**Nadine Gordimer**

**Burger’s Daughter**

**A**mong the group of people waiting at the fortress was a schoolgirl in a brown and yellow uniform holding a green eiderdown quilt and, by the loop at its neck, a red hot-water bottle. Certain buses used to pass that way then and passengers looking out will have noticed a schoolgirl. Imagine, a schoolgirl: she must have somebody inside. Who are all those people, anyway ? Even from the top of a bus, lurching on past as the lights go green, the group would not have looked like the usual prison visitors, passive and self-effacing about the slope of municipal grass.

The schoolgirl stood neither in the first rank before the prison doors nor hung back. There were several young men in roll-neck sweaters and veldskoen, men in business suits worn absently as an outer skin, an old man with a thrust-back head of white floss, women burrowed down into slacks and duffle coats, one in a long skirt and crocheted shawl, two in elegant tweed suits, with gold jewellery and sunglasses worn not as a disguise but as an assertion of indifference to attention. All were drawn up before the doors, invaders rather than supplicants. All had parcels and carriers. The voices of the women were clear and forceful in the public place, the white-haired man put his arms on the shoulders of two young men in private discussion, a tall blonde woman moved within the group with chivvying determination. She it was who borrowed the old man’s horn-headed cane to knock on the door when three o’clock passed and they were still standing there. As there was no response she took off her high-heeled sandal and hammered away with that in the other hand, as well. No one was in a mood to laugh but there was a surge of movement and voices in approval. The schoolgirl pressed forward with the rest, turning her head with the bold encouragement with which glances were linking everyone. A small slotted door within the great double ones opened on eyes under a peaked cap. The blonde woman’s face was so close against the door that the warder drew back and in an instant reasserted himself, but as a fair-ground gun meets its pop-up target, she had him.

—I demand to speak to the Commandant...we were told we could bring clothing for the detainees between three and four. We’ve been standing here twenty-five minutes, most of us’ve got jobs to go back to.—

There was an argument. A man with a briefcase arrived and the group quickly tunnelled him to the fore; he was allowed in through another door within the great portal and then, one by one, the men and women handed over their burdens through this doorway blotted dark by the shapes of warders. The schoolgirl was urged on, given way to by others; Lionel Burger’s daughter was among them that day, fourteen years old, bringing an eiderdown quilt and a hot-water bottle for her mother.

Rosa Burger, about fourteen years old at the time, waiting at the prison in a brown gymfrock over a yellow shirt and brown pullover with yellow stripes outlining the V-neck, was small for her age, slightly bottle-legged (1st hockey team) and with a tiny waist. Her hair was not freshly washed and the cartilage of her ear-tips broke the dark lank, suggesting that the ears were prominent though hidden. From the side parting of her hair there was a strand that twirled counter to the lie of the rest and had bleached lighter due to contact with chemicals in the school pool (2nd swimming team) and exposure to the sun. Her profile was prettier than her full-face; the waxy outline olive-skinned people often have, with the cave of the eye strikingly marked by the dark shining strip of eyebrow and the steep stroke of eyelashes, fuzzing at the ends like the antennae of moths. When the girl turned, there were many things disappointing —jaw (she chewed a bit of peanut brittle someone offered) heavy for the small chin, nostrils that cut back too sharply, half-healed and picked-at blemishes round the big soft mouth that curled and tightened, hesitated and firmed when she was spoken to and she answered, a mouth exactly like her father’s. But her eyes were light —washed-out grey, at a certain angle so clear the convex of the iris appeared transparent in the winter afternoon sunlight. Not at all like his brown eyes with the vertical line of concern between them that drew together an unavoidable gaze in newspaper photographs. The brown and yellow of the school outfit did not suit her colouring, allowing that she probably had not slept well the previous night and had not had time to eat between hurrying home from school and coming to the prison.

Rosemarie Burger, according to the headmistress’s report one of the most promising seniors in the school in spite of the disadvantages—in a manner of speaking—of her family background, came to school the morning after her mother was detained just as on any other day. She asked to see the headmistress and requested to be allowed to go home early in order to take comforts to her mother. Her matter-of-fact and reserved manner made it unnecessary for anyone to have to say anything—anything sympathetic—indeed, positively forbade it, and so saved awkwardness. She displayed ‘remarkable maturity’; that, at least, without being specific, one could say in the report. The other girls in her class seemed unaware of what had happened. They did not read the morning newspapers, listen to the news on the radio, nor were they aware of politics as something more concretely affective than a boring subject of grown-up conversation, along with the stock market or gynaecological troubles. After a day or two or in some cases even weeks, the recurrence of their schoolmate’s surname in connection with her mother, on the placards of street demonstrators against preventive detention, and the observations of parents, remarking on the relationship—Isn’t the daughter in your class ?—made her circumstance known and accepted at school. She was granted the kind of sympathetic privileges that served for the crises of illness or divorce at home which were all the hazards the children knew. Her fellow prefects divided her playground and other duties between them. Her best friend (whom she had told about the arrest and detention the first day) said she could come and stay at her house, if she liked —probably without having consulted her own parents. The school was a private one for white English-speaking girls and they innocently expressed their sympathy the only way they knew how:—Bloody Boers, dumb Dutchmen, thick Afrikaners—they would go and lock up your mom. As if she’d ever do anything wrong...

It did not occur to them that the family name was in fact an Afrikaner one.

*‘Among us was a girl of thirteen or fourteen, a schoolgirl still in her gym, the daughter of Lionel Burger. It was a bitter winter day. She was carrying blankets and even a hot-water bottle for her mother. The relatives of the people detained in a brutal dawn swoop had been told they could bring clothing etc. to the prison. We were not allowed to bring books or food. Little Rosa Burger knew her mother, that courageous and warm-hearted woman, was under doctor’s orders. The child was dry-eyed and composed, in fact she was an example to us all of the way a detainee’s family ought to behave. Already she had taken on her mother’s role in the household, giving loving support to her father, who was all too soon to be detained as well. On that day he had put others’ plight before his own, and had been tirelessly busy ever since his own wife had been taken in the early hours of the morning, going from police station to police station, trying to establish for helpless African families where their people were being held. But he knew that his schoolgirl daughter could be counted on in this family totally united in and dedicated to the struggle.’*

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*When they saw me outside the prison, what did they see?*

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**I** shall never know. It’s all concocted. I saw—see—that profile in a hand-held mirror directed towards another mirror; I know how I survived, not unhappily, if not popular then in unspoken, acknowledged inkling that I was superior to them, I and my family, at that school; I understand the bland heroics of badly-written memoirs by the faithful—good people in spite of the sanctimony.

I suppose I was aware that ordinary people might look down from a bus and see us. Some with wonder, knowing whose relatives and friends we must be—even somebody’s daughter, look, a kid in a gym—and knowing why we were there. Flora Donaldson and the others talked loudly in high voices the way another kind of woman will do in an expensive restaurant and, if in very different circumstances, for the same reason: to demonstrate self-confidence and a force of personality naturally dominant of an environment calculated to impress or intimidate. I draw that analogy now, not then; it’s impossible to filter free of what I have learnt, felt, thought, the subjective presence of the schoolgirl. She’s a stranger about whom some intimate facts are known to me, that’s all. We were aware of ourselves and the people belonging to us on the other side of the huge, thick, studded doors in a way that the passers-by would not understand and that we asserted, gave off—Wally Atkinson who had no one inside but had been in many times himself, and came to fly the standard of his white hair among us, Ivy Terblanche and her daughter Gloria, determinedly knitting for Gloria’s baby while waiting to hand over pyjamas and soap for husbands who were also father and son-in-law, Mark Liebowitz shaking his weight from one foot to the other in the kind of nervous glee with which he met crises, Bridget—Bridget Sulzer formerly Watkins formerly Brodkin born O’Brien—banging on the prison door with the heel of a multicoloured sandal from which the worn green leather peeled back, her sexy high-arched foot with thick painted toenails bare in spite of the cold. Even the two women I don’t think I knew, the fashionably groomed ones who didn’t belong (Aletta Gous attracted the friendship of wealthy liberal women whose husbands, at that time, let them run the risk as an indulgence) had set themselves apart from their background in the strange arousal of the persecuted. One of them had had her cook bake a special wheat-germ loaf (Aletta was always a food-faddist) and the lady argued high-handedly when the warder refused it; I remember because she gave it to Ivy—the queer occasion made such assumptions of sudden friendship possible—and Ivy broke off a bit of crust for me to taste when she gave me a lift home.

I was in place, outside the prison; both my parents had been expecting to be picked up for several weeks. Of course, when it happened, and they took my mother, the reality must have been different from the acceptance in advance; it’s impossible to conquer all fear and loss by preparation. There are always sources of desolation that aren’t taken into account because no one knows what they will be. I just knew that my mother, inside, would know, when she got the things I was holding, that I had been outside; we were connected. Flora pretended to cuddle me against the cold, but I didn’t need her kind of emotional excitation. She talked about ‘the girls’ in there, and my mother was one of them. Flora was a grown-up who made me feel older than she was.

I knew them nearly all, the people I stood among, and didn’t need to look at them to see them as I knew them: as I did the way home, the appearance of a landmark at a certain turn. It was that door that I see: the huge double door under the stone archway with a bulb on a goose-neck looking down as a gargoyle does. The tiny hatch where the warder’s eyes will appear could be a cat-door if it were lower. There are iron studs with hammer-marks faceting the white sunlight like a turned ring. I see these things over and over again as I stand. But real awareness is all focused in the lower part of my pelvis, in the leaden, dragging, wringing pain there. Can anyone describe the peculiar fierce concentration of the body’s forces in the menstruation of early puberty? The bleeding began just after my father had made me go back to bed after my mother had been taken away. No pain; just wetness that I tested with my finger, turned on the light to verify: yes, blood. But outside the prison the internal landscape of my mysterious body turns me inside out, so that in that public place on that public occasion (all the arrests of the dawn swoop have been in the newspapers, a special edition is on sale, with names of those known to be detained, including that of my mother) I am within that monthly crisis of destruction, the purging, tearing, draining of my own structure. I am my womb, and a year ago I wasn’t aware—physically—I had one.

As I am alternately submerged below and thrust over the threshold of pain I am aware of the moulded rubber loop by which the hot-water bottle hangs from my finger, and the eiderdown I hold against my belly is my old green taffeta one Granny Burger gave me when I was not old enough to remember her; my father thought my mother’s double-bed one was too big and too beautiful to get spoilt in prison. The hot-water bottle is my own idea. My mother never used one; and so—as I prepared the device I imagined her swiftly discovering it—she would realize there must be some special reason for its having been sent. Between the black rubber washer and the base of the screw-top I have folded a slip of thin paper. When I came to write the message I found I did not know how to address her except as I did in the letters I would write when away on a holiday. *Dear Mom, Hope you are all right.* Then this innocently unsuitable tone became the perfect vehicle for the important thing I needed to convey. *Dad and I are fine and looking after everything. Lots of love from both*. She would know at once I was telling her my father had not been taken since she had gone.

My version and theirs. And if this were being written down, both would seem equally concocted when read over. And if I were really telling, instead of talking to you in my mind the way I find I do... One is never talking to oneself, always one is addressed to someone. Suddenly, without knowing the reason, at different stages in one’s life, one is addressing this person or that all the time, even dreams are performed before an audience. I see that. It’s well known that people who commit suicide, the most solitary of all acts, are addressing someone. It’s just that with me it never happened before. It hasn’t happened even when I thought I was in love—and we couldn’t ever have been in love.

If you knew I was talking to you I wouldn’t be able to talk.

But you know that about me.