

thankful grateful blessed

Foreword

In 2010, 16 years into South Africa's democratic era, a high school opened in Gansbaai, a coastal town close to the southernmost tip of Africa where the Atlantic and Indian oceans meet. It was the cusp of a hopeful decade. As the paint of the new school dried, South Africa was preparing to welcome the world as the host of the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

President Jacob Zuma was still new to the job and for the first time, an opposition party – the Democratic Alliance (DA) – had wrestled the governance of a province away from the African National Congress (ANC) at the polls. It was a sign of a maturing democracy, some reported. State capture, loadshedding and lockdown had not yet entered the South African vernacular.

While Gansbaai was remote – there was hardly public transport out of town, and it was a two hour drive through winding single lane roads to Cape Town – it was far too from the promise of a New South Africa that many still clung to.

This was a town of early-rising men working longer hours to catch fewer fish. A town of historic abalone divers in depleted seas who, as the ink of legislation dried, had been criminalised as poachers on the dark side of the law. A town of people manning sharp hulled boats with cages strapped to their sterns, offering fleeting tourists face-to-face encounters with great white sharks who were being sighted less often in those waters.

A town of grey-haired retirees looking out to sea from their slate stoeps, and neat grids of dull suburban streets with holiday houses closed against the weather for much of the year. And to service all of this, it was a town like any other. With an OK Foods, a Spar, a Blue Bottle Liquors, a strip mall and three primary schools.

A town on the edge of a bay scattered with big-bellied fishing trawlers that emptied their loads into a fish processing factory at the harbour with its smoke stacks that stank up the main road with each onshore breeze. A town with contested interests on the edge of a sensitive and threatened ecosystem that, still today, needs to bet on its future as an industrial

fishing town or an eco-tourism destination. It is increasingly difficult for the two to live side by side.

This town of about twelve thousand people had never had a high school. Young people had to travel far to become educated, or give up any such aspiration to work on the fishing boats as their fathers and grandfathers had done. This was a town that was growing. As Eastern Cape municipalities collapsed, migrants arrived in the Western Cape demanding jobs, healthcare, electricity and schools.

In a country thick with failing schools, some townspeople dreamed of a place that would offer young people real opportunity beyond the hollow promises of short-term politicians. They dreamed of a school that would be good, despite being free. They dreamed of children choosing between an academic or a vocational education so that they would be better equipped for life after school. They dreamed, as tired as it sounds to a jaded nation, that the school would be a place where dreams really could come true.

They dreamed also of a school that would bring a historically fractured community together. Gansbaai threads along the single-lane R43, held between rocky coastline to the west and fynbos covered mountains to the east. Within those constraints, apartheid era patterns have mostly endured. Whites live in “town”. Coloureds live to the south in Blompark, set up historically as the “location”. On the mountain side of the national road, blacks live in Masakhane, an area that used to house single-sex hostels for black labourers and that has grown into a township and sprawling informal settlement.

In the first chapter I will tell you about some of the people who dreamed of opening a high school in Gansbaai to bring these communities together. What follows is an anthology of loosely connected stories about five boys who attended the school in those first few years, with two chapters dedicated to each of them.

The first tells of relationships at school that fuelled their beliefs in themselves and their prospects. The second are stories of their lives after school and their quests to realise a promise that should be made to every South African child: that, despite the failings of our democracy and the highest youth unemployment rates in the world, each child has the right

to a tertiary education and a life of dignified work. Those promises are inherent to our Constitution.

In the final chapter I explore what their stories teach us about the transformative power of relationships while considering how policy and its implementation might better serve young people.

I spent two and a half years visiting Gansbaai, and, once I had figured out how I wanted to tell this story, visiting the five alumni: Joudun Rooi in Stanford, Jack Swart in Oudtshoorn, Malcolm Mulope in Gansbaai, Asahleli Meje in Hermanus and Siviwe Yuyu in Cape Town. When I started out I never imagined that I would be writing about their lives so far beyond those places: in Jeddah, Livingstone, Atlanta and the wild seas of Namibia.

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In his 2024 State of the Nation Address, President Cyril Ramaphosa told a fictional story of Tintswalo – born in 1994 – and how her life was shaped for the better by the policies of the new democracy.

These five are equally democracy's children, but they have been failed in many ways by the promise of the New South Africa. Yet each of them graduated from the classrooms of teachers who believed that they could achieve anything that their counterparts in private schools could. Each of them was helped at school and beyond by people who believed in them and who reached out a hand. While it was Joudun Rooi who tattooed *thankful grateful blessed* onto his calf to acknowledge that, those words can be applied to each of their stories.

In the telling I will take you to a windowless room where strings of dried abalone – gutted and shelled – hang in the dull gloom as a man holds their leathery flesh to his face and inhales. As he breathes out, he believes that all will be well.

In another windowless room, a library in the interior of a declining convent, another man reads about confession by the dull light of a desk lamp. He learns that rather than a punishment, confession is an absolution. He turns the page.

I will take you to high-rise apartment block where a young man is being held against his will and where he plots his escape. Phone calls are made. Money changes hands.

I will take you on an odyssey with an eighteen-year old boy who crosses the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers to find what has been lost in a forgotten purse.

I will tell you how a man got to hold the heart of a whale in his hands.

I have invested a lot to get these words down because I believe it is a story worth telling.

As I travelled for this research and spun about 75 hours of recorded interviews into story, I moved with my family from the suburbs of Johannesburg to a smallholding in Knysna in the Western Cape. As I wrote through the second year of lockdown, we settled our children into new lives and new schools. I continued my work running Social Innovations which channels private money into public schooling and that delivers after-school programmes across the country. I registered for an MA at the University of Cape Town and this book is the fruit of that study.

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I first visited Gansbaai Academia in 2018 to interview Wilton Phillips. He was one of sixteen teachers I profiled in *Where Light Shines Through: tales of can-do teachers in South Africa's no-fee public schools*.

As I drove through the school gates for the first time there was something about it that captured my imagination. Firstly there was its name. Not Gansbaai High School. Or Gansbaai Secondary. But Gansbaai Academia. It suggested an aspiration to be more.

There was the sternness of the principal at the early morning staff meeting and the discipline that he demanded. The meeting started on time and the morning's business was dispatched swiftly. I sensed that Tommy Wilson was respected, even feared. He was also, I was later to learn, greatly loved. I was struck by the differing registers of him. From the stone faced leader of the morning meeting to the animated storyteller with the belly laugh and the abundant moustache who shared a smoke with teachers by the JoJo tanks that afternoon.

As I sat next to him, I looked at the gathered staff with their files and mugs of tea. It's unusual in a no-fee public school to find such a multi-racial gathering of teachers. I learned later that when Mr Wilson first visited the school eight years previously, he was immediately

struck by what he called the rainbow nation all gathered in one place. That is what inspired him to take the job.

There was Shark Alley, the foyer of the school, with its certificates, photos and framed newspaper cuttings celebrating its achievements. There were stories of alumni who had gone into the world and who were doing well.

It was a school with an industrial kitchen and a restaurant piloting new fields of study for the education department: hospitality studies, tourism and marine studies. There was the marimba band that had just returned from a tournament in Boksburg, Gauteng. A team of business studies students had returned from Sandton, the country's financial capital, where – competing against the most expensive schools in the country – they had won the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) Investment Challenge.

There was something going on there – something unusual – that I was drawn to understand.

This is the story of what I discovered. It is a quest to understand how a state-sponsored pocket of care might come about in a country characterised by government neglect. It is a quest to understand how relationships of trust and belief drive the prospects of young people after school. And it is a quest to understand – if the magic that I sensed there is real – if it can be sustained in a crumbling public service environment and against the demands of a small town's growing population.

I have spoken to many people along the way, and to be democratic about the storytelling, I have brought their voices with me. So come with us, and we will tell you about five men who graduated from Gansbaai Academia in those first few years, and what became of them when they left.