PAMELUMP

Anna Livia

WHEN PAMELA'S MUM heard me calling her daughter "Pamelump", she went all grey and quiet. Not grown-up type serious, like when they catch you telling a dirty joke, or saying a rude word, but really grey, like after someone's been sick. I thought she was going to burst into tears, if she didn't hit me first. Pamelump noticed everything: her mum going grey, me being scared I'd get the belt, then scared I'd hurt her mother. Pamelump always noticed. She had to. We went right on playing, though. First, because it wasn't fair to strain Pamelump's memory by making her keep too much for too long. Seeing as she couldn't just note things down like I could. Second, because you have to. They're always turning grey, or green, or shakey, and you have to go on as though you hadn't noticed. How they feel is their problem and you have to keep it that way. All they want is to pass it on to you.

Actually, the rules were more complicated than that because, whatever you do, and however much you go on playing, they have said it, and you have heard it. They were Pamelump's rules. She said sometimes it was much worse when everyone

pretended, because then she couldn't be offended, or angry, or anything.

When we were younger and the driver took us into town, I wheeled Pamelump places to look at windows and shops or to play with water. I had to steer her over the smoothest ground, and make sure to check beforehand that her tyres were full but not hard, otherwise she got jolted down in the chair and couldn't see anything but sky. All the kids would crowd round.

"Why's she in a chair? She's older than my boetje and he walks by himself."

"Can I push? My mum lets me push our baby."

"Where's your legs? Why've you got no legs?"

"Never grew in my mum's tummy." Her most generous explanation.

"Forgot to bring them, didn't I?" When she was feeling sarky.

"Same place as my arms." That's when she was angry and wanted to shock. It's such a small town, Luanshya; most of the kids knew her. But there were always some. A cousin from Ndola or a new family fresh out from Scotland. They said that no one had warned them, but I think some kids are naturally spiteful. Then they'd want to see what she looked like under the shawl, even the ones who'd looked before. They wanted to see how a shoulder goes when it doesn't have an arm on it. I know what they wanted because I was like that when my mum first told me. Now that I've washed her and dressed her, shaken her with fury and patted her so often, I know what she looks like. Just exactly the way you would expect a girl to look who doesn't have arms or legs. Where you or me go on, she stops. That's all.

Her mother had the African dressmaker cut Pamelump trousers with long legs, long-sleeved shirts, to pretend she might have arms and legs to fill them. But Pamelump complained she couldn't use her stumps with all that cloth flapping around. If people didn't like the look of her, they could look elsewhere. Well, the kids looked and the grown-ups looked away. I couldn't tell which hurt Pamelump worse. She made

excuses why we couldn't go places: the shops had too many steps, it was too hot to sit under a shawl. Then we stopped going anywhere except the bush and the farm where we wouldn't meet anyone who didn't belong to Pamelump.

Pamelump didn't really need to go anywhere. Her teachers came to her and she sent things away to England for correcting. Mostly her books returned marked "excellent". Pamelump was more proud of that than anything because the English teachers didn't know about her and couldn't have been marking her up. She worked out everything in her head then typed it with her chin, or checked it on her computer, though she had to program the computer. Her mother asked if I'd like to have my lessons with Pamelump, too. I would've, very much, even though Pamelump was a year older and much quicker. But my mum said, "I do draw the line at that. I'm afraid I really do draw the line at that. We said you could befriend her, and with your father away the money comes in handy, Lord knows, but really! If you spend any more time with that poor little lump, you'll forget what normal is."

Pamelump was my best friend, but I did have other friends. Girls at school I could run, skip and play British bulldog with, so I wasn't in any danger. Besides, with the radio and the papers, and the way people acted, Pamelump knew what normal was and she wasn't even it.

"My mum says it's really kind of you to go and sit with that poor little Pamela."

"My mum says she'll die soon and that's a kindness to all. They don't live past puberty."

"What's puberty?"

Pamelump used to ask me what my friends said. She already knew about puberty. She was watching out for it. And she knew all my friends' names. Her mother invited them to her birthday parties and some of them would come, on their best behaviour. But they could really only play British bulldog and skipping, so they weren't much fun for Pamelump.

"We going on the trampolines, Wendy, you coming with?"

"Ner. Pamelump's driver's coming for me."

"You play there every arvo. They should get a black to sit

with her." I didn't like having to tell Pamelump what the other girls said. I didn't like the way she called them "your friends", as though I agreed with them. It wasn't as though she didn't know. I already said about her noticing everything.

"You only come because my mother pays you. You're just like all the other shoppers."

"Shoppers" is what she called people paid for friendship. She was like that about the servants too. They were always kind to her, but she said it was because they were Africans and had no choice. She wanted them to love her just because. I said it was true we were poor, and my mum needed the money with my dad away, but I came to see her because she was my friend. She ignored that and asked: "Where's your dad, then?"

"Away."

"Away where?"

"He'll be home soon."

"I know where your dad is."

"Where is he, then?"

"He's in prison."

"No, he's not."

"He is."

"How do you know anyway?"

"Cos I read the papers not Teddy Bear Annual."

I didn't know what to say. "He never did it. He's an innocent man."

"Never did what?"

"What they say."

Pamelump looked at me. "He sold tickets on the trains. But sometimes he didn't give any ticket. He kept the money instead."

"No, he never. My mum says he never. And they're going to prove it and then they'll have to let him out and apologise in front of everyone."

Pamelump sneered at me, "So my only friend is a liar and her father's a thief."

If it would of been anyone else, I would of slapped her. Instead I sneered right back, "And my only friend has no arms, no legs and no brain."

"Your dad's cape coloured."

"And your mum lets her daughter play with one cos no one else would do it."

"See, see!" yelled Pamelump, "I was right all along. You only come cos you're paid to. You shopper. Shopper. Shopper. Tickey hopper."

"I won't be your friend any more."

"Then what will your mum do? Have to get a job instead of sending you out."

"She's got a job." And then I remembered and started to cry and couldn't stop. Usually Pamelump's good about crying, but after what she said I didn't want to be anywhere near her anymore. I ran out into the bush and hid in the mealies.

"So you're a coward as well as a liar," Pamelump stormed at me from her chair. I should have heard it bumping over the ground. "You can just run off and leave me."

"And you can get Benjamin to wheel you after." Benjamin turned away to examine the mealies. We got used to having our rows in front of people.

"Well," said Pamelump, as if she was beginning to be nice again, "what are you so upset about?"

"My mum," I told her, "she fainted at work. They sent her home. Now she's scared they won't take her back cos of my dad. They keep telling her to stay home and rest and it must be a very difficult time for her."

"Why did she faint?"

"Cos she didn't eat anything. I never noticed. She always said she ate breakfast after me and my brothers went to school. But it wasn't true. She didn't eat anything."

"Why though?" asked Pamelump, "Why didn't she eat? Was it because she was upset?"

"No! There wasn't anything to eat. She gave it all to us."

"It's alright, Wendy. It's not your fault. You just thought you were being good and eating your breakfast not to worry your mother."

"Yes," I sniffed, "I didn't know."

"And my mum will give your mum some money. Till your dad gets out."

"No," I said, "my mum wouldn't take it."

Pamelump looked at me. A funny little look, like making a child confess she's fibbing.

"No, honestly. She hates taking your mum's money."

"Then my mum must ring up the shop where she works and tell them they can't sack her."

"You can't tell your mum anything," I said. "My mum says the fewer know the better."

"Mum's alright about most things," said Pamelump. "It's only me she's funny with."

I don't know what Pamelump told her mother, but they let my mum go back to work and she had her meals in the canteen like salaried staff. After they'd eaten. All alone in the great big kitchen.

Pamelump did all sorts of things no one else did. I don't just mean thinking up strings to pull with her teeth, levers she could press with her tongue, but the games we played. She stored it in her memory to save herself the trouble of moving things around. She would think through whole crossword puzzles or chess games, just gazing at the empty pattern, and she was always right the times she asked me to write it down for her. That's how she played our games, but she made up no-arms-no-legs-games that were much more exciting. She said if you thought who got paid how much for doing what, it was obvious that all work consisted of was moving things around in the world. The further you were from the actual moving, the more you got paid. So we played moving games, where you touch nothing and remember everything.

"I give up, Pamelump, I don't know how Vincenza The Invincible is going to escape Brute Beit. You've got her hanging upside down on a meat hook, and it's Cecil Rhodes' Birthday so even if she gets away, no one will be around to give her tickey for a phone call."

That's when Pamela's mother turned grey.

"Wendy, dear, I'm afraid it's time for you to go now. I'll drive you. No need to wait for Benjamin."

But you remember it all, don't you, Pamelump? Because it's you I'm talking to. There isn't anyone else. There simply isn't.

I wonder if you knew what it would be like afterwards? I tell the story to myself often, to keep it alive, and it sounds strange now. Written down. I have never spoken of it to anyone. Never. To anyone. Do you know what that means? I try to keep it in order, in time at least, and it comes out like the children we were. I shall continue, I think, as if to a stranger. I feel a great need, after all this time, to make it separate from me. To say, "Yes, I did do that, and that, but look: there was all this time before, all this time after. Here it is on these pieces of paper. You can pick them up, you can take them away. They are not me. I am over here; far, far away; over here."

Maybe if there'd been a trial. But there was no trial. Only silence. Everyone was advised not to mention your name to me. Not even your name.

Pamelump's dad was very rich. Almost a millionaire. When his baby got born without arms or legs, he set up a trust fund for her so she could have everything she needed, or at least everything money can buy, which is not the same thing. She got all the gadgets, the attendants, the electronics but, after a while, she started to say no, because it was against her Philosophy. Lot of people offering her the stuff didn't think no-arms-no-legs people had a right to their very own Philosophy and should be grateful for all that hardware which was going to make their pitifully amputated lives that much more bearable.

"When I say I'm Pamelump, they say that's a wicked joke, calling attention to my poor affliction, 'stead of showing what a keen mind I have. Maybe being limbless has sharpened my wits, had I thought of that? I don't see them sawing the arms off their own daughters; rather go down on their knees and thank the Lord. If they won't call me Pamelump, they only think of me as the poor afflicted."

"Wendy," Pamelump's mother began on the drive home, "do you like coming to see Pamela?"

"Yes," I said. I tried to remember not to chatter. When I chattered to my mother about Pamelump, she said it wasn't natural, and then I'd have to play more British bulldog till she got over it.

"You don't have to come. I hope your mother doesn't make you?"

"Oh no, Mrs Geldenhuys. She thinks I come a bit too often."

"And what do you think, Wendy? Sometimes when I'm writing letters I hear the two of you laughing and I think how nice that you're friends."

She didn't say: "How wonderful", as if neither of us deserved friends. And she didn't say "How nice for Pamela", as if her daughter shouldn't aim so high.

"Mrs Geldenhuys," I said, my heart beating almost in my throat, "Pamelump is my best friend. My Very Best."

The charcoal burners' smoke drifted across the road so she couldn't turn to look at me.

"I'm glad," she said. "I wondered if I ought to let her go. You know, there's a special school in Jo'burg."

"She'd miss me," I said.

"Yes," said Mrs Geldenhuys, "I think she would. We did visit the school, but I don't think she liked it."

"No," I said passionately, "Pamelump's better than them."

I didn't mean "a better person". When Pamelump came back, she told me she had worse handicaps, but could do more, than anyone else there. They sort of flopped and let themselves be afflicted because all the helpers thought, "yes, that's how the afflicted should be."

"Is 'Pamelump' a nickname you have for her?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't sound very kind."

"No."

"For a very best friend, it sounds distinctly cruel. What does Pamela say about it?"

"Why don't you ask her, Mrs Geldenhuys?"

"I'm asking you, Wendy."

"She told me to call her 'Pamelump', and if I think a lump's a bad thing, I shouldn't play with her."

Next day I went to Pamelump's straight after school. We were going swimming. I didn't tell my mum because she wouldn't think Pamelump could; and if she knew, she

wouldn't think Pamelump should. Miss Mbata came with us; she stayed on the side to make sure nothing happened to Pamelump. The pool on the Geldenhuys farm is behind a mulberry grove, which means you get mulberries floating in it. It also means you're completely hidden from the house. Pamelump wears a life jacket for swimming, though she has to stay on her back. She says she just loves being out of doors with no clothes on, floating up and down the little ripples of the pool, watching the trees sway and the berries drop. She moved about quite easily; her back was very strong. She sort of rocked. I was proud of the swimming because it was my idea. I dived underneath her and she had to guess where I'd turn up; she rocked over to where she thought the next mulberry would fall and tried to catch it on her life jacket.

She let me pull her round the pool by her arm stump. When she suggested it, I felt so strange, like I wanted to cry. Or burst. She hated the other kids staring at her, always wanting to prod, feel how the skin tucked in; and now here she was, asking me. I knew it was just a game in a swimming pool, but I felt like doing ten somersaults.

"What you looking at?" she asked.

"You," I said, "your mouth's all red with berries, like kissing."

She turned sideways on the life jacket, picked up a berry and blew it at me. It got me on the cheek and splattered. We laughed and I took hold of her stump and we started to whirl off across the pool, making the water rush up over the edge. We charged round and round till we were taking the water with us and it made a tide that carried us on even after I'd stopped running. I looked down at Pamelump to see if she was still laughing. She looked adorable with the mulberry stain and I bent down towards her, not knowing yet what I was going to do. I still held her stump in my hand, and she seemed so trusting and happy that I kissed her, right there where her arm ended.

I felt all her muscles go hard. What a terrible liberty. She hated being mauled or slobbered over. She'd think it was pity and never let me near her again.

"You kissed me," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"Why?"

"I wanted to," I said, "I just wanted to."

Pamelump was quiet, weighing things up. She had to plan more than me. I waited. Then I looked round to Miss Mbata, but she waved so I don't think she'd seen.

"I'm glad," said Pamelump finally.

I beamed. I hadn't expected as much as that.

The water was still moving lazily along in the swirl I'd made. We let it float us around, both on our backs, hand to stump.

"Wendy! Pamela!" It was Mrs Geldenhuys. Pamelump looked furious when her own name was called second.

"What are you two doing? Wendy, I expect this was your idea."

"No," said Pamelump, "I suggested it this time. We asked Miss Mbata to watch us and . . ."

"I'm appalled," said Mrs Geldenhuys, "absolutely appalled. Don't you know how dangerous it is? What if Pam fell onto her face before Miss Mbata could reach her? What would you do, Wendy? Would you know what to do?"

"What makes you think I'm crazy as well as a cripple?" Pamelump screamed. "I can swim, you know, just because you don't let me . . ."

By now Miss Mbata had come round our side of the pool.

"I'm very sorry, Mrs Geldenhuys," she said. "It'll never happen again. It was such a hot day and I thought there'd be no harm if she wore the life jacket and I was watching."

"You should have asked, Miss Mbata. I do not pay my servants to decide my daughter's welfare behind my back. We will speak of this later."

"She didn't decide," Pamelump spluttered. "Why won't you listen? I begged her."

Mrs Geldenhuys looked half terrified, half proud. She wheeled her daughter back into the house. "Now listen, you two: that was a dangerous, stupid trick to play. It might be safe enough for you, Wendy, but Pamela has to take more

precautions. In future, if you want to go in the pool, Miss Mbata will go in the water with you, and you'll ask Benjamin to watch from the side. Have you got that?"

We nodded.

"And Pamelump, I don't want to see you taking advantage of the goodwill of the servants."

When Mrs Geldenhuys had gone, I turned to Pamelump. "She's going to let us swim."

"And she called me 'Pamelump'!"

Next time I went to Pamelump's, she told me we weren't going to play anything. She had to talk to me. I settled down on the front stoep, next to her chair. She liked sitting there on her own, watching the bougainvillea.

"I want to die," she said.

"Why?"

"Because I'm getting older."

"That's no reason."

"People like me don't live past puberty."

"Then why do it yourself? Anyway you might . . ."

"I don't want to be an exception. It's only going to get worse. I'll have to hire nurses to do everything for me when I'm grown up."

"I like doing things with you."

"But you'll get tired, Wendy. You can't hang around me the rest of your life. Lifting me in and out of swimming pools, feeding me, washing me."

"If you were someone else, you wouldn't think like you do. Anyone can dive and play British bulldog."

"Except me."

"It's nothing special."

"Unless you can't do it."

She paused.

"Do you only like me cos I can't move?"

"I like you because I have more fun with you than with anyone else."

"Well it's not enough. For me, it's not enough, You're the only friend I have, Wendy. I'm surprised I wasn't smothered at birth."

"Don't be silly."

"It's not silly. I have nothing to live for."

"Mulberry trees," I said, "and bougainvillea and the water lapping under you."

"I can't get to them."

"And me, Pamelump, you like me."

Pamelump was so quiet she scared me.

"It's not enough."

"I'm not enough?"

"No."

Another silence.

"You'll leave me, Wendy."

"No, never . . ."

"Already."

"What do you mean?"

"My mother called you first. You're the normal one, so it must be your idea."

"But that time it was."

"You said 'let's go swimming', as if it was that simple for me. I had to do the planning."

"You always do the planning."

"So it doesn't count."

"Pamelump, I have arms so, when I'm with you, I do the things you can't. I don't know what it's like not to have arms; you have to plan it."

"Well, I can't die unless you help me. Will you help?"

"That's a terrible thing to ask."

"Probably. But will you help me?"

"No."

"Wendy, every other human thing makes one choice. Whether to go on living. I can't choose, because I can't kill myself."

"How would you do it?"

"Sleepers. You must give me some of my mother's sleeping pills while no one is with us."

"What about the servants? And Miss Mbata?"

"Afternoon off Wednesday."

"Your nurse?"

"For Christ's sake, can't I even die without worrying what everyone will feel about my poor, afflicted body?"

I didn't believe her. I didn't want her to die because then I ought to die too, and I wasn't finished living yet. The sun on my back and ripe mangoes in the grass, it was enough. Why wasn't it enough for her? Because we were different. Because she could not ignore her mother's orders and sneak off to the pool by herself. Whatever we did, I had two arms and two legs and she had none. But when I kissed her, I thought it might be alright. That she might let me do things for her, agree to go on living. It wasn't such a bad world. I was furious. What made her think she could go off and leave me? Why wasn't I enough?

"Will you help me?" she asked again.

I nodded. "I'll get the pills, but I'm not feeding you. It's murder."

I was eleven years old and I was very clear about murder. But that wasn't the reason. I didn't want her to die, why the hell should I have wanted to kill her?

– Pamelump, are you listening?

"I can't feed myself," she said crossly, "you know that."

"I'll put them where you can reach. If you really want to do it, you'll find some way."

"Prove myself?" she said.

She might only be playing right now, but if she got depressed again, she might do it in a fury without really meaning to. I went to her mother's room and took pills from different bottles so it wouldn't notice.

"If you take too many, it doesn't work," she said. "There was a man in the papers."

We tried to work it out, but we didn't really have a clue. I left the pills on her reading lectern.

Next day, Mrs Geldenhuys rang my mother's work.

"Wendy darling, Pamela's had an accident. Smashed up her poor face. Mrs Geldenhuys says she'd love to see you."

Pamelump was all puffy with bruises and cuts. She had a black eye, but, much worse, she had knocked out two front

teeth and split her tongue open. That was drastic. She needed her teeth for so many things and false ones would just fall out if she tried to pull a string with them. Her tongue was too sore to press buttons, though it would've healed in time. Her hair hung over her eyes, a bad sign. She was always arguing with her mum to cut it. It was thick and long, gave visitors something nice to exclaim over. "What lovely hair." Don't notice the slab in the bed. Pamelump complained that, as she couldn't push it away behind her ears, she'd rather it wasn't there to torment her. They compromised and she always had it in a plait. Now it just flopped.

I was shocked. She looked beaten, just lying back on her cushions, crying.

"I'm sorry, Pamelump, I'm so sorry."

"Now do you see?" Her voice was thick. "I can't do anything. I've smashed two teeth and I can hardly talk."

She looked at me, one eye half-closed, one piercing.

"Wendy, I'm begging you. You kissed me because you love me."

I nodded.

"Please give me those pills. I fell out of my chair trying to get them."

I was angry and deserted and hurt, but I still did not want her to die. Most of the pills spilled into a video case when the chair tipped; in the fear for Pamelump, no one had noticed. I picked them out and held them in the palm of my hand. I would give them, one by one, to Pamelump whose mouth hurt so much she could hardly swallow. Twenty of them. I must dip my fingers into my cupped hand twenty times and feed her as I'd fed her hundreds of times before. If she wanted to change her mind, she could stop before any one of the pills.

"For pity's sake, Wendy," she said, after the third mouthful, "it's not a game."

So I gave her the rest four at a time to make it quicker.

"Wait with me," she said.

I stroked her hair and kissed her. I was eleven years old, nearly twelve. I knew that she would die and that I had killed her. That no one would ever understand. Anything. Why I

loved her. Especially not that. I would never see her again. Never talk to her again. Never play another moving game or swim in the pool. And I would never be able to speak to anyone else about her. They would talk of murder and affliction and what is now called euthanasia; they would not talk about the terrible loneliness, about my lack of power: I could not, for all my efforts, make a world she wanted to live in. She would see the bougainvillea waving on the stoep; she could not touch it.

I have written this just as I remember. When Pamelump closed her eyes, I waited a long time. Then I went out onto the stoep and began to pick bougainvillea. I left them on Pamelump's window sill.

FUNNY WOMEN

Shay Youngblood

MISS TOM WAS not a pretty woman, she was handsome like a man. Tall, broad-shouldered, big-boned, lean and lanky like a man. Her soft silver hair was cut short and curled tight around her nut-brown, smooth and narrow face. She had silver sideburns, thick eyebrows that almost met across the top of her face, dark black eyes that could see through almost anything, and a silver mustache, like a man. Kids, and some grown folks, who didn't know Miss Tom were always asking her if she was a man or a woman. Miss Tom was patient with small children and strangers, so she would say in a deep, husky voice:

"Don't judge a book by looking at the cover."

Her chest was flat as a man's, her hands were big, thick and callused. But she had a woman's eyes, dark, black eyes that held woman secrets, eyes that had seen miracles and reflected love like only a woman can. Her walk was slow and deliberate like she had somewhere to go, but wasn't in any hurry to get there.

Me and Miss Tom were friends, good friends. She taught me how to fish, throw a knife, carve a piece of wood, tame birds, and believe in a world of impossibilities. She lived in a