he asked.

For a moment I had the uncomfortable sensation that he was humouring me. There was really nothing to give me that impression, though, and I tried to put it out of my mind. I said that in the mornings I usually went for a run, and then worked for a bit on my own stuff before going in to the paper.

'And what's your *own stuff*?' he pressed, rocking slightly on his heels.

This was all surprising to me. I'd always assumed that in a social setting he would be arrogant, or at least aloof, because of his fame and his hat and everything. But he seemed genuinely interested in what I had to say. And maybe it was because of this, or maybe it was the wine, or the fresh air and the trees, or all of it together – whatever it was that encouraged me – I told him that I was working on a biography of my grandfather. This wasn't something I'd said out loud before, and the minute the words were out of my mouth I regretted them. Because then it came: 'Oh really?' he said. 'Who's your grandfather?'

Now if this were a scene in a movie, here would be what is called the *turning point*. That moment, that question right there, which sobered me up in a second, and not because it took me by surprise, but precisely the opposite: the point is just how ready I was to hear it, just how clearly I understood (or thought I understood) what he meant by it. Because even if the sculptor didn't intend it, I heard in his question a challenge, and saw before me – in the space between us – the same thing I saw whenever I considered that I might, in fact, be writing the book I'd told him about: I saw a pantheon.

It was a classical pantheon, Ancient Greek, but vaguely animated like a cartoon. The set designer in my subconscious had given it a floor of white cumulus clouds. Seated in the centre, on high-backed thrones, were the Giants. Your Churchills, your Mandelas. People who shook the world like elephants shake a tree, causing thick hardcover biographies to fall to the ground all around them. To either side of the Giants stood the Famous: artists, athletes and scientists possessed of such searing talent that crowds lined up to read about their lives

like villagers gathering around a winter fire. Then on either end stood the Well-Known: judges, academics and community organisers, people who had Made a Contribution, ordinary heroes who, but for the single book written about them by some noble noticer, might have remained unsung.

What I needed to do, I decided (and come to think of it, I must still have been slightly drunk), was to convince the sculptor that my grandfather belonged there, somewhere near the edges of this pantheon. I hadn't rehearsed the argument, which became obvious as soon as I opened my mouth.

I said, 'He was born in 1919 in Johannesburg.' Then, after a moment, 'So his first memory is of the miners' strike. The Rand Revolt? Which was in 1922. He was three years old in 1922! Which I think is kind of amazing. That he remembers that. And he still lives here. He stills *works* here.'

By the light of the kitchen I saw the sculptor lose interest. He hadn't said anything, but I read a whole paragraph of boredom in the angle of his hat.

The hat said, 'Oh, so it's minor league? A family memoir. A tribute to your ancient *zeyde*. Something to ring bind and hand out to family members here and in, I'm guessing, Australia?'

He was leaning to go inside, I could tell. I had to defend my grandfather! I had to defend myself! Charged with insignificance, we were about to be sentenced to summary dismissal from the mind of a famous sculptor.

'He's also had a relatively public life,' I said quickly.

I saw the sculptor's eyeballs turn in their sockets to take me in more squarely. The angle of his hat changed back, it seemed, to mildly interested. This was what he was waiting for: the claim to fame.

'He was a very well-known advocate,' I said. 'He did a lot of human rights work.' Looking through the open door at the little dimples of light in the dark-red kitchen floor, I said, 'He was one of the founders of Lawyers for Human Rights.'

'Okay ... *okay* ...' the sculptor nodded. 'Sure. What's your grandfather's name?'

He was doing some kind of calculation in his head. Had he heard *my* surname earlier?

'Jules Browde.'

I could feel myself straining away from this conversation and into it

with all my might. We were weighing my grandfather's human worth. Now I had uttered his name, and I was waiting for the sculptor to pronounce on whether he did have a claim, after all.

'Oh, *Jules Browde*,' he said. 'Yes. His wife is ...'

'Selma,' I said. 'That's my grandmother.'

'Of course. The doctor. Yes. A very well-known couple.'

Two other smokers came out of the kitchen. A journalist and a photographer. The photographer was holding a small cup of coffee. The sculptor greeted them. The meal was obviously over. Thenji must have been wondering where I was.

The sculptor took a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and extracted one with practised efficiency. 'Jules Browde was one of the Rivonia Trial lawyers, wasn't he?'

I almost lied and said that, yes, he was. If the answer to that question is yes, the conversation stops there. Case closed.

'No,' I said. 'He wasn't.'

I hoped I didn't sound crestfallen.

'But he's very good friends with George Bizos and Arthur Chaskalson, all those guys ...'

I really did say that, reaching the hard bottom of the barrel right there. And how I wished, at that moment, how desperately I wished that my grandfather had been part of the Rivonia defence team, like his friends, next to whom he suddenly didn't seem to measure up.

'I remember Selma from when she was in politics,' the sculptor said, bringing the flame from his lighter to the tip of his cigarette, illuminating his face for a few seconds.

'Oh, really?' I said.

He'd taken a deep drag, now he blew the smoke out the side of his mouth.

'Yes. A very dynamic woman.'

The rest of the smoke followed out of his nostrils.

So he really *had* heard of them. *Public life!* Maybe I could smuggle them onto the pantheon together.

'They're an amazing couple,' I said, scraping. 'They're one of very few couples to have *both* been awarded honorary doctorates from Wits. Nelson Mandela and Graça Machel are another. To give you an idea.'

'Is that so?'

I nodded, hating myself. I was dealing in goddamn *titles* now, *prizes*, begging this man, this stranger, to accept my grandfather's credentials.

I had to talk about something else before I started stamping my feet, tearing my hair out, spitting on the floor.

‘The book isn’t going to be a traditional biography,’ I offered. ‘I want it also to be like a sort of history of Joburg, because he was really there, *here*, I suppose ...’ I laughed nervously ‘... *here* through most of the twentieth century. And he’s still going. Still going strong. So I sort of want the book to be ... you know ... something like that, too.’

I realised, as the words fell from my mouth, that this was just another apology: if your subject isn’t enough, haul in the dog-eared metropolis. I was dying for a drag of his cigarette. I was dying to go inside. I wanted to fetch my phone from my backpack in the entrance hall and call my grandfather to apologise for feeling disappointed in him, for making excuses for him, for feeling the need to lie about him as if he wasn’t good enough to tell the truth about.

And the feeling of shame only became more acute after the sculptor wandered inside and left me there, and a wind picked up, and Thenji came out to look for me in the artist’s garden, dark and suddenly creepy at that late hour.

THE ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA

Interview 16

Date recorded: 05/04/2006

Let me just tell you. It was a Saturday afternoon near the beginning of ... Well, it must have been about 1958 or '59. Selma and I were out in the garden when a man poked his head around the side of the house.

The boys – and I'm speaking now about your father and your uncle Ian – were about eight and ten years old at the time, so when this chap told us he was selling the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, we invited him to sit down. Which he did.

He sat down, took some brochures from his briefcase, and started to tell us why we should buy the twenty or so volumes in the set. While he was speaking, I considered the position. The full set cost more than a hundred pounds, which was quite an outlay, but my practice was doing better by then, and I thought it would be a good investment for the family. I looked over at Selma and she must have known what I was thinking, because she nodded. So in the middle of his pitch I slapped my knee and said, 'We'll take it!'

This fellow, the salesman, glared at me and said, 'Please. Do *not* interrupt me.' And he then merely carried on where he'd left off. By the time he was finished, I had a good mind to tell him I didn't want the bloody things after all. But we did take them. I signed the requisite papers right there in the garden and, a week or so later, the encyclopaedias were delivered to the house.

Now that's almost by the way. Why I'm telling you this – aside from the fact of this salesman's rather odd behaviour – is that about a month

later I appeared in the magistrates' court for an insurance company that had insured the owner of an antique furniture shop on Fox Street.

On Fox Street, in those days, there were all *manner* of second-hand furniture people. Upholsterers, repairers, refurbishers, all that sort of thing.

A man – the plaintiff in the case – had left some furniture at this shop for repair, and shortly after he did there was a fire on the premises and his furniture was destroyed. So he was suing the owner for what he said was the value of the furniture. The insurance company was of the view that the man was exaggerating the claim, and the precise value of these pieces became the issue before the magistrate.

The magistrate was a man by the name of Immelman, and I remember that he became very amused at something that transpired during my cross-examination of a witness, a man brought to court by the plaintiff.

The witness's name was Mr Plotkin, and he was alleged to be an expert on the value of furniture. He was an old Jewish man who spoke with a pronounced Lithuanian accent.

My opponent in this case, by the way, was a colleague of mine by the name of Sidley – also, like I was, a relatively young advocate at the Bar.

So Sidley called Plotkin as a witness and tried to establish his expertise. Plotkin said he had been in business for so long that he had become an expert in many different fields. This was relevant because there were a variety of pieces involved. 'I am an expert on furniture, fixtures, fittings, *everything*,' he said.

I noted this.

When Sidley was finished with him, the magistrate said to me, 'Have you any questions for this witness?'

I said, 'Yes I do, your worship.'

And so the magistrate told me to proceed.

'Mr Plotkin,' I said, and I looked down at my notes. 'You said that you are an expert on furniture, fixtures, fittings, everything.'

'That's right,' he said.

So then I said, 'You're an expert on *everything*, sir? How can you be an expert on everything?'

He said, 'I have been for *thirty-four* years in this business. I'm an *expert*.'

And then I asked him, 'Would you say you're an expert on ... books, for example?'

He said, 'Books? Sure. I've bought books, sold books ...'

'All right, Mr Plotkin,' I said. 'I have just bought a brand new set of

Encyclopaedia Britannica. You've heard of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*?'

'Oh, yes, this is a very popular name,' he said.

So I asked him, 'How much would you say should I have paid for the set?'

Plotkin looked up at the magistrate and said, 'Your worship? This case, it's about furniture or it's about books?'

The magistrate, who was enjoying Mr Plotkin's performance, said, 'Don't worry what the case is about, Mr Plotkin. You just answer the question.'

So I asked again, 'Now come on Mr Plotkin, what should I have paid for a new set of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*?'

He said, '*Encyclopaedia*, hmm? Well. This is very expensive. I would say this costs about thirty pounds.'

'And what if I told you, Mr Plotkin, that I paid 120 pounds? Not thirty pounds,' I said.

Plotkin thought about this briefly. Undeterred he looked up at the magistrate and said, 'Your worship, this must be with *hard* covers.'

Sidley put his head in his hands, and I remember that the magistrate, Immelman, had to adjourn the court to conceal his amusement.