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# Experiments in Inhumanity

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A dissertation submitted in [*partial*] *fulfilment* of the requirements for the award of the  
degree of MA in Creative Writing

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## COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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## Abstract

*Experiments in Inhumanity* utilises for its setting the recognisable suburban backdrop of a mid to late nineties and early 21<sup>st</sup> century Cape Town and Pretoria. It focuses its attention around a specific white, middle class experience within pop-culture, making many references to music, television and film. In so doing it enters the debate as to how influential pop culture may be on teen behaviour, such as violence within relationships and peer groups. It throws elements like morose suburban existence, family dynamics and dysfunctional behaviour (specifically of a sexual nature) into the melting pot and attempts thereby to illustrate a fictional situation, which illuminates how youth culture might produce juvenile delinquency.

It follows the lives of siblings Michael and Alison and gives a window into the formative years of these characters as they struggle to find and sustain meaningful relationships. The characters' problems stem from a sexually traumatic incident in childhood. The novel investigates how, faced with the same starting point, the two characters achieve vastly different outcomes.

The novel uses German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of Eternal Recurrence as a motif, suggesting a repetitive, cyclical experience in the lives of the characters. It supposes a finite set of events recurring over an infinite time span.

It also experiments with narrative structure, breaking up a predictable – or expected – chronology while still attempting to retain a well-structured, suspenseful plot. The seemingly out-of-sync chronology has the purpose of reflecting the confusion inherent in the lives of the characters, as they attempt to reconstruct or extract meaning from a tortured existence.

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**“This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything immeasurably small or great in your life must return to you – all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over and over, and you with it, a grain of dust.”**

**- Friedrich Nietzsche**

## Alison: Prologue

You step over the threshold and you enter this place where you had once resolved never to return. A couple of paces takes you to the staircase which leads upstairs, where your hand, gripping the banister, creates for a moment the illusion of safety. But to hold onto a piece of this place for comfort reconfirms its deceit. Something courses through you. It is blood and it is life, but it is also fear, this thing you have fought to hold off for so long, suddenly so present. You are here and you must live through this experience again. You do not want to, you think you do not want to, but then why have you come? Why let yourself be talked into this? The thin veil of intervening years drops from this place in an instant and there you are, that afternoon, back there, dizzyingly present in that moment of time once more. You can smell the fragrance of autumn. The decaying leaves, the way the late afternoon sun falls slanted across the floor, your mother's voice calling you, beckoning you closer, insisting you come before your ice cream melts...

...and Charlie made a joke that my coffee's getting hot and my ice cream's getting cold. It annoyed me that the grownups laughed at this, that his mother stroked his hair in a parental gesture as she giggled. It's so infantile. He's eleven years old, as I was. Merely switching two words in a sentence no longer constituted humour. But I imagined I could see a conspiratorial look flash in my mother's eyes as she dismissed this joke as mere tomfoolery, not cute at all. And I assumed, because of this look, that my mother understood how infuriating Charlie could be and that she was not taken in by his pathetic charm but only smiling because convention demanded.

The surface of the lagoon rippled in the distance. It was a beautiful early evening drenched in sunny splendour. Childhood fantasies could still be seen shimmying on the water, but the air was heavy somehow. Dark clouds were rolling in, filled with thunder and rain. And when the storm arrived it would spill its contents and the lake would ripple everywhere with its disturbance.

I was shy then, uncomfortable and blushing as I stepped from the shadowy house. Charlie, who had, not half an hour ago, stood naked in front of me, touching me in my most private place behind the shed where the grownups couldn't see, had

seemed like an accomplice, one who understood the lure of the forbidden, but had transformed himself back into a blundering idio-child.

Mother (my mother) and mother (his mother) gathered plates and started clearing the table. They started talking about the weather and the bank of clouds building up to the back of the house, out that way, where the storms came from. They played predict-the-rain, that boring grownup game which ended without fail in an exclamation of "Put on a sweater" or even worse, "You can't go out in this." I had to move fast then to beat them to it. The fathers were down by the water's edge. They preferred beer to coffee and ice cream. Charlie had sprinkles on his ice cream. What a baby.

I gave my ice cream to Charlie, a gesture of complicity. He barely noticed intent. He gulped and slobbered. Big spoonfuls of dairy. Frenzied in his enjoyment, not heeding my haste in slurping my still-too-hot coffee. There was a rumble of thunder, not far away. It would come soon.

Charlie looked up, pausing mid-scoop. He had heard, he was afraid of the thunder. He attacked his treats with new vigour.

"My kite is still in the tree." He looked to where the fathers were.

I had to stop this. "Let's go get it."

He nodded, excited. Then looked back again.

"Our underpants are still behind the shed," I cautioned. "We have to go get it. They can't come with, they'll see." A dare. To go to the table, sit next to the parents with no underwear, our own dirty little secret, here under their very noses.

Charlie looked back once more, and suddenly I was afraid. His fear of the thunder, might it be greater than the fear of daring the forbidden? Had I gambled too much? Would everything out now? Would I be exposed as the instigator?

He dropped the spoon. It clanged against the side of the bowl and plopped into what was left inside. "Let's go..."

"Yes, idio-child, we must go now."

"What?"

"Come."

And we went.

I sigh. Resentment, loneliness and the bitterness only learnt with age is back. These things exist in the grown woman's mind, they weren't in that of the child. I sit down

on the steps, turning my back on the veranda and the view of the lagoon beyond. I feel like crying and curse my weakness under my breath. But, even though I bite my lower lip hard enough to draw blood, the tears find their way down my cheeks. And once the first couple are out, dripping onto the dusty rug, the rest come more easily, and while I feel cheated once more, this time by my own body, I let them come, I let them flow.

And Charlie is there in my mind. His face flashes in a hundred different situations.

Charlie, climbing up the tree, fetching his precious kite.

Charlie, his awe-struck face already contorted with pain when I turn away from him to run back to the house, the thunder much louder, so close then.

Charlie, his tear-streaked white face, twisted in agony as his father carries him through the front door, the underwear now upstairs where I stashed it. His mother is there, comforting. His arm, she says, might be broken.

Charlie, his face again twisted, for different reasons as he comes inside me for the first time. Me shouting *idio-child* at the top of my lungs at the precise moment of his climax. Him trying to silence me, afraid that someone might hear.

Charlie, Charlie, Charlie...

...the neatly trimmed blond hair. That soft implacable smile. A gentle soul, my mother called him. Ever reliable, always there, his presence like a refrain in my life's score.

But there is another face, which is also present at other moments, and on this face the features are more angular, the eyes more penetrative. That stare is more intense, always burning, always watching.

The front door opens and I am no longer alone. I look up and that face is before me now, Michael standing there, his arms laden with goods, brought along for this trip. First he aims for the kitchen, to put the stuff down, but soon enough sees my face, marks the trail of the tears which flowed there. He stops, shifts his weight, as he realises something of the moment's significance.

It feels like *déjà vu*, but all it really is is eternal recurrence. The two of us are here, in this place, this house, once more, like we were then. Only the two of us, a stolen moment of companionship, so intense, so confusing.

But we have come here to test our resolve, I determine. I have come to start afresh, launch my life along a new track. And this moment embodies that test, the

question if this time the life may turn out differently. But before what will be can be this moment has to be circumvented, needs to be averted.

Now he looks at me, some word of comfort caught in his throat. He looks as lost as I feel, sitting here, remembering, crying like a child, because the only man I came close to loving is gone. Idio-child is dead.

University of Cape Town

**I**

**MICHAEL**

**HOME COMING**

## Burying the Kite

The vast Atlantic ocean meets Cape Town in a place called Sea Point. It is an appropriate enough name, although the place itself is not very big. Its size hardly qualifies it as a suburb, but I liked coming here as a kid. So, when the taxi driver at the airport glanced at me in the rearview mirror, more concerned about some message on his cell phone than with his passenger, the first thing that came to mind was “Sea Point. Take me there.” He grunted, finished what he was doing and then drove me to my chosen destination in silence, not asking questions, not displaying any curiosity as to where I’d been and why I was going where I was going, or even what might lie beyond that. He left such thoughts to me.

Sea Point possesses a strange sense of vertigo. High rise apartment buildings stand side by side and even the land rises up and up to form Lion’s Head, dwarfing the human structures below, presiding over them in silent, mindless contemplation. When you turn your back on these things the first sight that greets you is the promenade, meandering along the opposite side of the road, the public swimming pool, some rocks, a lick of beach and beyond that the seemingly infinite stretch of that blue body of water. The oppressive weight of the tall and sturdy structures behind you, combined with the openness in front, lends the sensation of falling, falling.

It relaxes one, pausing here for a bit. It feels a little like life. Behind you everything is cluttered, busy and populated, while straight ahead there is nothing but a view, a possibility, an unknown which beckons, yet empty of human presence. But my reason for coming here is not simply to stand around gaping, tourist-like, at the sights the locals take for granted. No, on one of these high-rises there are big chrome letters bolted into the concrete above the entrance and they spell the words Manor Towers, and on the 15<sup>th</sup> floor is Billy’s apartment. Billy has been my friend for a very long time, and he is the reason I’ve come here first. Tomorrow we will have a funeral, but tonight there is some catching up to do. There are also questions in need of asking and answering. If I have learned one thing in my 28 years it is that death, when it does occur, is no slight thing. It has a prelude and an aftermath.

On the day of the funeral, the rain falls as dawn breaks, just as Charlie had fallen and broken. He had come to grief in his own backyard, a place he passed every day, not knowing that right here was where his final moment would occur. The circumstances of Charlie's death is unremarkable enough I suppose. His body was found in the garden of the Hout Bay home he shared with Alison, his left leg was folded awkwardly beneath his torso, his right arm bending the wrong way at the elbow, his eyes, open, empty, staring up at the balcony where he had been, moments before, putting in a new skylight. That's how Alison found him, around four o'clock in the afternoon on Thursday. She had returned from her studio, where she'd been working hard, putting in the hours to finish the last couple of pieces for her exhibition early the next month.

The one storey tumble, Alison said, might not have been enough to push him beyond the reach of the living, but the angle at which he hit the ground snapped his spine instantly. In a private moment with the mortician, Alison had been able to glean the information that if the angle had been even slightly different Charlie might not have been beyond rescue when Alison came home an hour or so later. Maybe. It was nothing more than speculation, which the mortician didn't like, only allowed himself to go there upon the insistence of the widow. At a slightly different angle, perhaps, but there's no way of telling, and besides, death is very clear-cut, you either are or you're not. "Maybe" can only be spoken in retrospect.

Listening to Alison recite all the details of Charlie's passing, her face set, masking the turmoil inside, as if this was just another rite she had to perform, I hid my own unease as best I could. I tried to picture it as she told it, and all of it was plausible and, dare I say it – vivid.

At the cemetery a little group of us huddle together against the wind which rustles the canopy of leaves above our heads. We are surrounded by lots of gravestones, positioned among prim walkways, snaking among neatly kept lawns. At our feet, almost confrontationally, the earth yawns in anticipation of another incumbent. The preacher handling the final rights supplies the necessary sobriety in his formal, subdued tone as we lay to rest Charles William Wilkinson.

I look at the faces around me. My mother is standing next to me, folding her arm into mine as I hold the umbrella she insisted on despite the rain having stopped. Across from us Billy and Fantasia stand, holding hands, heads bent, partly out of



respect and partly concerned with nursing hangovers from the previous night's excesses.

Charlie's parents are also here. His mother sitting in her wheelchair, crying, weeping with a ferocity that can be interpreted as inconsolable grief, the assistant from the Victoria Old-Age Home in Claremont handing her tissue after tissue, changing every soaked handkerchief for a fresher one. But she cries all the time now, Alison had told me in the car on our way here. She suffers from Alzheimer's and had just stared blankly at Alison and Mr Wilkinson when they had gone to inform her of her son's demise. In between bouts of tears she sits, breathing loudly, looking from face to face much as I am, only the glazed watery blueness of her eyes betraying that she probably doesn't have any idea where she is or what she's doing here.

Mr Wilkinson stands strong, defiant, with a fist pressed to his lips. He is flanked by three men I don't recognise. I assume they're from Wilkinson, Kruger and Associates, the law firm they run from Rondebosch. Charlie had been the Chairman of the Board before his death. This was his rightful place as sole heir, which had been bestowed on him the moment the doctor had announced, 27 years ago, that it was a boy. And this at the expense of the children of any of the junior partners, like my father's.

It is Alison, though, standing at the foot of the grave, clutching a rose to her chest, looking as defiant as Mr Wilkinson, that my heart goes out to most of all. She cuts such a brave figure, and I am suddenly overcome by a longing for her that I haven't felt in years. Her light brown hair pulled away from her face, the black dress, her eyes devoid of emotion. Alison. My Alison. All her attention focused on the fancy box which contains her dead husband.

I shrug off the thought and find myself wondering what Charlie's trip from the balcony to the ground must have been like, try to imagine myself plummeting and trying to guess what I might have thought. What is it like to die? To lie there, staring up at a nonchalant sky, your right arm and left leg folded underneath your body, blood beginning to trickle down your cheek, that coppery taste invading your mouth, beginning to realise that a crisp blue sky and a couple of fluffy clouds floating over Cape Town were the last things you would ever see. While he was lying there, which moment of his life was flashing through his fading consciousness, whose face was in his mind? Mine? Billy's? Or was it Alison, leaning, as if on the balcony above him at that very instant, looking down, saying a final confused goodbye? This sounds right

somehow. Perhaps Alison was so beautiful in his mind right then that he would have run inside, picked up the phone and dialled her studio's number, said "I love you," the thing that passed so rarely between them, over and over until he was satisfied that she understood that she was the one thing present in that final moment. He would have, probably, had he not been too preoccupied with dying, reduced to no more than a struggling mess, gulping for that last painful breath of fresh air.

"Amen," the preacher concludes.

The casket begins to descend. Alison brings the rose away from her chest, kisses it lightly and drops it on the coffin. After the green straps and the silver frame which hold them are removed, someone shoves a spade at me. Alison walks away, back to the car. I take the spade, watch her as she goes and then becomes aware of the eyes on me, the expectation of tears. Alison is strong, and so – cut from the same fabric – am I. The head of the spade digs into the gravel. The ground's outer crust is wet from the rain, but it is dry inside, the dust swirling in a cloud around me, aggravated by the wind, clogging my nostrils. I will do this. The first spadeful clumps down on the coffin with a sickening wooden thud. The rose disappears beneath the second. I can do this, am doing it, as I had done before...

\*

...It was not autumn then, but early spring, the chill of winter not quite willing to subside yet, but the pink blossoms and tiny green leaves sprouting from the peach trees in our back garden were testimony to the coming of warmer days. So many things seemed to happen in our lives as the seasons changed. Today school let out, for one, and that meant freedom. Freedom from homework, escape from teachers looking over our shoulders, liberation from routine, flight from monotony, into the brown leaf-covered hills, parks and streets where life was pure, pleasure and excitement waiting round every corner. Holiday time, our two favourite words in the English language, were here again. Even though it was only that silly one-week break in late August the South African education department deemed worthy of bestowing on us to break up what would otherwise be the longest term of the school year, to our thirteen-year-old minds seeming like all eternity.

When the final bell sounded at 13:30 precisely (we had synchronised our Casio wrist watches with the school clock to avoid disappointment), we bolted. Billy

and I cycled home together, bunny-hopping on and off kerbs and hooking wheelies at a moment's notice, the object to see who could keep the front wheel off the tarmac the longest. Billy always had lunch at my house, since his parents both worked full-time jobs. My mother and Charlie's mom, Aunt Mary, alternated driving duties between them on a weekly basis. It was Aunt Mary's turn this week. She would drop Alison off at my house and probably spend half an hour in the driveway talking to my mom before she took Charlie home. We preferred cycling, unless it was raining.

Billy and I would eat lunch and then we would be off into the streets, answering the call of adventure. On some occasions Charlie joined us, especially if we had bumped into him at school during the day. Invariably, and most of the time for a lack of anything better to say, he would ask what we were doing after school. We always told him, always invited him along, despite the knowledge that he would just hold us up, either at his house, making us sit around and wait until he was ready, or in the streets, on the bikes. He was not a strong cyclist.

We swung recklessly into the driveway of my house, quite happy to note that Aunt Mary's Cressida Station Wagon had come and gone. Charlie might be ready on time today, which meant we could hurry, and not have to find ways of killing time. I unlocked the garage with my key. My parents had agreed if I was old enough to cycle to school I was old enough to have my own key for the garage. Alison did not have her own key, because a year younger than me was not old enough. We stood our bikes against the wall and rushed inside to get changed out of our restrictive school uniforms.

By the time we came downstairs, there were Black Cat Peanut Butter and syrup sandwiches on white bread ready for us, two each.

"So, how was school, boys?" Mom was using the electric mixer to make cookie dough. She often made cup cakes for over the weekend. I liked licking off the chocolaty or vanilla goop from the mixing forks afterwards. Alison and I shared it, usually. One for me, one for her. Today I would make the concession that she could have both, being in a hurry to be off and all.

"Boring," I said through a mouthful of bread and spread. Billy didn't answer, he was busy washing his sandwich down with some Sprite lemonade.

"Well, at least it's holiday now. When you go back things will be great again. Nothing like a bit of a rest." Mom always said stuff like this. Like we would enjoy school, ever. I wondered if she enjoyed it when she was a kid.

“Alison! You’re going to eat that. I didn’t make it for nothing.” Alison was playing with her scrambled egg, poking her fork into it and twirling it absently around her plate. She was staring at me and Billy from across the table the whole time, but didn’t say anything. She always did this. She would come back from school with something specific in mind for lunch, prompting mom to say, “This isn’t a hotel.” She always got what she wanted, only when she did she often didn’t feel like it anymore.

We were happy with our sandwiches and happy to have them out of the way. Back in the garage we were oiling our chains and sprockets with dad’s little blue-nozzled canister. Alison had appeared, sitting on the steps in the doorway that connected the garage with the house.

“Hello, Billy.” Having waited long enough for attention we were not paying, she resolved to generate some.

“Hi, Alison.” Billy looked up and smiled.

Alison put on her cute face, clasped her hands between her knees and giggled. I was kneeling over my bike, watching them. I could see the smile on Billy’s face widening.

“What are you going to do today?” Her voice rose an octave higher than was normal. I knew Alison well enough to see where this game was going.

Poor Billy had no defence. “Well, we’re…”

That was as far as I allowed him to get. “We’re going Dirt Track Racing,” I said.

Billy jumped at the tone of my voice. Alison flashed me a sideways look, one that said “Butt out,” in an angry tone. But Billy was my friend, and I wouldn’t let this run any kind of course. This was my territory.

“Can I come too?” Her attentions swung back to Billy.

I stood up from my bike, took a couple of steps towards her. We locked eyes. “No,” I said.

I could see her draw breath, taken aback, preparing to make a comeback, but then she got hold of herself. When she spoke again the high girly voice was back.

“Why not? I want to come.”

Billy shuffled in next to me, started to clear his throat.

“It’s not a game for girls,” I said. “What are you going to do there anyway? You don’t even have a bike.”

Her eyes narrowed, but her voice remained in the upper reaches. "I could take your time. I could wave the chequered flag."

"That might be cool," Billy managed to get out.

Of course I kind of liked the idea of someone keeping our time, that had never occurred to me before. It would introduce a whole new element, us not only racing each other but against the clock as well, trying to beat our best lap times. But Alison could never get the idea through her head that I didn't want her near my friends. They were my domain. Alison and I spent enough time alone, and that way it was great. I didn't want her intruding on my friendships, just as I didn't want my friends intruding on what we shared. Alison had friends of her own, it's not like I was denying her something she couldn't get elsewhere.

"We don't keep time," I said. "We race. And besides, we don't have a chequered flag."

"I could make one." She was getting excited.

"Yeah," from Billy.

This was becoming tedious. I advanced another couple of steps on her. She'd gotten up from the stairs and taken a few cautious paces closer. She saw my look, felt it and was halted by it. "No, Alison. I said no." I used a tone of voice I had copied from Dad.

She stayed a moment longer, maintaining the stand-off. Her mind was surely churning. "Damn you," she whispered, but there was a faint glint in those eyes I knew well enough not to trust.

I knew what was coming next. We had to skedaddle.

"You didn't have to be mean," Billy said and punched my shoulder.

"Shut up, Fuck Bag." This was our new favourite term. We had picked it up from Justin. He was in high school, a year older than us. He used it to refer to Mr Lehmann, who was the principal at Oakleaf High. "I don't want to have to put up with her at the park. She'll be there for like three minutes before she's bored. And then we'll have to listen to her moaning all the time."

I went to open the garage door. I undid the latch and slid it up fast so it made that grainy screeching sound of metal grating on metal, when the inevitable happened.

"You just wait a minute, young man."

I turned around, glaring at Alison. She was standing behind Mom, peering at me with eyes full of pearly tears. She was getting quicker at this.

“Just what exactly is your story?” Mom was addressing me and Billy. Billy was toeing his bike’s tyre with the front of his sneaker and finding this engaging enough not to have to look up and meet my mother’s eyes. “Is being rude to your sister in fashion these days?” Now, like a heat-seeking missile, she was honing in on me. Alison smiled from behind her, sticking out her tongue.

“Aaaah, Mom,” I put on my most aggrieved voice. “I wasn’t rude.”

“Were too,” Alison piped up. She knew I could wriggle out of this one.

I ignored her. “Mom, we’re going to the park.”

“So take your sister along.” Her tone was softening. The worst was over.

“Aaaah, Mom. We’re going with the bikes. She’ll just hold us up.” Then the clincher. “If we give her a lift we’ll fall and get hurt.”

This got through. Mom kept her fists drilled into her hips: her “you’re in for a serious-talking-to, young man” stance. But her expression was wavering, the anger beginning to waft away before the breeze of reason.

“Aaaah, Mom. They never let me play with them.” It was all I could do not to burst out laughing. I never knew she could get her voice quite that high. Alison was fighting a losing battle here, she knew it. And I could see in her face that she was thinking, “damn, he’s getting better at this too.”

“Come on, Alison.” Mom spun on her heel, taking Alison by the hand. “You can help me make the cup cakes. And just see if they get any.”

Alison stuck her tongue out at me again, but there was a vanquished air about the gesture this time. I raised my middle finger in salute.

I grabbed my bike and rode off, leaving Billy to have to close the garage door. I was halfway down the block by the time he caught up with me.

We found Charlie waiting for us in his driveway. We waved as we approached and didn’t slow down. He fell in line behind us, pedalling hard at first to catch up to our pace and then we just cruised. Spring was coming, the clear air after overnight rain spoke of it, the blue skies confirmed it. This was that most special moment, the start of the holiday stretching out in front of us, beckoning with possibility. We took turns to take the lead on our way to the park. It felt good to be in the lead, but we also knew we had to conserve energy. The real racing would start at the park. I took the lead first, on the downhill section, then relinquished it to Billy when we hit the uphill section. I dropped to the back, right behind Charlie. It was only then I noticed the kite.

“Aah, Charlie,” I huffed. Nobody responded.

“Charlie!” Louder this time. Still nothing.

I cycled ahead, pedalling hard, surprising Billy when I passed him. I braked hard, throwing my tyre out behind me and turning to face the two of them.

Billy nearly crashed into me. He braked, swerved and almost fell. “Hey...” he shouted as he fought for control. Charlie, a little further behind, saw what was happening in time and stopped smoothly in front of me. Billy made a half-moon turn and rejoined so we formed a semi circle. “What’s going on?” I could hear the agitation in his voice.

“What’s that on your back?” I moved closer to Charlie, squaring up to him.

“You know what it is...” Charlie looked guilty.

I did know. It was the kite he got for Christmas last year. It had been his favourite toy ever since. He hardly left home without it, packed it in at the slightest provocation, found the most flimsy reason to bring it along. He had fashioned a couple of straps, with his dad’s help, so he could carry it on his back.

“We’re racing bikes today,” I said. “What are you doing bringing that thing along? I thought we agreed this morning we’re going to race.”

“We don’t race the whole time. I’ll fly it when we take a rest.”

“Yeah, take it easy, man. Why’re you so uptight today?” I hated it when Billy intervened like this. Billy got very protective of Charlie sometimes. Charlie could never stand up for himself. Billy preferred to keep the peace on our little excursions, not wanting anything to spoil the day.

He turned his bike and cycled off towards the park. Charlie looked at me for a bit longer, measuring whether it was safe to take off again. I backed down slightly. He walked his bike slowly past me, peeking sideways to make sure I wasn’t going to push him.

I jumped at him just as he was next to me. “Hey.” He almost fell, but I was feigning. Just wanted him to know I could if I’d wanted.

“You’re stupid, man,” he said when he saw I wasn’t coming. He hoisted into the saddle and set about catching up with Billy.

I watched them cycle up the incline and waited until they rounded the corner. I stood there, considering leaving them to go to the park alone. See how much fun Billy would have with only Charlie for company. Suckers. But then what? Go home?

I started cycling towards the park. The thought of going home wasn’t attractive right now. I had no doubt I’d just have to face an Alison-Mom coalition

orchestrated by Alison with the sole purpose of getting me in trouble. But I rode along slowly, made sure they had to wait for me, gave them time to consider my absence.

The park was filled with kids' apparatus. Yellow and red slip-and-slides, a big one and a small one, a metal rocking horse with a suspension pole in front and back, a sandpit, a soccer field, a splash pool, a witches' hat and several swings and jungle gyms. This was all for the kids. Behind the little rise to the southern side was the real reason for our coming here. There resided the dirt track with jumps and turns and everything you could throw at a BMX. I stopped on the crest of the little hill, looked down over the track. I imagined I was Greg Albertyn, this was American Supercross and on top of all that it was crunch time, the championship decider. I had to win, the others had to lose. It all came down to this.

"Hey Fuck Bag! Get your ass down here." The dirt track was also the place where the high school kids hung out in the afternoons, stopping here on their way home to smoke cigarettes and make out. Justin and Kelly were down there, talking to Charlie and Billy. I free-wheeled down the slope and aimed through the gate in the fence around the track which served to keep the toddlers out.

Justin was our all-time favourite person currently. He had seen Nirvana and Pearl Jam live when he went to America last year, which meant he had instantly achieved demi-god status in our eyes. He looked bedraggled in his school uniform, his shirt was never tucked into his belt and always wrinkled, he wore his green and yellow Oakleaf tie around his head like Rambo and smoked Chesterfield Filters. He was always in trouble at school over his dirty, blond hair. He had an undercut, although I'd never been able to figure out why it was called an undercut. The hair around his ears and at the back were over-cut while the thick, tangled mop on top was, I suppose, under cut. He was perennially in trouble with Mr Lehmann about the tuft of hair which obscured his crystal blue eyes. Mr Lehmann had twice chased Justin home and told him not to return to school until he resembled an Oakleaf pupil, which meant he had to get a haircut. Oakleaf High pupils apparently were people with immaculate hair. "The bright minds of tomorrow can only exist underneath accountant, short-back-and-sides do's," Justin had once said. We loved this. Justin had a way of making everything Mr Lehmann said sound funny.

Kelly was his girlfriend. She was a Goth. A Goth was someone who listened to Metallica and always wore black. Kelly very rarely went to school. She bunked often, had done so again today, agreeing to meet Justin in the park on his way home.



Having the guts to stay away from school was the coolest thing in the world. It meant she could wear whatever she liked, could dye her hair black (which she'd done), could wear a nose ring (which she was) and could get a tattoo (which she was going to).

"Go on," Billy said to Justin.

"What?" I'd missed something.

"Justin and Kelly's going to an oggy tonight," Charlie explained.

"An orgy, numb-nuts," Justin laughed.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's like a party where everyone has sex," Justin said.

I looked at Kelly.

"Can we come?" Charlie asked.

"No way, man." Justin laughed. So did we. We were laughing at Charlie, but kind of hoping Justin would say yes. "Who the hell are you going to have sex with? You probably can't even get it up yet." Kelly snorted laughter at this. She was very pretty when she smiled, which she didn't do very often. Justin once told us when Kelly was in the hospital that she was a masochist. Charlie had wanted to know what this was. Billy thought it had something to do with the cuts she sometimes had on her wrists.

"I can get it up if you show me how," Charlie said to Justin. Now Justin and Kelly both laughed. We did too, but again we were hoping for an outside chance to get invited to the party. I regretted bringing Charlie along to the park today. It was going to cost us more than usual this time.

"Maybe you can help him get it up," Justin said to Kelly.

"I think you're more his type," Kelly said. She blew smoke out through her nose when she spoke. This was cool, made her look like a dragon – a pretty one.

I knew Justin took us for idiots. It was funny sometimes what he thought we didn't know. The sex thing for example. I mean we knew what sex was. Charlie's dad had sat him down and told him about sex, a short uncomfortable speech starting with, "You know how boys and girls are different..." and ending with "...so now you know." Billy's parents had given him a book on the subject: *Answers to Important Questions*. There were colour drawings in the book of men and women, their genitals dissected in the drawings to illustrate the mechanics of the thing; what fitted where. It didn't take us long to figure out that the male genitalia could fit in other places as well, and this lead to more than one giggling fit. But that had been over two years ago.

We humoured Justin's assumption of ignorance on our part, at least Billy and I did, because we knew that high school lay ahead for us next year and it wouldn't be a bad thing to befriend someone a year older than us.

"Don't worry, mate. I'll take you some day." Justin crushed the butt of his cigarette under his shoe. "Now we gotta run. Catch you later."

Justin and Kelly walked off. Justin had his arm around her waist.

"Okay. Let's get started," I said. "Knock out, as always." We usually had two ten-lap races. The loser of the first race would sit out the second one, which was the Final. The winner of the Final would be the overall winner, even if he didn't win the first race.

"Ready. Steady. Go!" I was a whirlwind, a master of the craft. I had perfected this, honed my skill to an artistic expression. The others floundered, their only hope was to minimise their embarrassment. Charlie – no surprise – lost in the first round. He was out, vanquished, defeated, demoralised.

Billy, after a rest, did his best to give me a proper challenge in the Final. But, flying, encapsulated within a sublime rhythm, my corners perfect, my jumps astounding, pin-point precise, I left him in my dust. His challenge evaporated. He got desperate, tried the impossible, became ragged, lost his lines, botched his jumps. He was costing himself time, his difficulties underlining my superiority. On the last lap he fell. I crossed the finish line, triumphant, saluting the crowd, the hordes of cheering onlookers, the adoring fans. Even my detractors were stunned by the spectacle they had just witnessed. The champion elect, the conqueror. It was the sweetest taste in the world, that of adulation earned. Glorious.

But there in Claremont, in Arlington Park on Arlington road, my victory went unnoticed. Billy scraped his knee in the fall. He was sitting on the opposite side of the track, holding his leg, assessing whether the blood leaking from the wound was serious enough to cry about. Charlie was nowhere to be seen. His bike lay discarded near the gate in the fence.

I stood for a moment by the log we always sat on to rest, catching my breath. Then I heard the frrrrrp-frrrp sound from above. The wind tousled my hair, and swept the kite this way and that, pulling taut on its strings, whipping around in elegant arcs, controlled by a deft hand, made so by practice, from below.

My mouth tasted salty. My spit was thick and phlegmy when I hurled it to my left. I could hear Billy shuffling somewhere in the distance, pumping his legs in the

gravel as he picked loose bits of dirt from his wound. I stood in the saddle, pumped my legs hard up the hill, then I crested the brow, picked up speed, chose direction, aimed.

Charlie didn't look behind him, he was preoccupied, his full attention on the red and blue flap of material in the sky. At exactly the right moment I let my bike go to the left and hurled myself to the right. I thudded into him, our bodies connecting with satisfying force. We rolled in the grass and dirt. There were thorns here, I noted their harsh bite, but ignored them soon enough, focusing on inflicting pain rather than receiving it.

Charlie was trying to fight back, but his flailing arms swiped aimlessly and with no effect. He was not fully aware of what was going on. I regained my balance first. I was up on my feet and hurling him aside, as hard as I could. He was shouting something but the sentence broke off before it could make sense. He must be winded, he fell awkwardly the second time. I was up, looking around. At first there was nothing, but as I found my orientation again I saw it.

The kite was far off to my right, it had crashed into the ground. I gathered my bike, raced towards it. Moments later I was off home, heading for the park's main gate. I could hear Billy's voice somewhere far behind me.

"Come back. What the hell are you doing?"

I sped up. I was tired after the race, but the adrenaline was thick in my veins, my forehead was beginning to burn with the heat of it. Once I was close to my house, I was crying. I wasn't sure why and I didn't know what I was going to do next, couldn't remember what I had intended in the first place, but I was familiar with this feeling, it overtook me sometimes, my body acted faster than my mind could. My body was the faster racer.

When I reached my house dusk was slowly coming. The lights were not turned on inside yet, except for one upstairs, Mom and Dad's room. I climbed over the gate at the side, leaving my bike hidden in the bottlebrush in the front garden.

I fetched the spade from the garage, among dad's garden tools. The kite I tossed on the lawn outside. The television was on downstairs. I could see it flickering its weak blue light. The kite lay there, staring at me, evidence of anger.

There was a patch of soil in the back garden. Dad had forked it over on the weekend, planning to plant azaleas. Then the nursery didn't have and he got angry, decided to leave it. I dug. The soil was fresh, lumpy and a little muddy from the

sprinkling of rain the previous night. I could dig quickly, soon the hole was done. It didn't need to be deep, just well camouflaged.

I dropped the kite in, began shovelling dirt over it. Again and again. Sounds began to impress on me. The gate beside the garage rattled, someone was scaling it. The rear door banged open. Mother was calling me. I shovelled faster. I could still have it done in time, before they saw. Then I could catch my breath, wait for my brain to turn on again, explain my way out of this.

Billy reached me first. He put his hand on my shoulder. I kept going, maybe he hadn't seen, maybe they wouldn't remember, maybe their minds also got overtaken sometimes.

\*

The leaves continue their muted sounds overhead. The coffin has all but disappeared beneath the earth I shovelled. A bit of wood is all that is visible now, a bit of one of the chrome clasps, not much. Billy's hand is on my shoulder, firmly. I look into his face. His eyes are resolute. He doesn't say a word, but we look at each other, an unspoken unanimity passes between us. I take a step backwards, tasting the sweat on my lips.

"Michael?" I hear my mother's voice from somewhere behind me.

I clear my throat, look around awkwardly for a moment, and then one of the undertaker's attendants is next to me, taking the spade. All the faces are turned towards me, even Charlie's mother, Aunt Mary, looking suddenly solemn, a new vitality present in her gaze. She had stopped crying. I can feel Mr Wilkinson's stare, but I can't read the expression on his face. I turn away and walk to the car, Alison standing there, waiting. She, at least, not looking at me.

## Special Lady Friends

Her name was Lucille and she was inflicted on me as a kind of punishment for what I did to Charlie's kite. She was the first grownup I had met who insisted on me calling her by her first name. She called herself my 'Special Lady Friend' but because I had to go see her every Tuesday afternoon I knew she was a Teen Psychologist. It was printed next to her name on the information board in the waiting room so if she thought she was fooling me she was very short-sighted.

In her office I had to sit across from her, a desk between us, and answer all these questions she asked. Sometimes I had to look at pictures and tell her what I saw, other times we played word games and things like that. She was very friendly but all this really was, was another hour added on to school. She wore black-rimmed, sharp-pointed spectacles, dangled them from the very end of her nose so she could look at the papers on her desk through them. She peered at me over the top of them when I answered. Her hair was cone-shaped, very white but with a suggestion of a purple tinge. She looked very funny in her elaborate flowing dresses and floral scarves.

I made up situations and fantasies about her during the sessions to try and relieve the boredom. In one of them Lucille and I were a fearsome Wild West posse, our mouths and noses covered, wearing wide-brimmed hats, riding into towns shooting wildly-randomly into the air, robbing banks, only our eyes visible. She peered over her spectacles and demanded – in that clipped, angry tone she sometimes took when I refused to play her stupid games on Tuesdays – “Now look here, mister,” she said to the clerk. “You hand over all the greenbacks in the safe or we don't play the ball game for the last fifteen minutes.”

I had to keep from laughing sometimes, and that's how I had fun, but really, I hated her. It was all because of Charlie's stupid kite and my parents overreacting like they did over every little thing. On the night of the incident over the kite I'd heard mother crying. They were having a conversation down in the lounge after they thought I had gone to bed. I snuck onto the landing and peeked at them around the corner. I could move very quietly. I had practiced. I knew exactly which floorboards I needed to miss and which ones were safe and didn't creak when you trod on them. Dad poured them drinks from the heavy glass bottle with the top that looks like a golf

ball and pin which they kept in the cabinet above the television. I had drunk some of it when I was younger. I climbed on top of the lower part of the cabinet, placed my feet either side of the television set and slid the bottle closer. It was very heavy. But the golden brown liquid inside didn't taste like apple juice as I thought it would. It stung and made me cough. I didn't know then that it was brandy and wasn't all that bad once you got used to the taste. Justin called it "one of those indispensable things that makes life just a little more bearable."

I didn't know about that, though. It usually helped make Mom a little happier. She only laughed at dirty jokes when she'd had some but it had a different effect on Dad. At first he told a lot more jokes and got people laughing, but after long enough it seemed to make him angry, angrier than usual.

"Are we bad parents?" Mom had asked, amid-sips.

"No. Don't let it worry you. He's young. Boys always get into trouble at his age. It's nothing a good thrashing won't solve."

"No, Walter. You can't take the belt to him every time he does something. I don't believe severe punishment can teach him everything he needs to know to grow up fine."

"It never did me any harm. It teaches you right from wrong."

"Well," Mom had sipped again, she sounded like she was choosing her words carefully. "You and your father don't talk to each other anymore. I don't want to alienate the boy."

"That's different, Marjorie." They were using first names. That only happened when the atmosphere in the house was tense. "My father is a senile old bastard. The two of us have nothing left to say to each other. Michael will be fine."

Mom let it go, but she must have won that argument at some stage because I was never physically punished for the kite incident. They found more excruciating ways of dealing with me that time, alternative, sneaky ways to teach me the fabled old Right from Wrong. First of all, and most embarrassing, I had to go apologise to Charlie, his dad and Aunt Mary for my behaviour. This was unbelievable. I had to go apologise for him being an idiot, but Mom and Dad didn't see it this way at all. They seemed determined to squeeze every last drop of potential humiliation from this situation. Dad drove me over there and stood smoking a cigarette by the car as I had to trudge up the walk, ring the doorbell and make the speech Mom had made me

rehearse. It all seemed pre-arranged. The Wilkinsons stood in a row just inside the door and marched past.

“I’m sorry for my behaviour. I want to apologise and will do anything to make it up to you. I could come over and help with some housework,” I said to Aunt Mary.

“I’m sorry for what I did to Charlie’s kite. I know it was a special present from you and that it was his favourite toy. I feel very bad about what I’ve done. I will help to fix it if you let me,” I said to Mr Wilkinson.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to break your kite. It was a terrible thing to have done. I’m really very sorry and it won’t happen again,” I said to Charlie.

I knew all of this was made worse because my father worked for Charlie’s father. They were friends and my dad went out of his way to remain in Mr Wilkinson’s favour. Only after I had finished grovelling to all three of them did Aunt Mary and Mr Wilkinson move off, back into the house and beyond in the garden to busy themselves with whatever they’d been doing before I arrived. Mr Wilkinson had given my dad a quick wave before walking off. I looked over my shoulder in time to see my dad nod in acknowledgement. Now it was only me and Charlie left, standing around. He rocked backwards and forwards, his hands stuffed in his pockets, shifting his weight from heel to toe and back again.

“I am sorry about the kite,” I said again, unable to think of anything else.

“It’s okay. We’re going to fix it this weekend. You can come help if you want. Dad said we’ll go to the beach afterwards to try it out. I’ll ask him, maybe you and Alison can come along. We could make a picnic of it.”

I nodded and started mimicking Charlie’s rocking back and forward. It suddenly seemed quite a neat thing to do when you were bored and had to stand around for a long time.

“And about the fight,” I said.

“Huh? Oh, that. Don’t worry.”

Charlie had probably been too upset about the kite, but for whatever reason he hadn’t said anything to his parents about the fight we had had before.

Dad drove us back home, but shortly after turning into our street he pulled over and stopped the car. He turned the radio off. We were still a few houses down from ours. He sat like that for a while, just staring out at nothing, listening to the sounds of lawnmowers. I kept quiet.

Then, suddenly, his hand shot out and grabbed me by the collar. He pulled my face very close to his.

“You better pull yourself together, Michael. This is the second time... the second time!” His breath smelled of cigarettes. “I’ve had enough of this. You’re an embarrassment. I don’t know what’s going on inside that head of yours, and I don’t want to know, but you pull yourself together. This is no way to behave! Are we clear, are you hearing me?”

I nodded. His grip on my collar hurt my neck. “Yes, Dad.”

“Now get out. I’ll see you at home later.”

I walked home while he went for a drive.

The second way to punish me was Lucille. Although she was friendly and not all that unpleasant she still took up vast and valuable amounts of my time. Seeing her also meant Billy and I couldn’t go biking on Tuesdays anymore, not that we always did, but now it wasn’t even an option. I could see summer come and go through her office window.

\*

It was a grey, overcast afternoon the day I met Rebecca. A thin drizzle seeped through everything on my walk from the Study Centre to the offices of the Pretoria Campus Newspaper. It was the sort of weather most people would call miserable. I had finished an article for the newspaper, had laboured over the corrections in the Study Centre, contemplating whether it was ready yet, when I finally decided enough was enough. It was a simple article outlining some of the best value meals on and around campus. I would drop it off and make my way to the garden flat I stayed in at my aunt Gertrude and uncle Mitch’s house and be content that another day was done.

She was sitting behind a desk, staring at a computer screen, editing and correcting, when I entered. She was the only person in the office.

“Hi. Can I help you?” She said, looking up.

I remember stalling, my tongue momentarily heavy in my mouth, when I looked into those green eyes. Her hair was blonde, wavy, with dark roots and her smile was captivating. She was not the sort of girl one would call stunning, but she was immediately intriguing, the way she smiled as she waited for me to respond, the slight burst of laughter she tried to conceal by faking a cough when she began to



guess at my predicament. She was wearing a white top, one thin strap having migrated towards her shoulder, hinting at slipping down her arm.

“Uhm, well,” I cleared my throat, began to rummage in my bag, which hung from my shoulder. “I brought this.” I produced the three pages, stapled in the top left hand corner. “The Best Value Meals article.”

“Oh, yes?” That smile again.

“I don’t know who to give it to.” I looked around.

She held out her hand. “You can leave it with me. I’m Rebecca, the editor. It will have to come to me eventually, anyway.”

“Cut out the middleman,” I said, handing it over.

She glanced at the front page which contained my name and contact details. “Oh, Michael. Right. I enjoyed your book review last month.”

“Oh, thank you,” I said. “Which one?” The paper had run a feature called *Books you Simply have to Read* the previous month. I had handed in three book reviews but had forgotten to check whether they’d used any of them.

“The Iain Banks one. *The Wasp Factory*. It was very good.”

“Thanks. Did you read the book?”

“I did.” She placed my latest article on the desk next to her computer.

“And? What did you think of it?” I was overcome with a sudden desire for small-talk.

“It was good,” she said. “A bit disturbing, though.”

“Well written, I thought.”

She nodded. It seemed this was all that was going to pass between us, so I nodded, thanked her again and turned to go. I reached the entrance and stopped. I turned back to her again, not knowing why in that split second, but not stopping to think about it either.

“Say,” I said. “When do you get off?”

“What?” She looked up from her work again, this time not suppressing the giggle. “When do I get off?”

“Finish, I mean. For the day.” I felt my face growing warm, but tried to ignore it, hoping it wasn’t showing as much as I felt it.

She glanced at her watch and seemed to consider more than the time before she looked up at me again.

“I’ve got one more class. I’ll be done around five. Why?”

I indicated the window. "I hear Coffee Buzz makes a great Cappuccino. The kind that goes down very well on a rainy day."

Then she flashed the smile I would get to know quite well over the next few years, and would eventually miss once it lost the effortless humour it now possessed. "You know, I might just take you up on that. Since you are the resident expert." She tapped a finger on the pages with my name on.

"Great, see you then." I walked off, and loved that drizzle on my skin then. The day was suddenly bright and the rain couldn't dampen a thing.

And just like that, it happened. It was simple and it was natural, and nothing worried me. The past was the past and the future was before me, and although I'd kept pretty much to myself since coming to Pretoria just over twelve months before, this was the first tentative step towards the quiet, contented life I still thought possible.

\*

In Manor Towers, on the 15<sup>th</sup> floor, I knock on the door of apartment 15C. It is silent for a long time. All that is audible is the low mumble of a television set in one of the apartments down the hall, and if I strained my ears, the low hum of a refrigerator motor from Billy's apartment. I take the piece of paper from my pocket and double-check the address. Apartment 15C, Manor Towers, Beach Road, Sea Point. This is the place. I pick up my sports bag, sling it over my shoulder and consider going back downstairs to order a drink at the restaurant on the ground floor. To be safe I knock again, wait, and I'm about to start walking when I hear something inside.

It's a muted thump, an exclamation of "Ouch, fuck!" And then something crashes to the floor. I hear footsteps inside and then a female voice. "Hang on Harold. I'll be out now."

Another few moments pass before the door opens. "Sorry. I had to get a..."

Then she looks up and sees that I am not Harold. "Oh? Hello." She stands like that, utterly perplexed, looking past me down the hall, and not finding what she expects there, looks back at me. She has long blonde hair, braided, and she's wearing a skimpy red gown. "Sorry. I can help you?"

I can't immediately place her accent. It sounds slightly Russian.

"Yes," I say. "Is Billy in?"

"Yes." Another second of indecision follows. "Who are you?"

“Michael,” I smile. “Old school friend. Come to stay for the night.” I lift my shoulder so the sports bag moves there. She looks at it, one eyebrow rising, as if to say, “Oh, does that prove it now?”

“Uhm. First wait. I’ll call him.” She slams the door.

It swings open again almost immediately. “You don’t mind to wait. Sorry.” Slam.

Enough time passes for me to consider the restaurant again. I take my cell phone from the pocket of my jeans and start looking for his number. I find it, press “Dial” but then he stands before me as the door swings open again.

“Is that you Professor M?”

I smile. “Why yes, Doctor B. It’s me. I was just about to call you. What the fuck’s going on?”

“I’ll explain later. Come in, come in. Let me have a look at you.”

I step into a neat, wooden-floored apartment. There are two designer couches, a widescreen TV set into one of the walls. The far wall is glass, offering an appropriately breathtaking view of the Atlantic.

“Phew, Doctor B! What have we got here?”

“Well, Professor M,” Billy smiles. “This is the humble little hovel I call home.”

“Do you lead a secret second life? Interior designer by night. Holy shit, man. This is neat.”

“Contacts, Professor M, contacts. And does your utter surprise leave me to surmise that you never imagined I could develop a sense of style?”

“I have been gone a long time, Doctor B. A long time.”

We laugh, embrace, and I am shown to the couch, made to sit down and offered a beer. “You still drink Amstel, don’t you?” Billy asks on his way into the kitchen.

The girl appears again as Billy returns with the beer. She has changed into a white tank top and a mini skirt which rides deliciously up her smooth thighs as she sits down on the couch across from me. Billy hands over a beer to each of us and flops down next to her.

“Introductions ahoy,” he laughs. “Michael, this is my girlfriend Fantasia. Fantasia, this is my friend from before I could spell my own name, Michael.”

“Fantasia?” Is this a joke?

“Yes. I pleased to meet you, Michael.”

“Fantasia?”

“She works as a stripper down at the Kitty Parlour,” Billy says.

“Oh.” Dating a stripper. This is the first sign that the Billy I knew from school still exists in this after-school Billy’s life. The designer apartment, which looks like a virtual reality rendering of a page from *Interior Décor Moderne* magazine, doesn’t fit the Billy I left standing in Arlington Park roughly ten years ago. That Billy had looked at me on that particular rainy night, a dumbfounded expression on his face that would have been comical under different circumstances, asking “If you’re running away, what am I supposed to do?”

1997 that had been. In 1998 he sent me an e-mail, informing me that his parents had died when their Cessna aircraft, piloted by his father had come acropper in a spell of patchy weather and ended up somewhere in a valley forming part of the Drakensberg mountain range. I had kept expecting, for the rest of 1998, to receive a phone call from my mother saying that Billy had shot himself. I was sure he would do it that way. If he was going to kill himself he would do it with a shotgun barrel in his mouth. I couldn’t picture any other resolution. The Arlington Park version of Billy had been a boy at the end of his wits, with little hope of emerging into a life of sunshine and good fortune. But that phone call, when it came, came in 2007 and the name of the deceased had not been Billy.

Now, in front of me on a couch sits a man with dark, tanned skin, lean, ropey, well-toned muscles, black dread-locks swept back in a way that can only be described as neat. He is wearing a black, button-down satin shirt, designer cargo pants and Diesel loafers. I feel an unmistakable pang of jealousy. The hopeless, confused Billy with not a prospect in sight is gone. This is a man who exerts an air of control; over his destiny, his life.

He had inherited a lump sum from his parents’ misfortune, a lump sum that I assume is now paying for the designer apartment and the stripper girlfriend.

“How long have you guys been together?” I ask Fantasia.

“Two weeks.” She holds up two fingers before lighting a cigarette. She looks me up and down. I feel slightly underdressed in my jeans and T-shirt.

We talk about them first, but since they hadn’t known each other for long this topic soon flounders. We move on to how Billy had spent the intervening years. I had received the odd phone call on my birthday or around Christmas from him, but never

once had he volunteered any information about his life. And I never asked. We talked about me mostly. I told him about Rebecca, about my studies, and promised I would see him again sometime.

Billy is now a Capoeira Instructor, teaches classes on Wednesdays and Thursdays. He's had the Manor Towers flat for almost four years. Billy asks about my time in Pretoria and how I'm doing, about which I'm vague. Then the inevitable question is raised: Rebecca.

How is she? How are we getting along? Why haven't I brought her along so everyone could meet her? "Fine," I say. She is very busy right now, but we are doing fine.

Billy runs out of beer and opens a bottle of Johnny Walker Blue Label whisky. The conversation progresses to "when-we-were-kids" anecdotes. Billy and I recall the day when we stood at the bottom of the staircase at Oakleaf High, pretending to have a conversation while we were actually craning our necks to see up Sarah Moore's dress. She was the prettiest girl in school, and we'd figured out that Wednesday after second break, when her class was waiting for the Science teacher to unlock the laboratory, was the perfect moment to catch a glimpse of the panties every boy in school wanted to get into. We talk about the trouble we did get into, the teachers at school we liked and the ones we didn't, the girls at school we had crushes on and the ones we insist we hadn't fancied.

We talk about our own experiments, how we had come to call each other Doctor B and Professor M. And as we talk Fantasia grows quiet, retracts almost imperceptibly. She is no longer part of this conversation, no longer wants to be, either. She laughs at the funny bits, smiles nervously at others, but the slipping back has commenced. We are taking the first tentative steps into that specific long ago. It is fragile and innocuous at first, like uncovering a precious fossil, those first few careful brush strokes to remove enough dust for you to get an idea what it is you are dealing with. That's what we're doing as the sun makes its way towards the horizon while we sip whisky. But of course these conversations always go to a certain point, and then, abruptly, without resolution, they stop and hang in the air like a weight, suspended between Billy and me. I'm sure Fantasia can feel it, that there is a part we're not telling, that a story with such a trajectory has to go somewhere. And that its conclusion has to be unsavoury.

At some stage Fantasia gets up and leaves the room. She re-appears a few minutes later in platform high heels, a low-cut top and short black skirt. She fixes herself something and eats in the kitchen. A little later there is a knock at the door and she opens it.

“Come in Harold,” she says. “Wait, I get my bag.”

Harold turns out to be a fierce looking black guy who seems like the type that tears phone directories in half as a form of meditation. He is dressed in a smart black suit and wears sunglasses, despite the brightness of the day having departed. We are introduced, before Billy hands over some cash. Harold doesn’t thank him, merely pushes the wad of bills into his breast pocket and keeps glancing about. He is not very talkative and soon enough Fantasia is ready.

She pecks Billy on the cheek.

“Phone me when you’re done,” Billy says.

“As always,” she smiles and they leave.

“Well,” Billy says, closing the door behind them. “How does a burger sound?”

“Mouth-watering,” I smile.

In the basement which serves as the underground parking lot Billy’s 325i Diesel BMW chirps when he presses the button on the immobiliser control. He suggests we go to Club La Med, which is a beach bar and offers, in addition to good food and fine cocktails, an atmospheric view of the sunset.

On our drive over a lull slips into our conversation. Now that Fantasia’s presence is removed we are both aware that there’s quite a lot that has been left unsaid between us. The last ten years of semi-estrangement hasn’t made those things disappear, as I had always assumed they would. Ten years of festering silence and yet the issue remains.

We stop at a red light in Camps Bay. There are couples crossing the street, bright lights and booming music calling them to the clubs along the strip and everywhere young trendy people are having a good time and looking for sex.

“You never told anyone, did you?” I ask.

“No,” Billy says immediately. He keeps looking in front of him.

“You’re not planning to?”

“No.”

“Good,” I say. “Good.”

The light turns green. We drive off.

Once at La Med we sit down at the wooden benches outside, feel the light sea breeze on our skins and hear the murmur of the ocean beyond the soccer field, which glows a sickly yellow under a couple of lampposts intended to illuminate any night games. Two boys are kicking a ball this way and that without much enthusiasm.

Billy orders Whisky while I set about making my way through the cocktail menu. A silence drags out between us, which neither of us knows how to break. Billy plays with his car keys on the table.

“So,” I say eventually. “Tell me about Fantasia. Where did you meet her?”

He smiles. “I met her at the Kitty Parlour. Where she works, you know?”

“Dating a stripper, Doctor B? This can only end in tears. Write it down somewhere so you can refer back to it when she decides to hop the fence when the next snappy dresser appears. I don’t want to sound like the pessimist I am, but that could even happen tonight.”

“All right, thanks Professor M. Noted. All right? Noted!”

I am surprised at the vehemence in that reply. I had been half-joking. Our drinks arrive. The tension passes.

“I don’t mean to offend, I’m just saying. I have this theory about girls who like to take their clothes off in public. Do you want to hear it?”

Billy starts laughing with a touch of exasperation. “No. Not really. But I get the feeling you’ll tell me anyway.”

“I’ll give you one word of the theory: Promiscuous.”

“You made your point. Consider it written down.”

Another brief silence follows, during which we sit picking bits from other conversations.

“Who’s that big oaf Harold?” I ask.

“He’s the muscle down at the Club. He gives Fantasia a ride to work every night. Drops her off again when her shift’s done.”

“That’s very kind of him. Does he do that for all the girls at the club?”

“No. Look,” Billy leans in closer as he says this. “Fantasia’s from Romania. Her father is quite a wealthy businessman around those parts. And,” he pauses, searching for a word. “Let’s just say not every deal he makes is exactly clean. Now, if he were to get on the wrong side of some bad people, kidnapping the daughter isn’t exactly far-fetched, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Sure. Those Eastern Europeans cut off fingers, hands, everything a blunt, rusty handsaw will go through. Getting involved with her is a genius move on your part.”

Billy smiles a sarcastic smile.

I turn it over in my mind for a while until something doesn't fit. “But if daddy's loaded why's she stripping?”

“Apparently they had a big fall-out. She doesn't like to talk about it much, but he chased her away. She decided to come here, had to find work and that was the easiest money she could make. You'll agree, no doubt, that she is quite stunning.”

“Absolutely,” I smile. “You're living the dream. She sounds like a princess.” This does kind of fit. Billy the suave saviour, Fantasia the exotic damsel in need of a sympathetic ear and a place to stay.

The waitress is back to take our order. When she leaves I ask: “How's Alison coping?”

He sits up straight, as if slapped. He is coiled for a long second before he breathes out again. When he speaks his voice is very quiet.

“She's different now, Mickey. Tougher.” He flicks his eyebrows almost apologetically in my direction. “I don't know, man. I don't see her much these days, anyway. Things have changed since you left, you know. We don't talk much, she doesn't really visit, I don't make much effort. It's just the way it is. Life moves on. Slowly but surely things change. You never intend for them to, but they just kinda do, you know?”

I suppose it is the first time it really hits me that I have been gone a long time. All the new developments I had seen on my drive from the airport this afternoon, all those cranes, perennially building, swinging their long lazy arms this way and that as the construction process continues down below, the signs proclaiming new apartment high rises, another hotel, more car-parks, another overpass, none of these things has really brought it home. It is only once the change becomes personal that I notice it.

“And how about you?” I ask. “How are you coping with the whole Charlie business?”

Billy stretches his cheeks in a smile that is far from humorous. “It's sad, I guess. I feel guilty sometimes that I'm not more upset, but...” Another sigh. “Fuck man, it's been a long time. It was strange when your mother phoned and told us. Strange, like at first I was like, ‘who the fuck is Charlie?’ I didn't say it, but I thought



it. It took something to remember, like it's buried beneath something, like time had gotten in the way."

The beach bar is quietening down some. A big table behind us has moved noisily to the parking lot where people are saying loud goodbyes.

"How 'bout you? How're you taking it?"

It is his turn to surprise a laugh out of me. "Me? Hell, I guess I don't know either. It was strange to know I'll be coming back here, to Cape Town, to everything. That was strange."

Our food arrives and with it we order another drink. The wind picks up while we eat and by the time we're done and busy with our third round of drinks we're one of only three tables occupied outside. I get up and head for the bathroom. A sudden woozy feeling making me stumble along the way.

I've made it to the urinal when my phone starts vibrating in my pocket. I take it out while I unzip and look at the screen, glowing its strange green light. The name flashing on the screen is 'Rebecca.' The Pretoria area code of 012 flashes alternately with her name. I feel faint, have to lean against the wall and aim carefully into the urinal to keep from spilling too much on my shoes. I stand like that, head down, searching for some semblance of composure. Someone exits a stall behind me, asks if I'm all right. I wave him away.

I take a deep breath and press 'Answer.'

"Hi," I say.

There is the tell-tale delay of a long distance call. "Hi," she says. "How are you holding up?"

"Not bad. It's strange to be back, but it's also good."

"Good luck for tomorrow."

The funeral. It seems surreal all of a sudden.

"Thanks, take care," I move the cell phone away from my ear, go for the 'End Call' button when I hear her tinny voice, resonating in the speaker still. I sigh, bring it back to my ear.

"Sorry, what?"

"I asked, 'when are you coming home?'"

Home?

And then for the first time in a long time I give her a straight, honest answer:

"I don't know."

Back at the table Billy is taking care of the bill. His phone rang while I was in the restroom. Fantasia is done and asked if Billy could pick her up. Harold must have had something more pressing to take care of.

We drive to Castle street in the City Centre and Billy parks out front. I climb into the backseat and wait while he goes in to fetch her. The entrance is nondescript, a pink sign buzzing with a sick bulbs-about-to-burst hum over the door the only giveaway that something might be going on inside. It reads 'The Kitty Parlour.' The 'K' and the first 'r' are dimmer than the other letters.

At the apartment I sleep on the couch which is also a collapsible bunkbed. I turn it so I face the window. I lie staring at the moon, hanging like a flawed pearl, full and fat in a velvet sky. Billy and Fantasia bump and moan in the room down the corridor.

Some clouds are swept across the face of the moon by a strong sea breeze, and as I drift painstakingly towards sleep that face is first Rebecca's and then, eventually, Alison's.

## Celebrations, Celebrity and Celibacy

“So, I get round to her house on Saturday, right? Her fucking old man blows up at me. He’s a professor at the University, high profile life and everything. He tunes me he doesn’t want to see me come round their house again, says he’ll call the cops if he sees me again.” Justin tapped a Chesterfield from his soft pack as he said this. When the filter was free he took it between his lips and produced his Zippo, lit it.

“No way,” Billy said, and shook his head.

We were sitting on the swings in Arlington Park, Billy and me swinging slowly, Justin bent over, his feet on the grass either side of the dusty rut worn out by thousands of little feet underneath the swings.

“So, I ask if I can see her, talk to her at least, you know?”

We nodded.

“The fucking guy goes absolutely red. I swear, smoke coming out of his ears and everything. Tells me to take a hike. Only he said ‘make sure I never lay eyes on you again,’ like he was reciting a line from a fucking movie.”

“That’s just not right, man,” Billy said. “What did you do?”

“I left. I mean, what could I do? It’s his house. I can’t exactly push past him or demand to see her. Although I wanted to, I was this close.” He held up his fingers to indicate how close it had been. “But I was peeved, I’ll tell you that much. I was pissed as hell.”

Billy and I slowly came to a stop, the arcs of our swinging becoming smaller every time. We weren’t kicking, not braking either.

“I mean the guy’s a nut-job. He hasn’t got all his pigs in a row. You know?”

“The lights are on but there’s no-one home,” I mumbled.

Justin smiled. “Yeah, that’s it exactly. I mean, he keeps her locked up in that house on weekends. So where the hell’s she gonna get friends from, I ask you with tears in my eyes?”

Billy laughed at this.

“She has to obey the house rules. Her old man’s obsessed with rules and he’s old enough to be her grandfather. So, you can imagine what kind of rules they are. No spittle on the napkin. No... you know, that kind of shit.”

“But she’s got friends,” I said. I had seen Kelly and her girlfriends at the mall the previous Sunday. This I didn’t add.

“That bunch?” Justin laughed. “If you can call that friends. That lot of nosy tell-tales? They can’t muster the maturity of a three year old between the lot of them, and that’s on a good day, you know?”

Billy laughed, I inserted a token chuckle. “So now you can’t see Kelly anymore? What you gonna do?”

Justin was just past halfway with the cigarette. He handed it to Billy, on his right, first. Billy took a puff, didn’t inhale, billowed a big cloud of smoke out. I saw him glance sideways to make sure Justin and I had noticed. But Justin’s hands were clasped in front of him and he was staring at them. Billy took another toke for good measure.

Justin sighed, as if the end of the world was in sight, Armageddon itself visible on the horizon. “I don’t know. I’ll wait a while, maybe it’ll blow over. Give the old man time to chill out. In a couple of weeks maybe, I’ll test the water again.”

“What about her mother, isn’t she easier to get through?” Billy provided.

Justin grunted. “Her mother died last year. So now she lives alone with her father. She’s locked up in that house with him, only allowed out on weekends. The only free time she could manage to squeeze was by sneaking away while her father’s at work.” He shook his head, thinking. “No, I’ll have to catch her at school. But those pesky girlfriends of hers are always hanging about. They travel in a little gaggle. It’ll be impossible to get her away from them now.”

Billy passed the smoke back to Justin who took a deep drag, and blew smoke through his nose. “At least when I was around he let her out a bit more often, you know. Because she had a boyfriend he was a bit more lenient. Now what’s going to happen to her? But he was dead set against me right from the start. He was just looking for an excuse to get righteous on my ass.”

Then the smoke was held out to me. I read the red word Chesterfield on the paper with its thin golden lining, rolled it around between my fingers once or twice. I saw Billy looking at me intently. I put the filter in my lips. I dragged, as much as I could. The coal glowed red, ate up a pinkie-width’s worth of the white paper. I held it in my mouth, little by little I inhaled the harsh smoke. My throat wanted to seize up after the second intake, but I held it in. Then the cough escaped me. Clouds of smoke came out with every barking spasm. Justin laughed, so did Billy. A second or two

passed while I struggled to get fresh air, my eyes were burning, moisture forming and overspilling. My face felt green. I handed the smoke back to Justin, turning away at the same time. I didn't want him to see my face. I must have looked like I'd been crying.

"Don't worry, big guy," he slapped me on the shoulder. "You'll get used to it."

We swung, slowly, ticking left and right like the hands of grandfather clocks for a while, in silence, the creaking of the swing's frame the only sound. Justin finished the cigarette and crushed the butt under his shoe. More time tick-tocked by.

"But I don't understand," I said. "What did you do to upset her dad? I mean, the other day you guys went to that sex party. Everything seemed fine then." I could see Billy was watching me closely again.

Justin shook his head slightly. "That's the shit of it," he said. "I don't know what's going on. At the party Kelly started acting strange and the couple of times I've seen her since then she was different, hung up about something. Like, every Saturday we watch *Saturday Sundae* at her house, when we haven't got anything better on. She loves Alex Jay. But she just sat there, didn't say a thing. Then the next time I get there her old man becomes Satan himself. It's those silly friends of hers, they were at the party too, and I wouldn't be surprised if they'd sold some bullshit to her. Living in that house, never seeing anybody but her dad, how's she to know what's what? It's all fucked up I tell you. Those girlfriends of hers, I don't trust them as far as I can throw them. And..." Then he leant over to tap his finger urgently on my knee. "...I wouldn't be listening to anything they go around saying either."

I nodded, signifying understanding, that I was on Justin's side all the way. But I could feel Billy's eyes on me still and when I wondered just what it might be that they would go around saying it felt like Billy could hear the thought.

"Yeah, they're full of shit," Billy said. He didn't look away, so I did.

Justin got up off the swing. "Damn straight," he said. "I'm gonna make like horseshit and hit the road. See ya round."

"Later," Billy and I said as he walked off.

A few steps later Justin turned around, shouted at us over his shoulder. "Women! You can't trust 'em. Take it from me."

Then he strolled off, home, into the suburbs, off to wherever. Billy looked at me.

“Sheesh, that’s heavy, man.”

“Yeah,” I said, as deadpan as I could manage. A couple of kids hovered close to our bikes, standing against a tree a little way off. I watched them. They looked around, saw me looking, then ran off, giggling.

“I saw Kelly and her friends on Sunday,” I said.

“Oh, yeah?” There was a note of sarcasm in Billy’s tone. “Where?”

“At the mall.”

“And?”

“And nothing.”

“Really?” Billy smiled.

“Really, what?” I said.

“Did you buy her some ice cream? Did you kiss her hand? Did you tell her you love her?”

“Oh, shut up,” I was surprised. I was almost shouting. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Oh come off it,” Billy gave an exasperated gasp. “You’ve had the hots for her, like, since forever.”

“Shut up,” was all I could think of to say.

“What were you doing at the mall, anyway?”

“I was there with my mom. We were looking for a present for Alison.”

“Oh yes,” he snapped his fingers, remembering. The mockery was gone, replaced by curiosity. “When’s her birthday again?”

I smiled to myself. “It’s on Friday, but she’s having the party on Sunday, at Charlie’s house, because they have a pool.”

“Oh, sweet. That’ll be fun.”

“It’s going to rain this weekend,” I said. “It’ll be too cold to swim anyway.”

“Who’s invited?” Billy was beside himself.

I thought of not telling him. “Aah, bunch of nobodies.”

“Oh…” deflating, like a beach ball kicked into a lemon tree in the backyard.

“Remind me to give you your invite before you go home. I forgot to give it to you at school today.” I jumped off the swings and sprinted for the bikes. “Come on,” I shouted. “I’ll race you to my house.”

1992 passed swimmingly. Teenagers everywhere found, in Kurt Cobain, a spokesman who was as disgruntled with nothing in particular as they were. We would lose our spokesman only two years later to a self-inflicted shotgun wound to the head. But while it lasted it was great. We drew inspiration from live performances where the unlikely pop trio of Cobain, Novoselic and Grohl smashed their instruments and seemed generally appalled to be performing in front of adoring fans. We too were beginning to smash things at random and for no other reason than it being in vogue and able to make us laugh uncontrollably. Exposed windows in the neighbourhood were under constant threat, while hitting street lamps by standing below them and hurling a fist-sized rock into the air remained a tougher challenge than kicking the box below, which made them blink out unceremoniously. We preferred the more dramatic results of the few occasions we were able to be on target with our projectiles. The consequent sparks and breaking glass tumbling down on top of the thrower's head and the panicked thudding of feet as we scampered off, accompanied by the frenzied barking of seemingly the entire neighbourhood's dogs, all the way to our out-of-breath arrival at Arlington Park, was how we got our kicks. Once there we would lie around laughing until our stomachs cramped and our heads ached.

U2 were doing well for themselves with their new album *Achtung Baby* and I had walked in on Alison twirling about her room, the lyrics of *She Moves in Mysterious Ways* blaring loudly, on several occasions. That's why *Achtung Baby* became her birthday present from me. The cassette was R49-95 at Musica and I was confident that this thoughtful gift would make her taped-off-the-radio TDK cassette disappear into a drawer somewhere. On the album Alex Jay and Darren Scott's voices didn't continually talk over the beginnings and endings of songs.

Meanwhile Greg Albertijn was moving inexorably towards the '92 125CC Motocross World Championship – which instilled in us, after years of political sanctions and consequent isolation, a sense that we South Africans were in fact great and could achieve anything on a global scale. Our teachers, continually grumpy about our less than satisfactory marks, had the opposite effect.

In our back garden the peach trees were beginning to bear fruit and the days were gradually warming up, which meant ice cream, swimming, going to the beach and escaping the confines of the house and adult supervision without needing a good excuse. Life, in short, was glorious.

The contrast to the Cape Town I come back to in 2007 cannot be greater. The early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seem like a hangover, still suffering the side effects of the nineties. Charlie's death hangs over everything.

Alison picks me up from Billy's apartment on the morning of the funeral. I stand in front of the building, my suitcase in my hand, my sports bag on my shoulder, dressed in my suit, smart and ready. Alison parks and flicks a lever inside her Mercedes C-Class Coupe which pops the boot open. I place my baggage inside and stand next to the car, waiting as she climbs out. We stand in silence, looking at each other. She is very beautiful. Her light brown hair flicks casually in the wind, a few spots of rain collecting on the sunglasses that pushes it back like an Alice-band. I feel very tired suddenly, tired and sad. My sister had grown up and I had missed quite a bit of it.

We stand like that for a while, seeing each other as if from a great distance. All the intervening years, all the flavours of our shared history had never been quite as forcibly present as they are right then.

"Hey, you," she says, and we hug, uncomfortably.

Afterwards, in the car, she says: "It's good to see you."

It certainly is good to see her. We drive to mother's and talk about Charlie, what the mortician had said and how things are going. By the time we get to our childhood home it's raining quite hard. We sit in the driveway, waiting, both of us observing the signs of decay, inflicted in a matter-of-fact way by time. The bottlebrush is a tangle of branches, no prickly leaves or red flowers threatening to bring colour. The house, always so meticulously maintained, now slumps there in the yard, some awnings drooping, the roof needing paint, the little gate by the side of the house rusted and limp on its hinges. The verges need trimming and the walls can do with some touching up in places. Clumps of grass grows from cracks and splits in the driveway. The garage door which had once been red is now a dull brown.

"Take your bags inside," Alison says. "And tell mom to hurry. I still need to go see that they get Aunt Mary to the church on time, and pick up the flowers."

She is checking her make-up in the rearview mirror, running through her mental list of things to do and in what order. I sit for a moment longer, thinking: Is this it? Ten years and this is it?

Then she seems to realise I'm still there. She smiles wanly, reaches out, touches my knee. A shiver runs through me as she says: "It really is good to see you."



Mother cries, hugs me, kisses me, does it all again and then once more. When I eventually escape her grasp I walk upstairs and enter my room. A Nirvana poster is still stuck to the wall, the edges greasy with long-since-dried Prestik. Here and there pictures from the Top 40 magazine hang, the ink faded. The poster of Greg Albertijn which had hung on the back of my door is gone, probably fallen and stowed away, the thick paper too heavy to be supported by the aging, drying Prestik. I put my bags down beside my bed, open the A-Team curtains (also faded) and survey the back yard. Even the peach trees are wintery dead skeletons.

So many idle days have floated out this very window, I think, borne on a daydream, lost now. The castle in the clouds has a VACANT sign stuck intrusively in the foreground. And the older you get the more life feels like a long sigh, a finite letting out of breath.

On my way downstairs I peek into Alison's room. Much is as it used to be, and yet everything is different. Childhood feels very far away.

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Alison smeared sleepy muck from her eyes, a self-conscious smile on her lips. I was up at six, couldn't sleep, excitement keeping me up. I ran into my parents' room, jumped on their bed, woke them, beating the alarm clock to it by half an hour. They were agitated as they came to but it was Alison's birthday and I barely noticed Dad's "For heaven's sake." We sang Happy Birthday to You as Alison roused. Dad opened the curtains, the sun shone through the window. The day was bright. Alison's presents from Mom and Dad were a box of Quality Street, her favourite chocolates, and a promise to go shopping for clothes that afternoon. She opened my present, meticulously wrapped in the kitchen the previous night with Mom's help. She took it out, looked at it, turned it around and read the titles of the first couple of songs.

"Thanks, Michael," she said, threw the bedclothes aside and crawled to me, sitting on the edge. She enveloped me in a hug while Mom and Dad smiled. "You're my best brother."

"And you're my smelliest sister," I laughed as I slipped a hand into her armpit, where I knew she was ticklish. She crooned with delight and I heaved her over, onto her back, lying on top of her, trapping her beneath me. I worked away at her sides,

tickled her neck. She howled with laughter. Mom and Dad left, Dad to get dressed for work, Mom to prepare breakfast.

When they were out of the room we continued for a bit, but then we both needed to stop, take a breath. We lay side by side, our heads next to each other on the pillow. Her hair smelled of shampoo, her breath of sleep.

“So, now you’re twelve,” I said. “You’re getting old.”

“Very old,” she agreed.

“Soon you’ll need crutches.”

“And a wheelchair.”

“And a respirator.”

We laughed. She punched me in the ribs. Then, spontaneously we turned onto our sides and looked at each other. Her eyes were green, her hair shiny brown in the morning sunlight.

“I love you, Michael,” she said.

“I love you, Alison.”

We kissed. A soft peck on the lips, and then another. When her legs were together like this, the one on top of the other, I knew, high up, if you could manage to slip your hand in between them was her most ticklish spot. Again she crooned. A high pitched howl escaped her. Her whole body bucked, she writhed, alive. Her only defence against this manoeuvre was to get on top of me, straddle me. She managed to do it, grabbing my wrists, holding them behind my head. I let her overpower me, it was her special day, after all. She deserved a victory.

We laughed, caught our breaths once more. “Sneaky, sneaky,” she said. “Naughty boy.” She leant over me, her hair falling on my face. She used her hair to trace a circle – across my forehead, down my right cheek, round my chin and up the left side. Then she brought her head even closer, pressed her lips to my ear and whispered: “Naughty boy.”

I could feel the words, the breath by which they were spoken an actual presence, a living thing. Alison lay on top of me, our chests together, in rhythm with each others’ breathing. We kissed, again.

But something happened this time, something was different. It might have been because Mom and Dad were home, close by, and the door was standing open. As my tongue found hers she stopped, pulled away.

“No,” she said, and her voice was strange.

I pushed her off me. I got up, ran out of the room, to mine, closed the door. I sat on my bed, took more deep breaths, tried to clear my head, this feeling coursing through me. But suddenly all I could think about, kept feeling like an imprint on my skin were her small breasts, her groin pressing against mine. My penis was pressing against my pants, a little dome. But it would not go away, there was only one remedy, only one cure.

I shuddered, pin pricks of pleasure coursing through me, and in the end when it was done, I felt so tired, spent, like old change. A metallic taste lingered in my mouth. I felt like falling asleep, would have too, but for the discomfort of the stickiness underneath me. I stuffed my pyjamas in the bottom of my closet, darted into the shower across the hallway.

When eventually I got down to have breakfast, dressed in my school uniform, Alison's door was closed, the sounds of *She Moves in Mysterious Ways* floating out into the hallway. Mom ruffled my hair as she places a bowl of Corn Flakes in front of me. They were happy, she and Dad smiling. The sun was very hot, shining into the kitchen. I was very hot and Friday suddenly stretched out before me like an unbearable task.

At Camps Bay beach the wind almost always blows. It is perfect for flying kites. Alison, Charlie and I sat side by side on the backseat of the Station Wagon, waiting for dad and Mr Wilkinson to finish their little chat on our front porch. Aunt Mary and mom were talking also, standing by the car in the driveway, their conversation revolved around Alison's party on Sunday. How many chairs should we bring? Have you got enough of this, have you got enough of that? Paper plates? Paper cups? Cake? Sweets? Cooldrinks? Fruit juice? Will pick it up this afternoon, on our way back. Exciting times.

Charlie's head was bobbing this way and that, anticipation writhing within him, pent-up energy hardly able to wait to be unleashed on the beach. But the grownups were moving at grownup pace again, talk and plan, talk and plan. We smelled of sunscreen, were plastered with it, and had an extra tube in the bag we brought along. We were wearing flip-flops on our feet, swimming trunks and T-shirts and caps, and I had my towel wrapped around my neck. Alison was wearing a beaded tiara over a T-shirt and a bikini, flip-flops and a wide-brimmed hat that mom had

insisted was necessary and Alison had baulked at on account of it messing up her hair. Mom, predictably, won.

Earlier I had been very aware of Alison sitting next to me at the top of the stairs while we waited for the Wilkinsons. Mom and Dad went about their Saturday morning things after having dressed, pampered and lectured us to be on our best behaviour, not to forget to wear our hats and such and such and this and that and on and on and blah and blah...

Since yesterday morning there had been an odd distance between me and Alison. It was as if something had crept in, changed between us overnight, and try as I might I couldn't quite grasp why this might be. But Alison's subtle avoidance of me was noticeable. Before yesterday we had had no secrets from each other. Alison would walk into my room unannounced, and whenever she did I could feel her presence as something in the air. It was intoxicating, invigorating to try and steal private moments with her, to find excuses to see each other away from prying eyes. I would peek into her room while she dressed or into the bathroom while she showered. But this morning she had locked the door, to both. There was distance now, where there had been none before.

While there at the top of the stairs we were pretty quiet, didn't talk much. I took some of the beads of her tiara lightly between my fingers, started playing with them. She smiled faintly. I could feel her eyes on me, a certain tension in her leg. She had started shaving her legs just over a year ago. Mom had shown her how to do it, how not to hurt herself. The white baby fluff was gone, her legs were smooth, silky. I ran a finger lightly up the side of her leg. She shivered.

"Michael, don't," she reached for my hand, stayed it. "That tickles."

"Did you enjoy your birthday?" I asked.

"Yes. It was nice. Thank you for the present. Yours was the best."

"I'm glad you like it."

Dad came in suddenly, the door opened to reveal him. I dropped my hand in an instant, retracted it into my lap.

He stood down there, looking up at us for a long moment, and his face was strange, not angry, not friendly, perplexed maybe. He shifted his gaze from me to Alison, and then back again. "Charlie's here," he said. We hadn't noticed.

"Have you got all your things?" Mom appeared from the kitchen.

"Yes," Alison said.

“Yup,” I agreed.

We strolled outside, greeted Mr Wilkinson and Aunt Mary and put our stuff in the car where they showed us. Everyone made a fuss about Alison’s birthday, about her growing up, getting older. Charlie stood awkwardly before her. Alison waited. Then Charlie reached, put his hand on her shoulder and leant forward. He kissed her on the cheek, the lightest brush of lips on flesh.

“Happy birthday, Alison. For yesterday.” His voice was strange. It sounded awfully girlish.

I was about to laugh, the mere audacity of it, when I looked at Alison. She was blushing. She dipped her chin to her right shoulder for an instant and folded her hands into each other before her.

“Thank you, Charles,” she said. Fucking Charles? Even her voice was a little odd.

Both sets of parents beamed at each other, little looks of approval flashed both ways.

Charlie opened the rear door so Alison could get in. She did.

The laughter caught in my throat, nothing came out. I jumped in before Charlie, making sure to place myself between them. We bumped shoulders as we both went for the car door at once. As we waited for the grownups, who seemed to dismiss our little pantomime entitled *Who Sits Where*, all was very quiet in the backseat. Charlie was bubbling with nervous energy on my right and Alison stared out the window, not making eye contact with either of us.

When Mr Wilkinson finally swung his long legs deftly between the steering wheel and the front seat and looked around at us saying, “So, who’s ready for a day at the beach, then?” all that greeted him was a mumble of indifferent consent.

“Oh dear,” he said and started the car.

We had our picnic at Camps Bay beach. First we strolled a little way up and down the beach, scouting for a good spot. Once we found one, Alison and I stayed there, little human markers, as the Wilkinsons went back to their car to fetch the baskets, blankets and umbrella. Alison and I helped Aunt Mary spread the blankets while Mr Wilkinson drove the peg of the umbrella deep into the sand and put it up. I was still busy helping to arrange things when Charlie and his dad went off with the kite. The test run.

Nobody said anything. No statement containing any reference to the kite was directed at me. Charlie and his dad tested out the modifications and improvements they had made to its 'stability.' This was absurd. A piece of cloth on sticks whipped silly by the wind. What stability?

Alison seemed to take a keen interest in the kite's test flight. She was curious and attentive and Mr Wilkinson and especially Charlie made sure to include her in any excitement or achievement they marked.

"Pull down a little. On the left. Left."

"Smaller loops, Charles."

Mr Wilkinson kept a firm hold on proceedings by use of his voice, but never interfered with Charlie's hands. Charlie had a hold of the kite and although his dad found ways to point out possible improvements every other second Charlie had it all under control. I watched Alison, her beaded tiara flirting with the breeze as she jumped up and down, showering Charlie with little ovations. Her breasts were noticeable. Her hips, which had been little different from mine when we shared baths in early childhood, were now rounder. The word *sumptuous* came to mind, but I pushed it away.

Aunt Mary took a book from her carry bag and started to read. On the cover a muscular, long-haired man wearing an earring was kissing a woman's exposed neck. Mr Wilkinson came back, satisfied that Charlie had things under control. He shifted his sunglasses and took out a newspaper.

"Just shout if you want anything to drink, Michael," he said without looking at me. "We'll eat in a little while."

I considered taking his statement literally for a moment. I was tempted to see what Mr Wilkinson's expression would be if I started shouting at the top of my lungs. Would he sit up automatically and take out the cooldrink? "Here you go, Michael."

I looked over at Alison and Charlie. Charlie was engrossed in the kite, Alison engrossed in Charlie. I felt a little grossed out myself. I was sorry Billy wasn't there. This had been a bad idea. I decided to go for a walk up the beach, towards the rocks, the big boulders jutting out into the sea. I kicked wet clumps of sand before me as I made my way in the shallow water among fat old ladies, big-bellied men, splashing babies and the odd normal person. When I reached the rocks I climbed in among them, to the top of the biggest one and sat staring out to sea, trying to guess what lay beyond specific points on the horizon. I held my fingertip before my eye so it

intersected the horizon exactly. If I kept going in that direction, exactly straight, what country would I get to? I realised my knowledge of geography was too sketchy to know for sure.

I chased trapped fish around the rock pools, disappeared among those boulders, found my own little world there, cut off from everything outside. A great relief washed over me and I felt like I could stay there forever. Those rock pools and rock walls my universe until the end of time. My haven, my retreat. And then movement, in the far corner of my left eye made me look up. Like a sentinel, an intruder from enemy country, the kite hung in the airwaves, swept this way and that, mocking me.

On the Sunday we had Alison's party at Charlie's house. The day was sunny, too hot almost. My parents were there, having a braai at the Wilkinson's, sipping beer, wine, telling stories, laughing. Billy was also there, so at least I had company this time. Alison had spent a whole night up with mom, sitting at the kitchen table, filling in birthday invitations on coloured sheets of paper that said: You \_\_\_\_\_ are invited to \_\_\_\_\_'s Birthday Party on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. Alison at first said they were corny but after mom insisted they were necessary actually found herself enjoying making them.

All Alison's friends were present. Catherine, who lived just two blocks away from us in Claremont, and was Alison's best friend. The rest of the bunch, Wilmien, Nadia, Carin and Minette, were also there. They were all pretty. Nadia, for example was very tall, had long blonde hair and a light spattering of freckles high on her cheeks. But they were, all of them, pale and ordinary looking compared to Alison. With her long, light brown hair which sparkled in the sun, her shapely legs, and pretty features she would have put them all in the shade had this been a beauty pageant. Which in a way, with all of them parading around in swimsuits, it reminded me of. They were at that age when girls all seemed to have an acute self-consciousness about their appearance.

Charlie's present to Alison was a giant Panda teddy bear. It was huge, with a red ribbon around its neck and toppled my present from the top of her favourites list with ignominious ease. How this was more special than my present was beyond me. I had studied Alison, had closely observed for the last couple of weeks everything she touched, had analysed everything she said, had noted every shop window she had

looked in, and *Achtung Baby* had been the natural conclusion. Alison had always loved teddy bears, like every other girl, but she had said grumpily, when dad had teased her that they were going to get her a teddy for her birthday, that “I’m too old for that now, dad.”

She had wanted pretty things, lady’s things.

Now here was Charlie, handing over the very present she was most disinterested in and it melted her heart. She hugged him and planted a smack of a kiss right on his cheek. All her girlfriends went “Ooooh-whooh” and Nadia even held the back of her hand to her forehead and feigned swooning while the grownups laughed in a hearty way that was patronising. We posed for a photograph when the candles were lit and Alison blew them out to excited whooping and yelling. Everyone sang Happy Birthday, Charlie doing the “You look like a monkey and you smell like one too” version. Billy and I were just a little too cool to join in this sort of ritualised public humiliation so we kept quiet, but we did contribute a “Hip, hip, hoorah,” afterwards.

We ate treats, drank cooldrinks, sat around talking about many things, played with the inner tube of a tractor tyre in the pool, had bull fights with the girls, Catherine on Billy’s shoulders, Nadia on mine and Alison on Charlie’s. Nadia and I beat everyone. We were the champions, but although Nadia, in the spirit of the day, planted a kiss on my cheek for my troubles, our victory was a hollow one. Alison and Charlie got out of the pool after they lost and spent most of the rest of the party lying next to each other on their beach towels, chatting.

In the weeks that followed I made a point of keeping an eye on Alison at school. Her friends started coming over to our house for girl’s nights and pyjama parties. This was no more than an excuse for getting together to talk about boys. And whenever Alison’s name was mentioned, Charles William Wilkinson’s was sure to follow. It had started.

Perhaps I should have seen it in Knysna, on that afternoon by the lagoon already. Maybe I had, but refused to accept it. It was only on the Saturday of the Camps Bay picnic and the Sunday of the party that, finally, a long-nurtured suspicion stepped from the shadows and came to the light, dripping with slimy things that smelled of retribution and consequence.



**II**

**ALISON**

**PENANCE**

## Dear Tannit

The dead leave things behind. They vacate the premises but they leave simple things. At first I take it for granted, accept that this is the way it will be. But then, after a while I come upon discarded pieces from the life that had been. His favourite pair of shoes, the comfortable ones, with their tongues still out so he could slip his feet inside. The documents on the desk in the study which demand his attention. His name peeks through the windows in the envelopes of the unpaid bills. And when I come upon these things while cleaning up, arranging, trying to create some order I remember that his golf clubs were still in the boot of the Freelanders when I put the bags of shopping in. I reminded myself to take them out, but then I didn't and I still haven't. I could still smell him in the car when I drove to the shops, a faint odour of Eau de Cologne lingering. I don't know what to do with these things. The letters and businessy things I'll throw in a box and take to Mr Wilkinson since he's asked for them. And the rest? The rest lies here and there, scattered around, surprising me at unexpected moments. To gather them all up will take weeks.

I sit down on the bed and am surprised to find the cufflinks I gave him for our second anniversary between my fingers. I play with them. And then for an instant I feel like crying, but it passes. The tears don't come. Only a dry whimpery sigh escapes me. And while I put the cufflinks away in another box I'm afraid that the dry whimpery sigh might have been one of relief.

I drive to my studio every morning. It is really a garden flat situated in an old lady's backyard. Her name is Mavis. She has lived alone since her husband passed away two years ago. That is when she placed the advertisement in the paper: Garden Flat to rent. R 1 500.00 p.m. She was very happy when I came round to inquire.

"You should see the people who come," she said. "Foul-mouthed students with crazy hair. A mechanic who wants to know how much of the yard he'd be allowed to fill with old car-parts." She held her hand to her mouth and shook her head in disbelief.

I could imagine her relief at seeing a smartly dressed girl, back then still driving a Citi Golf instead of a Mercedes, but well mannered and well kept. She didn't really need the money she said, but could do with the company.

“It gets lonely,” she said. “Always nice to have another soul around. Someone to talk to.”

I told her that I meant to use the flat as a studio, where I could work during the day, somewhere quiet, somewhere away from the city, in the suburbs. This is perfect I told her. I’ll be here mostly during the mornings, won’t be a nuisance. I promised to pay the rent on time, always. I felt this necessary to add, since I suspected what her generation’s opinion of artists may be. She seemed relieved at the mention of payment, making me wonder whether she really didn’t need the money.

I could have converted my old room at Mom’s house into a studio. Charlie had offered more than once to build a studio onto the house in Hout Bay.

“Easily done,” he’d said. “It will save you having to rent another place.”

But the studio was about solitude. Or that was the intention. Once I moved my stuff in and settled into my routine I realised that it wasn’t about solitude at all – not with Mavis popping in at least twice a morning with the offer of tea, which I make a point of accepting at least every other time – but about escape. I needed to be away from Charlie, needed to be away from my mother, away from the faces that fill the life that had brought me to this place. I made a subconscious decision, I realise upon reflection, to evict myself from my own life for a morning, every day. I realise that the life I lead outside of this studio is a complex psychological torture and I feel that some distance, however superficial, from that life will make it bearable, will keep me from reaching a point of no return. And perhaps even, eventually, bring me to some kind of understanding of how I ended up with what I did when what I had intended, while lying on my bed as a child, had been something totally different.

So I started to work, content with my explanation to myself. My conviction and understanding lasted until I was halfway through the first painting I worked on in that studio. I walked in one morning, pulled the door closed behind me and looked at what was on the work bench before me. My legs just went from under me, not all at once, but slowly, like water leaking from a cracked glass. I sat down on my bum, my back against the door. The silence was thick, heavy, overpowering. When a bird chirped from somewhere in the garden it sounded very loud.

Here I was in a space I was trying to make my own. But there in front of me they were, the faces from my life. The painting stared back at me with mocking contempt, and it was like I could hear it say to me: “Surely, surely you were not so

ignorant as to think you could leave any one thing behind.” And it was true. My life had found its way in here also. I had nowhere left to run.

The first thing I painted in that studio was a picture of two boys sitting next to each other on a couch. I called it “The Boys.” So many people have come up to me at exhibitions and said they loved how the boys stare into the distance, forlorn and without hope. A leading critic wrote the exact same thing in the newspaper and commented on their expressions of frustration as they could find no viable future in the middle-distance into which they stare. But I know that “The Boys,” sitting next to each other, are not staring into some ill-defined space. They are staring intently at the television and their identical expressions are not ones of frustration, but pure testosterone-fuelled jealousy.

The studio seemed somewhat superfluous after Charlie’s death, but I kept it. I could easily have moved the studio to one of the rooms in the Hout Bay home. But I like going there to work. I like having tea with Mavis when I can spare a moment. And one gets lonely sometimes. It’s good to have another soul around, someone to talk to.

\*

I knew Michael was watching us. He crouched on the landing, up there, just far enough back so he could see what was going on in the living room. But I could see him when he was on his haunches like that. And even if I hadn’t seen him, the floorboards made such a racket that I could hear it over the noise of the television.

“It’s tough to explain emotions,” I answered Charlie. “Sometimes when I think about them they come to me as colours, sometimes as patterns. Texture, also. Like a surface that is either jagged or smooth. Now, happiness would be a smooth, almost sandy surface, packed like the beach on a wet day; firm underfoot, pleasant and easy to walk on. Anger would be spiky, like nails and glass that gnashes and bites, makes you bleed when you walk through it.”

I knew this would get Charlie’s attention. He stopped watching the television and looked at me. My head was lying in his lap. I focussed my full attention on the screen.

“What?” he asked. “That’s no answer.”

He had said absently that he loved me as he stroked my hair. But then he'd said: "Do you love me too?" He doesn't even realise he does this. He does it all the time, so I decided that whenever he was going to do it again I was going to answer in ways that would force him to think about what he was saying, instead of simply repeating rhymes he had heard his parents use.

"It is," I said.

"So, what does the surface of love look like?"

He surprised me sometimes.

"Kind of mushy," I smiled. "Red and gooey, syrupy, like candy floss before and after you licked it, both at the same time. And the caramel they put on Toffee Apples. All of those, at once. And when you walk through this you get stuck, but the sweet smell is in your nostrils, and every step it pulls long, sticky strands as you lift your feet, which makes it difficult to leave, which explains how and why we end up in love in the first place."

Charlie laughed. It was a clear and masculine sound, but with enough tenderness to be truly endearing. "Like a tar-pit, like the dinosaurs used to get trapped in? That's a little sad, but all right. So what does ours look like?"

I got on his lap. I rubbed my crotch against his. Then I kissed him. The sloppiest, juiciest kiss I could. I put my hand on his crotch, found him down there, started rubbing. He moaned, in my mouth. Then, I stopped.

"Like that," I said. "Sloppy."

I got up off him, off the couch.

"Hey. Come back. Where are you going?"

"Do you want some coffee?"

He laughed, a little self-consciously. "Not right now."

"I'll get you some coffee." I skipped into the kitchen where I turned on the kettle.

I got out two cups, added sugar, Instant coffee and milk, stirred. I sat down on the kitchen cabinet while I waited for the water to boil. Two girls, a couple of years younger than me walked by in the street outside. They laughed as they exchanged a scrap of paper. The one on the right pulled a funny face and then they giggled again. That's as much as I saw before they passed behind the bushes growing in our neighbour's yard.

I had passed Catherine in the hallway at school that day, on my way to my Chemistry class. I had waved, but she had looked the other way. We were too close for her not to have seen me, too far to hear me over the commotion if I'd called out. I kept walking, didn't make much of it at first, convinced I would run into her at second break. But when second break came she wasn't under the trees next to the Rugby field where we usually gathered. Only Wilmien, Carin and Minette were there, and none of them knew where Catherine or Nadia were. We sometimes went to the library on hot days to soak up the air conditioning or on windy ones so our hair wouldn't be beyond repair. But they weren't there either.

I tried to ignore it, make light of it with the other girls, but all the while I was very aware that I had been left with the remnants of the group, that the strong ones had chosen today to be somewhere else. Away from me. I kept seeing Catherine drop her eyes, finding something interesting to look at which kept me out of her line of sight. Then she had disappeared in the crowd, but the image didn't. That purposeful, shocked shifting of her gaze, that stayed.

For the last two periods of the day I kept wondering what Catherine and Nadia could have been getting up to together. I made a concerted effort to concentrate on Mrs Muller's droning monotones about where the debits and the credits go on a Balance Sheet, but their voices, so familiar to me, were carrying on their own intrusive conversation in my head.

"...and now all she does is hang around with Charlie."

"It's just Charlie this and Charlie that..."

"Oooh, Charlie..."

"Bitch."

And I thought of the song we used to sing in Primary school. Catherine and Nadia sitting under a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G. But that was wrong because it should be Alison and Charlie. But I kept hearing the song the other way, the wrong way.

The debits go left, the credits go right. All the debits are income and all the credits are expenses, or was that credits are income and debits are...

"Bitch."

The kettle's mechanism switched off with a pop, making me jump.

When I got back to the living room Charlie and Michael were sitting next to each other on the couch. They were staring at the television, which had tempted Michael down after all. It was just past four in the afternoon and I could hear the

*Knight Rider* theme playing. It was the new shortened half hour episodes they showed in the afternoon. But suddenly I felt sick. I left the two cups of coffee on the table before them and went up to my room. Mom or Dad would be home soon and then they could take Charlie home.

When he called “Goodbye” from downstairs I kept quiet. When Dad asked if I wanted to ride along, he was going to drop Charlie, I shouted “No.”

Michael hovered in my doorway just after Dad left. “What’s wrong with you?” he wanted to know.

I walked towards him, smiling as I went. He returned the smile, but his had a cautious edge. When I was close enough I slammed my bedroom door. I leaned my shoulder against it, just in case he decided to push his way inside. As the lock clicked I heard him walk away.

“Bitch.”

\*

We are up at the Rhodes Memorial, seated beneath the trees at the little Tea Garden. We do this sometimes, on weekday mornings. We would meet up at some restaurant, coffee house or the like and talk, comfort and laugh, but most of the time all three. Cape Town’s suburbs are spread beneath, the cooling towers beyond that, the industrial areas, the Cape Flats and the airport in the distance. It is a clearish day, though a little hazy.

In the parking lot I climbed from the Mercedes, having decided that very morning I would either return the Freelander to Mr Wilkinson or sell it, not prepared to drive it again, any further than was necessary to get rid of it. I felt a giddy nervousness tremble through me when I saw Tannit’s faded yellow beetle with the sunflowers painted on it already in the lot when I arrived. Her presence never failed to excite me like this. My palms feel sweaty and I guess I resemble a nervous teenager on the way to her first date rather more than the late twenties up-and-coming artist meeting her friend for a mid-morning chit-chat.

Although these meetings are a frequent thing Tannit’s exuberance and energy always makes them seem novel. I had met her at University and even then, while I was married to Charlie, she became a form of escapism. Our time together at University had been a delirious, druggy and passionate friendship. We had attended

parties in Camps Bay apartments, backyard get-togethers in Rondebosch and drove out to Stellenbosch some weekends. We got drunk and sang at the top of our lungs, went skinny-dipping in the summer, sometimes in the ocean and once when we snuck into the public swimming pool at Sea Point. We drove around in Tannit's beetle and made ourselves the life of many a party. They were carefree indulgences in lives that were otherwise occupied with concerns over money, the pressures of University, ambivalent career prospects and in my case marriage. And I had always thought in private that in those days I had received as much tutelage in the ways of life from Tannit as I did from all the other areas of my existence put together.

Her sunny demeanour is enhanced by her curly red locks. She always wears long, flowing, brightly-coloured dresses. She is over-the-top in a way, so beyond reasonable belief that I often wonder, as I do again this morning when I sit down at the table across from her, whether I had imagined her into being. That without the knowledge of my rational self she was a creation by my deeper self, another me, stretching out a hand which was strong enough to grab onto. I wonder whether, if anyone takes the trouble to investigate the parking lot they will find no faded yellow beetle with bright orange and brown sunflowers painted on it. I wonder whether I am actually sitting here alone, talking to myself. That I am in need of an assistance no-one has ever provided, and so I resolved to conjure.

She smiles delightedly when I sit down, takes both my hands in hers and kisses them, almost startlingly, given the train of thought she interrupts. She holds my hands between hers after I sit down.

"You know," she says after long enough. "Had I not known what you were going through I would never have been able to guess. You look so stunning."

I return the smile with one of my own, and here, opposite her I don't try to hide the fact that it is a tired smile. "And you keep bitching about me wearing make-up. Now you see: It does wonders."

We sit like that and when the waiter approaches he seems almost apologetic, as if he senses he is interrupting at a most inopportune moment. We order iced tea and toasted sandwiches, and Tannit holds onto my hands throughout. We come here often enough not to have to look at the menus. The waiter positively scampers off when he has finished taking the order. It makes Tannit laugh.

"Now, girl," she says, squeezing my hands for emphasis. "Tell me how you are."



"I'm good," I say, dropping my eyes for the first time. "Considering."

She gives my hands another squeeze and then lets go. "Yes?"

"I started cleaning up this morning. Putting things in boxes and marking them. Some has to go to Mr Wilkinson, other..." I look out over suburbia. "We might be having ourselves a backyard sale one of these days."

Tannit smiles wanly. "Sure. I'll bring the camcorder and we'll sit around watching grainy footage of you haggling with overweight middle-aged men over lawnmowers and snobbish grey-haired vulture ladies over doilies and tea trays. I'm getting nostalgic already."

I grunt. "It's too soon, though. I realised as soon as I started. But you know what Mr Wilkinson is like. He's got business to take care of. Papers, signatures and numbers, those are his friends. They're the only things he's got left that has the power to console."

"Make him forget, more like."

"Forgetting doesn't sound bad to me at this point."

"You be careful, girl. It's a big chunk of your life. Don't go cringing every time you think about it. That won't do you any good."

The wind stirs the leaves and lifts the tablecloths gently. I stare at the traffic passing busily down below, little Matchbox toys sweeping around Hospital Bend.

The waiter arrives and places a pitcher of iced tea and two glasses on the table before hopping off again. Tannit pours each of us a glass.

"How was the funeral? Did you cope?"

"The funeral was the hardest," I say. "I was barely aware of anything. I'm just glad it's out of the way. Michael, though... Michael..."

"Aah," Tannit exclaims. "Michael. All right let's jump straight in. I'm Doctor Frasier Crane and you'll never believe it, I'm listening."

"Well, doctor," my grin feels genuine for the first time in a long time. "They had to practically wrestle the spade out of his hand. He seemed to want to bury Charlie himself." Tannit's jaw drops, her brow furrows. It is almost comical. "Yes. I'm afraid so."

"Lay that demon to rest once and for all," Tannit is shaking her head. "And you?"

"I just walked away, couldn't watch. It's not that I'm heartless..."

"God! Of course not." She reaches for my hand across the table again.

“Billy and his new lady of the night were there, so I figured they’d take care of him.”

Tannit proceeds to squeeze my hand again. “Where’s Michael now?”

“He’s staying with my mother for a while now.”

“For how long?”

“I don’t know. Depends, I guess.”

“On what?”

“On why he came back.”

“I’m not following.” Tannit removes her hand to get at her iced tea again.

“Well, look. He didn’t get along with Charlie. They were never friends. They were more a kind of forced acquaintances through proximity, if that makes sense. He didn’t come to my wedding, he didn’t call or visit. Nothing, ever. If I didn’t call him, or Mother didn’t, he never made any effort on his part. Now Charlie’s dead and he hops on a plane as soon as he’s heard and here he is.”

Tannit sits drawing patterns in the condensation on her glass. “If they didn’t get along, as we know they didn’t, then the funeral would logically be the one Charles Wilkinson event he would attend. That makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“Sure. But it also means he would have to see the Wilkinsons again, or Mr Wilkinson specifically. And Michael knows that old man goes a bright red hue of anger whenever he sees Michael. No, Tannit. I know him too well. There’s more going on here. My big brother has some hidden motive for being down here right now. He could easily have stayed in Pretoria and avoided this whole mess. No one would have missed him, in fact, everyone might have been better off without him hanging about.”

“My loving gods, Alison. You speak as if there’s no good in him.”

I look down into my glass, clink the ice cubes against the sides. “There’s not a lot of good in anyone, Tannit. Some people hide it better than others, but I think humans are built up from a rotten core. It’s the first ingredient.”

A silence hangs between us. I know Tannit can’t stand these sort of remarks, but it’s not like I’m being provocative, it just slips out that way; my own rotten core speaking.

The waiter arrives in the middle of that testy silence. He places our food in front of us and asks, “Is there anything else?”

A grumpy “hmmph,” from both of us is the only answer to that.

"Thank you. Good," he says and there is noticeable pace in his retreat.

We are about halfway through our sandwiches before I speak again. "I've actually got a favour to ask."

"Yes?" she says through a mouthful of bread.

"I have to go to the Knysna Holiday house to pick up some odds and ends."

"The Knysna Holiday house?"

"Yeah. Charlie and I used to go there from time to time. Our families used to holiday there together when we were kids. The house belongs to Mr Wilkinson, but now that Aunt Mary's in the Home nobody uses it anymore. There might be a few of our things still lying around the place."

"What's the favour? Do you want me to go?"

I consider this for a long moment. The easy way out, presented just like that. All I have to do is say yes. "I want you to come with me. I hate the place."

"Is that where... you know..."

I nod. "Yup, that's it."

Tannit looks at me, and I suddenly don't like the expression on her face. Her mind seems to be running over something. She is churning out ideas, which is when Tannit is at her most volatile.

"All right. On one condition."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"We take Michael along, make a little outing of it."

"Tannit, no..."

"Look, baby girl. Are you going to see him at all while he's here?"

"As little as possible," I admit.

"He's your brother, for the love of all things sane and rational."

"We didn't exactly have the white picket fence childhood, as you well know."

"All right. Fair enough. But at some point you'll want to put all this behind you. You can't keep carrying that dead weight around."

"You're beginning to sound like Dr Phil."

"You said yourself that he has motives for being here. A bit of solitary confinement in our company and it will surely out. Besides, I'll have to meet him someday."

My sandwich seems very dry. I push my plate aside and swallow some iced tea. "We should get some more ice from the waiter," I say.

"Come on, Alison. This could be the perfect opportunity. You have to go back to the Knysna House, that's difficult in itself, now confront all of this. You can't keep looking the other way."

I sigh.

"When are you planning on going?"

"After my exhibition."

"Good. Then you've got some time to think about it. Let me know. I'll come along."

"Thanks, I guess."

"Anytime," she says, squeezing my hand one last time.

In the parking lot we stand around watching a tour bus disembark. Old grey ladies and bald gentlemen with thick glasses swarm about the memorial much as pigeons do on Trafalgar Square. They snap pictures and speak in thick British accents.

"We timed it well," Tannit laughs. "Now let's run and keep running."

I smile. "I'll see you, then," I say.

I am about to turn and walk to my car when Tannit calls me back. There is something odd in her voice, not as self-assured as it usually is.

"You are thinking about what I said?"

For a long moment that drags out and during which I can see Tannit's confidence waver, I can't grasp what she is referring to.

"Two weeks ago, at that Italian place?"

This happened before Charlie's death. "To tell the honest truth," I say, then stop. I can't find anything to look at. "So much has happened now. I haven't really had the time, or energy."

Tannit nods, seems about to say something and then doesn't.

"Okey-dokes," she laughs. "I'll be off then. I love you, girl."

She jumps in the old beetle, which she refers to sometimes as the Hitler Mobile, "that's why it needed the flowers, makes it kosher." She starts it, grinds it into reverse and swings it out of the parking space. Then she grinds it into first and speed off down the hill in a noisy rattle, dangling her arm out the window in a parting wave.

I get in the Mercedes and drive off to my studio. Once there I can work undisturbed while Mavis takes her lunch time nap. But try as I might I couldn't concentrate. Tannit's *I love you, girl*, made in an offhand, almost dismissive way

keeps running through my head. Enough has passed between us for me to know that the tone of voice in which it was spoken belied the depth of feeling behind that statement.

That evening I'm out on the balcony, watching the sun slip from sight and the shadows crawl over Hout Bay. Slowly the lights come on and the blue water turns green and then grey before it becomes black, an empty space that gushes and foams, invisible yet alive. It keeps its many secrets, hides the slimy, scaly things beneath its surface. When the moon rises it peeks between clouds and leaves a milky reflection on that imperfect mirror. From here on the hill, high above, overlooking, it seems a sinister place to be tonight. The blinking lights below, the sounds of life from the bay, music from the restaurants and muted voices drifting up on the cool breath of the night seem ominous. The house seems very big, empty and threatening behind me. I imagine for a while that I can hear breathing from the living room blowing into the back of my neck, slow and steady. The void becomes a presence.

I came out earlier with a bottle of wine and the cordless phone which rings with annoying regularity. First it was mother, wanting me to come over for dinner. Once I convinced her that I had a dish of lasagne in the oven she made me promise to come over tomorrow.

"You can't sit alone in that house," she had said.

The gallery phoned after that. They made it clear that the reason for the call was to express their condolences, but they couldn't help but wonder how the last two paintings, meant to hang in the entrance hall, are coming along, whether they could have them by Friday, only you see, they still needed to do the lighting set-up, which, of course they couldn't until the paintings arrived. And they'd made an appointment with the installation company for Monday, so Sunday at the latest, only the gallery was only open in the morning on Sunday and Saturdays were busy, so really Friday, when you think about it, would, if truth be told, be best.

I open a second bottle of wine not too long after that and take a dish of lasagne and pop it in the oven. I know I won't eat much of it, but it is something to do. The kitchen light is the only one in the house that is on. The furniture makes odd shadows on the carpet. The whisper comes again and it is almost like I can make out words.

*How could you do this?* There is a draught from the living room.

I put the glass aside when the oven bell rings and take the bottle of wine by the neck. The lasagne is hot, but I scoop a few spoonfuls into my mouth.

*How can you live with yourself?*

I tell myself out loud that it's the wine and then I switch all the lights on. I put some music on the stereo, some Frank Sinatra. I turn old blue eyes up just a little louder than he needs to be. I take the lasagne and another bottle of wine to the study.

I type I-don't-know-how-many phantom e-mails. They all meander around the same topic. And while I type I look at myself on the beach at Knysna, Charlie's arm around me, both of us smiling for Mr Wilkinson who took the picture, smiling like we have the rest of our lives before us.

*Dear Tannit*

*I need you to understand that your friendship is valuable to me. I'm trying to salvage something from this life, but you must appreciate that I'm in a fucking weird place right now. There are things I haven't even told you! It's not that I'm unhappy, it's just that this is my life, this is me. I am not unhappy, not exactly. I am merely aware of the mistakes I've made, of how many of them there were, and of how impossible they are to rectify, how constant time's flow, which takes us away from the point where some appropriate remedial action could have been taken.*

*I'd like to give you more, but all I have to spare is a little bit of a little bit of a little bit of something that was never a lot to start with.*

I wake up in the morning with a stain on my blouse and a dull throb to the right of my forehead. In the living room I find the sliding door standing open and the misty morning's sea air filling the room. I close up, dump the wine bottles in the trash and the glass in the sink. I swallow the strongest painkillers I can find in the medicine cabinet and then collapse in a warm bath.

On my way out, thinking that I need to pick up a greasy breakfast somewhere, I hear the computer in the study is still on.

My e-mails Inbox folder says Messages Received (1). The message is from Tannit, and all it says is:

*Dear Alison*

*I know.*

## The Uncomprehending Breath

1994 was a prominent year in my life. I remember it with stark precision and for many reasons, but mostly because it was the year my one true love revealed itself to me. This discovery – made with unexpected swiftness – affected every facet of my being. Things hitherto unknown or taken for granted were revealed to me in all their subtle glory:

The rich colour of green grass at sunset, some in the shade, some in the little honey pots of lingering sunlight.

The first smell of the ocean when driving to the beach.

The caw of a white-breasted crow as it circles in an intense blue sky. The heartbeat of the world as I lie on the ground, staring up at that circling bird.

Mimicking Homer Simpson's "D'oh!" or Marge Simpson's groan.

The way the paint peels on the railings running along the walkways at Oakleaf High. The polished smoothness of those railings, weathered and lacquered by a million touches.

The darkness at the dead of night, the muted click as the backdoor closes behind Michael as he slips out of the house and into that blackness, whispers as he tells Billy to be quiet, watch out for the gate at the side since it creaks on its hinges. The creaking of that gate on those hinges, and their laughter somewhere along our street as they assume they're out of earshot.

The shrill ring of the telephone in the night.

And crying, and ululating wailing that breaks your heart with its suggestion of infinite, empty helplessness.

The moment you learn that a parent does not necessarily know better when they have no answer to the question: "What happens now?"

The fainting sensation inside when the suspicion takes hold that some of the responsibility for coping, and holding things together may be yours.

The first time you see your grandfather cry.

And silent tears. Grownup crying, the kind I've never cried before. So many silent tears in the still, stagnant nighttime dark, as I stare at my ceiling and hope that

the heavy feeling inside me doesn't get stuck there and become immovable for the rest of my life. And wondering what it would be like if it does. Things. Little, subtle things. 1994 was the year I fell in love.

\*

Although my lover's revelation happened with a suddenness that was shocking enough to leave a bitter taste in my mouth, the initial advances were made by way of small, insignificant measures that would have been overlooked by anyone who wasn't overtly superstitious. It came like love-letters, roses or chocolates dropped in my mailbox with a note that read – in a script I did not recognise: *From your secret admirer*. I was being stalked and I didn't realise it until afterwards, until what happened had become irreversible.

I remember the Stefanos Leonades Art Classes. His name had a romantic ring and I said it many times to myself during the day at school. I had taken to excusing myself from Wilmien, Carin and Minette's company at break time. I went looking for Catherine and Nadia on my own. A few days after they first chose to abandon me, I found them. I would wander around, keep out of sight while floating into and out of earshot. They never went to the Rugby fields, nor did they go to the library. Rather, they roamed around the school grounds, like spirits, trying to utilise the space of Oakleaf High to the fullest. They would go where they pleased, talk, chat and laugh as they went, carefree. And all the while they would be looking for the perfect opportunity to become invisible. Mostly they would wander up the service road, and seem to the casual observer to be heading to the new Science labs built at the top of the hill, the highest point on the Oakleaf grounds. But they never once entered those laboratories, those held no interest for them. They were interested in the anonymity beyond.

They slipped, without fail, behind those buildings and scampered into the little copse of trees that grew there. Catherine and Nadia were never alone, though. They had befriended a group of boys who were a couple of years older than us. I didn't recognise any of the boys since they had never attracted my attention before. There was only one that looked familiar. I had seen Michael and Billy with him on occasion and when I asked Charlie about him he said he was called Justin. When they slipped behind the buildings like that I went inside the science lab right at the back. It was



Mrs Prozesky's lab and she was always neat. She had little black curtains before the windows which meant I could sit inside and peek through a little parting. Sometimes Nadia, Catherine and their little group would go too deep into the trees and I would lose sight of them. But more and more as the days and weeks went by and no-one observed them entering or exiting this little secret place they grew more bold.

They would enter the treeline and within moments Justin and the other boys would have cigarettes lit. They would light some for the girls as well and distribute them among the group. Catherine and Justin were very close. Whenever they got in there she would hop on Justin's lap, and although I was far away I could swear that his hand slipped between her legs, and underneath the green dress. She would lie back against him, his hand would work away at her, and eventually, as she reached a climax – or faked reaching one I would sometimes convince myself – she would grab onto his head and pull it down into her neck where he would kiss or bite her. I walked close behind her in the corridor one day and saw the love-bites she now sported. Her hair had changed as well. Before, she had worn it in a long pony, tied tightly to her scalp. Now she tied it loosely and her black hair kept spilling over her face. When they stepped over the tree line she would untie her hair completely and when she lay back against him Justin would bury his face inside it. It reminded me of dogs, always smelling their partners from behind. Catherine would never look into his face when his fingers found their way inside her. Her back would always be to him and he would always end up with his face in her neck or her hair.

Sometimes when it became too much to bear I would cease following them and sit with Charlie in the library where he liked reading the newspaper. Charlie and I would sit by the Rugby field with Carin, Minette and Wilmien. We would talk about trivial things I would forget instantly. My mind was always with Catherine and Nadia. Catherine who was never home when I visited her.

"Oh, sorry dear. She's gone to Nadia's house," her mother would say when she answered the door. "I'll tell her you were here. I haven't seen you around for a while."

I didn't know where Nadia's house was and wouldn't stoop so low as to ask Catherine's mother. Our slumber parties had always either been at Catherine's house or at mine. Now they had erected a barrier and I couldn't get close. My only contact with them – intimate as it was in a contradictory way – was to watch the boys finger them during second break behind the Science labs.

Charlie remained as sweet as ever. He was very observant, noticed quickly that something was wrong and kept trying to pester it out of me.

“Tell me what’s wrong. We’ll do something about it. I’m sure I can help if you tell me. Is it me? Is it us? Don’t I make you happy?”

I got away, making excuses of not feeling well, reassured him that he shouldn’t worry, it would soon be over. But those lies sounded flimsy even to me. I slipped away more and more, found myself in Mrs Prozesky’s class with increasing regularity. On the few occasions that she locked her lab I moved to the one alongside, or the next one. On occasions when I was too far away to make out more than vague shapes and clouds of grey smoke moving among the trees I whispered the new name that I had discovered, which had sneaked into my vocabulary lately. A name that became more exciting the more I said it. I sat in the Science labs and tasted it, experimented with its texture on my tongue, curiously rolled it around in my mouth, tasting, testing, dreaming. Stefanos Leonades. Stefanos. Leonades.

Stefanos was thirty five years old and had spent the majority of his twenties in Japan. He fell in love with Ukiyoe painting there. He became famous for it and would exhibit his work in Cape Town, Johannesburg, London, Sydney, Tokyo and New York. But he was a recluse. He lived alone in Rondebosch and I took his classes on Saturday afternoons. He would sometimes move the classes to Sunday afternoons when he had other concerns to take care of on Saturdays. Those Sunday classes were my favourites. Very few people would turn up for those, since they had family get-togethers and the like, I assumed. It would often be only me and a couple of others on Sundays which meant Stefanos would spend more time with us individually. He taught us to draw and would lean over our sketches and point out flaws and areas in need of improvement. He would also compliment us on good drawings. I liked the musty smell of him, the stale odour of cigarettes always on his breath, and the rough feeling of his hand when it brushed mine as he took my pencil to illustrate what he meant.

It was Mr Wilkinson who told us about Stefanos. I was never sure how the contact was made, but it must have been a friend of a friend. Mr Wilkinson supported my interest in art vigorously. And when my father balked at the considerable expense these classes would involve Mr Wilkinson insisted and although it was never spoken of to me I was sure that he paid for them himself. No future daughter-in-law

of his would ever be denied anything. It was the Wilkinson way, and when it came to the Wilkinson way potential brother-in-laws would be vetoed if Mr Wilkinson found the parenting to be wanting.

Sometimes when we students arrived Stefanos would open the door of his house with a quizzical expression on his face, as if we'd raised him from a deep slumber or stupor and his face would betray that he had no idea who we were or what we might want from him. This expression would always pass and he would grunt and wave us inside.

"Go on with your drawing," he would say, motioning vaguely in the direction of his studio, built onto the house.

There would be no sight of him for a time and we would draw in silence, the scuffing of pencil or charcoal pen on paper our only accompaniment. That and the intermittent shuffling of feet or scratching of chin and head as one of us pondered how to proceed. Then, unexpectedly, Stefanos would reappear, his thick black hair still tangled, sipping a cup of coffee that one could tell even from the smell was bitterly strong. He would put on Stravinsky and sit at his desk rubbing his eyes until the flesh around them was as red as the veiny whites. When half of the two hour class had rolled by like a lazy tumbleweed he would begin inspecting everyone's work and offer helpful hints and scathing criticism before taking up station in front of his easel. There he would visibly slip from this world and into some other as he meticulously applied another minute touch to the delicate female figure stretched out on a barge floating, amid cherry blossoms, on water with an inky blue-black sheen.

Those Stefanos Leonades art classes were my passion. I was adamant not to miss a single one. The thing I craved above all else was to arrive on one of those Sunday afternoon classes alone and be the only person there with Stefanos. This finally happened on the first of May in 1994. Dad was quiet in the car while we waited for Michael. I sat in the front seat since I would be dropped off last. Michael's passion at that stage was Formula One. He gathered all his magazines and season guides and put them in a red and white Pick 'n Pay bag. We dropped Michael at Billy's house where they would watch the Grand Prix with Billy's folks.

I arrived at the Rondebosch house and saw no cars in the driveway or parked on the grass verge outside. My heart-rate increased instantly.

"Are you sure there is a class today?" Dad wanted to know.

"Yes," I said. "Stefanos said there was. Everyone's probably late."

“Go and see if he’s home. I’ll wait in the car.”

“It’s okay Dad. There is a class. I’m finishing a drawing today, he knows.”

Dad smiled. “Still, go see. I’ll wait.”

I jumped out and raced to the front door. I rang the bell three times. The house was deadly quiet behind the front door. I waited. When no sound came I rang the bell again, three more times. I heard Dad open the car door and get out. Come on, I thought. Wake up, damnit.

“Come on, Alison,” Dad called from the car. “Let’s go.”

I turned around and trudged down the steps. I was almost at the gate when the front door opened and Stefanos peered outside. When I heard that front door open I swung around and waved at him.

“Hi, Stefanos.” I made for the door.

“Alison,” Dad called again.

With feet that were suddenly heavy I turned around to face him.

“You forgot your bag.”

I fetched my bag from Dad and ran to the house again. “Thanks, Dad. See you later.”

“I’ll be here at four,” he shouted but I was up the steps in front of the door already.

Stefanos was still standing in the exact pose he had struck when he first opened the door. He leaned in the doorframe, his head seemingly too heavy for his neck. He looked at me for a long time, not saying anything. Dad slammed the car door shut and started the engine, but didn’t drive off yet.

“There’s no class today.” His voice was rough. “I said so last week.”

“Oh.” I suddenly remembered. I didn’t know what to do for an instant. But when he moved to close the door I found my voice and was surprised that I had something to say. “I’ve got a picture I’m almost done with. I’d like to finish it today. You can just come check it out when I’m done. Tell me what you think, maybe.”

He paused, listened to me and then seemed about to shut the door anyway. But for some reason he didn’t. “Very well,” he said, turning away. “Come in.” He walked away but left the door open. I turned and waved at Dad. He waved too and then reversed into the street and drove off.

Inside, Stefanos went left and disappeared into the house. I turned right and went to his studio. The studio was slightly chilly but quiet. I walked around,

savouring being in his private space. I looked at the sketches and notes, telephone lists and other sundries spread on his desk. I took my time looking over his paintings, marvelled at his deft touches, little smears of colour that seemed almost crude when viewed up close, but understated from further away.

I sat down at a desk with my drawing. It seemed rough by comparison, but I resolved to finish it, to make it good, to win some approval from the world-renowned Stefanos Leonades. At first I couldn't begin, didn't know where to touch. I felt far away from the lines and smudges on the paper. It seemed like something someone else had done and wanted me to finish. I became aware of the silence and it made the studio feel colder than it was.

I got up and went to the mini hi-fi he kept on his desk. There were three CD's lying next to it. Two Stravinsky, one Bach. One of the Stravinsky boxes were empty, already in the CD player. I pressed the Play button and went back to my desk.

For a while still nothing happened, but then I imagined I could understand why he liked Stravinsky, grasped that he needed it to work. That's when I noticed a line that needed extending, and I set about doing it, with a steady hand, feeling where the line needs to end, envisioning the final picture, in its perfection, as he'd taught us.

"Even when you're working on the smaller detail you need to understand your drawing. The holistic approach."

I drew. I extended lines, shortened others, curved some and shaded curves. I had no idea of time passing, and as with the snap of fingers I was there with him, in his other world. It was no longer a place only he could access. And it didn't feel like intruding. It felt like I deserved to be there, that I belonged there with him. I worked with painstaking precision at some moments and with feverish rapidity at others. It was only when I sat back and realised I was done that I became aware of the world again, of the studio, the music and the wind ruffling dead leaves outside.

I looked up, thinking I'd better go call Stefanos, to get the verdict on what I'd done. I suddenly thought how rude it was of him, not to check on me. But before that thought could go anywhere I noticed him, sitting behind his desk, looking at me curiously. He smiled when he saw I noticed him.

"So..." he said.

"So?"

"So, what do you think of Stravinsky?"

I felt like blushing. "I put it on. Thought it might be nice to work to?"

“It is, isn’t it?” He turned it down a little and came over. He sat down at the desk next to mine and turned the chair so he faced me. He still did not look at my drawing.

He sat, without speaking, seeming to wait for me to fill the silence.

“Why do you like Stravinsky?” It was all I could think of.

He shook his head and leant back in the chair. “It reminds me of Tokyo, funnily enough.” He looked out the window when he spoke. He seemed to slip easily to different places in his mind, roaming the globe while sitting in his chair. “The hustle of the place began to get to me. I longed for some Western culture. I loved the place, really loved it, but the constant noise was driving me insane. So I found Stravinsky in a CD store late one night on my way home. I picked it up, paid for it and listened to it as soon as I got to my room. Then it reminded me of growing up in Cape Town. Now it reminds me of Tokyo. Funny how that works.”

He looked at me, seemed to descend back into the room. He wore a curious smile for a second, seemed to realise he was telling this to a young girl who was really no more than a stranger. “It is good to work to.”

I smiled, thought of what to say in agreement, but kept quiet, not wanting this moment to pass.

“Now,” he said, straightening in the chair, becoming serious. “Let’s have a look at what you’ve got there.”

He picked up the drawing and looked at it. He didn’t say anything, merely held it in his hands, turned it slightly, turned it back. The picture showed a young girl’s face in the foreground. She was staring into the sky which formed the backdrop of the picture. And in this sky a white-breasted crow was caught, mid-swoop in its effortless flight. I had to suppress an urge to grab the picture away from him.

“Hmmm,” he murmured under his breath.

One standard-sized agonising wait later he said. “Good. Very good. You’re coming along nicely.”

This was all he said. It seemed rude, after all the effort, that this was all I was going to get. But he had yet to put it down.

“You always seem to draw faces. You’re very good at capturing expressions. Why is that? Do you study people that closely?”

“Expressions are fascinating,” I said. My voice felt slightly different, unfamiliar. “People betray so much with their faces. With words they’ll hide their true

feelings, throw you off the scent. But faces cannot lie. Expressions are truthful.” My head felt dizzy. I was discovering some new voice, and it was saying things I didn’t know I knew.

“Go on,” he said, putting the drawing down on the desk before him. “Explain it to me. When do you see these expressions?”

At odd moments, I thought to myself, but couldn’t say it. It sounded too basic, too simple, too dumb in my head. I had his attention, I was now the intriguing one, and I couldn’t go fluffing it by saying something stupid.

I kept looking in his eyes. He was waiting patiently for me to go on. I could see Catherine and Justin slipping in among the trees. I reached up and undid two of my shirt’s buttons. He waited, kept looking in my eyes. I moved my chair closer to his. I took his hands into mine. They were rough against my skin, hairy. He allowed his hands to be taken. I placed them on my knees. Slowly I moved his hands up, rubbing them against my legs, moved them inside my thighs and then stopped just short of where men want most to go. There were only inches, and a tight pair of jeans between us now. Stefanos Leonades, Stravinsky and me, alone in the studio, in absolute privacy.

I lifted my hands from his, and waited for him. I would have allowed him any freedom then. I was his. A bead of sweat trickled down his left cheek. His eyes remained locked on mine. His lips seemed to tighten and his Adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed. He squeezed my legs in his hands, firming his grip. His strength surprised me. I was afraid suddenly, but I kept looking in his eyes, refused to show it. He let out a long strained breath, then let go of me and sat back in his chair.

And there it was, so many colours mixed on his face, so many shades of feelings inside. There was brutal want in his eyes, a tight-lipped rationality around his mouth. A mix of determination and confusion, hovering in a perfect ambiguity before it receded.

He wiped a hand across his face, erasing, cleaning the pallet.

“At odd moments,” I said. “Like that.”

“Oh, my God,” he said and started laughing. It sounded like a valve releasing pressure. He laughed until he had to clench his belly in his arm, and then he wiped some moisture which had spilled from his eyes off his cheeks. “Goodness,” he said once the laughing diminished to a chuckle. “You are a clever one.”

He got up and walked over to the mini hi-fi. He stopped the CD and switched it off. The silence was back.

He came over to the desk and looked at the drawing again. "It's very good," he said, touching it lightly. "Next week the class will be on Saturday afternoon again. At two, as always. Let yourself out, I'm sure your dad will be here soon. It's almost four."

He left. I gathered up my things and went outside. I sat on the grass verge by his gate, waiting for my dad to come pick me up.

We fetched Michael afterwards. I stared out the window at the world floating by. Michael sat in the back, and his eyes roamed the beyond much as mine did. Dad drove, content in the absence of language at first. But after a while he turned the radio down and looked first at Michael in the mirror and then at me next to him.

"So, how was the class?" he asked. "Did you finish your drawing?"

"Yes," I said, without looking at him.

He drove on, perhaps understanding he would get no more out of me. When he gave up on me he looked in the mirror.

"How was the Grand Prix?" he asked. "Who won?"

"Schumacher," Michael said, just audible.

"How's Billy's parents? Are they well?"

"Yes." Michael kept looking out the window.

We hadn't gone much farther when Dad turned up the radio again. And as soon as he stopped the car in the driveway we jumped out, went inside and closed the doors of our rooms behind us. I put on some U2 but wished for Stravinsky, and I lay on my bed, thinking, thinking. I heard, between songs, Kurt Cobain blaring from Michael's room, and supposed he too was lying on his bed, thinking.

At about seven in the evening Mom called us for dinner. Dad made the family eat at the table that night. He did this when he was worried we weren't seeing enough of each other. The dinner was quiet. Michael and I ate quickly, hoping to be away, not up to the effort of being chatty. The television was on in the living room. The news came on. We were having a family dinner, but we were all listening to the news.

The top story that evening was the announcement that Ayrton Senna had died. He had crashed in the Grand Prix that Michael and Billy were watching at Billy's house. He had been taken from his wreckage and flown to a nearby hospital. But by



six, he was dead. Michael stopped eating. They showed a picture on the screen of Ayrton's young face, his unruly mop of brown hair, he was smiling. And at the bottom of the picture there was a caption which read: Ayrton Senna 1960-1994. Michael pushed his plate aside and went up to his room without a word.

Nobody tried to stop him.

I thought it was strange, the timing of the whole thing. How mere weeks after Kurt Cobain died in Seattle Ayrton Senna died in Italy. For most observers these two deaths held no relation, had nothing in common. But Michael lost two idols in a month. It would seem even more strange when, within three days, death would not be an abstract thing, reported on television, or read about in the newspaper. That night, watching and listening to the news, while picking at our food in silence would be the last time the four of us would have dinner together.

By 9:28 pm on Wednesday, the 4<sup>th</sup> of May death, for our family, would be a reality.

On the Monday after coming home from school I stretched out on the lawn in the backyard. I had followed Catherine and Nadia again that day. Since the Sunday afternoon Stefanos was all I could think about, the next art class and how I could strengthen the intimacy we discovered on Sunday. Charlie's presence annoyed me suddenly and I rehearsed in my mind a thousand times how I would tell him that our experiment of the last two years had been fun, but was over now. Even Catherine and Justin's frolicking during second break couldn't dampen my mood today. I recalled the strength of Stefanos's hands on my legs, his long fingers, man's hands. Catherine and Nadia simply could not compete with that. I was a few steps away from getting the real thing. They could keep their boys.

While I lay there, my mind darting from place to place, a crow appeared in the corner of my vision. It glided through the air with gracious ease, allowing the wind to lift and lower its small body. The thing was marvellous. A moment of true eternity took hold of me. It felt like I could see forever, and there was no thread of doubt in my mind that everything would turn out as I wanted it, that the world and everything in it would be mine, that it was all up to me. No-one and no thing would ever stand in my way. It was a feeling of immense and incredible power – invincibility. It swept through me like a wave, filled me with power, built up to an almighty crescendo. At that very point it was all I could do to stop myself from leaping to my feet, phoning

Charlie and telling him to go to hell, and running to Stefanos and jumping in his bed and chasing, like a luminescent angel, every shadow from every cranny of his life. And he would thank me for it. He would thank me at the top of his lungs, and we would collapse, exhausted from the effort of saving each other, together in the ultimate expression of love – forever.

The crow dipped sideways, arced and swayed. For a second I could swear one tiny black eye looked directly at me. And then it cawed.

The sound was a harsh falsetto squaw. It cawed again, louder. Again, louder still. It looked at me. It swung, this way, that way, teasing me with the sight of it. It mimicked leaving, then swung back around, centred itself in my vision once more. It was all that existed. There was no escaping it. It cawed again, louder, closer. It cawed inside me, filled me. I started to cough, choke.

My whole body broke out in gooseflesh, my skin alive and alert to the imminent threat. It was all over me, enveloping, paralysing. I couldn't run, I couldn't move. It held sway.

And then it cawed again, floated lazily for one last turn and flew off.

I sat up, breathing in panicky gasps of air.

It was a strange thing, but once my breathing slowed and I looked around at the sane garden, lawn and prefab walls around me, the sensation blew away. I felt silly for getting worked up like that. I thought of the picture I had drawn on the weekend. That crow from the picture had come for me, had hovered in the air above me until it found a special fold in my mind. And there it split a crack open for itself, and it waited in the shadows, waited for the black moment when it would swoop.

But that didn't happen on the grass outside my house. It happened on the Wednesday night at 9:28 pm. Then I sat up in my bed and heard the caw of that crow again, a crow that was not inside my room and not outside my window either.

Michael asked Mom and Dad if he could stay over at Billy's on Wednesday night. They immediately refused.

"It's a school night, Michael. You know you're not allowed to sleep over on school nights." Mom stopped peeling potatoes to look at him.

Dad sat at the kitchen table reading over memos and office papers. He'd been working late all of the previous week, and the night before. When he arrived home that Tuesday night, Mom was surprised that he was home early. He explained that he

brought work with him, that he couldn't stand the four walls of his office for one more minute. I was helping mom prepare Tuesday night's dinner, rinsing lettuce, when Michael came in to make his request.

"Mom, I know," he said. "But we have a science project due on Thursday. And we're still a long way from finished. I have to go to Billy's house tomorrow after school so we can finish it. It's not for fun, it's for work."

Mom sighed. It was obvious she didn't like the idea. She looked at my father.

Dad looked up from his papers. "Hmnn?" I wasn't sure how much of it he'd been following.

"What do I tell him?" Mom seemed unwilling to deal with this decision now.

"Oh, fine," Dad said. "Go. But this is an exception. It's not going to become the rule."

"Thanks Dad," Michael said and sprinted out of the room before anyone could have second thoughts.

Dad never ate dinner that night. He went up to the room early, drank painkillers and went to bed.

"Is Dad okay, Mom?" I asked when I realised he would not have dinner with us.

"He's just tired, dear. They're working very hard at the moment."

Michael gulped down as much of his food as fast as he could and then slipped back up to his room again. The upstairs corridor had a strange coldness to it when I went to my room later. Michael's door was closed, a thin crack of light was visible beneath his door, but there was a veiled silence behind it. In Mom and Dad's room the door was closed and the light off. Mom was still watching television downstairs. The whole house felt heavy, as if something had crept inside while we were not looking.

On the Wednesday I came home from school and Michael was gone. It was only Mother and myself. Dad phoned around 5 pm to let Mom know he wouldn't be home for dinner. We got Chinese take-away and ate in front of the TV.

I was in bed at 9:28 pm, unable to sleep when the phone rang. Mom came into my room shortly after. Her face was ragged with emotions that were new to me and frightening.

"Get dressed," she said, touching my leg absently. "We've got to go to the hospital. Your dad's been in an accident."

She phoned Billy's house, but there was no answer.

I had rehearsed in my mind a thousand times how I would tell Charlie that our experiment had been fun, but that it was over.

But then things started getting in the way. And I couldn't tell Charlie anything, since nothing seemed to matter anymore.

1994 was the year I fell in love with dying.

University of Cape Town

## In Search of a Feeling

*How many windy Cape Town days does it take to grow up?*

This question rings out from the oppressive dark inside my head. I always feel a weight placed on my shoulders when I walk through the doors of this house where the young girl I was became the woman I don't want to be. My thoughts aren't often this clear or unconfused inside the walls of this Claremont house, so when it does come I look at Michael standing next to me and almost say, "Excuse me?"

I do look at him, but the sentence never leaves my mouth. Michael is staring out the window. He swallows, a little click noise betraying the inner workings of his larynx. I turn my eyes back to the window. The wind sweeps through the trees, cars trundle along the streets. The world and everything in it moves inexorably forward, onward. And we stand here, shoulder to shoulder, watching it do so, feeling it do so, doing so ourselves while we share no language, communicate no meaning. We stand here, acknowledging the silence that constitutes our relationship. It is hard to remember whether we were once happy here.

I have taken up my mother on her offer of dinner, more to get her to stop phoning every night. The pampering is beginning to get to me, the overly concerned phone calls, the umpteenth heartfelt commiseration insisting on my victim status in my own life. I feel somewhat guilty about not spending time with Michael now that he's come back. Whichever way I want to argue it, it has been ten years since I've seen him. But it is this thick silence, this dense space between us which surprises me most.

We have to come here, shoulder to shoulder in the house where we grew up together, to find out that this place had fertilised a growing apart which is now so advanced that we have nothing left to say to each other.

Mom calls a loud "dinner's ready!" from downstairs, and we make our way to the table. We fill the massive silence with the clink of cutlery and "please pass the potatoes."

I sit there, chewing, watching their faces. And I know that no amount of windy Cape Town days are enough to grow up. But, at the same time, one confusing Cape Town night is all it takes for carefree thoughts to blow away forever.

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When we arrived at the hospital Mom started pacing around the waiting room, walking maybe a half-marathon in the 45 minutes we were made to wait. A doctor came out at some point and said something about doing everything they could, about allowing us to see him as soon as was possible. So, Mom paced and I sat. At first I tried to page through the magazines, but there was little to hold my attention. Mom came over to me, the first time she'd taken any notice of me since we arrived. She touched my knee again absently, just as she had done when she'd woken me up earlier.

“I'm going to phone Billy's house again. Stay put.”

She went off and I was alone in the waiting room. I watched people passing in all directions, some rushing, some strolling, some even chatting and laughing. An old man came to sit down across from me. He nodded “hello,” and picked up a magazine. He seemed to have as much difficulty as I did, finding something worth reading. He looked at the big-faced silver watch on his wrist every fifteen seconds and his finger kept tapping on the wooden armrest.

“Walter?”

I looked up, saw Mom had come back from the phones down the hallway. I felt very self-conscious. She was looking at the old man sitting on the opposite side of the table from me. I thought about how to explain it to him. My father is in the Intensive Care Unit, he's been in an accident, we're worried, my mom's not doing very well right now. I'm sorry, excuse her. She's confused. I was sure the man was waiting for his wife or child. Maybe he had a similar emergency. He didn't need any hysterics from some random lady who happened to be in the same waiting room as him.

I got up from my chair, meaning to calm Mom down, get her some water or something.

The man looked up at my mother. It was a strange suspended moment where we seemed to drift out of time, the whole world wobbled and then we drifted back in. The balding man with the strong features, bulbous nose and sunken eyes didn't look away or confused. He met my mother's gaze and then bowed his head.

“You're late,” Mother said. Her voice was challenging.

“I came as soon as I heard,” the old man said.

I sat down, not trusting my legs to support me any longer.

“You’re fifteen years late,” Mom said.

Then she collapsed into one of the waiting room chairs. She took her face in her hands and started crying. I watched Mom weeping into her hands, thought about what to do. Do I go over and hug her, tell her everything was going to be all right? Wasn’t that her job?

The old man, this new Walter, looked away, rubbed his hands across his face and got up. I thought he was simply going to walk away, that it would turn out Mom had made a mistake, that they had both seen each other for people that they weren’t, people that were somewhere else tonight. But he walked over to her, sat on the chair next to her and put his arm around her. She resisted for an instant, and then she cried harder, letting out a painful, anguished cry that sounded like giving up. People who were walking past stopped to look. Walter hugged her tighter and now she allowed herself to be hugged. She didn’t look at him, her face still buried in her hands, tears falling like rain from between her fingers, onto the rug, where they mingled with dirt, cleaning chemicals and probably other tears, cried by people we would never meet.

People kept walking past and glancing over at Mom and this Walter, sitting there in a passionate and uncomfortable embrace, holding onto each other with an awkward, broken love, and some of the more perceptive flicked their eyes from that pair to me, sitting a few chairs further away. I watched the faces of the passers-by, their eyes glancing and then flicking away again quickly, before they could see too much, before they could be drawn in or become involved.

“I’m sorry,” New Walter said.

Mom stopped crying a little, she sat up and leaned back in the chair, resting her head against the wall behind her.

“Oh, my god,” she breathed the words out.

A nurse came over from the reception desk and handed Mom a handful of tissues. Mom smiled, putting on a face that I supposed was meant to say thank you, but fitted her like a scowl. The nurse just smiled a seen-it-all-before smile.

When her face was dryer she looked at the floor. “Sorry for what, Walter? Hmm? Could you please explain to me what you’re sorry for. And what goddamn difference it will make now?”

I had never heard her talk like that. I suppose New Walter never had either, because he tried to find something in the room that he could look at.

“Fifteen years. Do you know what a long time that is? Do you know what its like to try and build a normal family when the man you love knows only hate? Do you have any idea?”

“More than you would believe,” New Walter said, addressing a different point on the floor, a little left of the one Mom was addressing.

“Fifteen years,” Mom repeated under her breath.

I suddenly felt very sorry for New Walter. He was such a sad figure, and now Mom was giving him hell. I decided I would have to say something nice to him if I got the chance.

“We’ve had two children in that time. You missed an entire life. You’ll miss theirs too.”

New Walter looked at me for the first time since his hello-nod. I put on the best smile I could under the circumstances. I still wasn’t a hundred percent sure what was going on but I kept feeling sorry for him, tried to show that at least one of the girls in this waiting room was still capable of being nice, even here, even now.

He smiled back. I stood up and went over.

“Hi, I’m Alison,” I said. I extended my hand.

He looked at it for long enough to make me consider retracting it again. Then, slowly he took it, like an astronaut in zero gravity. His face remained stoic but his eyes spilled. It ran through the cracks on his old face, like a flood through a desert. His lower lip wouldn’t remain steady.

“Hello, dear,” he managed to say. He held onto my hand so tightly I thought he’d crack my bones. I could feel his heat coursing up my arm, through my veins, filling me. “I’m Walter,” he said. “I’m your grandfather.”

Then he hid his face and cried more silent tears while Mom started crying the loud version all over again. I felt properly embarrassed by now, aware that, although the people passing to and fro had become less not one passed without looking at us. I sat back down and got a magazine that had Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman on the cover. I made sure my face stayed behind it while I waited for this all to be over.

It wasn’t long after that when the doctor arrived and said we could see Dad, but shortly. He was weak and still critical.



We saw him, but there wasn't much to see and what there was wasn't pleasant to look at. The strong, confident, sometimes impatient man I had gotten to know as my father was a fragile little pile of skin-like putty with many plastic veins going into and out of him, a thick tube down his throat. The lights were off in the room.

Mom sat down by his bed and whispered words I couldn't make out. My new grandfather stood behind her, and didn't say anything. They left the room when Mom started crying again.

Now I was in here alone, in the dark. The light from the nurse's station didn't quite reach me and the faint glow of the fortress of equipment Dad was in shone a weak, eerie green light. I went closer, stood by his bed. His face wasn't recognisable. His skin was like ash. I wondered if I should also whisper things to him, whether he would be able to hear me, and what I would say if I knew he could. There was nothing, no words for this.

Then, in the faint glow of the machinery I saw his eyes open. He looked at me, but his gaze went through me. He was looking in my direction and somewhere far behind me he must have seen something. I opened my mouth to say something, to make it known that I was here, so he would see me. At first nothing came. He looked like he tried to smile, but it was difficult with all the paraphernalia.

"I'm sorry, Dad." It was barely audible, but it surprised me. "I'm sorry. We didn't know."

*You little barbarians*, I heard him shout again.

"Alison," the voice startled me. I wanted to answer, say I'm here Dad, when I realised the voice was coming from behind me.

I looked around and saw New Walter standing in the doorway.

"Come on," he said. "I think it's better if we go now."

I looked back at Dad one last time. His eyes were closed.

In the parking lot Mom unlocked the car for me and I got in. I waited a long time as she and grandfather spoke and sometimes hugged and often cried. Eventually, when Mom got in she had to dry her eyes before she could drive. She stared ahead of her, driving extra carefully.

"Your grandfather is going to come stay with us for a week or so," she said on the way. "I want you to take the chance to get to know him. He's done some bad things in his life, but we all deserve some love..."

...if not forgiveness, I would think in my bed later, was probably how that sentence was supposed to finish. It was interesting to watch Mom and Grandpa negotiate the space around each other. That Wednesday night was easy enough. She showed him to the spare bedroom downstairs and fumbled to put on some new sheets until he said that it wasn't necessary, he could do it. She made coffee and took him some before she went to bed. But I don't think she slept much that night. The thin line beneath her bedroom door betrayed that her light was never turned off. For the rest of the week he stayed there their relationship was strange. They were like two strangers under the same roof, both embarrassed and uncomfortable with the arrangement but determined to salvage something, or commit some act of partial redemption. Forgiveness never came, I sensed. It never made an appearance. But there was support, that was present, and come the day of my father's funeral Mom needed that, she needed it badly.

On the Thursday morning the Wilkinsons came round. Aunt Mary hugged Mom first and Mr Wilkinson took her in his arms next and repeated he was sorry until Mom, who hadn't cried yet that morning, did. I didn't go down when I heard the doorbell. I stayed in my room and hoped they would forget about me. But Mr Wilkinson was soon upstairs. He hugged me and told me he was sorry. Aunt Mary held onto me for a long time, sitting on my bed, squeezing me with varying pressure throughout until she cried, and dampened my left shoulder. Once they had all left the room I lay back down and stared out the window. Charlie sat down on my bed next to me.

He took my hand in his and held it without saying anything. He just held it, and ran his fingers lightly through my hair, brushing my cheek with his fingers as he did so. I started to cry. It came out suddenly and with unexpected violence. Charlie took me onto his lap and held me. He rocked me like I was his baby. And for the first time it felt like I was. That moment of true, untainted concern was all it took. I loved him, I loved him as best I knew how.

It took a while for the storm of emotion to blow through me, out of me. It spiralled, meaning to go beyond control and then it reached its zenith and broke, subsiding slowly, dying down to some dry heaves and eventually sniffles and finally nothing. We sat like that for a long time, just sat, didn't say a thing. Language was superfluous.

We listened to the murmurs of the conversation from below. I asked Charlie if he wanted something to drink.

“We could go fix some coffee for everyone,” he said.

“Let’s.” I took his hand and we got up. As we were about to exit into the hallway I stopped and turned around. I kissed him on his lips, and for the first time my heart was also there. “Thank you,” I said. And we went downstairs.

We put out cups and made coffee. Over the boiling kettle we could hear bits of the conversation from the living room.

“And now there’s no answer,” Mom was saying. “He doesn’t even know yet. I can’t reach them...”

“It’s all right...” Aunt Mary.

“I’ll go fetch him at school this afternoon,” Mr Wilkinson.

“Are they talking about Michael?” Charlie asked.

“Yes,” I said. “He’s gone over to Billy’s and Mom can’t get hold of him. They had some Science project they had to work on.”

“Oh. So he wasn’t here last night. He doesn’t know?”

I shook my head.

We took them coffee and sat with them for a while. I sat by Mother who kept squeezing my leg without looking at me. Charlie sat by his parents. Grandfather stayed in his room throughout this visit. I heard him slip out the backdoor at one stage, and I thought I could smell smoke out in the garden.

When they left Mr Wilkinson promised that he would go straight to Oakleaf and fetch Michael. “Don’t worry about him. He’ll be fine.”

We all hugged again and they were off. Grandfather came in when they left and followed Mom up to her room. He made some sandwiches for lunch and went to sit on the garden chairs outside to eat his.

When he finished his polony and mustard sandwich he took a pipe from his coat pocket and lit it. I went to sit with him. He smiled when I sat down but didn’t say anything.

The birds chirped in the trees, cars passed, taxis hooted; oblivious. We sat, we waited for the silence to pass. At least I waited. Grandfather seemed content with the world passing. He looked at nothing in particular, just stared, and even when he did look at specific things he gave the impression of not seeing them.

“Why didn’t you come visit?” I asked.

He turned his head in my direction, shrugged.

“I didn’t even know I had a grandfather. Mom’s parents died before Michael and I were born. I never thought about where Dad’s parents might be. It seems silly now.”

He puffed at his pipe, blowing smoke like an old-fashioned locomotive. “I suppose they never talked much about me, hey?”

His voice was rough with decades of smoking. “Not to Michael and me. Parents never talk to their children about important things.”

“Is that so?” He cracked a half-crooked grin, not taking the pipe out.

“So why didn’t you come visit? It would have been nice to have a grandfather.”

“Did your mother tell you to make me feel guilty?”

I decided to look at my feet for a while. My cheeks felt hot. “I don’t mean to be rude. I’d just like to know what’s going on and it doesn’t look like Mother’s going to tell me.”

He lit his pipe again. “It’s a long story,” he said. “And not the best time to tell it, I think.”

“Well, tell me the short version.”

“What?”

“Every long story has a short version. Break it down for me. Give me the basics.”

“I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

“Start with basically...” I indicated for him to go on.

Now he looked straight at me, and I felt sorry for having said so much. His eyes were hard. They were old, canny eyes that must have stared down people and situations much scarier than me. I looked away first, and could suddenly not even find the words with which to apologise. But he looked away too eventually and continued smoking his pipe.

“Basically...” There was a long pause as he tasted the word. “Basically your father and I didn’t get along. He was a difficult boy.”

I waited for a long while, until I realised there would be no more. “That doesn’t really tell me much. What happened?”

He smiled a sad smile and shook his head. "That's as basic as I can make that story. Things are always more complicated. There's always more to a story. Especially with family. Family is hard."

As I got up to leave I said "You'll come visit us more often from now on, won't you?"

I went up to Mom's room and lay down on the bed next to her. I saw old photo albums lying next to the bed, face down. We lay, staring at the ceiling together. She started squeezing my leg again. It was becoming annoying but I thought it best not to mention this.

"How are you, Alison? Are you holding up all right?" I could hear her voice was cracked from crying a lot.

"I'm okay," I lied. I waited for her to believe me. She hardly seemed aware of me. "What happens now?"

I didn't know what I really expected her to say, didn't even know what exactly I wanted to know by asking that, but I expected more than the heavy sigh I got. "I don't know, Alison. I don't know."

The room was warm and quiet. It felt safe in here, kind of. Then Mom took my hand and kissed it. It surprised me. She even smiled.

"Charlie is a good boy," Mom said. It was the furthest thing from my mind. "You should remember that. I know the two of you don't always get along as well as you should. Don't be too hard on him. He's a good boy."

My heart beat heavily in my chest. I felt very exposed. The thought that Mom might have been observing the nuances of our relationship made me feel self-conscious. I felt bad suddenly for having thought ill of Charlie at all, especially after his tenderness earlier. I kissed Mom on the cheek and went to my room. I desperately wanted to be alone right then.

I put the radio on and waited for the deejays to convince me that everything was all right, that nothing was out of place. Nothing was too big to cope with, this was just another day, one more to get through. I thought I understood what grandfather was doing, switching off, allowing time to pass unnoticed. He was waiting for the bad to pass, so the good would return. Or maybe just for the bad to pass.

I drifted towards the cool, dark oblivion of sleep, like a leaf towards the middle of some quiet pool deep in the forest. But then the telephone rang and yanked me back to a humid Thursday afternoon.

It was Mr Wilkinson on the line. Michael had never showed up at school. Nobody knew where he was. Mr Wilkinson had been to Billy's house as well. But they weren't there, either. That was when Mom really started to worry.

\*

"It is truly impressive how you constantly seem able to re-invent yourself." Marie Verster is a leading art critic who has taken a keen personal interest in my work. She is now in the habit of coming up to me at my exhibitions and talking to me for most of the night. Of course she knows nothing about me other than my art, so the conversation, or monologue, as it more often is, always centres around my work, the themes and motifs rather than on any common ground which may lead to us forming a friendship.

"Your reputation for inventive ingenuity precedes you to Europe, of that I can assure you." She is an utterly unimpressive old woman who no doubt lives alone, has very few friends but is adept at being sociable, with a shark-like ability to smell public events where being seen is more important than having anything interesting to say. On the opening night of my exhibition I somehow get stuck with her in the entrance hall of the gallery, where the two paintings, delivered on time in the end, reside under their resplendent lighting set-up. I am sure it is no coincidence that Marie manages to trap me in the foyer where people are strolling in and out. It means maximum visibility, so all present can see from the outset that she is on first-name basis with the artist.

"You have this uncanny knack of touching our true selves. It is only the most powerful and provocative works that can achieve that." She is talking a lot louder than is necessary for me, standing right next to her, to hear. But she makes sure her voice carries a respectable, noticeable, but not uncouth distance. The gallery staff are inside serving wine and making sure everyone is comfortable. I envy them their distance and anonymity.

"You do realise that the upward curve of your popularity and acclaim is unprecedented." Formulaic stuff. I wonder how many artists have stood in similarly discomfited positions hearing some variant of this sentiment, if not the exact words. I smile my most disarming grin, nod in the most agreeable way. It is just how it works in this business. You put up with people like Marie because tomorrow she will write

articles and reports about your works and exhibition, and her opinion of me, more than my work, will precede me to wherever.

I expected seeing Tannit again would be awkward. But she surprises me, and afterwards makes me wonder how I could have been concerned. Things wash over her, but her smile never seems to rinse off. She comes up to me in the foyer, first clasps my hands and then embraces me warmly, hugging me tightly for nearly a minute before letting go, completely oblivious of Marie's shocked, dramatic pause.

"This is so exciting," she says. "I hope it goes well. I know how much work you put in. I hope it goes really well."

"Thanks," I manage before she disappears into the throng of milling people, looking for the table with free wine.

"My," Marie says. "An over-enthusiastic fan, I take it."

"A good friend," I smile. "If you'll excuse me for just a bit." I have to take this opportunity to get away. "I am glad you've come, but allow me to make sure that my friends are seen to."

She absorbs the blow of rebuttal as best she can, and I scamper. "Fuck," I whisper under my breath.

I find Tannit with a glass of wine in one hand and an entrée of cheese, spring onion and celery in the other. She is standing in a corner, out of the flow of human bodies. I join her, holding a glass of wine myself.

"So, what do you think?" I ask.

"It's great. It looks spectacular. You never showed me that one, though." She is pointing at a naked female dipping her hand into a dark pool of water on which cherry blossoms float. It is my experimental Ukiyoe painting.

It strikes me as odd. She's right. I have never shown her that one. I can't imagine that there is any reason why I wouldn't, but now that she's pointed it out it seems important. I usually show her all my work, anticipate her opinion nervously and value her comments greatly. She is the only critic that matters to me, the only one I want my art to please. I open my mouth to explain, but Tannit is already talking.

"Is he here yet?"

"Sorry?"

She elbows me, aiming for my ribs, almost spilling my wine. "Don't be silly. Michael. Is he here yet?"

I swallow. "No. He's coming with my mother. She's always late, you know how it is."

Tannit nods. "Have you told him about the Knysna trip yet?"

I think about the dinner at my mother's house earlier in the week. I think about the oppressive silences we tried to fill but only managed to ignore. I think about Michael's eyes, downcast, not as confident, self-assured and arrogant as always. I think of Michael's calmness, of his eyes looking at me constantly, but flicking away whenever my head turned in his direction.

"No," I say. "I haven't mentioned it."

"Well, you should."

"Why are you so keen to meet him, anyway?"

Tannit shrugs. "You've talked about him on-and-off for the last eight years I've known you. He's obviously important to you. Forgive my curiosity, but you've painted him in so many different colours in the stories you've told, I hardly know what to expect."

"You should have said something earlier. I could have sent you our family albums." I drain what is left of my wine.

"You go left, I'll go right, and we'll meet up in the middle," Tannit says.

"What?"

"Mingle, damn it." She aims for my ribs again, but this time, with an empty wine glass I avoid the intended blow. "It's your exhibition. It's time to wow them, and the paintings are only half the battle. Standing here in the corner is not the answer."

"A noble ideal," I smile. "But I'll greet about two people before Marie Verster is on my trail again."

"Leave her to me. We'll see how she likes having her ear talked off." Tannit strides away with purpose. I can't help but laugh, and feel the tiniest blip of pity for Marie.

First I need some more wine, have to douse the unsociable feeling threatening to overwhelm me. I run into old friends from university who fill me with gratitude for their interest. I run into an old professor, who compliments me, and points out possible areas of improvement. I run into acquaintances and I run into strangers keen to have a word. And after feeling satisfied that my duty is more than performed I run to look for a quiet corner and drag Tannit to it so she can shelter me. I find her in the foyer. I have almost reached them, am within touch of joining their conversation



when I realise who she's talking to. Mom has her arm around Tannit's waist. They are laughing, laughing at something, something Michael has said.

I stop. I take a deep breath. I tell myself not to be silly, to go closer, to join them. I force my feet to take a few steps closer. I catch a snippet of conversation. Michael saying "Really?" Tannit saying, "Yes, we studied art together..." My heart thunders in my chest. I need fresh air, escape. I skirt the foyer, make sure to keep a huddle of people always obscuring me from their view. I reach the parking lot, sit down against the bonnet of my Mercedes. The mumble of conversation from the gallery is now off to my right. The sound of the ocean lapping the shore is in front of me. I feel like going for a walk on the beach, clearing my head and trying to come up with a way to handle Tannit and Michael, to unravel what is bothering me so.

And then a voice speaks behind me. I recognise it, laugh at the silliness of the thought, and go cold when it strikes home that this isn't merely my imagination. It is him. He's here.

"Do you still smoke?" He offers me a cigarette, holding the packet out to me, the filters sticking out, perfectly arranged like on an advertising billboard.

Words fail me. I take a cigarette instead. It is easier than speaking, now. He takes a Zippo from his pocket, shields the flame from the night breeze. I drag. The taste reminds me of him. Him standing here with me, reminds me of him. I can smell him, and although it has been many years the smell is still familiar. He may have been gone a long time, but the memory of him has never gone far. He lights another cigarette for himself and leans against the car. Our shoulders touch, a slight brush. My heart leaps at the contact. It is like there is a current running between us, and no amount of time apart can tame it.

"I'm impressed," he breathes his words out with the smoke as he's always done. "It's very good. I recognise many of the faces. Your brother Michael. Your mother, and your father. But not me. Why?"

I drag on the cigarette. The dark water gushes and foams down in the bay. People's voices drift around us, muted by distance, filling our silence with barely heard, half-understood phrases:

"Maybe in the summer..." "Intelligent but pretentious..." "Do you remember..." "I could have sworn..." "Out, Stellenbosch way..." "I'm in landscaping now..." "It's tough..."

They feel, while they drift around us, like they are the only appropriate answer. But guilt, or something, the need we have to explain, to not be misunderstood, to not be thought of worse than we deserve, makes words come out.

“It’s impossible to paint you.”

“Oh?”

“You were something else. Not inspiration. You do not belong here.”

We smoke, not talking. I think perhaps we are done. That this is enough explaining for now, maybe forever. I want to get up and leave. My muscles refuse to move, insist on staying. His shoulder is still against mine. We are touching. My insides cry out for the touch, wants more touching, more feeling, that feeling only he can provide.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry?”

“About your husband.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you miss him?”

“None of your business.”

“Another place where I do not belong?”

“Correct.”

“Come home with me. Come fuck me.”

Life is a game of give and take, win and lose. Some things fall away, other things take their place. I lost a father once and gained a grandfather. I lost a brother once, I lost a husband recently, I gained a lover once, I gained a friend recently. Life, death. It’s a trade-off. Some go, some stay, some don’t. Babies are born, old people die. Life, death. Babies die, old people live. Death, life.

I’m looking for a feeling, such a simple thing, but so impossible to find among the rubble of my life. Death. Life. Intertwined. So present are both in my lifedeath that they have become inseparable. The one has become the other, the other the one.

There are many pills in the medicine cabinet, intended to sustain life. But if you chase enough of them with whisky they say...

Strong wine, I’m sure will do the trick. Death, life. Life, death. They’re the same really. Win, lose. Give, take.

**III**

**MICHAEL**

**TRIPPING**

## Roaming Secret

By 1994 the very essence of teenage angst had been redefined. Green Day had entered our vocabulary and our record shops with an album by the innocent sounding title of *Dookie*. It's appeal was universal – Charlie even owned a copy. But despite the tag of mainstream being pinned on the punk rockers from California almost before they had time to appreciate their transcendence from garage band to International Superstars, they were not shunned by us. Not everyone understood that with their coming being drunk in public, shouting nonsensical comments at middle-aged passers-by, wearing torn and dirty clothing, dying your hair the colour their name suggests or being generally trashy was not only cool, it was sublime. The nature of teen angst had undergone a subtle yet significant transformation. Depressing lyrics and suicidal inferences had meant that we adopted a generally morose demeanour. Green Day redefined it to such an extent that it had developed, overnight, a sense of humour about its trashiness. We all knew the words to their hit single *Basket Case*, knew it so well our throats hurt from shouting it. We had become trashy, and it was, as mentioned, sublime. It was exactly the break we needed from being depressed. Now we had an excuse to roar jovial drunken laughter at remarks that weren't even mildly amusing. It felt like smoking the good reefer, and we smoked, and we inhaled great lungfuls – those of us who knew, who understood, we did this. For the rest it remained a catchy tune.

“Your pants are on fire,” Billy said.

“And you're a dumb-ass motherfucker,” Justin said.

Uproarish drunken laughter from all.

We regained composure only after a bit. Billy was wiping from his cheeks the nasty snail-trails the uncontrollable laughter had caused. “No, I'm serious,” he said between persistent bouts of giggling. He was pointing at Justin. “Your pants really are on fire. You better do something.”

“Aaahh, you dumb-ass motherfucker!” Justin jumped up and danced about the room. He tried to outrun himself around Billy's parents' living room. We all collapsed in peals of laughter once more. It truly was the funniest thing we had ever seen.

Catherine was pointing as she laughed. Her voice was shrill and rang out louder than ours, rose higher. Justin was looking at his pants, jumping, slapping at it as opposed to watching where he went. He slammed into the sliding door full-force. It was safety glass, so he was fortunate like that, but even so it wobbled belief-defyingly inside the frame. I was beginning to cough from laughing too much. It needed to stop soon if I was going to breathe in time not to die.

Justin's sudden adrenaline rush meant he had the presence of mind to flick the catch on the sliding door and sweep it open. Two seconds later he splashed into the pool, water flying in criss-crossing patterns. It was an awesome sight to behold, easily the craziest thing ever. Justin came up for air, wiped hair out of his face and looked back towards the house.

"You fucking bastards," he said, but he was smiling. Catherine got up and walked over to him. She took off her jersey on the way, then her T-shirt, her jeans. Justin's smile was getting wider. He kicked away from the side of the pool, allowing her some space to get in. She took off her bra, her petite black G-string. She descended the little steps and got into the pool. It was chilly outside. Her nipples were hard instantly. Billy and I stared, not able to believe what we were seeing. I remembered Catherine at the slumber parties Alison used to have, about them giggling when they mentioned boys' names. I remembered them endlessly combing their hair, sneaking out some of mom's make-up, telling each other stories of their husbands one day.

"Sweet," Billy said.

I could hear jeering and whistling from the roof. Marius, Nadia and Quinton were still up there. We had pelted the neighbours' tennis court with eggs earlier. That had been the funniest thing ever, until Justin caught fire of course.

"Do you want another beer?" Billy asked, getting up. He stumbled slightly before he was steady. "Whooaahoo. Steady on," he shouted out at the pool. He made it sound like he was shouting at them, but he was really shouting because of his lack of balance. Justin flipped him the finger.

"Yeah, I love you too, man. There's some more Heinekens in the fridge. I'll bring you one." He loped off.

I tried to follow him, but I couldn't even get up, the room spun dangerously around me as I tried to come upright. I lay back down, then tried again, slower. It was worse the second time. My mouth was filling with bile, runny and sour. I curled into a

little ball, pulled my knees into my chest. I groaned. I didn't want to, but it took the puking sensation away for a moment so I kept doing it. I was thinking about how to make the sound not seem stupid for when someone came in the room and found me there. Thinking about that meant I wasn't thinking about the taste in my mouth. That helped.

Then there was a shrill sound in my ears, loud and close by. I didn't want to get up, I didn't want to move. I wanted the sound to stop, go away. There was lots of shuffling on the roof suddenly. People were swearing, running, scampering. I squeezed my eyes shut. It would all pass shortly, I was sure.

"Hey, Mickey. Get your beer. I gotta answer the phone." Billy was back in the room. "Hey, dude." He nudged me with his foot. "Take the beer dumb-ass, I need to get the phone."

At that moment more people rushed into the room. Marius's voice was very loud. "Fuck, dude. Don't answer it."

"What?" Billy was confused. "It might be my parents. Just keep it down in the background. I gotta just talk to them. It'll be fine. Don't worry."

"No, you idiot," Marius's voice was urgent, almost whispering. "It might be the neighbours. They must have found the eggs. Don't answer it."

The shrill ringing of the phone continued for a long time. The four of them sat around waiting anxiously for it to stop. I was willing it away with all my effort, not caring what might be on the other end of the line.

The last thing I heard before finally passing out on Billy's living room floor that Wednesday night was Nadia asking, "What's wrong with him?"

I was woken up by the phone ringing again. My head felt like something died in there; I could feel its pressure in my forehead. I could even taste it rotting in my mouth. My tongue felt like it had a coating of diseased sewer rat fur on it. The high-pitched ringing made my ears ping with a high-pitched whine. I struggled onto my knees. Some considerate soul had thrown a blanket over me before going to bed. With the blanket in one hand and a pillow from the couch I trudged through the house looking for a room far enough away from the phone. Billy was asleep in his room, his legs were splayed, one arm was over his face and the other reached out to his bedside table. He looked like the aftermath of a failed parachute jump.

A peek into the guest bedroom revealed a tangled Justin and Catherine. The double bed in Billy's parents' room contained a prostrate Marius with Nadia's head on his chest. Quinton was draped over a two-seater couch that was much too small for him. I ended up in the upstairs study where I lay down on the floor underneath the blanket, put the pillow under my head and drifted in and out of consciousness as I imagined I could hear the ringing telephone, intermittently demanding attention that was not forthcoming.

The clock on the wall in the study read eleven o' clock when the smell of frying bacon and eggs wafted up to me. A *Rage Against the Machine* song was booming loudly downstairs. I needed more sleep but the rumbling in my tummy was not to be denied. An array of early morning activity greeted me in the kitchen. Catherine and Nadia were frying mushrooms and onions to go with the toast, bacon and eggs. Justin and Marius had both started on the beer again. Quinton lay stretched out next to the pool, soaking up some sun.

I sat down next to Billy at the kitchen counter. He was staring at a Disprin dissolving in half-a-glass of water.

"Hey sleepy-head," Nadia laughed, overly cheery. "You look a little weathered this morning."

"Those," I said, pointing at Billy's drink. "Hand it over."

Justin came inside and slapped me hard on the shoulder. "Morning sunshine." He was also speaking a lot louder than was necessary. "You conked out first. Way to go."

I tried to smile but the expression didn't fit. "Fuck you."

"Don't worry little man," he slapped me on the shoulder again, twice.

"Practice makes perfect. The more you drink the more you spew."

"Hurry up with those painkillers!"

"Here you go, Monsieur."

Justin had already lost interest. He was back at the stereo with Marius, going through the CD collection.

"I wish you'd plug the phone back in," Billy said.

Justin laughed. "No way, B-Man. That thing's annoying the fuck out of me."

"Touché," I agreed and downed my remedial concoction. "Chemistry," I said to Billy. "You gotta love it."

“Hey, how about *The Tumbleweeds*?” Marius sounded excited. The name debate was yet to be resolved, I realised.

“No,” Justin said.

“Why not?” Marius was surprised by the rejection.

“We’ve been through this,” Justin said. “Nothing beginning with The... It’s too 1960’s Britain – *The Beatles*. Or American – *The Drifters*, *The Monkees*, *The Byrds*, *Buddy Holly*.”

How he got to Buddy Holly only he knew. This was Justin logic only Justin could follow. But the list of names did make me think of my parents’ record collection at home, the sort of thing we prided ourselves on not listening.

“You could go the Dutch way and call yourselves *Band Zonder Naam*,” I said.

“We’ve got to have a name.” Marius was getting frustrated.

“I know,” Nadia chimed, still way too cheery. “How about *Three Hot Guys*?”

Crash and burn, really, but groupies get away with stuff like that. Only Catherine laughed.

“We’ve got to have something original, that doesn’t sound like we’re trying to copy someone else. You’re heading in the right direction, Nadia.” And you knew, while Justin said this, that it was going to have to be something that sounded original to him, since originality was so subjective. Especially if you considered that they were a three-piece band, in which Justin sang lead vocals and played lead guitar, Marius played bass and did back-up vocals and Quinton, who could mostly be found riding his skateboard in places he was not supposed to, played drums when he showed up for band practice. They were every other band, the only reason they couldn’t call themselves *Nirvana* or *Green Day* or even *Rage Against the Machine* was because those names were already taken. Even so, the difference eluded everyone who took longer than two seconds to think about it.

“You could call yourself *The Acid-Burn Skullheads*,” I said.

Everyone burst out laughing at once. Nadia could take lessons, I was free every afternoon and evening, payment to be arranged.

Justin came over and slapped me on the shoulder again. “Mickey, you’re the man. I knew there was a reason we keep you around. I think you just nailed it. *The Acid-Burn Skullheads*. It rocks.”

Voila. Problem solved. Nobody pointed out that five seconds ago Justin had been opposed to any name beginning with The...



“Hey, Quinton,” Justin popped his head out the door. “How does *The Acid-Burn Skullheads* tickle you?”

Quinton lifted his head just long enough to say, “sure, whatever.”

My sentiments exactly.

Justin dusted his hands in a that’s-all-in-a-day’s-work gesture. “Now, hurry up. We’ve got to get going soon.”

*The Acid-Burn Skullheads* were formed about five weeks before. That night would be their first gig. The Bohemian Salamander was a club in town that was renowned for its R7, 500ml Ginger Draughts and its Battle of the Bands. Strictly speaking the competition was only open to university students and older, but since Justin knew the doorman at the club who, according to him, was sleeping with the owner, he found a way in.

“Rules don’t matter when you know someone on the inside,” Justin had said.

They had reserved for themselves a space on the entry list – a space that as yet had nothing in the space left for band name – and had started rehearsing immediately. Monday, a week ago, Justin asked us to be roadies for the band. At first we said no, it was clear he merely wanted someone to carry the heavy amplifiers, speakers and cumbersome drum kit around. But Justin had explained about the Bohemian Salamander, and how he would give us a percentage of the prize money if they won.

It still did not seem worth our while since a band formed just over a month before the competition would obviously not stand a chance. It was only when Justin explained that it would mean we had to miss school the following Thursday and Billy remembering that his parents would be out of town for the week that the plan came together. It meant playing hooky on Thursday. This would no doubt get us in trouble by Friday, probably land us in Mr Lehmann’s office and set a pot boiling at home but that was the sort of risk that made it worthwhile.

So it was agreed. We would all spend Wednesday night at Billy’s house, and would drive to the club – thanks to Justin’s newly acquired driving licence – on Thursday morning and set up. It was perfect. Billy and I went away and planned out every detail.

“But if he calls us roadies one more time I’m going to kick him in the balls,” was my only concern with the plan.

“I’m not sure that would be a good idea,” Billy had cautioned. “That Quinton guy who plays the drums is pretty hardcore. He beat up a guy using his skateboard as

a weapon. They were down at the St Paul's Anglican Church grounds the other day and the caretaker came down and chased them away. Quinton apparently lost it and beat the guy three times. Broke his nose."

Billy's eyes shone with admiration. "You watch too much TV," I'd said. I was sure the story was embellished but there could be no doubt that Quinton was hardcore and he was good friends with Justin. But still, we would have a day off from school, Justin would get us into a club where we would be sold beer and if that meant carrying a couple of speakers, well then we were still winning.

We all piled into Quinton's Volkswagen Microbus and despite Justin being the only one with a valid driver's licence Quinton drove us down to Long Street. The Microbus belonged to Quinton's older brother who allowed him to borrow it for road-trips and such. He parked in a side street and while we carried the equipment inside Justin stood talking to his friend the doorman. The place was still quiet, a couple of girls sitting at a table and a few students at the bar. The air was already thick with smoke and the blue and green lights along the walls gave the interior a dim, nauseating glow. We piled the equipment on the stage while Marius started arranging and plugging things in while Quinton assembled his drum kit.

My head was still fragile and the effort of carrying the stuff inside made me feel shaky all over. I lay down on one of the benches. Billy ordered a couple of Ginger Draughts and joined me.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I said. "Just waiting for the painkillers to kick in."

*The Acid-Burn Skullheads* went on first at about 4 o'clock that afternoon. My headache had dissipated to such an extent that I was actually beginning to enjoy myself again. Those Ginger Draughts really helped with that. They weren't half bad either. Billy and I were quite surprised. We hadn't heard them rehearse at any point but their sound was a pleasant surprise. There was something of Robert Plant in Justin's high-pitched whiny lyrics and the sound was good old-fashioned rock and roll rhythm meets Punk. We head-banged, we moshed. I chipped a tooth and Billy got an elbow in the face. His eye didn't exactly swell up but it did acquire a slight purple tinge.

"Are you all right," I asked afterwards when I noticed.

“Yeah,” Billy panted, wiping sweat from his brow. “They’re great. Imagine, we might just get paid for this gig after all.” Then he turned round and headed for the bar. “More beer.”

We put the equipment back in the Microbus, threw a tarpaulin over it to keep nosy passers-by from seeing that we had close on twenty thousand Rand’s worth of stuff in there. Back inside we watched the next band, who would go on at six, set up, and drank beer.

Justin went off, talking to everyone he knew. It was quite a while before we saw him again. Some of Quinton’s skater friends arrived and he went off with them. Marius stayed, and getting a little tipsy he was entertaining Catherine and Nadia no end. Billy and I were commuting between the table and the bar. The place was filling up at an alarming rate. Getting to the bar now meant pushing, shoving and trusting aggressive looking guys to move just a nineteenth of a centimetre so you could squeeze into the little gap between their oversized asses.

The next band eventually got on at 6:30pm. Everyone thought their name *Masters of the Universe* was quite original but their music sucked. Halfway through their third song I realised it wasn’t going to get any better and I went off in search of Justin. The club had an upstairs where a deejay was spinning alternative tunes. I hippped and hopped around the dance floor for a while, more looking for Justin than anything else. I found him eventually on the far side of the dance floor. There was a VIP room alongside it where the bands and deejays could hang with their friends, out of the maddening rush of the crowds. Justin was on a couch with a girl who was probably ten years older than him, and in their passionate entanglement it seemed like they were trying to climb down each other’s throats. I stood watching for a long time. They were oblivious to the world around them, lost to everything and every one but each other.

Poor Catherine, I thought. I felt kind of sorry for her, standing there watching those two. She wanted the cool, bad-ass guy and probably congratulated herself every night for getting him. But I wondered how aware of the consequences she was. To her Justin was irresistible, a dream come true. To him, she was no more than a young piece of ass, instantly replaceable if he felt like it. The girl sitting on top of him got something out of her bag and slipped it down his throat, then they started devouring each other again. That broke my paralysis. I turned to go downstairs, talk to Catherine, keep her down there so she wouldn’t have to see this.

I crossed the dance floor and was about to descend the stairs when I saw her. I froze. It was incredible. Catherine disappeared from my mind. At the upstairs bar, under the neon Jose Cuervo Tequila sign, bathed in golden light, she stood. I walked over, pulled by the undeniable gravity of purpose, drawn by the power of coincidence. She was there with some of her friends whom I remembered from around school. There were no guys around.

“Hi,” I said when I got to her. She was waiting for her drinks order to arrive. She didn’t notice me. I was standing right next to her, but I may as well have been on another planet, in another bar on some other street, in some town far away. “Kelly.”

She turned, looked at me. “Yes?”

“How are you?” I grabbed her, hugged her to me. I felt her go stiff instantly.

“Hey, back off,” she pushed me away. She looked quite flustered. “What do you want?”

“It’s me, Michael. Don’t you remember?”

For a little longer there was no recognition. The bar lady arrived. “Excuse me. Your drink.”

“Oh.” Kelly turned, took out her purse.

“Hey, let me get that for you,” I said.

“It’s fine, don’t worry.” She paid quickly.

I was still fumbling through my pockets, remembering Billy had the money with him. She was about to move off. I grabbed onto her arm. She froze. Her eyes bulged. She looked at me with a mixture of grief and desperation. “What do you want?” she breathed in a strained breath. “I’m here with friends. I know a lot of people here. If you do anything funny...”

“Hey,” I said. “Relax. It’s me Michael. Do you really not remember me?”

She stopped, seemed to consider the situation again and then for the first time I got the idea she actually tried to remember, or allow that she might know me.

“Michael?” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “You remember, Justin’s friend.”

“Oh.” Her expression changed from cautious to Get-the-fuck-away-from-me in one fluid motion. “I’ve got to go.” She ripped her arm out of my hand and disappeared into the crowd at a pace that made me ill with disappointment.

I turned away, to go downstairs, giving up. How could I have spooked her so? I kept seeing those beautiful eyes flashing with anger, that pretty face filling with frightened rage. What could –

And then I was up against the wall, painfully. My right shoulder slamming into it and my left shoulder taking the blow from a body. I struggled to breathe. Someone had a grip of my throat.

“What the fuck was that all about?”

*Justin*, I tried to say. *It was nothing*, I tried to say. *Just said hello*, I couldn’t manage. *You’re choking me*. I had to get something out.

He slammed me against the wall twice more. “Huh? Talk you little shit! What was that all about?”

I pointed at my throat, that I couldn’t answer if I’d wanted to. He dropped me to my feet again, let go of my throat. His hand dropped to my chest and his other pulled back in a fist. “Tell me the truth or I swear I break the rest of your teeth.”

I coughed. My throat stung terribly. It felt hot. I could taste blood. “I just said hello.” I finally got something out.

“What were you talking about? It doesn’t take that long to say hello.”

“I just said hello, offered to pay for her drink. Then she got freaked out. She didn’t know who I was.”

He stared at me very hard then. He seemed to weigh what I said with what he’d seen. It took a while, but then he leaned in right up to my face and spoke so close to me I could taste the words and the breath on which they came.

“If I ever see you near her again I will fucking kill you.” He slammed me once more against the wall for emphasis and then let go.

A big fat guy walked past, chuckling. “You kids gotta learn to relax,” he laughed and kept walking.

Justin wiped some spittle from his lips and flashed me one last warning look. Then he went downstairs.

When I look back at things I can never determine whether I made up my mind at that very moment or whether it happened at some other stage and was merely confirmed that night. It’s difficult to tell when you look back. You can remember certain thoughts you had, the important decisions you made in your life. But you have no timeline.

What I do know is that while I stood there – swallowing the taste of blood back, telling myself not to be a pussy in order to keep the tears back, wondering whether my throat was swelling up bad, telling myself it was only shock and surprise, that – something changed. The kid that went downstairs to join the group of people at the table knew something the kid that went looking for Justin didn't. And his head reeled with it, and his heart burned with it. Something that was intangible before was real now. I could taste it while I laughed at the jokes. I could feel it in the back of my throat when I nodded and yawned, agreed that it was getting late. And the taste, although new, was not unfamiliar. It felt like a thing which had always been waiting, had recognised its moment and risen up.

Home was different. I could feel it as soon as I stepped inside. There was something intangible in the mood that had changed. The way the house felt, the familiarity of it was suddenly replaced by some heaviness, some knowledge yet to be shared. Being reasonably drunk I dismissed it out of hand, reasoned it had to be some drunken sensation that would pass come morning. I moved about the house as quietly as I could. I took my bag upstairs, tip-toed back down to get something to eat. That was when the change became tangible. There was a box of matches and a pouch of pipe tobacco on the kitchen table. I heated some Russians and lathered tomato sauce on them once they were inside a couple of hotdog rolls. Before going to my room, still wondering about the tobacco, I sneaked into the garage. I had no definite reason, merely felt myself going there.

I opened the door that connected the house to the garage. Dad's car wasn't there. I didn't make too much of it at first. I went upstairs and ate the rolls in the dark, opening my curtains so the moonlight would fill the room with a soft, silky tone. It was too late for him to still be working, it was after midnight. But for the last couple of weeks he had been coming home later and later. He hadn't been his usual self. He was often irritable and quick to make a fuss of the smallest indiscretion. But for a while now he had seemed to, almost imperceptibly, retract. His moods had become non-existent, he'd not even put up a fight when I asked to stay over at Billy's on Wednesday night. He'd lost interest. I hadn't seen it for what it was then, I'd had my own things to take care of. But I should have known it was coming. He was going.

I expected there to be trouble about my absence at school. I still felt like something the dog brought up the next morning. I had a headache like a shard of glass driven deep into my skull just above the left eyebrow. I was considering going downstairs and getting some painkillers. It was still early. How I was going to get through a day of school like this I didn't know. Maybe I could fake an illness. It was Friday after all, make a long weekend of it.

The chance of that was slim, though. After the phone call from Mr Lehmann, or whoever followed up on absentees, getting out of school today would be the most improbable thing.

What I did expect was some dressing down from Mom before breakfast, then she would cry a little, say something like I don't know with you sometimes. Then the siege warfare would start. She would sulk through the weekend and beyond, and try as I might, or be as nice as I like, the next time I would see her smile was up to her, not me. With Dad's absence, I supposed physical pain at least would be off the menu.

What I did not expect was her rushing into my room in the morning, grabbing my shoulder and pulling me out of bed.

"Mom?" and a shocked expression was all I could manage before she laid into me.

"Where the hell have you been? Do you have the faintest idea how worried I've been? Do you think it's funny, disappearing like that? I phoned Billy's house. I phoned the school. When Mr Wilkinson couldn't find you I phoned the police. And now, and now, of all times now! My God! My God, Michael. What do you want from me?"

I was out of bed, standing there with my arm in her grasp. It must have been the shocked look on my face, my mouth hanging open, my eyes wide, but she stopped. She grabbed me to her, hugged me fiercely for a moment and then started to cry.

"Oh, Michael. I'm sorry. I was so worried."

She stayed there and she cried. She held me like that for a long time before she seemed to regain some sort of composure. There seemed to be something she wanted to say.

"Do you know about Dad?"

I thought of the empty garage last night. I nodded.

"Don't run, Michael. Talk. We'll all get through this together."

She hugged me again, but this time in a zombie-like state, just a perfunctory squeeze and she left, seeming to recede into some inner safe-house and then to her room where she closed the door.

I got back in bed and tried to get back to sleep. I tossed and turned, but no position offered comfort. My headache was growing worse. Eventually I got out of bed and went downstairs. There was an old man sitting in the garden, smoking a pipe. I ate some cereal with warm milk and found painkillers for my head.

I don't remember too much about the next couple of days. I remember scenes of Mom sitting hopelessly at the kitchen table, the old man who turned out to be my grandfather on Dad's side trying to comfort her. I remember a dull anger tingeing the periphery of every scene, and an unsure waiting, wondering if he would come back to pick up clothes or have the decency to come clean, drop by, if not to explain, at least to say goodbye. But he never did.

The speed with which mom and Alison gave up on him surprised me. But it sort of figured. Women always expect the worst from men. I felt kind of sorry for him, thought about how much of a farce their marriage had been all these years if he could give up on her that quickly, and she on him. They acted as if he was dead.

People kept dropping by. I stayed in my room. Everyone seemed to want to get the inside scoop on what happened, the freshest gossip was always the juiciest. At one stage, while Alison was away at the Wilkinsons, Mom having said it might be a good idea for her to get out of the house for a bit, and she was busy talking to more visitors, I tried to phone Dad. I dialled his cell phone number.

I don't quite know what I expected or what I was going to say. There was no answer, it went to voicemail. "I am unable to take your call right now. Please leave your name and number and I'll get back to you as soon as possible."

Sure you will, I thought. "Dad, it's Michael. I just want to know what's going on."

Then I hung up. What did I want from him? To take me with him? To come back? I understood what silly ideas they were. He had made up his mind, had found something better. I didn't know what to think anymore. Phoning from the house wouldn't have been the best idea either. He would have recognised the number.

I tried phoning the Knysna house the next day, suddenly sure he would be there. I thought I had him. A woman answered. "Hello?"

The secretary. The mistress. I hung up.



Later I phoned again. I realised it might just have been holidayers renting the house from Mr Wilkinson. I had to find out. But the phone wasn't answered again.

Mother explained again that father died in a car accident. But then she didn't go on. She cried, turned her face away from me. I was lying on my bed, staring out the window. She squeezed my leg and left the room. I lay on my back watching the little patch of world I could see framed by the window, trying to stop thinking about why Mom would lie to me, why she would think I needed protecting.

I decided to phone Billy and arrange to stay with him for a while. His parents were still away for that weekend. I packed my bags and left a note on my bed, saying: I'm fine. I'm at Billy's. Don't call. M.

Billy cycled to my house late that night. I took one bag and gave him the other. We went downstairs. Alison waited for us in the living room.

She stood there in boxer shorts and a tank top. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to stay at Billy's until the two of you start acting a little less paranoid."

She shook her head. "What about the funeral, Michael? Mom would want you there."

"Fuck you, Alison," I said. "How stupid do you and Mom think I am? Stop this bullshit. That's exactly why I'm leaving."

I didn't want to have an argument about it so I turned and left. Billy came with me. He was very quiet.

"Watch for the gate at the side. It creaks. I don't want to wake my mom."

We climbed over and cycled off.

"Damn, Mickey," Billy said somewhere along the way, cycling slightly behind me, slightly out of breath. "Your sister's hot."

## The Best of Intentions

Rebecca picked up the cup, kept it hovering before her while she blew on the warm, foamy liquid inside. She was looking around the coffee shop, apparently not seeing anyone she knew. It was pretty quiet. We were one of only three occupied tables. Outside students were dashing through the drizzle, book bags and the odd umbrella holding off the precipitation as they skirted around puddles. The conversation was slow in starting, yet I didn't sense nerves from her. She was pretty together.

"So, you're quite serious about the journalism thing," I prompted.

"Yeah," she smiled. "My mom and dad are both journos so I guess it was just the most obvious choice."

"Like running the family business once dad gets too old?"

She smiled, for the first time a hint of self-consciousness creeping in.

"Something like that, I guess." She swirled her coffee and took another sip. "Why are you writing for the paper?"

"I like writing about pop culture and entertainment. It takes one's mind off other things."

"You mean, mundane, everyday reality?"

I smiled to myself, looking into my cup. With her I might have a chance to find out what that was like.

"Where are you from originally?"

"Born and bred in Cape Town," I said.

"Really? Why'd you come up here?"

I swirled my own cup. "I guess I just needed to get away. All the old familiar places... I needed a change."

She spilled some coffee in the saucer.

Would it always be like this, I wondered? Another lie, another half-truth, just one more tiny detail getting in the way. I watched her closely as she mopped the spillage with her serviette – so carefree, so trusting so soon. It was clear in her smile that the world had never hurt her, never turned its back on her, never forced her to look upon its ugly face. I considered telling her everything. Some part of me wanted to scare her, frighten her off, make her run from the thing that sat across from her.

And yet, another me wanted her to know, not to spoil her but to warn her that the world had teeth and hungered for the unsuspecting.

She looked up, smiling. "You know Michael, you are a breath of fresh air."

I smiled, unconvincing.

"Are you all right?" she asked. She put her hand on my leg, concerned. It was a natural thing for her.

I pulled her closer. Our faces moved towards each other, hovered there for a moment as I expected her to resist or pull away. And then she kissed me, soft, warm lips pressing against mine. I breathed her in, I breathed her out, accepted the wetness of her tongue, found the roof of her mouth, claimed her.

She pulled away, a little flustered. "Oh my God."

"Mine too," I smiled.

I got off the bus at around eight and walked the two blocks to get to the flat. Suburbia was quiet, taking shelter from the rain. No dogs barked. Everywhere lights shone in windows, televisions flickered their bluish light, street lamps painted the rain yellow. The fresh smell of wet grass and tar was in my nose and deep inside me there was a struggle. Might I one day confide in her, might this have been my turn of fortune?

Rebecca. Her lips, her breath, her face. It was burned on my mind. I started whistling, turning my face up to the rain's nourishing coolness and I let it fill me.

I laughed. It was a clear sound, spontaneous and free. It came out naturally from me, like it did from her, like I had breathed in something of her joy and was now simply letting it flow through me.

I laughed.

\*

My first thought when the phone rings is Rebecca; what to say to her this time. My heart twists in my chest when I hear Mother answering the phone. Rebecca has phoned twice since I've been here. Once the night of my arrival and again the night after the funeral. A week has passed since then without any further calls, and with every passing day and every hour a call from her becomes more likely. After long enough I suppose that will change, and with every day that passes the likelihood of a call from her will decrease. It is like the graphs we used to do at school. At first the

graph shows a steep incline, and then after flattening out for a bit shows a sharp decline. At present we are still on the incline, and that dark pencil line burns the page with the force it was drawn with, as she sits at home or in the office editing, keeping half an eye on the phone and another half on the cell phone while convincing herself that it doesn't matter, that she isn't expecting a call from me anyway, that I can go and burn in hell for all she cares, that she deserves better than this, that for all she's given to this relationship she is getting so very little in return, that...

...and she will snap up the phone when it rings and say "Michael?" before she could help herself, and be disgusted by her weakness when it is her father, asking if he could bring that nice boy from the office he's been telling her about around for dinner tonight. She will tell him "no" straight away, will be angry at him for implying that there is anything the matter. "You know, it's hard enough to make this sort of thing work without parents trying to sabotage it."

And then he will ask when she last spoke to me, and her voice will take on a strange inflection, and remind her father for a moment too much of me, and she will say "this morning. We got off the phone just before you called. That's why I thought it was him when you rang, thought he'd forgotten something."

Her father will hang up the phone after a sufficient amount of small-talk convinces them both that whatever troubles there are it does not affect their relationship and sit in his office in Johannesburg and stare out the window while he replays the conversation in his mind and worries about his daughter and wonders whether he should phone me and straighten a few things out.

Much the same scenario in Rebecca's office as she sits playing with her pen, trying to get back into editing that back page article, and give up and go outside, light a cigarette and watch students criss-crossing the piazza, some laughing, some rushing, others strolling but all relatively content or happy. She will think about what her father said, about the boy he wanted her to meet. She will get angry all over again at his assumption that Michael is not worthy of her and be glad that she said no for the umpteenth time. This time. But she will keep thinking and by the time that cigarette is out she'll be livid with me, with having to put up with this. And next time?

And the time after that?

At some point daddy is going to offer and she is going to go "You know what, fuck it. Bring him on. I'm done playing the aggrieved girlfriend waiting in vain. Bring

that fine young piece of man over and tell him to get ready for the experience of a lifetime.”

I turn over in bed and smile to myself. I know we’re not quite there yet, but it won’t be long now. I try hard not to think of the night before I left for Cape Town. I don’t see myself hunched over her sleeping body, watching the rise and fall of her chest, so pretty, so contented, so vulnerable.

“Michael?”

Mom, calling from downstairs. I sit up in bed, shake my head to clear all the thoughts whirlwinding about, am surprised and annoyed my palms are sweaty when I rub them together.

“Michael. Come quick!”

Downstairs I am greeted by an ashen, white-faced mother. She has her purse in her hands. Then she puts it down and goes into the kitchen, comes out again immediately. She is about to go upstairs, then turns around and looks at me, as if only then noticing I’d come down. She sits down on the couch and holds her head, shakes it in a mixture of defiance and disbelief.

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

She looks at me, a couple of tears welling up in her eyes. “I tried to do right by you kids. I did what I could. You were headstrong, both of you, in your own ways.” She is no longer looking at me, or addressing me. She is looking out the window, at the garden, through it, beyond it. “After your father…”

Fourteen years on and she still can’t bring herself to complete that thought.

“I thought it was a good thing. I let you be, most of the time. Thought it was a sign of strength. The two of you were forced so early to stand on your own feet, weather storms. And now? Have I assumed too much? Wouldn’t you talk to me if you had problems? Do you feel you can’t come to me, trust me? I’m your mother.”

The last bit she directs at me. She waits, as if my answer is vital, will make or break something all too fragile.

“Mom, what’s going on?”

She has to visibly force herself back into the present, face what is at hand.

“That was Tannit on the phone.”

I had met Alison’s university friend at the exhibition.

“She tried to kill herself last night. My baby…”

That’s as far as she gets. Then those two tears overtake her.

Surreal. Her eyes are watery things, almost afloat as they drift from one end of the room to the other. She takes us in and then keeps looking around. She's searching for someone else that's supposed to be here, I think. One of the nurses brought in a chair for Mom on which she now sits, right up against the bed, holding Alison's hand in hers and stroking hair from her forehead repeatedly. The mothering instinct is now replaced with a great big hole of helplessness as she sits there, trying to understand, trying to will her daughter back to health. There is guilt on that face too as she puzzles over what she could have done better, or differently. I wonder where my father is right now, and I'm angry that he doesn't have to experience any of this, that his cowardice and fallibility which has caused this has also excused him.

But there is solace, I think, looking around. Alison's eyes seem to liven just a little when they happen on Tannit. The people who really care about her are all here in this room with her. It feels right to have come back right then. To have left Pretoria, to have returned. Me standing here is living proof that I am not like him. The right choice and the hardest one to make are so often the same. That's just the way it is.

I'm lost deep in my own mind here in a hospital room on a bright morning with a pleasant sun shining through the window. The view of Table Mountain is stunning. But of course the mountain doesn't have eyes to look this way. And a good thing too. Humanity is no pretty sight, even on a hopeful, sunny morning.

Someone takes my arm, drags me back here with a simple touch. It's Tannit. Mom whispering to Alison, oblivious of us.

"Can we talk outside?" Tannit asks.

"Sure. We could get some coffee."

We walk along the hallways, descend the stairs and find the cafeteria. We don't talk until we sit down.

"Thanks for phoning," I say.

"It was the worst thing. I rang her last night after she left the exhibition. I couldn't reach her. I tried twice more on the drive to her house. Nothing. She wasn't at home. I decided I was overreacting. I went home, tried to get some sleep. But by this morning I was sick with concern, so I got up and drove over to her house again. It's just like I knew something was wrong. I saw one of the lights were on upstairs. I rang the bell fifteen times or more. There was no waking her up, though." Tannit tears

open the little sugar sachets and pours the white granules into her coffee. Her voice is pleasant, confident, almost cheerily detached from what she's recounting.

"I noticed the door on the balcony was open. One of Charlie's ladders is still lying around in the backyard. That's how I got up there." She shivers. "Anyway, I found her in the bathroom, face down –"

Tannit stops for a moment. A rueful smile lifting the left corner of her mouth slightly. She shakes her head.

"It was like I knew, Michael. From the moment I couldn't find her at the gallery after we talked last night, I knew."

I nod. I wait for the barrage of questions to start. How can this happen? Why would she do this, Michael? Tell me, tell me...

"Listen, Michael," she says.

I brace myself, take a deep breath and prepare for the first roundabout.

"Can I ask you a favour? There's something I need you to do for me."

"Yes?" I stir my coffee thoroughly for a second time.

"How long are you in Cape Town for?"

"I don't really know, why?"

"I'm taking Alison out of the city for a few days. Once she's recovered her strength of course."

"Okay –"

"I want you to join us."

I couldn't understand why this would be a difficult thing for her to ask. "It sounds nice."

"So, you'll come?"

"Sure," I say. "A trip with two lovely ladies, what man in his right mind is going to say no to that?"

"Wonderful." Tannit takes both my hands in hers across the table. "Thank you, Michael. Thank you so much. This means so much to me –"

First it hangs in the air like that. And then she checks herself, once she realises.

"– to her. It'd mean a lot to her."

"Of course," I say. "Where are we going?"

"There's this house in Knysna she and Charlie used as a summer hideaway..." That's as far as she gets.

"No," I say and pull my hands from her grip. "I can't; there's no way." I get up, turn to walk back to Alison.

"Michael!" Her voice is stern, insistent.

I look at her once more.

"You have to do this."

I shake my head, a burst of hysterical laughter escaping me. "Why? That makes no sense. There is no thing in this world I can think of that *I have* to do."

"Well this is. She's been through a hard time, Michael. You know that. The ones she loves needs to help her through this, and the ones that helped get her in that hole even more so –"

She lets it hang like that for a bit, gives it time to sink in, to hit; holds out the noose in case I want it.

"And that entitles you to a double dose of responsibility."

I take two steps, back to the table, lean over it. I speak right into her face, wanting her to feel the words. "You know nothing about us."

There is a flash of real fire in her eyes. It is brief but it is fierce. Then it passes, as quickly as it had come.

I step back.

"Look, Michael. Alison needs the help of those closest to her. The two of you have always been close. You've been gone so long, and yet she talks about you... when I'm able to get through the wall she builds around herself. It's always you I find there."

Tannit leaves soon after our conversation. She tells Mom that she'll be back around seven in the evening to see how Alison is doing and take her home if the doctors allow, but both suspect she might have to stay for another night of observation.

"If she looks better tomorrow morning she can go," a nurse filling in her chart says.

Mom and I stay there for most of the day. We go downstairs to the cafeteria to have lunch. We eat in silence. Mom hardly touches anything on her plate.

"I can't protect you anymore," she says at one point and then starts pushing the ingredients of a chef's salad around her plate again.

It is late afternoon. We are about to leave when Alison's grip on mom's hand firms. For the first time there is true recognition in those eyes.



“Oh, my baby.” Mom grabs her and holds her. “You have no idea how good it is to see you.”

Alison smiles faintly. “I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“Don’t be. Everything is going to be all right.”

And there it is. The one phrase that always makes me hear a sound from inside myself like a rusted iron bell clanging deep down inside a dungeon. Everything is going to be all right, any time soon.

I kiss Alison’s forehead. “Welcome back, fighter,” I say. “You had us on our toes there.”

The faint smile across her features as a late afternoon sun illuminates the room makes me almost believe the little parenting catchphrase.

On the way home I ask mom to drop me off at Billy’s in Sea Point. “I need to go tell him what happened. I think I’ll spend the night there, get him to drop me off tomorrow.”

The evening is wet. A thin wind-swept drizzle fills the air. I go up to the fifteenth floor, knock on Billy’s door. It is quiet, no light on inside. I phone his cell number. The phone rings for a moment, then is turned off. I decide, despite the weather, to go for a walk. He is probably dropping off or fetching Fantasia. I would try back in an hour or so. I walk along the promenade, beyond it through Fresnaye and Bantry Bay, turn around at Clifton and goes back. The rain comes and goes, and when I get back to Sea Point it is dark and the street lights are on. The traffic has thinned and the promenade is all but empty.

Now and again some souped-up Volkswagen thunders by, speakers pumping. I sit down on a bench looking out to sea. Something is stirring. I am overtaken by a sense of culmination, a feeling that a vital moment in my life has arrived, and that everything depends on how I will react. I like Tannit. I know she means well, but those intentions amount to nothing. She simply has no idea what she is getting into. And now Knysna, brazenly declared as the destination of our little trip, to sort things out, to right all wrongs, to make everything all right.

And then that old instinct stirs again. It feels like my mind speeding up. I can see Charlie’s kite in the air, feel Alison’s lips on mine, blood, sweat, tears and a salty taste. How could I be so stupid? I am back in Cape Town, and this is my life. I have to

get out, have to go while there is time, before things go down their familiar path. There is still time...

Things I thought I'd left behind are suddenly back. Dark, oblique, shadowy things that is me, but doesn't need to be. How hard I've tried to turn my back on these things, so often got so close to getting rid of that bitter taste which hangs at the back of my throat. It is like breath so bad you are sure everyone can smell it. And a certain look has crept into my eye, so vivid I can see it in the mirror. Another town had been the answer, another start in a different place where my name could be what I wanted it to be. A place where I could say what I wanted, think whatever was convenient or comfortable. A place where my shadow was not as long as it is here.

Those were my plans, my thoughts, my ideals. And it had been going so well. It really had. I had a girl I kind of liked, and suspected (anticipated) I could grow to love. She was charming. She had her shit together, she was perfect for me. But that certain something which boils in me always is never far away. It simmers under a veil of normality. It makes my countenance take on a look of slight disinterest, friendly aloofness. Some find it intriguing, some want to get to know me better. Others are satisfied to call me an asshole and look no further. All of this is fine, manageable. It is better than what had come before. Better than going into that madly spinning in-between place I can't get out of until its fury is spent.

The night is cold, invigorating. The wind tugs at my hair where I sit, the air wet again, the wind whipping insistently. The sidewalks are damp, the ocean foams.

My hands burn. I rub them inside each other, my breath coming in shallow gasps. I bite my lower lip, wondering what will come. I can feel it rising again. It is in me. It laughs, like it is surprised at my surprise to find it still here.

*I don't leave, Michael. I'm nowhere but here, Mickey. Don't you know?*

I don't, not really. Or maybe I do. But I had hoped once, had really wanted to leave all this behind. And I had been doing so well. Progress. That was what I had been making. One painstaking day at a time I had been getting my life together.

*Really? Honestly? Together? Mickey, please. We know better than that, don't we...*

The voice of dark, rainy nights is how I have come to think of it; Justin's voice. It is always Justin's voice, never far away. But all that was so long ago. So many hard-fought-for days have passed since then. So much grinding along a featureless road. I have sweated the poison from my veins. It is no more. No longer in

me, but behind me, in the dust along that road which still carries the marks of my heavy tread. I was finally just another guy. A student in a town that gets very dry in the winter, swallowed whole by a bleak landscape. In autumn I would disappear among the fallen jacaranda flowers, their purple blossoms camouflaging my bruises. That town that gets so green in the summer. There is no tumultuous ocean there, forever hissing, never quiet. No fierce wind that howls, moaning around corners. There are a 1 700 kilometres between that place and this. I have buried this, left it behind.

*Mickey. Mickey, come now. Don't do this. It's upsetting to watch.*

My future was slowly growing rosy. I had no concern beyond what I was going to have for supper or how I would fuck my girl tonight. Life was good, simple, liveable.

*What a short memory we have. Don't you remember? We danced, you and I. And do you remember every time we did, we laughed. You were never more alive than in those moments...*

But then the thunderstorms came to that place where the world was so quiet it soothed like a rocking chair. I was deceived. It was so calm there. But in summer the heat would come, would grow oppressive. In bed I would toss and turn, lathered in sweat, and the lightning whip would crack in my ears, dry, dangerous, gnashing thunder. There was no peace to be found there either.

And yet I had the life. A job. Responsibility. Taking care of people, taking care of myself.

*Oh, we took care of people, make no mistake.*

I clench my hands, bury them deep in my pockets and walk across the road. Please Billy, I think. Be home my friend. Be home. I need you now.

He isn't.

I try to phone him. His phone is off. I sit down, my back against his door. There is nothing else to do, nowhere else to go. Tannit's insistence, her blind, probing meddling. I have to leave, get Billy to drop me at the airport tonight, catch a flight, get away. It was never a good idea to come back. Things are better in Pretoria, thunderstorms and all. Justin's voice is not so clear there.

*Running again, Mickey? From what? It's you, Mickey, it's you. If there's one thing you can't escape it's you. Don't you remember Pretoria? Her pretty chest, rise*

*and fall, rise and fall. When she dared defy you, dared to look around. You know her stepping around on you was never far away. All it needed was a handsome young man. Your precious little life so fragile a stranger could steal it with a glance. The power you gave her, unloaded everything on her. Your saviour, the hand that would pull you from the pit. Oh, what a little sheep you became.*

*Do you honestly not remember? Taking back what's yours. The beating of your heart, so alive. Oh yes, Pretoria, I remember how normal you were there. Sure Mickey. Everyone needs a hunting knife. Wasn't it funny? Wondering on your way down there what the proper name for a Crocodile Dundee knife was. Oh, how we laughed, don't you remember, you and I. I and you. Don't you? Lovely, lovable, placid little Mickey. Like that was ever going to be the answer, to give over to the mercy of others. Oh, poor little Mickey. But don't worry, life is like that brandy on the cabinet way back when, don't you remember? The brandy that looked but didn't taste like apple juice. Sure it's bitter at first, sure it's not nice, and it makes you feel bad, makes your head ache, your stomach burn. Yeah it's bad, but then you get used to the taste, and once you're used to it you get to like it. And eventually you can't do without it. Come now Mickey. Who is this pathetic little skulker nosing around Cape Town? This kid's heading for another pounding, another heartbreak that hurts so bad your mouth tastes like piss. Just another innocent little girl who's decided she means well. How nice of her. This is a road you've been down. Come now Mickey, come now. Pick yourself up. Don't run, not now, not like this. There's business still to do. We can shake it, live a little.*

At some point a couple who lives on Billy's floor walks past. They nod a perfunctory greeting, but when I don't respond they keep going, give me sidelong glances on the way by.

A little trip to Knysna, I think. It is all coming back. This is going to be a disaster. How did I get myself into this?

*Crunch time, Mickey. Now they'll want the truth. And when they have it they'll turn up their little noses. "Oh my, how despicable." That truth, Mickey. Yours and hers. They want that. The truth that they can never grasp, that thing which only the two of you can share.*

"Mickey? Is that you?"

I look up at that voice. "Doctor B?"

“Hey, man.” He comes up to me. “Look at you. You’re soaking wet. What’s the matter?”

“Can I stay over tonight?”

“Of course. What’s wrong? What’s going on?”

I get up, but suddenly I’m not very steady. My head is reeling. Billy gets hold of me and pushes me against the wall, supporting me.

“Mickey, tell me what’s going on.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Come inside.” He unlocks and we go inside. I flop down on the couch among some women’s underwear. Billy puts the kettle on and then sits down facing me.

The clouds continue to roll in on this dark, damp night.

Quite some time passes before I say, “It’s Alison. She tried to kill herself.”

## A Last Supper

My room is quiet now that both of us are exhausted. Rebecca gets out of bed, taking no precaution to cover herself, opens a window. I peel off the condom before tying a knot in it to avoid spilling. I drop it on the carpet next to the bed and lie back on the pillow. She comes back after taking a shower, sits down next to me, cross-legged. She lights a cigarette and then merely looks at me while she drags on it. I run my hand along the inside of her thigh. Her skin is hot. The room is stuffy and clouds of steam billow from the bathroom. The still night air barely moves the curtains; relief is not on offer.

“Michael, where the hell are you?”

There’s a surprising amount of vehemence there. She’d been distant all day, had rolled her eyes at the slightest provocation. This had lead to furious, almost violent sex when we got to my place. She kissed me lightly in the driveway, where we stood next to the car. It was perfunctory, infuriating. I could feel her frustration pulsing like heat from her. I grabbed her, dragged her to the room and fucked it out of her. But I hadn’t got all of it, it seems.

“What? I’m right here, babe.”

“You’re not, though.”

She slides over, climbs on top of me, straddles me. She moves her crotch against mine.

“It’s hot, babe. Do you have to?”

“Look at me.”

“Are you ready to go again?”

She takes my face in her hands, turns it to hers. “Kiss me,” she says.

I do.

“Properly,” she says.

“What the fuck is up with you tonight?” I haven’t the energy to play these little power games now. I’m spent.

“I’m going to make love to you,” she says. She bends closer, runs her tongue along my cheek, dips it in my ear, tickles.

I break out in gooseflesh.

“Sensual, passionate,” she whispers. “Soft, intense. It’ll be just you and me, away from here, away from life, outside of time.”

I feel myself stiffening slightly. She feels it too, takes me in her hand, caresses. She slips me into her.

“Wait. The condoms are over there.” I reach out to the bedside table.

She stops my hand, puts it on her breast. “What are you so afraid of, Michael? It’s just you and me. We’re the only people here.”

She kisses me. “Just the two of us. Now, I’m going to love you and I want you to look in my eyes – the whole time. I want to feel you, not just inside me down there, but inside me in here as well.”

She tightens my hand on her breast, over her heart.

“You’re very lovely, but I have to ask, are you *on* something? Is it in the bathroom? You didn’t just shower, did you?”

Then she slaps me hard across the face. “You fucking bastard!” She shouts loudly enough to startle me. Spit flies from her mouth and sticks to my cheek. I’m getting slightly worried about Aunt Gertrude or Uncle Mitch coming over to investigate. Our only hope is if *Noot-vir-Noot* is turned up loud in the house.

She jumps off the bed, putting on her clothes as she gathers them. I sit up, rub my cheek, watching her.

“I don’t know what the fuck to do with you.” She stops gathering as a thought comes to her, turns around to face me. “Do you even like me?”

It’s very sexy. Her standing there half-naked, skewly dressed, her face flush with anger, her whole body pulsing with it. I almost feel up to a second round. “Would you calm down for a moment?” I clean her spit from my face. “What is going on? You’re going too fast for me.”

She comes back to bed, collapses on the edge of it. “You’re not here, Michael.”

“Now, see, right there, what do you mean?” I spread my arms, hunch my shoulders questioningly, making myself as visible as possible. “We see each other almost every day. We spend every moment we have free together. How much more should I be here?”

“That’s just the point.” She’s still angry, it’s like she’s biting back on the frustration to be able to say this. “We see each other all the time. Between classes, at the paper, we go out in the evening, we do everything together, and yet you’re just not

there. We make small talk. We say 'Hi, how was your day?' We respond 'very nice, see you tomorrow,' 'have a nice day,' 'hope you're fucking great.' It's all bullshit, don't you see? It doesn't mean a thing. And then when we're here, alone, then you're gone. Whenever you go inside me, it's like you escape. It's like I can feel it. I look in your eyes when we're fucking, and that's all we're doing: fucking. You don't even see me. You're not here."

She takes a deep breath. I've learned by now to let these things blow over and out, not to interrupt.

"It's like you're fucking me with your dick, but in your mind you're with someone else. Someone who's more important to you."

I wait. A thin trail of moisture runs down her flushed cheek.

"Babe, relax. I'm with you. Who else could there be? I'm just pre-occupied. Exams are coming up, I'm behind on work. I've got a lot on my mind. Just relax, we're fine. Stop this bullshit."

She buttons up her blouse. She's not satisfied, but she's had enough. "I'll see you tomorrow." Sarcasm palpable. "Sleep well." Before she's out the door she turns around. "Don't forget it's Chris's wedding on Saturday. I'll pick you up at six, please be ready."

She slams the door on the way out.

And just like that I'm no longer sleepy. I consider going for a beer, surrounding myself with people who are smart enough to realise that trumpeting your sorrows to those who are supposed to be on your side is never the answer. It's the thing with relationships. So soon, being together just isn't enough. Satisfaction? There is none.

Chris is Rebecca's younger brother. He is the young achiever in the family. They have great ambitions for him once he completes his law degree, and with his father's contacts none of those ideals seem too lofty. On the Saturday in question he is marrying Nerine, his childhood sweetheart. They have been dating ever since high school, have known each other all their lives; it reminds me so much of Charlie and Alison that I am nauseous at the mere thought of having to attend, but things with Rebecca are too rocky for me to chance a wriggle-out-of-this-important-event manoeuvre. My obstinate refusal to attend Alison and Charlie's union has now finally caught up with me.



The ceremony is held in the little chapel on the University of Pretoria's main campus. From there, after showering the happy couple in confetti, the guests make their way to the Rautenbach hall underneath the Aula performance hall where the reception is to be held. I have to hang around with Rebecca on the lawn outside the Aula for pictures. They take snaps of the bride and groom, then with the parents, then the whole family together, Rebecca and her new sister-in-law, Rebecca and Chris, and every other combination they can think of. I manage to slink away after the main family portrait and find the table with the pre-dinner sherry. Most of the guests have arrived, arranging themselves into little groups, talking loudly, laughing, patting each other on the back, expressing their need to see each other more often, marvelling at how they have lost touch over the years. I move among them, hover around several groups without joining any. I slip into that in-between space among them, present yet invisible.

A little later I spot Rebecca near the door, chatting to some friends, her obligation to the photographers fulfilled. They are laughing at some joke, and Rebecca is laughing a little too loudly. And just as the laugh recedes, her chin dipping in that momentary self-conscious way of hers, I see it. The smile from the coffee shop. That endearing, vulnerable expression which had made me want her almost instantly. I haven't seen it in years. That rainy coffee shop afternoon now almost ten years distant. Ten years of a monotonous timeline of growing indifference and discontent. But there it is, still present, that smile still in her armoury. My heart beats a little livelier as I walk over, for the first time in a while I feel something other than dull disdain for her.

But then I falter. My heart skips a beat like a hip-hop tune and I stop altogether. That smile, which has reappeared for the first time in years, isn't for me. She is standing on the edge of the group. Closest to her stands a blond boy who looks vaguely familiar. I can't quite place who he is, just one of those faces that float around at backyard get-togethers and large booked-out tables at restaurants. It is a celebration day face, extending a hand one might shake on those occasions, say "hi, how've you been," listen for a second and then break the grip, dismiss the face for the rest of the night, until the next party, the next time, until now.

Rebecca's hand reaches out, her arm naked and healthy flesh in the sleeveless bridesmaid's dress. She touches the blond boy's shoulder and her chin dips again as

they make brief, intense eye contact. I stand where I am, watching them talk, joke together.

My mouth tastes a little bitter. I loosen my tie slightly.

Then the microphone first whines feedback as the master of ceremony plugs it in, and then THUD-THUD as he taps his finger on it to check that it's working.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome. Thank you for being with us. We'd like you all to stand and welcome the new couple, Chris and Nerine."

And then the hall is drowned in applause; dignified and tearful from the older people present; whooping, cheering and whistling from the younger. Bodies obstruct my view. I can see the newlyweds, but not the happy couple. I only see Rebecca once we sit down at the tables, each at our designated spot.

"Where were you?" she asks once we are sitting. "You missed half the photographs. I was looking for you."

We are seated at the table with the family. My eyes wander around the hall, searching out the nameless blond intruder. But he must have been stuck somewhere near the back, with the rowdy friends. I don't see him again for the rest of the day, and would have forgotten about him completely, had I not seen him again a few days later.

Autumn comes slowly. Little, suggestive signs betray its coming as it shoulders summer gradually out of the way. Leaves turn yellowish, lose only a little of their pigment. Wilt. An oak leaf brushes my shoulder on its way to the ground, where I look at it, surprised. Some deeper sense in me recognises the turn of the season, acknowledges the full-circle routine of the earth, of time, of life. And I feel an inexplicable excitement well up inside me. At first I try to dismiss it, but then merely accept and appreciate it. I walk along the cement path, watching the students sit on benches around me, their laughter and conversation serving to further brighten this oddly lit day, and I see the colours of their clothes more clearly. The brown and pink clashing on a T-shirt with Bruce Lee on it, hand outstretched, a caption which reads "No Noodles." The jeans are bluer and the belts blacker or browner, and then I see a scarf, casually discarded over the back of a bench, and I begin to understand, the forebrain catching up with the deeper – animal – brain, that the very early mornings are turning cold again. The season is turning, time visibly passing, and I am forced to

ask myself what I'm still doing here, at the university, now in my tenth year after leaving school.

This would be reunion year at Oakleaf, back in Cape Town's suburb. But here I am in Pretoria, still at university, and the happy feeling leaves – unlike summer – suddenly. It's like I'm realising where I am for the first time, that perhaps I've made a mistake, that perhaps this life which I'd been anticipating easing into has somehow come and gone, its shelf-life up, expired. The world has turned, and although I've turned with it, hurtling who-knows-how-many miles through the vacuous blackness of space as its passenger, I've somehow managed to stand still. The part-time job at the web-design company, the adequate but well-below average salary I've somehow managed to stretch every month; it's all an illusion of progress, advancement. I had taken a break for four years after finishing my BA, intending to get my life on track, create the means by which to provide for Rebecca. But I merely ended up back here, studying some more, as if a lack of knowledge was to be blamed.

And when I arrive on the piazza, on my way to the student newspaper for which I still write from time to time, I pause. I stand looking at Rebecca from across the open space. She does not see me. It is crowded with people, mostly younger than me, going to-and-fro. I am but one face among the milling mass. But then mine is the face that she can pick out of a crowd and I stand still, allowing people to mill and pass about me, waiting for her to spot me.

She is sitting on the stone ledge on the other side, smoking a cigarette. Her hair glows golden in the daylight. She is busy with her doctorate, doing the campus paper gig more as a tedious but hard-to-give-up hobby. It's like occasional drug use becomes a means of having a good time, becomes a bad habit, becomes a problem if you don't stop. It's like that loving relationship which becomes a habit, becomes a convenience, becomes an aggravation, becomes an exchanging of words, becomes an infrequent and then an increasingly frequent argument, becomes an emotional war. I realise, as I stand there, pretending these things are not a reality, pretending I'm not thinking these things, that although she's much further with her studies than I am, is graduating at the end of this year, she still has clingy attributes to her personality. She worked for her father for three years, but she also ended up coming back to university when the job didn't quite work out. Now she still does the newspaper job, which she pretty much loathes, although it could have been given up years ago. But she clings,

partly out of desperation to fill her life with inconsequential things that will keep her mind occupied, and partly out of an ill-defined sense of duty and responsibility.

But it's okay, I think. It's the reason we're still together. Extended periods of passion or bliss are taxing. Things have to slow down, normalise. And then I see another blond person appear. I recognise the boy from the wedding. He sits down next to Rebecca. He sits down next to what I realise is my reason for still being here, for studying five years on that three-year BA degree and another two so far on that MA which should have been done by now, but I've somehow managed to stretch, doing the bare minimum to keep the supervisors and programme coordinators, not happy, but not quite pissed off enough to kick me out before the end of the year.

And the blond boy who knows none of this sits down next to Rebecca, and she smiles. He starts talking, gesturing, joking, gesticulating. The smile becomes an honest full-throated laugh. Her hand reaches for her mouth, covering it in a self-conscious, young girl way. She loses ten years with that simplest of gestures, and standing here, transfixed, my heart beginning to beat in my neck muscles, I burn for her like I haven't in years. I remember her gestures. They once existed in the relationship that was – *is* – mine and hers.

Her laughing, her sudden vulnerability, the blond boy notices it too. He stops clowning, leans closer, speaks seriously. She nods, listens. The nod, though, is unsure, hesitant. Then his head darts towards hers. He kisses her, a quick, clumsy peck on the cheek. She is surprised. She turns to face him. There is an awkward moment between them. Something huge hinges on that moment, its weight leaning this way and that. He puts his hand behind her neck, pulls her to him, kisses her properly, kisses her the way a man kisses a woman when he wants her, when he burns for her.

She pushes him away. She shakes her head, not able to look him in the eye anymore. The moment passes. He stays, talks to her. She looks at the cigarette between her fingers. He talks. She nods, ambivalent, but she's listening. When he runs out of words he gets up. He touches her shoulder, softly, walks away. She finishes her cigarette and goes back into the offices. He walks on, becoming just another person in the crowd at some point.

When my paralysis finally breaks I cross the piazza. Inside the offices she's sitting behind her desk, staring at the screen in front of her, not doing anything, her expression vacant.

"Becs," I say.

She jumps. "Michael? My God you gave me a fright."

I take a couple of stapled pages out of my backpack. "Here's that Latest Music Releases article."

"Oh, thanks. Just pop it on the table over there, thanks," she says, then pretends to go back to work.

"Cut out the middleman," I say as I pop it on the table.

"Sorry?" She looks up. "Did you say something?"

"No," I smile. My smile is not nervous. It's reflective, introspective.

The world turns as I stand there, the season changes slowly, but I stand very still.

"Will I see you tonight?" She asks.

"Maybe," I say, reflective, introspective. "Maybe tomorrow night."

By early 2007 there's a little pub down the road from where I stay. The shopping centre in which the pub is located closes by six in the evenings; by seven it's deserted. But once the dust of the day is settled, the custodians of a hard day's labour departed, we appear, rolling like lazy tumbleweeds through the inadequately lit parking lot. It's like a support group. Old Jasper stands behind the counter, rubbing glasses with a piece of cloth that seems ancient. Jasper, with his safari suit and his comb peeking from the top of his right sock, is the group facilitator. He used to be a game ranger up north somewhere in Zimbabwe but when his wife and daughter got raped and murdered he moved down here.

"My family was my everything," he said often. He took his Land Cruiser and what he had left, which in effect was nothing, and he came here, eventually opening this bar he runs at a loss. It is his retirement and everyone who comes here to drink knows without having to discuss it that some night we'll come here and the pub will be closed because Old Jasper has finally run out of money. And the pub will be demolished and a Clicks or a Spar – something *Good for You* will be erected, something decent the housewives would need. And we won't be surprised. All the patrons of JASPER'S, which was painted in browning letters that tried to be golden, would know not to look for him. He brought his shotgun with him when he moved down.

This is the mythology of JASPER'S and it is, as a consequence, a sombre place. And we, the people who frequent JASPER'S, are the ones who fell through the

cracks of the world, and windswept, we end up here. JASPER'S is that grimy corner where all the dirt ends up when the wind stops blowing. The atmosphere is forever heavy with half-sober melancholy and a cloud of stale cigarette smoke. Youngsters sometimes come in to shoot some pool, but they never stay long. Their girlfriends usually nudge them after the second game and ask to be taken somewhere trendier.

So, most of the time I'm the youngest person at JASPER'S. I think of it sometimes as a suicide halfway house, or the last truck stop before the end of the line. Once this thought had formed, one night about six months ago, I had vowed to stop coming here. I was afraid of getting sucked into this non-life myself. I had listened to so many stories around this bar, none of them as bad as Old Jasper's but some quite close, and I realised that I possessed something in my life that all those other stories lacked: A girl who whispered my name when she climaxed. And so I stopped coming here. I didn't need this therapy.

"Hey, Mickey," Buster says when he looks around at the sound of the door banging shut behind me. "I haven't seen you in yonks."

"Hey, Buster," I extend my hand, we shake. "Glad to see you're still here."

He laughs from the pit of his stomach, his whole body shaking. "Where else would I be?"

Old Jasper comes over, nods a mumbled "hullo." He's rubbing a glass. "What can I get you? We have a special on Holsten."

"Get two for the price of one-and-a-half," Buster laughs. He seems to be well on his way, an empty and a full bottle of Holsten in front of him.

"Really?" I smile at Jasper.

He shrugs his shoulders in a what-you-gonna-do gesture and brings me two dumpies of Holsten. I pay and take a swig. The beer is malty, and to a palate brought up on South African non-tasting champagne beers it tastes crude. But it doesn't take more than three mouthfuls before it becomes drinkable.

"So what brings you round?" Buster wants to know.

"Determinism," I say.

"Hey, whoah, whoah, back up. There'll be no mumbo jumbo here. We'll have nothing but good old friendly banter, perhaps the odd heartfelt chinwag but don't come here with... with... jargon."

As Buster shakes his finger at me I realise I don't know his real name. He's a burly man in his late fifties who might have been, in his day, a bit of a lady killer. But

now, with all the Holsten specials, Chesterfield Filters and his job at the scrap yard it has all gone, quite literally, pear-shaped. I met Buster on one of my first nights in here.

Old Jasper was watching a Charlie Chaplin film on the television over the bar, positioned so that he had the best view. It had never really been meant for the customers, but we could see it from where we sat.

“That’s who you remind me of,” Old Jasper said, chuckling out of the left quarter of a grin that was wrapped around a Royal’s cigarette. “Buster Keaton.”

Buster and Old Jasper both laughed. I joined in, more out of surprise at the good cheer than understanding the reference. The name Buster Keaton meant nothing to me. I had a vague sense that he must have been some black-and-white picture actor back in the day, but what he had in common with Buster I couldn’t tell.

As the laughter died down Buster turned to me unexpectedly and said: “You know, you’re okay, kid.” Out of the blue, like he’d been sitting there contemplating whether he was going to beat me up or not.

“The only folks who know about –isms are the philosophers and the artists, and they only know because they have a taste for things stronger than beer. Cheers,” he clinks his bottle against mine. “Drink up, be merry and tell me something in the common tongue.”

“No, I’m serious,” I say. “Determinism, that’s why I’m here.”

“All right,” Buster sighs. “Out with it.”

There’s some Champions League soccer game on the television and Old Jasper pays us little heed.

I swirl the last of my first beer around the bottom of the bottle. “I am battling with the question of whether my life is subject to determinism. How deterministic is my fate, how much of it is my choice.”

Buster lights a cigarette and his expression tells me I’d better start being interesting soon.

“Let me put it this way. Do you think one incident, one half-hour can determine the outcome of the rest of your life? That when you get to the end of it and you look back, you retrace all the events and decisions that got you to this point that you can always point back to one specific half-hour and know that if only that hadn’t happened, everything would have been different?”

He drags long and hard on his Chesterfield. "Your heart sounds heavier than it should at your age, boy."

"Sometimes life just takes a wrong turn, and whatever you do, forever after, nothing can re-turn that one fatal, deterministic half-hour. Everything is set after that."

Buster and I drink most of the night away. He does not have the answer for me, but it's no problem. I'm not looking for the answer in the round green bottom of any of those Holsten bottles either, but I like that my mind blurs a little, the world somewhat out of focus around me. I walk home in the early hours of the morning, the chill bite of autumn making itself felt; the encroach of the dying season.

The next morning I wake up with renewed purpose pulsing in me. I have no need to go in to university on Fridays, and to further ensure my time is my own I phone Neil who runs the web design company and let him know I won't be coming in for the next few days. He's pretty relaxed about it, admits work is slow at the moment. I can hear he's relieved not to be seeing me for a few days. He pays me by the hour and always tries to find something for me to do. He says he'll phone me when he's got some work lined up. I tell him to do just that but I know Pretoria will be a name on a map again by the time he makes that call.

I punch Rebecca on my speed dial.

"Hi," she says. I can hear commotion in the background. She must be at work, at the paper. I wonder if the blond boy is there.

"Hi," I say. "I'm cooking you dinner tonight. I've got something important to tell you. Please come."

"Sure," she says quickly, but the inflection she gives the word betrays a seed of doubt. "What's so important? Can you tell me now?"

"I'd rather have you here." It hangs like that for a bit. "I'd rather look you in the eye, I mean."

"I'll be there," she promises. "Can we make it around seven?"

"Seven's fine."

"See you."

I put the cell phone down on the bedside table. Its weak blue light shines for a moment, then winks out. I sigh, think about it all again. But it all leads to the same conclusion.



I pick up the phone again, dial one of the airline companies and book a ticket to Cape Town on the first available flight the next morning. "Yes. One way."

The phone returns to the bedside table afterwards.

Time to go shopping.

Chicken, onions, sweet peppers, mushrooms, Worcester sauce, nutmeg, paprika, spaghetti and cheddar from the grocery store.

Three bottles of red wine from the liquor store.

A knife from Barber & Sons Hunting Accessories shop.

The miracle of the modern mall: True shopping convenience.

Dinner goes well. Afterwards we sit around, talk about this and that, try to watch TV.

The air is syrupy with anticipation. But she's tired, she says. She'd like to take a nap.

"One too many glasses of wine."

"Stay the night."

She smiles. "I've got a lot of stuff to do."

"You won't be doing them tonight, anyway. Not after one too many glasses of wine."

She kisses me lightly on the cheek, perfunctorily, friendly, like she'd kiss her dad. "I'll take a nap, see how I feel when I wake up."

Our exchange happened half-an-hour ago. I'm sitting in the garden flat's living room. The television is on but the sound is turned off. The room is bathed in its bluish hue. There are no sounds but Rebecca's steady breathing from the bedroom. Far off, faintly, I think I can hear the low rumble of thunder. The wind is picking up, but it's a light wind, lifting the curtains playfully, tugging at them, caressing, then departing suddenly, leaving them limp on their railings once more, deflated, abandoned.

I take the knife out from under the couch, slide it out of its leather sheath. Its blade glints blue in this room. Its hilt is firm in my hand, its weight significant. I have arrived at another landmark on my life's road.

I stand up from the couch, and as I walk to my room a strange sense of vertigo overwhelms me. I'm free-falling, time extends and contracts. And it's strange. I have to pause for a moment and hold my head. It's like I can see a road from above, cars passing in the street, people walking down there like little dots. I can hear the ocean and one piercing seagull's caw.

But then I shake my head, the image shatters.

I get on the bed, straddle her, gingerly. She's asleep, breathing peaceful, regular breaths. Her chest rises and falls, rises and falls. I move only as much as is necessary. I pull back the duvet she was only halfway under.

Rise and fall, rise and fall.

I lift her T-shirt away from her chest. I slide my hand carefully inside, keeping the fabric taut, away from her skin. Then I cut the shirt open at the front, sliding the knife through the fabric from the neck to the waist, and fold it back. She's not wearing a bra.

Rise and fall, rise and fall.

Her skin is milky, smooth.

Rise and fall,

An image of half-digested chicken, slimy spaghetti spilling on the bedcovers comes to me.

Rise

And blood. What will it look like on the bedcovers in this light?

And fall

It's enticing, this thought, of laying her bare before me.

And fall

I raise the knife, like a high priest, at the altar of my existence, she the sacrifice so that I may live.

Rise

I wonder if they'll mention my name on the news. Whether dad will see and think, that's my boy. I can see him come to visit me. He'll walk in and sit down, all nonchalant like, like he'd never been gone, and say "so, how've you been you little barbarian?"

And fall

"I've been well, dad. But I've fucking missed you."

And fall

And fall

I'm crying. Tears are falling on her bare skin. I turn my face away. Don't wake her. She'll put up a fight, she'll scream. She won't understand.

Rise

I'm confused, scared.

Then the phone rings.

And fall

It's still on the bedside table. The ring tone is shrill, impossibly loud.

And fall

And the knife clatters on the floor

fall

And Rebecca moans, annoyed, waking

Rise

I'm on my knees, it's dark

And fall

I can't find the knife

Ring, ring, ring

"Answer it, damn it." Mumbling, sleepy

fall

then my fingers happen on it

Rebecca sits up

Rise

"Damn it, Michael!"

I push it under the rug

fall

"Hello?"

"Mom?"

And fall

"Michael, are you sitting down?"

"Mom?"

And fall

"Michael, are you all right?"

"What do you want?"

"It's Charlie, Michael."

"Mom? What?"

"He's dead. You need to come home. Alison needs you. She needs all of us now."

All of me?

fall

“Michael?”

Rebecca

She’s looking at her T-shirt, open in the front, pulling it together. “What’s going on?”

“Charlie,” I say. “Alison’s...”

“He fell,” mom says.

“I need to go.”

Rise

“Alison needs me.”

And fall

University of Cape Town

**IV**

**ALISON**

**CLARITY**

## Feeling so Fucking Special

I wake up with a memory of blackness. I don't possess the faculties to even guess at where I am or how I came to be here. There lies a chasm of oblivion between this place and the last coherent thought, and I fear that the darkness may overspill and claim spaces that shouldn't belong to it. At first there is a kind of panic, escalating, as I fear I may be engaging in a battle with time itself, that I need to fight hard and immediately to regain the consciousness that is rightly mine. With every increment of time that passes the blackness spreads, like ink leaking from an overturned pot, erasing words on a page that were hard to conceive in the first place. The sun shines sanely through the window, insisting on normality, but the blackness is vast and is driven by forces beyond my grasp.

Time becomes elastic, consciousness drips like melting wax, affording moments of recognition. I am aware at times of voices around me, speaking, consoling. Later, of human touch, whispers, my name. The first true vision I have is of Tannit, standing at the foot of the bed, sunlight across her features. She smiles, and that's what I take with me when the darkness comes for me again.

When I finally wake, in the normal sense of the word, and look about the room, I recognise the environment of the hospital ward. There are other beds, a television speaks incessantly, the attention of the patients, cocooned in white sheets, focused on the flickering screen.

"Alison."

Mom is here, holding my hand. Her eyes are red from crying. Her smile is one of relief. "Oh, my baby. You have no idea how good it is to see you."

"I'm sorry," I manage to whisper, finding my voice through parched lips. My body is heavy with paralysis.

"Don't be. Everything is going to be all right." The relief in her eyes is still tainted with worry. I try to remember how I came to be here, but the blackness is still there, impenetrable.

Then Michael's face is here also, leaning over me, kissing my forehead lightly, and for an instant the black curtain pulls back and it's like I can almost

remember how I got to be here. But the revelation is not complete, before I can grasp the imagery and sensation it recedes again, obscures itself once more.

“Welcome back, fighter,” Michael says. “You had us on our toes there.”

His touch is tender, his concern genuine, but the darkness inside of me pulses in response to the darkness inside of him. I yearn to feel his warmth, but that thought brings fresh panic.

I continue to drift in and out of consciousness, but the black place where I go begins to resemble sleep, loses its threatening quality, becomes becalmed and begins to feel like healing.

Later, when the world reasserts itself the sun is gone and a soft drizzle brushes against the window, sweeping from a grey-black sky. The televisions on the ward are still on, and they blare out the news of the day. I listen to the reasons behind rising fuel prices for a while before I become aware that there is someone sitting next to my bed.

Tannit smiles. “Hey, baby. I just came by to check on you. How are you feeling?”

It might be imagination but I feel stronger looking into those eyes. “I don’t know,” I reply, then indicate for her to help prop me up. She helps rearrange pillows and after a bit of effort I’m upright. My head is still dizzy and it feels at one instant like I’m going to vomit, but the nausea passes.

Tannit offers me a glass of water and the first couple of mouthfuls wash down my throat like an ultimate relief. We sit, enveloped by the noise of the ward, the hushed conversations of other patients with visitors, the aging gentleman with the glasses in the far corner who has his television turned up a little too loudly. We wallow in our silence, but the feeling passes when Tannit speaks.

“Can you remember what happened?”

I shake my head, slowly, but I’m unsure. I can suddenly remember many things, all of which happened, and to me.

“I found you on your bathroom floor.”

I nod, looking at the sheets with which my hands are now toying. “I’m sorry,” I say.

“You gave me the fright of my life,” she grabs one of my hands away from the sheet, making me look at her suddenly. Her eyes burn fiercely when she says, “I can’t afford to lose you now. You mean too much to me. I’m trying to help you get through

this, but I need some cooperation, just a little will to live will go a long way. You owe me that much, at least.”

I look down at the sheets again. Sorry is the only thing to say, but I don’t feel like repeating it. If I’d had it my way I wouldn’t have needed to apologise for anything ever again.

She catches herself, forcibly calms down before she speaks again. “I’ll come check in on you again tomorrow. As soon as you’re well, I’ll take you home. So, you concentrate on that now.”

I hold out my hand, and she puts hers in mine. “Thank you,” I say.

This makes her laugh, self-conscious, dismissive, as if it was nothing, like she did this all the time, it goes without saying.

“I love you,” I say.

Her smile falters. A tear trickles down the contour of her nose, just the one, before she can catch it. She looks down into her lap, removes her hand from mine and finds a tissue in her bag. It’s crumpled and smeared already. She dabs it to her eye and then seems to realise what she’s doing. She stuffs it away in embarrassment. She sits like that for a while, looking down, deliberating with herself whether to follow the trajectory of this conversation now or rather let it lie.

“One of these days, you know,” she says eventually, pronouncing each word with care. “You will have to tell me more. You are not worth holding onto if you’re so keen on getting out of here.”

I know she’s right, that I’m not being fair to her, that she deserves more, but the truth is that she just hasn’t been foremost on my mind lately.

“I’ll check in again tomorrow,” she repeats and kisses the back of my hand. She starts walking away, then stops.

We look at each other. I wait. She deliberates. “When I came around the first time there was a BMW in your driveway. Whose was that?”

I turn my head away, look at the drizzle’s intricate patterns on the windows. This is the thing about me and Tannit. She knows more about me than anyone else, but even she only knows the tiniest bits. There are so many gaps in all the stories. I know if I will ever tell everything to anyone it will be to Tannit, but that’s not going to happen because as much as she needs me I need her. It’s a trade-off, either me or my history. The story of the BMW in my driveway is the story of how I ended up in



this bed, in this state. And I don't have the strength to find out what Tannit would make of Stefanos Leonades.

I turn my head back, away from the window, fully intending to answer Tannit's question, give her the name she asked for, but only that, only the name, once again the bare minimum, the shortest answer possible – which was no answer at all – would have to suffice.

But Tannit is no longer there.

So, I lie back and will sleep to take me, but the memories keep flashing at me. Recuperating in bed would give me a lot of time alone with the reasons and ways that brought me here.

\*

I've often been asked to explain art, and I've tried on such occasions to have something relevant and interesting to say. But people look disappointed when I finish. They expect me to be able to explain it completely. Their expressions often communicate: "But if you don't understand what art is, how can you make it? And how can we trust you that it is good, and that you're not just having us on?"

Well, they can't, of course, and that is usually my answer. Liking is subjective, good is a construct. What I don't say is that how can I explain to you in a ten minute conversation what I believe art to be, how I've studied, read and thought for years about the subject only to arrive at a vague notion of what it is for me? If I could explain it in ten minutes it would hardly be worth passing out degrees on it.

This is what I come to realise, lying awake in that hospital bed, listening to the loud snoring of the old man in the corner near the door: If I could explain in ten minutes how I came to be here, if I could sum it up, it would hardly be worth explaining and would probably mean I wouldn't have ended up here.

But I do know that it has something to do with a teenage girl, and her wish to be thought well of. This girl who didn't want people to know who she was, who was afraid people would find out what she did, and would assume that that was just typical. There would be no benefit of doubt. This girl suspected, although she knew it was impossible, that everyone knew already. What had happened had stayed between the ones involved, and had become their secret.

But despite this certainty the suspicion remained. Other people's eyes said so much about their suspicions, justified or otherwise. And the girl began to wonder if something slipped into one's soul when the worst thing happened, and that it was visible on one's face or in one's eyes, that other people didn't have to be told to know, that it was plainly obvious. She suspected their secret wasn't secret at all.

Several trips to Catherine's house – who the girl hadn't mustered the courage to face at school, especially not surrounded by her newfound entourage – had yielded nothing, except the certainty of rejection. One afternoon, on her way home from school the girl followed Catherine home, at a safe distance. She saw Catherine go in the front door.

The girl rang the doorbell. Five minutes later Catherine's mom opened and said that Catherine wasn't home yet, that she'd gone home with a friend. On her way out into the street the girl saw Catherine peeking down at her through an upstairs window. The curtain fell back into place as soon as the girl looked up, but only a moment too late, long enough for enough to pass between the two girls.

*I don't want you coming around here anymore. Don't you understand? I don't want to be your friend. I don't want to be seen with you.*

*How much do you know? You can't possibly know.*

*Go away.*

It hurt so very much. It hurt so much more than it was supposed to, like a ragged blade pulled through the skin. It hurt in ways and places where it did not belong and the depth of the incision was impossible to calculate. The girl lay on her bed, crying into her pillow for many hours. Her mother saw and tried to console her, reminded her that she had other friends, that Charlie was a great boy and that he loved her very much. As did Michael, as did she herself. But this was not the same, and that was the thing that was impossible to explain.

Mom seemed to give up on Michael when he left for Billy's. Grandfather offered to go fetch him, to whip some sense into him if need be, but Mom shook her head deliberately from side to side.

"No," she had said, as if in afterthought. "Let's not force him. It's a shock for all of us. If he chooses to be absent, to deal with it in his own way..." she didn't seem to know how to complete the thought. "He'll open up when it hits him. And we'll be here for him."

So Michael missed the funeral. He didn't call, he didn't show up. I thought I understood exactly. After everything, his feelings about Father's death, although confused and certainly in conflict, must have bordered somewhere close to relief. I knew mine did. When they lowered him into the ground and the congregation sang The Lord is my Shepherd I cried more grownup tears, ones that were a concoction of grief, loss and relief. I thought of them as grownup tears since only grownups could cry about more than one thing at the same time.

Michael came back the day after the funeral. He didn't talk to anyone, didn't apologise for his behaviour, simply parked his bike in the garage, made himself some hotdog rolls with lots of tomato sauce and disappeared to his room where he turned his music up loud.

Grandfather didn't stay for long after the funeral. The grief that had bound him and Mother together for the first time in fifteen years ran out. Their uneasy relationship and antagonistic existence began to reassert itself. Grandfather stayed long enough to make sure Mother was really up to running the household and then one morning he was gone.

I found Mom in the kitchen, busy preparing lunch. I tried to help but she waved me away, her agitation visible in the robot-like flick of her wrists. I poured each of us a glass of orange juice, placed hers at a distance where it was obviously meant for her, but also far enough away so she wouldn't accidentally tip it over. Her whole body seemed tense, wound up and ready to fly into a rage at the slightest provocation. I waited. She was making a chicken salad.

It took about fifteen minutes of waiting, my glass of juice finished, rinsed, dried and put away in the cupboard before she sighed, stopped for a second and took a sip of hers. She turned around to look at me where I sat, waiting. A thin smile touched her lips.

"So, now it's just the three of us, pumpkin. But you know what?"

I shook my head.

"We're going to make it anyway."

I nodded in enthusiastic agreement. "Mom?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think Grandfather will come visit sometimes?"

She shook her head and barked a short note that might have been laughter.

"No, my dear. No, no, no. That man has no place in his life for anyone but himself.

The only reason he showed his face around here in the first place is because his guilty conscience got the better of him.” She turned around to go back to preparing the meal.

“But he’s my grandfather...”

She smiled a sad smile, came over to me and put her arms around my shoulders. Her hands smelled of chicken. “We’ll be fine. We don’t need looking after. We can be strong together, the three of us.”

And that was the end of that.

Suddenly the Saturday, and sometimes Sunday, afternoon drawing classes was a contentious point. Nothing had been said about the classes since Dad’s death. I got the impression that Mom thought we had come to some unspoken agreement about them. I chose to ignore this.

Despite Mom’s supportive attitude to my passion she had since Dad’s death adopted an intense kind of financial tightening philosophy. It was like a complicated assortment of belts that she was tying tighter and tighter until it left no room for breathing. And then, once accustomed to this new lack of freedom she would feel the need for further tightening. She was spotting all sorts of decadence in our life and her main aim was to eradicate any expense that even hinted at being excessive or could vaguely be gone without. She assumed a role of brave poverty, putting on a façade so the outside world would not suspect. But in private she would be horrified by even the smallest expense. “Month’s end is still a decade away” became one of her favoured phrases, and her automatic response to any hint of frivolous expense.

Sensing this manic air of cost-cutting I didn’t bother to make any fuss about the art classes for the first couple of weeks. I was nervous to see Stefanos again after the way our last encounter transpired. I was waiting for fresh inspiration so the next drawing I made would stun Stefanos. I wanted to keep escalating his opinion of my work and, more specifically, of me. I wanted him to go from adequate satisfaction to mild amazement to outright yearning. In the time I missed, the sketches were foremost in my mind. I forgot that another kind of groundwork had also been done.

It was three weeks after Dad’s death, having missed two weeks of classes, when I decided I’d had enough. I packed all my art equipment in my bag and at a quarter to two I marched into Mom’s room where she was re-reading one of her old novels for the umpteenth time.

“Can we leave soon?” I said when I entered. “I don’t want to be late.”

She looked me up and down, resting the book against her breasts. “Excuse me? Late for what?”

She knew of course, she knew all too well. “For class. Stefanos is very strict about punctuality.” He could care less, of course, but tactical embellishment was key to this kind of argument. “He locks the doors once he starts his classes. He doesn’t like to be interrupted. He really is brilliant.”

“Alison, we’ve talked about this.” The sentence was dismissive. She picked up the book again.

“No, we haven’t. I haven’t had a say. Mom, this is important to me.” Sprinkling just the right amount of pleading and hurt on it.

The book dropped to her chest again. “Alison, I can’t take you every time. Some Saturdays I have things to do. It’s only that it’s an inconvenient time. Try to understand, dear.”

“But I can walk there. It’s only a few blocks away.”

“Alison, no.” The overuse of the first name was a sure sign of anger. “There are bad people out there who would go out of their way to do all sorts of nasty things to a pretty girl like you.” Now comes the scare tactic. “There’s simply no way I’ll allow it.”

“Michael could walk with me, or cycle. Then he could come home. Stefanos can drop me at home afterwards. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.”

“Don’t drag your brother into this, Alison. This is your problem, not his.”

“Well, then I’m going. It’s the freaking suburbs. There’s a traffic light at Main Road that I can cross. It’s not like we live in the Congo. What could possibly happen?”

Mom put the book aside and sat up. She tapped the bed next to her, indicating for me to sit down. I knew what was coming, we’d been building up to this – getting to the point. I sat, slumping my shoulders already, looking as aggrieved, dejected and as hard done by as I could manage.

“Now, Alison. You do understand that now that Dad’s gone we all have to make sacrifices. Our money situation has changed now. We don’t have the luxury of living like we did before. I’ve sacrificed many things that I like to do and so has Michael. You’re already taking art at school. They’re teaching you everything you need to know. This Greek man’s classes are an unnecessary extravagance. You understand, don’t you, dear?”

She put her arm around me.

“Oh, I understand, Mother. I understand better than you give me credit for.” I stood up slowly, feeling her arm drop from my shoulder. I was about to cross a line that there was no jumping back over. I could feel myself teetering closer to it, off balance, unable to stop. “Nothing has changed. Just because Dad’s gone doesn’t mean anything. We’ve always been in the Wilkinson pocket. We all know that. Dad working for them, running their errands. You all getting so excited about me and Charlie. We all play along because it keeps the Wilkinson pockets open. Now that Dad’s gone I’m the only one that’s keeping the Wilkinson fountain spurting merrily. So if I am to be the whore I’d appreciate a little more freedom around here.” My heart was thudding dangerously in my chest, my cheeks felt flush. It was like going down the side of a mountain, leaving the road, finding no purchase, caught up in an avalanche. I turned to face her. “And since the art classes are a passion of mine, and the Wilkinsons are paying for it, I don’t need your permission.”

Then she slapped me. She slapped me hard, then.

The look on her face hurt more than the palm of her hand burnt into the side of mine. Her expression was all the retort I would ever get or need on the subject. There in her bedroom – she still sitting on the edge of the bed, me standing in front of her, my hand rising slowly to my cheek – we had never been further away from each other.

I ran to the bathroom first. I looked at myself in the mirror. Her hand was tattooed, a big red welt, down my left cheek. I splashed my face with water. I wouldn’t cry. I refused.

So I bit back the hurt and the embarrassment and the shame and allowed only the anger to flow through me. I ran to my room and got the Panache Flowers Scent which I kept for special occasions. I changed my denim jeans for a white skirt with green floral patterns and I changed my white T-shirt for a tight white strap top. I looked at myself in the mirror.

I walked out the front door.

I arrived at Stefanos’s house a full hour after the class had started. Before ringing the doorbell I paused in the garden, spraying some scent on my cleavage and in the small of my back. It was a hot day and the walk had left me covered in a sheen of sweat. I felt pathetic. The day was too hot for a fast walk, especially when I’d set out at a pace

I thought would still bring me to Stefanos's house more or less on time for the class. And I'd misjudged the distance horribly. I had always thought in the car on the way there that it wouldn't be much more than a fifteen minute walk. I ended up walking for three quarters of an hour.

Still, I was here, and today was not a day for turning back. I rang the bell.

Stefanos opened the door after a few moments of waiting. "My, my," he said. "I was convinced I had seen the last of you." Then he just stood there, didn't let me in or close the door.

I stared at him, not quite knowing what to make of this.

"Well?" he said.

"Sorry?" I stood there, clamping my bag – which was about ten times its own weight by now – under my arm. "Well, what?"

He smiled, as if I knew perfectly well and was wasting his time by pretending not to. "You don't show up for class for two weeks, and now – when you do – you're more than an hour late. That's what I mean by 'well?'"

He stood there, shouting at me, a fierce passion burning in his eyes. I was no longer just another student sitting unnoticed in the back. I was having an effect on him. "Well, if you must know," I spoke softly, looking down at the floor. "My father died. And my mom wouldn't come drop me off, since she doesn't understand how important this is to me. So I had to walk, so there."

I allowed the silence which stretched out between us. He shuffled around, transferring his weight from one leg to the other and then immediately back again. He cleared his throat to say something, "I'm, uhmmn –"

"Can I use your bathroom?"

"Sure." He stepped out of the way.

I squeezed past him, as close as I could manage, and made for the bathroom. Just as I closed the door behind me I heard him close the front door.

In the bathroom I went and stood in front of the mirror. I freshened up as best I could. The outline of Mom's palm was still there on my right cheek, faintly. But if one didn't know to look for it, it wasn't that obvious.

Stefanos was in the studio, bending over someone's work, checking, making suggestions. He didn't look up when I came in. Everyone else did and I was sure they had heard our exchange at the door. I sat down, took out my stuff and immediately started scribbling away. Nothing to see here, just a little late. And after what felt like a

long time everyone did return to their own work. I made dark charcoal lines, squiggled up-and-down zig-zags that resembled storm clouds. The force of my pen made deep grooves in the paper. I crumpled the first page and started on a second one. This time I tried to draw rather than scratch storm clouds laden with rain. It lasted for about three minutes before the first imperfection caught my attention. Then I scratched my zig-zags over it again, obliterating it.

I was vaguely aware that people were beginning to pack up their things and leave.

I crumpled the second page. The storm clouds went to hell. On the third clean sheet I drew a random line that at first didn't look like anything, just a half-moon shape of nothing. I stared at it. I'd made it all the way here but now inspiration was nowhere to be found. I dared the line to start making sense. It refused. The exercise became a battle of wits. I could outsmart this senseless shape, render it sensible. And then, just like that, it did resemble something. It looked a bit like the cutting-edge of a scythe. So I drew another curve which met the first and it became a blade. Then I could see the dark shape of the Grim Reaper lurking behind that scythe, an unearthly grin on his skull-face. But that felt too clichéd. I stared at it some more. The Reaper was no longer a cartoonish image. It changed, complicated. And suddenly it was an African man cutting wheat in a field, harvesting crops for his family, out of love and concern, but his smile, his expression, it refused to fit the act of what he was doing. He was not reaping the wheat. He was murdering it. The wheat bled as it was cut, fluid exploding from the broken stems. And the man smiled his crooked smile and he harvested murderously. The sky behind him was a sunset over the African plains. The setting was beautiful, the landscape pristine, and yet he smiled his crooked smile, harvesting murderously.

Then a new sensation gripped me. Heat. Searing, intense heat. Something inside me responded. I was being touched. Stefanos breathed in my neck.

His hand was on my breast, down the front of my top. He squeezed hard enough to hurt. His tongue was in my ear, slathering. His kisses were wet, hot, frenzied. He lifted me out of my chair. The charcoal pen fell out of my hand, landed on the floor and rolled away. His big hands slipped between my legs. He rubbed me down there, rough. I leaned back against him. The room was empty, everyone had left. It was only us. This time not even Stravinsky was here. He pulled up my skirt, fumbled my panties out of the way. He slipped fingers inside me. I could feel his



penis, erect, huge in the small of my back. His fingers worked away at me. The heat was increasing, everywhere. He pulled me closer still, pressing me hard against him. I started moving against his penis. He groaned, louder. He wasn't just groaning, he was saying something.

"Do you know how wrong this is? Do you know how wrong what you're doing is? Do you know how much trouble we can get into for this?"

He kissed my hair, my head, my neck. Big wet kisses. He was licking me. I slipped my hand behind my back, in between us. I gripped his penis firmly in my right hand, started stroking it. He groaned again, sounded like he was about to break down to tears. The moan was whimpery, whiney.

His fingers slipped further inside me. Then he found me, and the heat intensified, filling me like boiling water. I moaned, no sound came out. My grip on his penis loosened, convulsions of pleasure ripping through me.

"Oh, God, oh god, oh god," was what came out when my voice returned.

"What we're doing isn't right," he whispered, just when I was coming down, otherwise I would never have noticed how little conviction was in that voice.

I leaned back against him, breathing hard. "I'm good at keeping secrets," I managed to huff, squeezing his penis again.

Then he bent me over the desk, sending papers and pens scattering. When he went inside me I screamed. He put a hand over my mouth. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't make a sound. I started crying. It hurt. It felt like he was going to rip me apart. I was convinced that if I looked around there would be blood everywhere.

And then, suddenly, it was over. He pulled out of me, took his hand away from my mouth and squashed me down on the desk. I felt warm spots on my back and heard him groan, like an old animal dying. He collapsed onto his knees behind me. He was catching his breath. He groped my bum as he did so. I bit my lip, to stop the crying, but I couldn't. Dry heaves kept going through me. Tears ran freely down my cheeks.

"Go clean yourself off," he said. "I'll drop you at home."

## The Unbearable Possibility of Loneliness

I'm surprised when we pull into the driveway. The white walls of the house seem stark, lifeless. The brick paving is the colour of a sepia photograph. It's a wintery day, a crisp sky interrupted by clouds racing in the strong breeze, everything in motion around us. The beetle's engine shudders to a halt. Cars pass behind us. I hear voices talking and laughing a little way down the street. The wind moans and howls around the corners. And I realise how little difference it would have made, how insignificant it would have been if my attempted suicide had been successful. I am struck again by how negligible the difference between life and death is, how small the sphere of our influence.

Tannit touches my shoulder, sensing something of my mood.

"You really could have used the Mercedes," I say.

"No," she laughs. "Let's get your stuff inside."

My stuff is a bag of necessities Tannit brought along to the hospital. She carries it up the stairs and stands behind me when I unlock the door. While the key turns in the lock I have an image of the inside of my house. The furniture is covered in plastic, the floors are dusty, the day's horrid sepia light infects this picture and makes it look like a new image trying to be nostalgic. It speaks of death but in a tone that does not fit.

What I do find when the door swings open is a complete contrast to this. On the table in the living room notebooks and papers are scattered in a messy pile which seems to have sprouted from some original sense of order. The telephone lies there too. Tannit pushes past me.

"Oh, this," she says, as if in response to a question. "I moved in while you were gone. Hope you don't mind." She points to the mess on the table. "I handled some of your orders from the gallery. The show is doing well. You're selling like you wouldn't believe. The attempted suicide was reported in the newspaper and now apparently everyone and their mothers have been in to hear the gossip. And practically everything has sold."

I stand in the doorway, not moving.

Tannit stops, slips the bag from her shoulder and waits for me. "It's the perfect marketing tool for an exhibition, it seems."

She surprises a laugh out of me, just a brief chuckle that feels like relief.

"There you go," Tannit smiles. "Welcome home, honey."

Then we both laugh.

"Please don't leave," I say.

She stops laughing.

"Stay with me." I think of the way the house has felt since Charlie's death, of the way there always seems to be something like breath running through the rooms. I think of Mom saying 'you can't sit in that place all by yourself.' I think about the voice that whispers every time my back is turned, the figure that keeps moving in the corner of my eye. "I can't face this place alone."

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Stefanos was very polite on the drive home, made small-talk.

He smiled and pointed when we passed the traffic light at Liesbeeck Parkway. "That's where I met my first wife," he said.

He drove on. Dusk faded into night and all the streetlamps were on. It stretched oblong shadows alternately out before us or behind us. I rested my head against the passenger door's window and watched the dark world drift by. My head bumped a little when the car's suspension absorbed the bumps and undulations of the roads. I was very tired, from the walking and then the fucking. I knew I would sleep as soon as he'd dropped me off. I could not care less about how he met his first wife or anything else about her. He carried on.

"It was the simplest of things. I was on my way to the traffic light. It had turned amber and I thought I'd still make it if I stepped on it. It was one of those moments where two people see the same thing and interpret it quite differently. She was driving right in front of me, also watching the lights change, measuring the distance between where she was and how far she needed to be. Her answer was to brake, mine to accelerate. I ran into the back of her. This was shortly after I came back from Japan. It was the first car I ever owned and I smashed it into the back of this very pretty blonde girl's VW Golf. We exchanged details and the rest, as they say, was history. We were married for nine years."

He finished as he pulled into my driveway. He stopped and switched off the car's headlights. I reached for the door handle but he activated the central-locking. I slumped back in the seat watching the dark hulk of our house against the even darker backdrop of the night sky.

"The problem was we couldn't have kids. I couldn't give her any. This was fantastic news to me; the end of the world to her. She had wanted two, a girl and a boy. I didn't want any but couldn't care enough to strictly forbid it. She cheated with contraceptives, didn't take them when I thought she did. Once the doctor told us of the complications – my complications – it was that traffic light incident all over again. I accelerated, she braked; we were no longer in the same marriage. It all ended, quite simply, with a crunching blow – the way it had begun. A basic difference of interpretation."

I tapped out a rhythm of boredom on the seat's armrest. I needed to get in the shower, wash and wash and wash. Mom's light was on inside the house and I could see the bluish light of the television flickering downstairs.

"Are you going to be all right?" he asked.

He was looking straight ahead of him.

"That's the big question, I guess. Can I go now?"

"As soon as you convince me we're fine. I don't want you to regret tonight."

"We're fine," I said, leaned over and kissed him on his cheek. "I'm just tired."

"All right," he sighed. He breathed in and out and then just sat there, his finger tapping lightly on the steering wheel.

"I told you I won't tell anyone. I meant it. I won't. I don't want anyone to know."

He sighed again, turned his head slightly and looked at me in the faint glow of the dashboard's display lights. After a long stare, our eyes locked throughout, he nodded, satisfied, and flicked a switch so the car unlocked.

"Phone me if you need anything. A lift to class, anything."

"I will," I said, jumping out. I ran to the front door, not glancing back. I padded upstairs, trying to be as quiet as I could. Michael was passed out in front of the television. I dropped my bag in my room and made for the bathroom. Just as I reached it I heard Mom's voice from her room.

"Alison, is that you?"

“Yes, I’m home. Hi.” And then I locked the bathroom door, turned on the shower and stood there. I had showered at his house too, but that had been a rush job, now I simply stood there, let the water flow over me until it burned, until I boiled and everything inside me started feeling, if not cleansed at least less rotten.

I lay awake in bed for a long time, listening to the wind in the trees and thought about how nothing ever went according to plan.

The following Saturday Mom drove me to art class. We hadn’t spoken to each other much that week and the subject of the classes was avoided when we did. On Saturday morning she walked into my room while I lay in bed staring out the window. I often woke up early in the mornings, usually when it was still too cold to get out of bed and then lay there thinking, waiting for the sun to rise and the world to warm.

“I’ll take you this afternoon if you want to go.” That was all she said.

“Thank you,” I said and felt guilty.

She took me to class and she picked me up again afterwards. I dressed nicely once more.

Stefanos didn’t treat me any differently than he treated the other people in the class. He greeted me when I arrived, commented on my picture I had titled “The Reaper.” I touched up the picture here and there, smoothed out rough lines.

Stefanos looked at “The Reaper” as if it was the first time he’d seen it. Of course it wasn’t. Last week this picture had been on my desk before me and he’d packed my things in my bag while I was in the shower. I couldn’t believe that he hadn’t looked at it closely before slipping it in the bag.

“It’s good. Very dark, though. You should be wary of such heavy things at your age. There’s enough time ahead for terrible thoughts. Try to have some happy ones.”

If I’d wanted a psychologist I would have gone to see one, I wanted to say but didn’t.

“This line seems too dark. Fix that one.” Then he was into the technical criticism.

I smiled at how he was able to hide his attraction and feelings from everyone, impressed by how blatantly secretive he could be. When the class was over and everyone left I lingered and made sure I was last to leave. He sat behind his desk,

paging through some pamphlet one of the older women had handed him. It looked like an invite to some exhibition. I came over, leaned against his desk.

“Hey,” I said. “That was impressive self-control.”

He sat back in his chair, scratched his chin and then folded his arms across his chest. His face was cold, devoid of emotion.

“So? Now what?” I waited.

“Go home.” He said. “You shouldn’t be here.” He took me by the arm and lead me to the front door, shoved me out. “Good bye, Alison. See you next week.” And then he slammed it shut.

Mom waited in the car. I got in. When we stopped at home I turned to her and said: “I’m not happy there. I think maybe it is a better idea if I don’t go there again.”

Mom said nothing at first, just sat there, looking like she was about to cry, making me wonder how much she might suspect. “All right,” she finally managed. “If you’re sure.”

“I am.”

I got what I wanted, and somehow it just wasn’t what I had expected it to be. Bright things spotted lying next to the road lose their shine when they’re held in your hand.

And then, as so often happens, when I was focused on one problem another solved itself.

Catherine simply walked up to me at school one day. I had stopped following her and Nadia around since my Stefanos experiment had begun. I was in the library, reading, waiting for Charlie to arrive; his final class before break was on the far side of the Oakleaf grounds.

“Hi,” she said, making me look up.

The expression on my face must have been dumbfounding. “Hi,” I mumbled.

“Can I sit with you for a bit?”

“Of course,” I said, not sure whether it was a good idea.

She pulled up a chair, sat down and started rubbing the top of her nails with her fingertips. “I’m sorry I haven’t been seeing that much of you lately.”

“Oh, don’t worry. That’s all right, I guess. I understand if you guys don’t like Charlie that much.”

She looked surprised. News travelled faster than she anticipated, it seemed.

“I see you’re hanging out with Justin these days, how’re you guys doing?”

Her face twisted into a mask of disbelief. She must have rehearsed some specific sequence before coming here, but now it was all going awry. I was producing too many pinpoint accurate remarks. I felt almost sorry for her. Except for the day I followed her home after school and we saw each other through the window she had no idea that I had meticulously gathered all the necessary information.

She looked down into her lap, where her fingers were still seemingly trying to get rid of the nails. “We broke up. He cheated on me with one of his ex-girlfriends. He’s a pig.”

She blurted it out and then just sat there, completely vulnerable to whatever I might say. I shook my head. “That’s terrible,” I said. Laughter was suddenly welling up in me. I had to swallow hard to keep it from bubbling up my throat. “What about Nadia and her guy?”

“Oh, they’re all weird these days, Justin’s friends. Marius says he’s in love with Nadia, that they should be together forever. But Justin’s the asshole. It’s just my luck. I always end up with the assholes.”

“Well, my brother’s still available,” I said.

It was fantastic. Her face contorted again. She seemed about to burst and scream at me. She was convinced I was being cruel, but I kept my face as blank as possible. I could see her inner workings on her face, reminding herself that she was here to make peace, scolding herself for being too touchy. It felt good to have absolute control of a situation again after my recent Stefanos experience.

“I’m just kidding,” I said and watched her visibly relax. “Don’t worry. We’ll always be friends. We don’t have to see each other all the time to remain friends.”

She smiled gratefully and we hugged. Then we sat there looking at each other.

“You know what?” she said.

I shook my head.

She leaned very close to me and whispered. “Do you remember that girl Kelly, that Justin used to be with a couple of years ago?”

I didn’t have the faintest idea who she was talking about. Until Catherine had started chumming around with Justin I had hardly known that he existed.

“He raped her.” Catherine nodded seriously at my expression of shock.

“That’s how bad he is. You should tell Michael and Billy to stay away from him.”

What? Was he going to rape Michael and Billy? Again I had to fight hard to keep the laughter down in my tummy. Catherine didn't seem to make the connection of what she was saying. She nodded very seriously again, mistaking my pained expression of keeping a straight face for one of concern.

"He's bad news." We hugged again and then she got up to leave. "I love you," she said over her shoulder, flicking her hair as she left.

And then, as I watched her go I understood that I didn't love her anymore. I had no interest in seeing her again. My obsession was vanquished, her spell over me broken. And all it had needed was this pathetic, half-hearted cry for help. She wasn't much worth as a friend was my conclusion, she was sad and more than a little lost.

Charlie passed her in the doorway. She nodded a greeting to him and he returned it with a faint nod of his own. He came up to where I was sitting, smiled, rolled his finger at the side of his head in the universal gesture of "she's nuts" which made us both laugh. He opened his bag and got out two cans of drinks. Fanta Grape for me and a Coca-Cola for him.

"Here you go," he said. "I stopped by the cafeteria on the way."

We hugged, we walked outside, we sat down on the edge of the Rugby field watching the boys run around, kicking a ball, watching little groups of boys and girls everywhere. Charlie sat with his arm around me. Life was simple again.

1994 had been a tough year. It had also been a formative year and by the time it had passed I was able to focus my mind and my efforts. That's the effect of horrible times and experiences, it clears some of the rubble from your life and it shocks you into action. I was shocked into diligence and passion for my art. I learned as much as I could, soaked up every bit of information I could get my hands on. My drawing and painting improved in leaps. I finished school earning one of my three distinctions for Art, the other two for languages. For a month or two after school those distinctions – and specifically the one for Art – were the most important things in my life. They proved to me that I was capable, provided some recognition of the fact that I was good at the thing I most wanted to be good at.

They probably meant more to me than they should have. As soon as I was accepted to study Fine Arts at the University of Cape Town they ceased to matter. They had got me as far as they were ever going to and from here it depended entirely on me. But by then I was completely alone and threw myself at the work once more.



After our tentative reconciliation in the library on that day in 1994 Catherine and I had lost touch with and interest in each other completely. She'd phoned my house once and I had phoned her once but that had been as much pretence as we allowed ourselves. That was one friendship which, once it lost its intensity, no longer existed.

Wilmien, Carin and Minette had stuck around until we matriculated. But even that had become an on-and-off kind of friendship. I realised gradually that their talk of boys and where they'd like to live bored me. Michael and Billy had become impossible to befriend in the later high school years. They had started getting into fights at school, or at nights when they went out. Michael and I had stopped talking at some point during those late high school years.

So, when Charlie proposed to me he was the only person in my life. He had done a six month business training course and worked at Wilkinson, Kruger and Associates – at a hugely inflated salary, I would later discover – while completing his law degree. His father promised us a house in Hout Bay and free reign at the Knysna holiday home, Charlie explained when I hesitated.

"I'm settled," he said. "I know what I want from life now. I'm working my way up in the company." It was always *the* company, never *my father's* company. "I can provide for you, Alison. You are the meaning in my life, the only person for whom I will do anything. I love you. I have always loved you."

Ever since the Knysna House, I thought. Ever since we hid our underwear behind the shed, I thought. Ever since you fell and broke your arm, I thought. Ever since my life became one long, shrill shriek in the dark, I thought. Ever since I discovered that no one is too close to hurt you, I thought.

"Always," he repeated, slipped the engagement ring onto my finger, kissed my hand, looked into my eyes and smiled. "You and me, together forever, Alison. My Alison."

I tried to stand up and walk away. I couldn't face him then. I stumbled, my head reeled and I had to sit back down.

"Whoah. Are you all right?" Charlie asked. "Can I get you some water?"

"No, I'm fine." I put my hand on his leg, smiled to convince him I was.

Then we sat and he held me tightly.

"You'll give me some time to think about it, won't you?" I asked leaning my head on his shoulder.

"Of course," he smiled. "Of course."

I took the ring off and handed it to him.

“No, no.” He said and put it back on. “You wear that while you think about it. That represents the life you can have with me. I want that there to remind you while you think.”

We were at the Baxter theatre with his parents that night. We’d all gone to see *Cats*. The Wilkinsons returned from the restrooms, refreshed and ready for Act II. I saw Mr Wilkinson notice the ring immediately and nod approvingly to his son. It was funny, I thought. He must have asked their permission first. I wondered whether he’d consulted my mother, but then he probably hadn’t needed to.

“I need some fresh air. I’ll see you inside.” I kissed Charlie on the cheek and made for one of the balconies.

People were beginning to move back into the performance hall. I was smoking by then and stood on the balcony in a figure-hugging little black number, having a cigarette. The wind was cold but I enjoyed shivering. I was back at one of those crossroads of life where the wind always seemed to be a little more chilly than elsewhere.

I smoked. I thought about Knysna. I thought about idio-child, the word appearing unbidden from my memory. I thought about the sleep-overs with Catherine, Nadia and the rest, how the talk about husbands had begun to bore me at some point. And now here I was, stumbling towards that exact life. I looked at my hand, the idio-ring on my finger. Could it be that I, like my parents, had fallen in love with the Wilkinsons? There had never been any doubt in my mind during my high school years that I would drop Charlie eventually, as soon as I got round to it. And yet, he’d always been good to me, always been there when I had needed someone. I didn’t for one moment imagine that he understood me, but he had been there, had understood enough to know when to be there. And when I looked back over my life I realised that he had been the only one who had stuck around. There was no-one else. Just little idio-child and his idio-wife.

I flicked the cigarette away when I was done and turned to go inside. And there was Charlie, leaning in the doorway, just Charlie, his hands in his pockets, his blond hair flopping in the breeze, the lights from the entrance hall behind him.

“Hey,” I said, feeling a little guilty, seeing him standing there like that, handsome, confident, and me standing here, thinking silly childish thoughts about

why I won't marry the only man whom I ever meant anything to. "I said I'd meet you inside."

"I just needed to look at you for a while."

"You're missing *Cats*." I laughed, mock-serious.

I walked into his embrace and after the cold wind on my bare shoulders he felt warm and safe. I leaned my head against his shoulder and tried to imagine him as my husband.

"Would you like to go see *Cats*?" I ran a finger around his nipple, through his shirt. "Or would you like to see if there's anyone in the lady's restrooms?"

He lifted my dress and took me from behind as I hung onto the lid of a toilet. And just as I reached a climax I shouted "idio-child!" at the top of my lungs.

"Shh!" He covered my mouth. "There might still be ushers about. What did you say?"

\*

The wind blows up the forested hills surrounding the Hout Bay house that was our wedding gift from Charlie's parents. I stare out at those hills, at the foaming, perennially restless ocean. I feel kind of sorry for Charlie, while I'm sitting here on the balcony of the house we shared. I watch people walk their dogs along the beach in the last of the lingering sunlight, and I think of how differently our life turned out. I feel almost guilty for a moment. Guilty that I didn't know better then, when I was 21. Guilty that despite our best efforts happiness never became an institution for us. Guilty that Charlie isn't here today, and I am.

Tannit walks out and sits down at the table, next to me. She takes out a bankie of weed and some Rizlas. She starts rolling a joint.

At some point she looks up, while she licks the thin paper and sticks it to the joint. She sees my shocked expression.

"What?" She shrugs. "The food's about half-an-hour from done and there's nothing like this to build up and industrial-strength appetite."

"I thought you quit smoking that stuff years ago," I say.

"I did quit for a while," she says, obviously relishing my shocked expression, happy that she can still surprise me. "But then I started again. And don't you dare try

and make me feel guilty about it either. Not after the fucking roller coaster ride you've made me endure the last few weeks."

I smile. Then I laugh, delighted, surprised. "As long as you don't smoke in the house I won't kick up a fuss."

"Yes, mom," she mocks. "Do you want some?" She holds the smouldering thing out to me. "Want some?"

"I don't know, we're not in college anymore."

"Great for medicinal purposes." She holds it closer.

When I inhale, and hold the smoke in my lungs until it starts to burn, before exhaling, an amazing thing happens. I relax. And I realise that its something I haven't done in months. Perhaps it was just the marijuana, but on the balcony, sipping wine and smoking with Tannit as the sun slipped away, I imagined I could be happy.

More than that in fact. For the first time I suspected I might actually be happy. And the guilt slipped from me like a gown, tossed aside on the way into the shower.

## When the Yellow Wind Blows

The N2 undulates along the coast. It sweeps and dips through farmlands, mountain passes, wheat fields and fishing villages. A navy Mercedes Coupe glides along this road early one Friday morning. We crest another rise as the sun creeps over the hills in the distance, lighting the wheat fields along the road, colouring them a dusty gold. Heavy banks of blue cloud advance on the mainland, spilling like frothy foam from the surface of the ocean.

We pass a sign indicating Knysna at 450km. Tannit snores in the passenger seat next to me. Long drives put her to sleep. We barely made it through Sir Lowry's pass before she started snoring lightly. I can see Michael's face in the rearview mirror. He is awake, staring out to the ocean. We are here in the same car, driving a road we have driven before. We know where this leads and I am convinced that we are both apprehensive. But circumstance has trapped us here again, something I think we are only gradually realising. We share the same blood, genetic make-up, we're sharing a drive out to the childhood holiday spot where we shared so much more, and I wonder as we drive, as the sun rises and the clouds roll in and the road curves and bends, how much memory we share, just how similar our thoughts must be. Do you remember what I do? Do you remember like I do?

Michael is quiet, haven't said more than hello to Tannit and me. His dark eyes comb the passing scenery at times, the ocean holds his gaze for long minutes when it comes in view. I sense a darkness about him, a brooding quality he often displays, but which is somehow more intense than usual. The Knysna house draws nearer.

400 km.

He sighs heavily.

It comes closer.

I look at the speedometer. 132km/h. That rate leaves us less than four hours.

Tannit snores, oblivious.

Michael stares, pretend-oblivious.

I press the pedal down a little further when we're in the bottom of a dip, and we begin to climb once more. I don't want to lose too much momentum. The meter reads 124 km/h before it stabilises.

This is the inexorable approach.

I would have sworn I was incapable of making this drive. I have been on this road with this same feeling of dread rising in my chest but it had always been someone else driving. This is the first time I do what I think impossible: drive us back there. I know it is Tannit's will driving us, her wish pressing my foot down on the accelerator. I wonder what Michael must think, what his motivation for being here is. A misplaced sense of responsibility? Regret? Hope of redemption? Why is he here, why did he agree to come?

If I could ask him these things I would. But of course the lack of language between us does not allow this.

I want to ask whether he's been back there. But what if his answer is "since when?" Then I would have to say "then" and he might ask "when?" and I might have to explain "then" and what I mean by it. And I don't have the language for that. I wouldn't know how to answer that, because even though I know Michael was there, can remember the sensation, the juicy prickling of him being there, I don't know what he remembers. What sensations linger in his mind when he thinks of that day?

I remember rolling thunder, rain, banks of dark unruly clouds and suddenly the air-con in the car feels too cold, as I look at the clouds continuing to roll in from the ocean, as if anticipating that day, as if preparing to re-enact it. Even nature is anticipating this cycle, noting this return and seems feverish about its unnatural quality, upset at the forced revivification of the misdeed.

375 km.

I sigh as well. My hands are not steady on the wheel.

\*

"He's a loser."

"Stop it, Michael," mom scolded. Her tone was exasperated.

"He is. He's a big loser. You should have let me bring Billy along. We could have beaten him up."

"Michael. Stop it now. The Wilkinsons are our friends and you'll get along with Charlie, whether you want to or not. You be nice, or there's trouble."

"But he's an idiot, mom. Every moment with him is torture."

"Don't call him an idiot, Michael. He's a nice boy."

"I know. All nice kids are idiots. They're nice because they don't have enough brains with which to be naughty."

"Walter, say something," Mom sounded like she was losing patience and conviction. She looked for back-up, but dad was laughing. It was a clear and resonant sound. There was no chance of concealing it from us.

"You're not helping," mom said. "You're encouraging trouble."

"It's all right for you guys," Michael said. "You get to spend time with the grownups. Aunt Mary and Mr Wilkinson are nice. We end up stuck with, with..."

He searched for a word. I had one ready. "Idio-child."

Michael laughed. I always felt a warm glow of pride when I made him laugh. I smiled. His laughter was prettier than dad's. Because it was his, it was beautiful.

"Yeah, we get stuck with idio-child."

I watched him laugh, his face turning to me in recognition of my contribution. I glowed like the sun that was rising in the windscreen as we drove along, as we approached. Dad rummaged in the cubby-hole for his dark glasses, found them, put them on. We were driving straight into the sunrise, but it was better than getting stuck in mid-morning traffic dad said.

We passed a sign that read: Knysna 300.

\*

I need to stop this thought-train. It hurtles too freely.

Think of something else.

I do.

It comes surprisingly easily.

\*

Tannit hop-stumbles into my life. One moment she is on the periphery of it – the girl with the shocking red curls I glimpse from afar while she jots pages of notes in Art History class. The girl getting her hands, cover-all and face dirty in the clay sculpting workshops, the girl with the clear laugh who is wont to slap her friends on the back and shout "Hello, prude!" – and the next moment she is dead-centre.

"Whoops, sorry... Oh, hello."

She more or less falls into my arms. I had walked up, in my usual campus trance, not wanting to make unnecessary eye-contact, not wanting to have to start a conversation with a stranger. She was on a ladder, a group of her friends at a table with paint cans. She was on her way down from the ladder to fetch more paint when she slipped on the second-to-last rung and stumbled into my path.

I mumble, “sorry.” I want to scamper off. But somehow I don’t. Somehow our eyes hold each other for a long time and my mouth goes dry at her piercing gaze, confident, self-assured.

“Hi, I’m Tannit,” she holds out a hand. “I’ve seen you around.”

“I’m Alison.” We shake.

“Help us paint this mural, won’t you?”

“I...uh...I can’t, I’ve got to be...” I’m glancing at my watch. She’s not listening.

“Trevor! Give Alison an apron and a brush. The quicker we get this done the more beer we can drink before Forrie’s closes.”

I’m still stammering in protest while Trevor, a goofy looking fellow with long straight hair and retro-fashionable black-rimmed glasses, hangs a paint-smeared sheet around my neck like he’s awarding me a medal and says “tie it at the back” while he slides a brush at me from across the table and fills a tray with paint. “We call ourselves Tannit’s little helpers. Off you go.”

The mural takes the rest of the afternoon. It’s past seven when we’re done. After putting all the equipment away we sit around on the brick paving, smoking cigarettes and admiring our handiwork. Tannit sits behind me, our backs leaning against each other for support. We’re sharing a smoke.

“Now,” says Tannit. “To the bar!”

We all get up and trundle along to the car park. I’m thinking of how to phrase a goodbye, knowing I need to get home. But everyone is off in a different direction. I end up at my car with Tannit still in tow. Her hand is on the passenger door handle before she says: “You don’t mind if I catch a lift with you.” It’s not really a question.

“Of course not,” I smile.

I end up driving to Forrie’s, which is still open. I park the car in the dark parking lot. While I’m busy locking the doors Trevor walks past.

“C’mon lovers,” he says. “The last-rounds bell waits for no one.”



We drink, laugh, smoke, tell jokes, sing songs, do impressions of lecturers and roar jovially. I feel more welcome and at ease than I can remember feeling anywhere else at any other time.

I spot Tannit looking at the ring on my finger a few times.

“Your round, Alison.” Trevor announces after the third round of drinks are finished.

“I’ll help you carry,” Tannit says and escorts me to the bar.

While we wait for the drafts to be poured she leans in close to me. “You’re married?” she asks.

I lift my left hand, toy with the ring. “I am,” I say.

“How old are you, 22, 23?”

“23,” I whisper.

“How did that happen?”

I’m trying to formulate an answer, but it dawns on me slowly that I don’t know.

After the fourth round I announce that I have to get going. Tannit says she’ll catch a ride with Trevor, but she’ll walk me to my car. I tell everyone what a pleasure it was to meet them. I get hugged, like I’m an old friend.

In the car park Tannit leans against the car. She rubs her face in her hands. She looks like she’s about to pass out. I grab onto her, steady her.

She looks up. Our noses touch. I feel her hands take my hips. I can feel the skin of her fingers on my skin just above my jeans. She moves her mouth closer to mine, hovers. I close the final bit of distance. Our lips touch. It is soft and welcoming. Something that feels like a sigh blows through every crack inside me and lifts dust that had been hitherto undisturbed. Something wakes up and it flows through me, fills me like water; clear, cleansing spring water.

We break contact slowly. We keep looking at each other, neither of us apologetic. It feels like arriving at a long-sought conclusion, an ultimate resolution.

“I’ll see you around,” she says and walks away.

And then I drive off, home, to my husband.

Charlie is in the study when I walk in. He comes out to greet me.

“You smell like beer,” he says.

“I had a few with some varsity friends. I’ll introduce you to them sometime. You’ll like them.”

“I got some Chinese. It’s in the oven if you want. You know, next time, just pick up the damn phone and let me know.” He turns to go back to the study, the matter settled.

“Oh, my humble apologies Master husband. Please forgive my impetuosity and penchant for fun.”

“Don’t be cute. It doesn’t suit you. I’m going to bed. I have to get up early tomorrow to go to work, to support your penchant for fun. Please be quiet when you come to bed.” He turns to go.

“Aren’t you even worried I might have cheated on you?” This surprises me. I don’t know where this comes from and instantly regret saying it.

Charlie turns once more, walks up to me, takes me by the shoulders and kisses my forehead. “I know you won’t cheat on me.” He smiles and then walks out of the room.

I eat my take-away dinner on the balcony, listen to the stirring of the ocean and feel a strange stirring in myself, as if in response to the tumult on the rocks below.

That night I lie awake for a long time, listening to Charlie snore, remembering Tannit’s paint-roughened fingertips on my skin.

My marriage to Charlie turns slowly into a precarious, sloping pathway down the side of a mountain. It’s rocky, we stumble, we argue, we disagree and for a time it is only the convenience and security of a home to come back to at the end of the day that keeps us together, until even that is not enough. I am home less and less. I spend more time with Tannit, Trevor and the gang. We smoke weed and drink beer and shooters until we feel sick and happy at the same time. We succumb in this way to the pressures of growing up, live the student life, turn our backs on our responsibilities and give in to oblivion and procrastination. Charlie throws himself at his work, at his studies with a vigour that is greater than ever. It has the dual effect of his job at Wilkinson, Kruger and Associates going well, the boss’s son gaining more respect for actually pulling his weight. Our tension increases. The mountain path becomes a treacherous landslide.

I arrive at home one night. I park my Citi Golf in the driveway. A navy Mercedes Coupe is parked there too. I don’t recognise this car, have never seen it before. I turn off the engine and sit in the dark, hoping my head would spin less, waiting for the nausea to pass. I realise after a while of sitting there, after wave after

wave of sickness hits me, that this is no longer the weed or the alcohol. This is another crossroad in my life. I recognise the feeling slowly. This time the wind that blows across the open plains of this place is radio-active, and carries the sickness I feel in my head.

I imagine walking in on Charlie and his mistress. I think how arrogant he is to bring her here, to take her first in the shower and then in the bed he shares with his wife. It makes me sick. I hate him right then. At least that's what I think it is, it's what I mistake the feeling pulsing through my head for. Indifference, in the sick yellow wind of the crossroads, feels like hate. Guilt, at not caring whether he puts it in her mouth or her ass. Guilt, at welcoming the complete and final destruction of my life. I hate myself, not him. But there, in the car, at the crossroads I am smiling. I will not go without a fight. The final annihilation is about to commence. I welcome the spinning in my head when I get out of the car, slam the door. I will scratch this little bitch's eyes out, call Charlie every name that's ever run through my head.

In this state I relish the drama of the final confrontation. It will be apocalyptic, and the ashes that will be left here afterwards will glow with the ferocity of it.

I unlock the front door. I swing it open. It bangs against the wall and swings back most of the way, hitting me in the chest. I stumble into the wall, turn, swear, slam it shut behind me. I throw my bag into the living room to my right, spread my arms and shout at the top of my lungs: "Honey, I'm home! Care if I join you? You won't even have to introduce us."

I stumble as I walk out of the entrance hall, and then I hear Charlie speak, to my left, quite close in fact.

"Lower your voice, damnit."

I turn and see him sitting there. He is dressed in a silk button-down shirt, wearing his Italian tailored trousers, what he calls his 'fancy-pants.' He's gone all-out for this little whore. There are two places set at the table, roses in the middle – and I'm struck again by how corny he is and wish this little bitch luck with a man who can't muster a thought beyond red roses – wine, everything. She must be quite the little vixen. There is only food on his plate.

"Your little whore not hungry?" I ask, loud enough to be heard upstairs where she's no doubt making the last minute adjustments to her lingerie.

"You're drunk," Charlie says.

I can hear the anger in his voice and it infuriates me further. To worry about my drinking habits, to have the audacity to throw it in my face at a moment like this when he's been caught red-handed. But then, he's always been daddy's little boy, the one who never puts a foot wrong, so he probably doesn't know how to act in this situation. Some pointers are in order I think.

"All right," I say. "Here are some things to help you get through this. First of all," I count melodramatically on my fingers as I talk. "What you want to do is beg. Even if you don't mean it, you get on your knees and beg for forgiveness. Second of all, once I have rejected that, you grovel. You say how sorry you are, you say how your life will be worthless without me in it. And you do this, even if it is a lie, like everything else in your life. Even though you are devoid of emotion you do this, because it serves a very important purpose." Now I'm pointing my finger at him across the table.

He twirls his fork in the last bit of pasta on his plate, staring at me levelly.

"The purpose of this pantomime is so I can walk out of here with an ounce of dignity and self-respect left intact. What you do not want to do is sit there so pristine and angelically confident, as if I had it coming."

My head swirls. I stumble against the table.

Charlie puts his fork aside, pushes his plate away, dabs at his mouth with a tablecloth. He stands up. "I'm going to bed, we'll talk in the morning."

"Like fuck we are!" I shout. "We talk now. This all ends here, now. How dare you?"

I can see him breathe in, steady himself. He seems to be gathering all his left-over patience. I'm hoping that infinite supply will run out tonight. "You're drunk. There's food in the oven. I'm going to bed. We'll talk in the morning."

"You can't simply dismiss this. You can't! What's her name? Does she make you happy? Do you love her?"

He stops at the stairs, his hand on the banister. Then he slowly turns around, faces me. He takes something out of his pocket, tosses it on the dining room table. It's small, it's hard, it clatters loudly.

I look to my left, my head is beginning to spin again. He stays on the stairs like that, waiting for me to catch up.

On the table to my left lies a pair of keys. Car keys. Mercedes car keys. There is a small red ribbon tied around it, and a little card.

“Happy anniversary, darling,” he says.

Then it’s all too late. It all comes down on top of me at once. I swoon. I collapse to my knees. I retch. Ugly, burning mouthfuls of beer, spirits and stomach acids spread across the floor in a yellow-brown spray. Tears flow freely down my cheeks. I can hear him sigh, standing there on the stairs, looking down on me. That sigh speaks of an internal struggle, of him doing something that is very difficult for him to do.

“Clean that up before you come to bed,” he says. “Hopefully that’ll be the first step on the road of getting you to behave like a grownup again.”

He turns and clomps up the stairs.

Then I behave like a grownup. “I want a divorce,” I say.

He doesn’t hear me.

Something snaps inside me. The sick yellow wind blows in my mind. If I thought I knew rock-bottom I was mistaken. This is a whole new world. The landscape of this crossroad is sparse and diseased, the very soil crying out in anguish. That voice is nature wronged. That voice is carried on this wind. No person is supposed to end up here.

I open the door. It’s around four o’ clock, a Thursday afternoon. I’ve just arrived back from the studio. I have an exhibition coming up. I’m working hard, taking lots of strain. I see the ladder on the balcony.

And the solution is there in front of me.

I tip-toe closer, put my bag down.

The solution beckons.

I approach the ladder.

I’m beginning to feel sick again. I see tools lying around, empty boxes from which he’d taken the skylights.

My head is spinning.

I’m on the balcony.

The yellow wind blows.

\*

Welcome to Knysna, reads the sign.

I know the way well. I turn off the main road, go uphill for a bit, away from the coastline, and then we descend again, along the road that runs the perimeter of the lagoon. I find the driveway, turn in. The gate is open, someone must be here. This conjures the possibility of escape for a second or two. There are renters, holiday-makers in the house. We can't stay after all.

This thought passes quickly. I had phoned Mr Wilkinson, assuring him I was feeling better, that we would make the trip as soon as the house was available. And he had made sure it was available, very soon.

At the end of the driveway, parked in front of the house, stands the little red Daihatsu. It belongs to Saul, the caretaker. I park next to him and we get out. He exits the front door as we stretch our legs from the drive, breathe the moist lake air. Tannit is still fast asleep in the passenger seat.

"Alison Wilkinson, my dear lord." Saul has aged. His beard is grey, betraying no sign of the rich brown it used to be. His hair is cropped short and his jeans are dirty as always. His faded red shirt is tucked into his pants, but has betrayed him by sneaking out behind. "How are you, dear girl?"

He hugs me tight, his eyes watery the instant before he grabs me by the shoulders. "I'm so sorry to hear about Charles. He was such a good boy. It is a terrible loss. I feel so terrible for you, my dear."

Mrs Wilkinson. I can feel it rattle through my head. Michael shifts slightly, kicking a stone from the gravel driveway.

"I've put the things Mr Wilkinson asked for in a box upstairs. It's in the main bedroom. You'll find it, no problem." He notices Michael for the first time. I don't think he recognises him.

"You folks enjoy your stay, now. This place will do you good. The air is clean and fresh here, always has been." He walks up and shakes Michael's hand. He doesn't recognise him.

He looks at Tannit, sleeping in the car. He must assume Michael and Tannit are a couple, friends who accompanied the grieving widow Wilkinson. He smiles, points at Tannit. "You tell her to have a good time, also. And phone if you need anything, my number is on the list by the telephone. I'll come sort it out for you, no problem."

"Thank you, Saul. We'll be fine, but I'll ring if we need you."

We hug again before he drives off, crunching along the driveway, waving when he gets out and closes the front gate, leaving us alone, here.

Michael looks at me and I at him. The day is suddenly very quiet. Even the sounds we can hear, the twittering birds, the far-away drone of cars, seem muted. The clouds have rolled in, have reached the land. The day has acquired a strange bluish hue. Nature goes quiet in anticipation of the onslaught from above.

“We’d better get the stuff inside,” Michael says.

I nod. He pops the boot and begins gathering boxes of supplies. I decide to walk ahead, open up some curtains, get the house ready, see if the refrigerator has been switched on. And it’s like I leave myself behind. I can see myself walking to the front door, can see myself open it, pause for a moment. I’m watching this like it’s someone else doing it, someone else living it, but it’s somehow closer to me than that. It’s hard to explain. You feel light-headed. You...

\*

...step over the threshold and you enter this place where you had once resolved never to return. A couple of paces takes you to the staircase which leads upstairs, where your hand, gripping the banister, creates for a moment the illusion of safety. But to hold onto a piece of this place for comfort reconfirms its deceit.

I sit down on the steps, turning my back on the veranda and the view of the lagoon beyond. I feel like crying and curse my weakness under my breath. But, even though I bite my lower lip hard enough to draw blood the tears find their way down my cheeks. And once the first couple are out, dripping onto the dusty rug the rest come more easily, and while I feel cheated once more, this time by my own body, I let them come, I let them flow.

The front door opens and I am no longer alone. Michael is standing there, his arms laden with goods. First he aims for the kitchen, to put the stuff down, but soon enough sees my face, marks the trail of the tears which flowed there. He stops, shifts his weight, as he realises something of the moment’s significance.

It feels like déjà vu, but all it really is, is eternal recurrence. The two of us are here, in this place, this house, once more, like we were then. Only the two of us, a stolen moment of companionship, so intense, so confusing.

Now Michael looks at me, some word of comfort caught in his throat. He looks as lost as I feel. The wind picks up outside. The rain will come soon.

Michael walks over, sits down on the stairs next to me. He sighs. Even now, even here, there seems to be nothing left to say.

\*

There was a scurrying and a rushing outside. I was nervous. It was raining hard. Charlie was out there, in that rain. The parents were shouting my name from downstairs. I had done something wrong, but I didn't want to get in trouble for it. I was standing with the underwear in my hand and there were footsteps on the stairs. They came up quickly when I didn't answer.

It was dad, he was shouting, "Alison! Don't play games now. Where are you?"

He was so very close now, and in my haste I ran into Charlie and Michael's room, not my own. Who slept where, I didn't know. I picked a bed and slipped the underwear under a pillow. I hoped it was Charlie's pillow.

Dad opened the door just as I put the pillow back.

"What are you doing in here?"

"I, I..." I didn't know what to say. How much trouble would come of this?

"Where's Charlie? Where's Michael?"

"I, I..."

He walked over, straight to the bed, to lift the pillow I had just replaced. He'd seen. It had all gone wrong. His hand was on the pillow, lifting it, before it stopped.

"Walter!" Mom's voice, from downstairs, panicked. "Walter, come quick. We found Charlie. He's hurt."

Father forgot about what he was doing. The pillow dropped from his hand. He made for the door. "I'm coming," he called.

I ducked towards the pillow again. Had to move it, now they knew where it was.

"Alison!" Freeze, heart-thundering.

The rain battered everything. There was a streak of thunder, the sky tore.

"You get out of here now. You're up to no good in here. Come."

He wouldn't leave until I'd joined him. It was only at the foot of the stairs that I paused, when he let go of my arm. The scene downstairs was one of chaos. Mr



Wilkinson and Aunt Mary had Charlie standing between them. Mom was on her knees before him, asking where it hurt. Dad left me on the stairs and rushed over.

"It's his arm," Aunt Mary said. "I think it might be broken."

Michael appeared in the doorway. He was also soaked. He had slipped unnoticed into the living room.

"We have to get him to a hospital," Dad said.

"We'll take our car," Mr Wilkinson said.

"We'll drive behind you," Dad said.

"You kids stay here," Mom said, turning to us. "You lock the doors, you watch television, you behave. We'll sort all this out when we get home."

"Do you understand your mother," dad said, looking at us. His face was hard, twisted, scary. It was difficult to remember that he loved us when he looked like that. "Look me in the eye and tell me you understand."

"Yes, dad," Michael and I sing-songed.

The parents left. They locked the door behind them. The thunder cracked once more. We were alone. Michael squeezed past me on the stairs. He gave me a strange look, one I hadn't seen before.

"What? Where are you going? Don't leave me alone," I said, running after him.

"Why? Are you scared?" Michael looked around. He was teasing, but he was doing more than that also. I felt strange, different. I needed to be with him, it was important not to be alone right then.

"I'm going to put some dry clothes on." He went into the room he shared with Charlie and slammed the door behind him. He locked it.

I was standing outside, helpless, everything gone wrong in an instant. Everything upside-down.

"Michael," I whispered, and the whisper was soft, afraid.

I heard him scurrying; his footsteps, this way, then that. It took a short while which stretched and felt like forever. Then the door opened again and Michael stood there looking at me. He was holding something in his hand, and he was looking at me like he'd never looked at me before, and I felt like I had never felt before. It was Michael and me and what he held in his hand and these new feelings. The rest of the world did not exist.

Everything changed then. Nothing was ever the same, because that night the worst thing happened.

\*

“I’ve missed you,” I say to my brother, sitting on the stairs next to me.

He nods, doesn’t speak.

“Why’d you go away? I love you so much, why’d you take that away from me?”

Then Michael looks at me, and for the first time we talk.

University of Cape Town

**V**

**MICHAEL**

**DESCENT**

## Being the Shadow Man

I look at Alison, sitting next to me, and try to explain.

“Being a good man is something you have to put your mind to. You’ve got to work at it. It’s something you have to want to do.” I sigh. “I’ve simply never found anyone who was worth being a good man for. I’ve tried, have at times even succeeded. But it never lasted for long enough.”

We listen to the wind pick up, rustling through the leaves on the trees all along the perimeter of the Knsysna house’s grounds. I see she has bitten her lip. I walk over to the boxes of supplies and fetch a serviette, come back and dab at her lower lip, wetting it and soaking up the trail of blood which has reached her chin. She takes it from me and sits looking at the bright red stain, so vivid against the white.

“You know what I’ve asked myself a thousand times... every time I think of that day?”

I shake my head slowly from side to side, grind my teeth quietly together and try not to think of *that day*. But it clangs and clatters in me like a rusty gate, limp on its hinges in a strong South Easter. I hear the screeching moan of the swings in Arlington Park. I hear Billy’s drunken laugh and Justin’s thinly veiled insults. I hear Charlie’s exclamation of fear. I taste the dust of our long-ago fight. I see Rebecca and I see Kelly. I see Buster and Old Jasper, drinking their two-for-one-and-a-half Holstens, while misery refuses to give up on them.

“How much of it was our fault?”

I hear my father’s voice, and just like that the wind in my head dies down as the one outside begins to wail around the corners of this house. I look at Alison, slowly take her face in my hands and kiss her. She kisses me back. I taste her blood in my mouth, on my tongue, running down my throat, filling my stomach, filling me to the furthest reaches of me, filling me with new life, new vitality, and that most fragile of things, which the world is so expert at stealing, that thing called hope. It fills me now, and its long-awaited return is welcome. I kiss her, and she kisses me back. All the denial, all the rejection washes from me, and it is like I can see the dirty pool of its rinsed-off fluids spread beneath me.

And the sky cracks and the thunder rolls its heavy drum roll.

\*

They were white with what looked like a pattern of little pink roses from this distance. It was a Wednesday, after second break and Sarah Moore, along with the rest of her class were waiting for their Science teacher to arrive and unlock the second-floor laboratory. Billy and I were pretending to have a conversation, taking turns to look up her dress. She was having a conversation of her own, so didn't notice. Sarah Moore. That name could be heard up and down the hallways of Oakleaf High, it echoed in the boys' locker room at gym class and several of the First team Rugby players boasted having fucked her. Every school had a girl like that. Sarah Moore was ours.

"What are those, roses?" Billy asked.

"Looks like," I said.

"Man, I wonder what she'd be like, what she'd do, what she'd say..."

Billy was drifting away, his voice becoming dreamy towards the end of the sentence. "That's the sort of thing you might have to investigate with your pants round your ankles, Doctor B."

"Hmn," he didn't hear me. "You know, this is unfair. How can we get close to a woman as popular as her?"

I don't think he meant for me to answer him, but it just so happened I had a response in mind. I had, in fact, been considering the same question for weeks, ever since the *Acid-Burn Skullheads* had had their gig at the Bohemian Salamander, and I had bumped into Kelly.

"I'll tell you," I said.

"Good," Billy answered, his voice lilting, his mind still miles away. "You be sure to do that."

I reached out and touched his shoulder. "Snap out of it, Romeo."

He looked at me. "Hmn, what?"

"I said 'I know how we can get to party with a woman like that.' How close you get to her, well, that bit is up to you."

His eyes doubled in size, unbelieving. "What are you saying? You know a way?"

That's why Billy would always get left behind in the world. He possessed no talent for the carefully laid plan, the meticulously arranged plot. If it had been left to

him, he would never get within shouting distance of a woman like Sarah. But in this world, if you harboured aspirations to punch above your weight you needed to be observant, you had to notice the flow of events, and you had to create opportunities where there would otherwise have been none. It was simple, actually, took little more than presence of mind. In that way Billy was fortunate to have me. He would have been utterly lost without me.

“Outside the main office building, right by the entrance, there is a piece of paper stuck to the notice board with Prestik.”

Billy looked at me like I was Mr Latham trying to explain a bio-chemical reaction in Science class.  $\text{H}_2\text{O} + \text{CL} \rightleftharpoons \text{HCL} + \text{O}_2$ .

“What?”

“The heading of this piece of paper is: Standard 9’s Waitering Volunteers for Matric Farewell.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Doctor B, listen to me,” I took him by both shoulders. “We sign up to be waiters at the Matric farewell next weekend.”

Billy looked perplexed.  $\text{H}_2 + \text{OCO}_2 \cup \text{R}_2\text{D}_2 + \text{HUH}$ ? “But you never want to do school stuff. What’s got into you now? And waitering for the matrices? Carrying around their shit, running up with a ‘please’ and ‘yes’ and ‘thank you’ every time they snap their fingers? No way, man.”

“Think about the after-party, Doctor B. Do you imagine for one moment Justin won’t invite us there?”

It was always fun to watch Billy’s face when understanding dawned there. It was bright, like a sunrise over the ocean, glittering. “My God, Professor M, you are a genius.” He looked up to the second floor and shouted, pointing: “Hang on my love, I’m coming for you, baby!” And then he started sprinting.

I looked up. Sarah and the rest of her class had made their way inside while we were talking. I turned and started sprinting, catching up with Billy just as he reached the main office building. There were space for twenty names on the list. 17 had already been filled. We inked out our names and contact details.

“We should go by Arlington Park this afternoon, see if Justin’s there. We’ll see if we can pave the way today already.”

Billy just needed a push, once he was off he usually caught up pretty quickly. As we walked to class where we would no doubt get shouted at for being late I thought of Kelly, saw her dark lashes, pitch-black hair, her green-blue eyes, her pale skin and I saw her blow smoke-rings at me and whisper, "Michael, Michael, do with me what you will."

By the late nineties our pencil cases, book bags and everything else we owned sported the anarchy sign. We scratched it into our desks at school while teachers tried to imprint knowledge they considered valuable into our heads. We mightn't have had more than a vague notion of what the sign meant or what it stood for, but it didn't matter. We were creating our own experience. We were the generation who didn't need Jackass, Marilyn Manson or Eminem to be inspired. They didn't create us, we created them. We weren't angry. It was nothing personal, but we were in search of identity and some common experience when there was nothing which catered for our needs. And so we created our own. The age of self-destruction – the age of laughing in the face of everything that had been left for us – had commenced.

The sun was high in the sky over Arlington Park. I was lying on my back, already beginning to itch from the grass. The clouds rolling overhead made it seem like the earth's turning was noticeable. I dragged deeply on a Stuyvesant Filter and blew smoke up into that sky.

"Of course there'll be an after-party," Justin informed Billy. They were sitting on the swings, penduluming, this way, that way, on the edge of my peripheral vision.

"And what do you have to do to get invited?" Billy was doing all the work now. I could lie back and wait for things to develop.

"Well," Justin's voice assumed its usual mocking tone, and it was like I knew what was coming before he started speaking. "Firstly you have to be in matric. Secondly you have to be at the Farewell. And thirdly, you have to be invited."

"Oh," Billy's dejection was clear. "But, is there a way we can get invited?"

Justin laughed, blew out smoke before him as he swung backwards, making it look like an acrobatic plane trailing smoke. "Hey, kid, don't worry about it. It's the kind of party where everyone shows up anyway. If you're drunk, you're in."

"So we can just show up?" Billy was still not sure. I almost felt the need to stop him while he was ahead; the gold-embossed invite he seemed to be yearning for would not materialise. "Whatever goes," was as close to formal as this would get.

“Dude, you can do whatever you like. If someone asks who invited you, just don’t mention my name. Anyway, kids, I’m gonna trundle.” He hopped from the swing mid-arc and I could hear his footsteps going away from where I was lying, as he was off to wherever he goes.

Billy brought his swing to a halt, came to sit down next to me. “So, what do you think? Do we chance it? It would be nice to go.”

I exhaled grey smoke. “I’ll tell you what we do.”

He shifted expectantly.

“We go to the party, and tell anyone who happens by that Justin invited us.”

“But he just said –”

“I heard what he said.” I could feel Justin’s grip on my throat again. I could see the anger in his eyes again. I could feel my back up against that wall again.

“We shouldn’t cause trouble,” Billy said.

“We won’t cause trouble,” I said, sitting up. “We’re just going to have a good time. Come on, let’s go.”

We got up and strolled home, tying our school ties around our heads like Justin used to do. We were not riding bikes anymore by then, we were way too old for that, just another fad, come and gone. I thought about what music to listen to when I got home, I thought about that sensation of the world turning beneath me again. I thought about what we must look like, shirts hanging out, ambling along, deliberately unpresentable. I thought about what people passing us in the street must think. I thought about the pile of schoolwork I needed to catch up on and wondered when the inspiration to do something about it would descend on me. I thought about Justin’s extreme response to my saying hello to Kelly, and I thought about Kelly’s face, her skin, her eyes. And I thought about Alison and how we used to be able to talk and joke about stuff. And I didn’t think at all.

\*

The first thought that comes to mind when I think about holiday at the Knysna house is sleeping late. So I was annoyed when Charlie woke me up early, banging through the closet. I feigned sleep and watched him through narrowed eyelids as he was putting on underwear, shorts and a T-shirt. When he went out of the room, toothbrush in one hand and toothpaste in the other I checked my Casio. It informed me that it was



6:45. The little freak, I thought. This was probably the exact time he got up for school every morning. I turned to face the wall, started tracing patterns and seeing faces in the minute imperfections in the plaster. Charlie came back and dropped his toothpaste and brush in his bathroom kit bag and went out, trying to close the door quietly behind him but banging it nonetheless.

“Idiot,” I whispered when he was gone.

I kept tracing the patterns on the wall. The house was quiet. After a bit, I fell asleep again.

When I woke up the second time my Casio said: 11:47. That was more like it. I got up, went downstairs, heated up some left-overs from the previous night's barbecue in the microwave. I could hear Mom and Aunt Mary talking on the patio outside the back door overlooking the lagoon. They were discussing the drive they'd taken into town that morning. I spotted the chocolate cake and ice cream they'd picked up to go with afternoon tea. I sat, listening to their jabbering for a while after I finished my makeshift breakfast. I thought about how to spend my day. Dad and Mr Wilkinson were out walking by the lagoon somewhere. The Nintendo was still out from the previous night when Charlie and Alison had sat up playing it. I decided to try Super Mario Brothers again. I hadn't been able to get past Stage 13 the day before. I kept getting my jump over the second-to-last pipe wrong and landing right on top of the Venus flytrap which was just beyond it. Today I would crack it.

But, after finishing Super Mario Brothers 2 for the third time it lost some of its charm. I put the Nintendo unit and game cartridge back in the cabinet beneath the television and decided that I should find something to do. It was getting on towards afternoon.

I went out onto the patio where Mom and Aunt Mary were making their way to the bottom of a bottle of wine. Dad and Mr Wilkinson were busy with a couple of beers. There were no signs of Charlie and Alison.

“Don't go far, Michael. We'll have ice cream in a bit,” Mom said.

I walked off anyway. Alison and Charlie's continued absence was suddenly of interest to me. I scanned the sky for the kite. There was no sign of it, but it was not in the house either, so he must have been off with it somewhere.

I walked out along the edge of the lake. The afternoon was getting stuffy. I was sweating all over. The clouds were packing together over the ocean, the threat of

rain, meaning more time indoors. There were boats out on the lagoon, bobbing aimlessly, people sunbathing, whiling away holiday time.

I continued, almost off the property by the time I heard their voices. I crept along. I wasn't sure why, but it was suddenly important that they didn't see me. I found them behind the shed where Mr Wilkinson kept the fishing gear. I was approaching the shed from the far side, so I was behind the shed with them, but I stayed among the brush, squatted down so they wouldn't see me.

They were standing very close to each other, and their talk had grown quiet suddenly. Then I noticed. Charlie was busy looking down the front of Alison's pants, she was holding them out so he could. Then it was his turn to do the same. She peeked in the front of his shorts. Alison shook her head and they whispered some more. Then they both took their pants off. My mouth went dry. My heart was beating quickly.

They touched, inspected each other, whispering and giggling throughout. Once the game of 'show me yours, I'll show you mine' was over they began putting their clothes back on. But I soon realised that the game wasn't over yet, it had become a different game. Charlie put his hand on Alison's shoulder, kissed her on the cheek, a quick peck. She smiled, took him by the front of his T-shirt, pulled him closer and kissed him on the mouth. Then they both smiled, and they hugged. I was about to get up, to walk over and ask "What's going on here?" in a loud voice, put a fright into them. But Charlie had lost interest. He was going over to a tree nearby, and then I spotted the kite stuck in one of the higher branches. He was scratching his head, then he yanked at the string which was still within reach, but the kite wouldn't come loose. He only succeeded in getting it more firmly stuck.

Then Dad's voice called out from somewhere nearby. "Michael, Alison, Charlie! Come have some ice cream!"

Alison and Charlie panicked at the same time. Charlie ran in behind the shed again. They peeked around the side of the shed, trying to figure out if they'd been spotted. Charlie tried to get something Alison was holding in her hands, but she kept it away from him. She whispered, explained. Then she stuffed it under a rock.

"We're coming, Dad," she shouted. She whispered to Charlie again. He shook his head, unsure, but she pulled him by the arm and they set off towards the house.

I appeared from my hiding place when they were gone and walked over to see what they had stashed behind the shed. I lifted the rock and saw. I looked at it for a long time, my heart thundering in my ears.

“Michael!”

Dad was still calling. My heart made a bid for freedom via my mouth. I had to swallow it back. I put the rock back the way I found it and made my way to the house.

Charlie and Alison were already there. Charlie sat down to his ice cream.

Alison had gone to the bathroom.

“Come on,” Charlie shouted. “Your ice cream’s getting cold and your coffee’s getting hot.” He laughed, the parents laughed. I didn’t.

Alison appeared, not laughing either. I didn’t know what all this was, but I was powerless to stop it right then.

\*

I’m out walking the perimeter of the lagoon again. I won’t go all the way round. I usually walk out to a spot from where I can see the Heads, stand watching them, the passageway they make to the open sea. I used to do this when I was younger as well. Whenever we would come to Knysna for a holiday I would sneak away at least once, come out here to this spot I found. It was a tall rock, but rough enough to scale. On top it formed a natural seat, my stone throne. I hadn’t been here since the summer of 1991/92. I wondered as I walked along whether I’d still be able to find the rock. But the Heads would guide me, so I wasn’t too worried, merely let my mind drift and roam, much as my body was doing.

I can feel a strange pull, when I sit looking through the passage to the open ocean that the Heads carve. Something tugs at me, like an undertow. It beckons. I always feel a strange sense of falling, tumbling, drifting out. It feels like giving up, it feels like a sweet release.

I reach my spot after about half-an-hour. I’m surprised how much longer this walk used to feel. Now adult legs and an enhanced sense of direction makes the trip seem hardly worth it. The rock is still there, but Knysna has expanded since ’92. Now the rock, which used to be a spot in the bushes, some way from the nearest road is a feature next to someone’s driveway. The numbers 663 are bolted into the boulder. The house seems deserted, nobody seems to be home. I get my sneaker onto the three, test its hold, and then boost myself up where I perch on the rock. There’s some dried seagull droppings on the rock, and some fresh ones. I try to miss the fresh ones.

There's a lot more going on around the banks of the lagoon. New jetties, boat launches, restaurants, hotels and viewing points. I watch a cruiser full of tourists motor slowly by, making its way out through the Heads, obscuring my view for a while before it disappears around behind the rocks. The serenity sucks me in, and it's difficult to remember that this place broke me once. Although the pull exerted through the Heads does remind me of my inability to put myself back together again.

\*

A startling white streak of thunder ripped down the length of the sky. It was still out over the ocean, approaching. The parents seemed pre-occupied with their own comings and goings. Dad and Mr Wilkinson were down by the water's edge again, holding beers by the bottle neck. Mom and Aunt Mary were busy clearing the table, taking things inside. I was sitting in the lounge, pretending to be busy fiddling with the Nintendo games, but Charlie and Alison held my attention. They were whispering, Alison was pointing. Charlie was looking to where our fathers were.

I was still trying to catch up with what exactly was going on here. But I became the Shadow man again and nobody was paying me any attention. Charlie and Alison set off towards the shed again. I knew how to get there without being seen. This time I would go round the other side of the house, approach the shed from a different angle which would still allow me to get in behind them unnoticed. It was time to go. I slipped out, avoided being seen by the parents. I ran along the grass, leopard-crawled like I'd seen on *Platoon*, fought through the undergrowth and shrub. I shot at phantom enemies among the bushes with my phantom gun. I was the last man of my platoon standing. I was the great hope of a nation, of all mankind. I had to survive or everything died. I frustrated the enemy with my speed, agility and eluded them at every turn. Just when they thought they had me cornered I slipped away. They began to understand that they were vulnerable despite their numerical superiority; that the Shadow man had come for them.

I lost my way somewhat. I was out in someone's yard. I could see people with a boat trailer by their garage. A little dog lying on the back patio spotted me. It barked incessantly and charged at me. Shadow man had been located, but he was ready. I took up stance. I was faintly aware of an old lady appearing on the back patio, shouting.

“Fifi, come back. Fifi, no!”

It was a little white dog, it was baring its teeth. As soon as it was within range I let fly. My sneaker caught the dog satisfyingly in the rib cage. It yelped loudly, moaning its pain. It set off back towards the house, now fully aware that the Shadow man was not to be trifled with. I picked up a rock, aimed it along the dog’s intended path.

“Stop that,” I heard the old lady shout.

One of the men by the garage had spotted me also. “Hey you! What do you think...”

But that’s as much as I heard. I paused only long enough to see whether the projectile (hand grenade) hit the intended target. It missed, by a whisker, making the dog change direction, zig-zag in evasive manoeuvres. I was into the underbrush again, jumping over some rocks, sliding down an embankment. I could still hear faint shouts behind me.

“Get him. Who was that little son of a...”

Shadow man eluded. Shadow man merged with the shadows.

The thunder rumbled loudly again.

I paused for a moment, lying among some dense vegetation. I was aware that the Boat Men would spot me from their high vantage point if I moved. I lay quite still, heard the leaves flicking around me as their snipers took random shots into the foliage. They didn’t get lucky. Their rabid dog attack squads were ineffective and their hopeful snipers equally impotent.

Enough time passed for me to judge it safe to move. I lifted my head, looked up the embankment. There was nothing but the clouds and the first few drops of rain to see. They had called off their counter-offensive. I was up and running again. The rest among the leaves had given me enough time to orientate myself, mentally retrace my steps. I ran along the foot of the embankment for a while, sprinted along the open street and disappeared into nature’s cover once more.

Shadow man reached the shed unexpectedly quickly. It was closer than I anticipated. I hadn’t gone as far wrong as I had imagined. The Boat Men and their killer dogs must have been the second house along. Closer than I would like. An image of dad’s angry scowl sent a shiver up my spine.

I was in an open patch suddenly and I stopped when I recognised the shed. I almost ran Alison over. She jumped, a quick yelp escaping her. We looked at each other for a moment.

“Shit...” I was looking around.

She had been holding a ladder, which now she'd let go of.

The ladder wobbled, hesitated on the final point of balance and then fell. I looked up in time to see Charlie make a grab for the closest branch and fail. I jumped back. His foot slid from the top rung in one fluent motion. He hit his head against one of the thick branches. He twisted awkwardly, hanging like debris in the air for a moment. Then there was a sickening, liquidy, squelching crack as he hit the ground. He cried out in a voice which sent cold fear pumping through me. The side of his head was bleeding.

I looked at Alison. Our eyes met and held. I turned, I ran.

Shadow man eluded. Shadow man merged with the shadows.

I caught my breath, lying among the brush once more. I could see our house from my hiding place. My heart was beating loudly in my ears. My mouth tasted salty. The rain beat heavily on everything, a cacophony of sound as the leaves and ground and bark accepted the falling drops. Then thunder and lightning provided more sound.

Alison ran into the house, shouting. She was inside for a few moments before she came out again, now trailing all four grownups. The group set off for the shed. I considered making a dash for my room right then. Go inside, lock the door, find shadows with which to merge. But my body was stiff in its refusal to get up. I breathed. I tried to think of something else.

It rained and rained.

Eventually the little group returned, their patient with them. Charlie was bawling louder than necessary. He was making it seem like the end of the world. I was instantly angry but I had to be calm, breathe, act like nothing had happened. They were all inside the house. I knew I had to get in there, that my continued absence could only make my fate worse, make me more guilty.

It was the rain and a thick crack of thunder that was closer than I liked which finally got me moving. Inside I was the Shadow man again; surprisingly. Nobody paid me any attention. I was standing off to one side, dripping on the carpet.

“We have to get him to a hospital,” Dad said.

“We’ll take our car,” Mr Wilkinson said.

“We’ll drive behind you,” Dad said.

“You kids stay here,” Mom said, turning first to Alison, then to me. “You lock the doors, you watch television, you behave. We’ll sort all this out when we get home.”

“Do you understand your mother?” Dad said. His voice was loud, vibrating with anger and embarrassment. “Look me in the eye and tell me you understand.”

“Yes, Dad,” Alison and I said automatically.

Then they were gone, driving off. I looked at Alison on my way upstairs. I was trying to judge how much she had told them. She couldn’t know of the Boat Men and the killer dog squads of course, but how much of Charlie’s injury and fall had been blamed on me? I couldn’t tell. Her face was still full of panic.

“What?” she said. I shoved past her on the stairs. I got a whiff of her wet hair, could feel her eyes on me. She came after me. “Where are you going? Don’t leave me alone.”

“Why? Are you scared?” I shot over my shoulder. “I’m going to put some dry clothes on.” I slammed the door of the room I would have to share with the patient when he came back. I was the Shadow man again. I slipped away at will, eluded easily.

The room was warm. The rain beat down outside. I took off my wet clothes and inspected my body for scratches and blood. There was a little here and there, but nothing of concern. I reached under my pillow for my pyjamas. It was bundled way back in the corner. I threw off the pillow so I could get at it. And then I froze. Alison’s white panty had purple flowers on it. That sense of falling was back. It was like I was tilting over a precipice, and it was very strange, it was almost like I could make out the scenery below. Cars stopping at the traffic lights, people walking to and fro, going about their day, oblivious. There was a promenade, the hush and rush of the ocean was loud in my ears. There was wind. I was spinning, I was falling...

I shook my head. I could feel a stirring in me. I put the underwear to my nose. I inhaled. I turned around and walked to the door. I opened it up and Alison stood before me, looking into my eyes.

I still had the underwear in my hands. I only realised I was naked when she touched my belly. She ran a finger around my navel. The world spun. I was free-falling down a dark crevice, but I was not alone. I had a companion, so it was fine. I

felt safe despite the cold chill that ran through me, despite the feeling of dread which took hold of the centre of me. I took her by the hand and led her to my bed.

I took her clothes off.

She looked me in the eyes, smiled faintly.

My fingers found the cleft between her legs.

She breathed in sharply.

Her beauty was overwhelming.

She was me and I was her.

The difference between us became negligible.

The space between us disappeared.

I was in her and she was around me.

Time became like wax, dripping.

We were together.

The world was spinning.

It didn't end there, it began there.

We were lost to the world, completely outside of it and unaware of it.

And so we didn't hear the car door slam.

And we didn't hear the key turn in the lock in the front door.

And we didn't hear the footsteps coming up the stairs.

And we didn't know dad was in the room with us until he spoke.

\*

I sit on my stone throne and watch the tide pull out between the Heads. I wish these memories would get sucked out of me. I wish what happened didn't happen and I wish the tide would suck me away and wash me clean, fill every crevice of me with icy salt water, so the raw wound I am will burn fiercely, until all the hurt is gone and life's only destination, sweet, dark oblivion, will welcome me in a warm embrace, finding me there, afloat in the ocean. I wish for this. I wish for the tears running down my cheeks to cease. I wish I didn't remember. And I don't wish at all.



## Epiphany

Billy's dad dropped us off at the Matric Farewell. We had been made to wear white shirts with bowties and black trousers. Billy promised his dad that we were fine for a lift home. We hadn't organised anything but we could probably get Justin, Marius or Quinton to drop us off. The Farewell was being hosted at a building in the city centre. We reported to Mrs Holmes, the Home Economics teacher from whom we were to receive instructions. She showed us where everything was. The matrics were having sherry and speeches for the parents at the Oakleaf High Main Hall and were expected to arrive here at about eight. We put out cutlery, straightened table cloths and got things in order. Billy and I slipped away for smoke-breaks as often as we could manage.

The evening was quiet, the wind hardly stirred. In Cape Town, when the wind didn't blow the city seemed dead, as if some vital part of it was missing. We smoked and the clouds we exhaled hung in the air around us like cartoon thought bubbles. We didn't say much. I could sense a nervous excitement in Billy. We were sitting on a low wall in the parking lot, kicking our legs and waiting.

What Billy planned to do about getting close to Sarah Moore was unclear; I wasn't sure even he knew, but he'd been talking about her non-stop for the last week. What I planned to do to get close to Kelly was also vague in my mind. I wasn't even sure whether she would show up. I hoped she would, and that we could make it to the after-party. There, things would take care of themselves. Getting her into a conversation shouldn't be impossible.

We smoked a couple of cigarettes each. We waited until the first cars started turning into the lot before we got up, rushed inside and rode the elevator to the third floor where the Farewell dinner would be laid out. Mrs Holmes was upset when we arrived. We stood, bored, through the lecture about responsibility and her not having enough hands as it was. When she was done we left the kitchen and stood in the hall with the other waiters, mimicking Mrs Holmes's shrill voice, laughing. The matrics started coming inside in little groups, in couples.

Sarah arrived on the arm of a bulky guy we didn't know. It was quite possible he wasn't from Oakleaf High. Wherever he was from though, he was at least twice

Billy's size. Billy deflated visibly. It was not looking good. Justin, Marius and Quinton arrived together. Nadia was with Marius, but Quinton and Justin had no dates. They didn't seem bothered and started mingling with groups of girls as soon as they came in. There was no sign of Kelly.

I continued to wait.

Almost everyone was seated and the principal was on the podium putting his notes for his formal address in order before Kelly arrived. She was with her friends, none of them with boys. I watched her closely from where we stood in the corner near the kitchen, waiting to be called on to bring in the starters. She was wearing a long, dark dress which reached her ankles. Her shoulders were bare and her dark black hair hung loose. She was breathtaking. They sat at the table at the far end of the room.

Then I noticed Justin noticing her. He whispered something to Quinton sitting next to him. Quinton mouthed something which seemed like: "Fuck it."

After the principal's excruciatingly boring speech everyone present stood to cheer and applaud. I caught a quick glimpse of Justin making jerking off motions with his hand before we busied ourselves with the evening's waiting. Tables four and five had been assigned to me. I tried to keep an eye on Kelly, at table 18, but found myself running between the kitchen and the hall with a regularity that rendered meticulous observation impractical. Justin was at table six. Billy served them and I saw that he paused long enough to pester Justin every once in a while. I hoped he wasn't overdoing it; we still didn't know where the after-party would be.

The dinner passed without incident and it was around eleven pm when we found ourselves standing outside in the parking lot smoking with Justin and a group of his friends. There were only a few guys present whom we knew. One of the guys we didn't know was quite rowdy. He had a silver flask in his pocket which he sipped from at regular intervals. The sherry before dinner and the two bottles of wine designated to each table clearly hadn't done the trick for him.

"So, okes," the rowdy guy said. "I must say these girls are looking fine. They're all coming to the after-party, aren't they?"

"We'll round 'em up," Justin smiled.

"I'd like to slip a few of them something. Oh yeah, oh yeah," the rowdy guy remembered something. He snapped his fingers by his temple, trying to coax the memory. "Like that one you used to date, what's her name?"

I could see Justin's eyes narrow. He squinted at the rowdy guy through the smoke from his cigarette.

"Kelly, the Goth one with the dark hair?" Marius provided.

Justin's eyes flicked left in a quick bird-like gesture. The look was only a flash, but it was an annoyed one which Marius bore the full brunt of for the brief moment it lasted.

"Yeah, that's the one," the rowdy guy's eyes lit up as he remembered. "Whoaahh." He made a deep grunting noise in the back of his throat and grabbed his crotch with his hand, proceeding to thrust his groin into his palm. "I'd like to slip her one."

I was watching Justin closely now. This had turned rather interesting all of a sudden.

The guy standing closest to the rowdy guy was a tall, almost impossibly thin and gangly specimen. He laughed through his nose at his friend's gesture, which rowdy guy began to exaggerate when he realised he was drawing attention. They reminded me of Laurel and Hardy, the tall one and the fat one, Laurel and Rowdy.

Something came to Laurel. He seemed to realise they were the only ones laughing. "Isn't that the bitch who accused you of raping her?" He asked Justin.

The whole group fell silent instantly. Everyone waited for Justin's response. I saw Quinton flicking his half-finished cigarette away.

"Excuse me?" Justin said. "What did you say?"

"I asked," Laurel continued, oblivious of the sudden change in mood. "Is that the bitch who accused you of raping her? Did you?"

"Whoaahh," Rowdy said and fucked his hand again.

I saw Quinton cracking his knuckles. He didn't have his skateboard with him tonight but I was sure those hands could do some damage.

"Where do you pick up bullshit like that?" Justin asked.

Laurel, I sensed, was beginning to pick up a hint of danger. Understanding that he might be on tricky ground he proceeded more carefully. "No, man. Uhhh, no offence. I mean, it's just what I heard. She and her friends, some other people, you know they've been kinda badmouthing you as a rapist. I mean, I just wondered, I don't know anything."

"You shouldn't believe all the stories you hear." Justin finished his cigarette, flicked it into the bushes in the building's forecourt garden.

“And you shouldn’t go around accusing people of being rapists, you dumb fuck.” Quinton stared down Laurel and Rowdy.

But it all ended well when Justin decided to call off his dog. “All right. It’s time we get going. This joint is dying a slow death and there’s beer waiting in the Microbus. Shall we, Quinton?”

Quinton smiled.

They were about to walk off when Justin turned to us. “Would you kids like to drive with us?”

“We’ve still got to go help clean up inside. Mrs Holmes said –” Billy started.

“Yeah, we’d like to. That would be nice.” I finished.

Billy looked at me, his vague sense of responsibility trying to get the better of him.

“Come on Doctor B, like she’s gonna know.”

“Of course she’ll know, she’s got her knife in for us already.”

I saw Justin losing patience, beginning to turn away from us, our only realistic chance of getting to that party disappearing.

I started walking after them. “Come on, Doctor B. We’ll just tell her our lift arrived, we had to go. We won’t even be lying.”

The after-party was held at a four-storey mansion built into the slope of Lion’s Head in the Tamboerskloof area. It belonged to Sarah Moore’s boyfriend’s family. They were from England. Billy perked up noticeably when he realised that meant Sarah would definitely be there, and that some outside chance of impressing her still existed. How he was going to get past the boyfriend in his own house was harder to understand. We were one of the first cars to arrive. Justin and Quinton opened beers and started passing them along. We stood around in the street outside, drinking and waiting for the hosts to arrive.

Sarah and her boyfriend were next to appear. They unlocked, showed Quinton where to park and within half-an-hour the whole place was swarming with people. Billy and I were out by the pool, sitting around, not really talking to anyone, watching people walk to and fro, wondering why we’d bothered. We managed to scavenge beers from the fridge, not knowing who they belonged to but always hoping we weren’t taking from the stash of the guy standing in line behind us. We went back out to the pool and sat around.

Billy got up at some point, looked around and said: “Fuck this. I’m going to look for Sarah.”

He walked off without a pause or any further ceremony and disappeared in amongst the crowd. I sat watching the lights from the house dance on the pool water, following the reflections of the people on the opposite side. Snippets of conversation floated out to me, mostly incomprehensible babble.

I had to go to the bathroom. I walked past a group sitting under the lapa.

“Hey, waiter,” one of them shouted. “Bring us a beer then, will you?”

Everyone laughed. I noticed I still had my bowtie on. I untied it and slipped it into my pocket, undid the top button of my shirt. In the living room another group sat around, playing some kind of drinking game. I paused there for a bit. Each person had a card stuck to their foreheads. They were getting trashed quite quickly. I went up the stairs and looked for a toilet. The sounds of sex emanated from almost every room I passed.

What I found, before I found the bathroom, was a queue leading to it. A couple were kissing each other in line before me. I sipped my beer. A guy stumbled out of the bathroom, looked at the couple, said, “whooh! Get a room,” and then stumbled off again. The couple found a room, the bathroom. I waited.

I waited.

I hoped they would do their business – whatever it may be – and be done with it. I really had to go. But it was deadly quiet on the other side of the door. I thought of looking for another bathroom. I put my ear to the door, listening for sounds from within, hoping to get a clue as to whether this might be worth the wait or whether I should get busy with alternative arrangements, when someone spoke behind me.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

“I, uhh,” I stepped back from the door, trying to be nonchalant, seem inconspicuous. “They uhh... I’m just trying to figure out what they’re doing in...” I looked around, and my thoughts floated away from me. I stammered something incoherent and then just stood there, staring at Kelly.

“Is there someone in there?” she asked.

She had make-up on, dark mascara under her eyes. Her long black hair seemed like velvet in the hallway lights.

“I uhh... yes. Yes there is. Two.”

“What?” She laughed.

"I mean, two people went in. A boy and a girl. A couple. I don't know how long they'll be."

"Aaahh, bugger," Kelly said.

And so we waited together. My need to go was getting quite serious but this was the best opportunity of the night to speak to her, a one-time offer. I stopped waiting and turned to face her again.

"Do you remember me?" I asked.

She smiled. "I've seen you around, yes."

"I'm sorry about that night at the Salamander. I didn't mean to be obnoxious."

She looked at me for a long time. "I'm sorry, at the Salamander?" And then something came to her. "Oh, at the bar, that was you?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry."

"That's okay. You just spooked me."

"I didn't mean to. It's just that I've had the biggest crush on you since the day I met you." I felt the words coming out, rolling like rocks down a hill and try as I might there was no stopping them. "But back then you'd still been with Justin and there was nothing... I mean I respected your decision to be with him and all, it's just... I don't know... he's always been a bit of an asshole. I could never understand what you were doing with him." I had a suspicion I was pretty red-faced by then.

She looked at me, a thin smile creasing her lips. "Well, I certainly learned my lesson on that account."

"You mean the rape?"

The words hung there, like those smoke clouds the dead, windless Cape Town refused to disperse. Her face twisted, she looked down at the floor.

"I'm sorry," I said. "The uhuh..." An image of a floundering Laurel came to mind. "I'm sorry, it's just what I heard."

"You know," she sounded contemplative, spoke easily, her voice out of sync with the pained expression on her face. "I can't wait to be done with school. It's just a couple more months and then I can fuck off. I'm going to England on a working visa next year, shake this whole twisted place off my shoulders. A fresh start."

The bathroom door banged open behind us and the couple emerged, hanging on to each other. "It's all yours, folks," the guy said and gave me a little wink.

We watched them walk off down the hallway. And then it was just the two of us standing there. We found ourselves suspended in some kind of time-warp. There was no way to proceed with a conversation like this.

Kelly snapped her fingers by the side of her head, making me jump. “Just like that,” she said. “One moment and your life is fucked. One moment you’re walking along and everything is sane, your hopes and dreams seem achievable, and the next – nothing. There’s nothing left. Every day becomes a weight around your ankles. Every heartbeat a shackle you can’t shake.”

I wanted to hug her. I wanted to hold her and tell her that together we could break all of it. Two broken people, together, could be whole again.

“Would you like to have a drink with me downstairs?” I asked.

Kelly sighed and looked at me long and hard. There was enough time for an overwhelmingly hopeful feeling to rise in my chest. It was all coming together for little Mickey. Professor M was a genius.

“Look, Michael,” Kelly said after several imagined lifetimes with her by my side had passed. “I remember you from when you and Justin were friends. You were always nice to me. I always kind of liked you.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. My world was turning around, doing a full 180 in front of my very eyes, and I urged her to go on, to get to the end of her confession so our blissful union could commence.

“But that was another me. What Justin did... it changed me. It changed me forever. I don’t know why I’m being this honest. I guess I just want someone to know the truth. I don’t go with boys anymore, Michael. I’m done with the love men think they can provide.”

She bent forward and kissed me on the forehead. “You’re very sweet. But I’ve gotta go home. I just popped in to say hello anyway.”

She went in the bathroom and closed the door behind her. I was left to stand in the hallway, feeling the heat of her lips still burning just above my left eye, hoping she’d left a smudge of lipstick I could discern in the mirror, which I would sit staring at for the whole day tomorrow – a little trace of the life that could have been.

I sighed. I was still right where I had been. And I still needed to pee. But then another sensation became more pressing.

I couldn’t breathe. There was a pain in my throat. It took a moment to realise that someone had me by the collar. Then I felt a knee smash into my lower back. The

sound was a dull thud and pain seared through every part of me, amplified by a full bladder.

“You little motherfucker,” I recognised Justin’s voice whispering warmly into my right ear. “You’re a very slow fucking learner, aren’t you?”

Justin started walking me to the stairs. I felt something warm trickle down my leg. I gritted my teeth and hoped I could hold out a little longer.

I couldn’t understand where he’d come from, where he’d been while Kelly and I were talking, but there were many rooms on this floor and I suppose all of them had been occupied. And, really, if I’d have cared to think about it this shouldn’t have surprised me in the least. That hope which had momentarily bubbled in me, well of course that had to be eradicated. It was just my luck. In the ludicrous game that was my life there was no “Get out of jail free” card. There was only a “Don’t pass go and don’t collect R200” card.

We went down the stairs, me with my collar firmly clasped in Justin’s claw. Down in the living room – where some person luckier than me, playing a different board game, might have found some salvation, some caring soul to say, “hey, leave the guy alone,” – we found a group of people thoroughly trashed and wholly occupied by their drinking game. They did not spare us a glance. But Quinton walked in from somewhere outside at that very moment and saw me and Justin.

“Come, Quinton,” Justin said. “I caught this little prick with Kelly upstairs.”

“Motherfucker,” Quinton said, and I had a moment to reflect on how one-dimensional their vocabulary was getting.

Then Quinton cracked his knuckles and followed Justin and me down another flight of stairs. We walked out the front door, descended the couple of steps there and walked down the steeply sloping driveway and arrived down in the street.

There Justin swung me around by the collar, bringing his knee up into my back again, causing a harsh squealing cough to grate up my throat. He swung me so that Quinton became the centrepiece of my vision. Then Quinton hit me in the stomach and all my former misgivings about him were confirmed. He really was very strong, and it seemed he knew a lot about punching, had practiced. Being friends with Justin that should not really have surprised me. If you were friends with him, even an acquaintance and not really a friend, you ended up here; fighting in the street. More accurately, being held down in the street and beaten in the street. Down here.



My bladder let go after about the third blow. And even here, even now, it felt like ultimate relief. Quinton spotted it immediately.

“Yeah, you little pussy. You see what happens,” he laughed. “Little motherfucker pissed himself.”

“Aah, for fuck’s sake,” Justin said and shoved me away from him, towards Quinton.

Quinton really was very good at this sort of thing. He used my staggering, wandering, disconcerted stumble towards him to plant a huge smacker of a blow just above my left eyebrow. It was at that point I lost my ability to stand up. Quinton helped, though. He got me by the collar, pulled me to my knees, and pulled back his clenched fist once more, winding up.

On my knees before him I had a moment to think how funny it would be if I told him I wasn’t going to give him a blow-job. That caused me to smile. Quinton noticed and I’m pretty sure that’s why he chose my lips as the next destination for that lethal left hand of his.

I didn’t smile much from that point on. I didn’t do much really, from then on. Quinton punched me a few more times, I think. Justin then got creative with where to kick me. The kidneys hurt the most. And once they were satisfied that I’d been taught a valuable life lesson, they dumped me.

There was a patch of dirt and yellowy kikuyu grass between the after-party venue and the house next door. They dumped me there, spat on me a few times and then trundled off, laughing and swearing.

I tried to say “Justin, Quinton, you’re very sweet, but I’ve gotta go home.” My mouth felt sore and full of blood so I don’t know what came out and I’m pretty sure Justin and Quinton didn’t hear it, since I heard the front door slam shut, impossibly far away while I said it.

I thought of a lot of things while I lay there.

I thought of Kelly saying “What Justin did to me... it changed me.” That made me want to laugh.

I tried another word out. This one I’m pretty sure I got out right, despite the blood and the sore mouth. This word was made for a bloody, sore mouth.

“Motherfucker.” It was the word for the evening, all the vocabulary this situation could ever need, so I said it again.

There was a time, long ago in some different lifetime, when we would get in trouble for saying that word – and that made me want to laugh too. And that made me think of my father shouting at us. “You little bastards. If you want to live like fucking barbarians, then be fucking barbarians.” And that made me laugh, which hurt my throat and made blood run down my cheeks and into my ears.

I thought of Kelly saying “Just like that. One moment and your life is fucked.” And that really made me laugh, but it was still sore, so I decided to giggle, rather. That hurt my tummy but that was okay, to hurt somewhere else for a while. That wasn’t so bad.

I thought of Kelly saying she doesn’t go with boys anymore, and how that was kind of funny. And how maybe I shouldn’t go with boys anymore either. Especially down the stairs and out the front door.

And I thought of Kelly saying she was going to England on a working visa next year, how she was going to shake this whole twisted place off her shoulders. “A fresh start.” And that didn’t really make me want to laugh. In fact it made me stop laughing. That seemed like something to do.

With the laughing passed nothing really hurt anymore. There was a dull throb inside me that didn’t feel healthy, made me worry a bit, actually. But it was okay. If I could sleep a little, maybe it’d all be better, like a fresh start, maybe.

I heard people talking in the driveway, saying goodbyes, wishing each other luck for the Final Exams. And it was kind of nice to hear these friendly voices, even if they weren’t speaking to me. I hoped they would do well in the exams, hell, they deserved to, why not? If I could just sleep a little.

I wondered if what Justin did to me... whether it changed me enough so I’d never be able to sleep again. That would be a bummer. But really, that was maybe a silly thought, because it wasn’t long before I was asleep.

When I woke up the sun was out and the wind was blowing. Cape Town was alive again. I could hear all the sounds I knew. Cars driving, lawnmowers mowing, people saying, “Eissh, man. Are you okay?”

I tried to open my eyes and on the second attempt I managed. I don’t know, he must be the gardener or something. The lawnmower had stopped mowing. My eyes felt caked down with something. My mouth was very dry. He bent over me.

“Hey, man. Can you hear me?”

I smelled his sweat, and wondered what I must look like to him. I could hear him, of course, but I didn't have the strength to tell him, or to nod, or anything, really. I just wanted to go back to sleep. I hoped Kelly had left a lipstick smear on my face and that it was still there.

But when I woke up in the hospital they'd cleaned me up a bit and it was no longer there, assuming it had ever been.

Mom and Alison came to visit me in the hospital, which was nice of them. Mom wanted to know who did this to me. I told her not to worry, that it was a game which got slightly out of hand, everything was fine.

Two policemen arrived later and asked the same question. "Who did this to you?"

So I told them not to worry, that we'd been playing a game which had got slightly out of hand. Everything was fine.

They left eventually, despite mom's objections. "There's nothing we can do if he doesn't want to talk," one of them said. He gave mom a card and told her to phone if I chose to remember anything.

Mom was angry at me, said it wasn't right that whoever did this to me should get away with it. But she really needn't have worried. Nobody was going to get away with anything.

\*

The walk back from my stone throne to the Knysna house begins to seem very familiar by the Saturday afternoon. It's the third time I'm out there. I woke up Saturday morning and went straight there, sat around for an hour and then walked back, woke up Alison and Tannit and we set about a brunch of eggs, bacon, toast and fried tomatoes. Alison and Tannit started sorting through some of the papers lying around, checked the boxes Saul had left and made sure everything they needed was there. Alison said she wanted to make sure she didn't have to come back here again. She wanted to close the book on this place once and for all now.

I shared the sentiment. So, I walked out to my spot again around noon and set about removing the ghostly image of this place from the corner of my eye as best I could. But it is hot out here with the sun at its fullest height in the sky, so I don't stay more than a couple of hours. When I go back Tannit and Alison have finished for the

day. Alison says she got tired of all these memories floating up to the surface quite quickly and after about an hour of sorting and checking had settled for piling as many things into the boxes as she could, gathering up anything she thought Mr Wilkinson could possibly want. Afterwards Tannit opens a bottle of wine and they both sit on the patio outside, waiting for the day's heat to subside. I get a beer from the fridge and join them out there. We have sandwiches for lunch after which Tannit produces a bankie of weed and sets about rolling joints.

I smoke the first one with them, drink another beer, and feeling extremely mellow decide to take another walk out to my vantage point of the Heads. They open a second bottle of wine just before I leave. It is cooler now, so I sit around watching the push and pull of the ocean through that gap. When the sun dips low I realise I have been sitting here for a long time. I start back, breathing in the evening air and feeling lighter than I have all day.

I am quite hungry and think about suggesting a trip down to one of the eateries in town. I am sure the girls will agree after their afternoon of smoking and drinking.

I come back and find an empty patio. There are three empty wine bottles on the table, and an ashtray full of butts; I count four. I walk around the house and see the Mercedes still in the driveway. They must have gone off for a walk, I think. I go back round to the patio and open the sliding door, sit down on the couch and page through the copy of *Womyn* magazine Tannit has brought along. It doesn't serve for long and is soon superseded by a full bladder. I drop the magazine and go upstairs.

I find the bathroom door open and the bath full of water. The floor is strewn with underwear, a pair of jeans, a summer dress, a white blouse. I stand urinating, not thinking of much. I zip up, think about pulling the plug and rinsing the bath. I yawn, and suddenly lying down seems like a good idea. I can sleep until they get home.

I make for my room, but only get as far as the door when I hear a sound from the master bedroom at the end of the hallway. I think that perhaps one of the windows are open, that the wind is picking up.

I go to close it.

The door is slightly ajar and I push it open. I take two steps towards the window before I stop.

I stand there, breathing in and breathing out.

One smooth thigh peeks from under the covers. Two chests rise and fall in unison, rise and fall, rise and fall. Arms are wrapped about each other. The room is

slightly stuffy, as if effort has been exerted in here. Smooth black hair drapes one pillow, shocking red curls another. Two chests rise and fall, rise and fall.

I breathe in, breathe out, go out. I tip-toe down the stairs and sit down on the couch, staring at that magazine, but not really seeing it.

I feel the thin hair on my arms stir, as if in response to an icy breeze. I shake my head slowly from side to side.

I get up and walk out to the shed, pausing to pick up the set of keys from the kitchen table on my way out.

I undo the padlock and open the door. Dust swirls in the fading sunlight. I look around in the dark, until my eyes adjust. I find the toolbox Saul keeps just to the right of the door.

I scratch around inside it for a while, not thinking. Then I find a knife Charlie and Mr Wilkinson must have used when they went fishing. I test its cutting edge, when my mind starts catching up. What am I doing?

I can feel myself swallow, and there is a coppery taste in the back of my throat.

It is as if I can see myself standing there, one hand holding onto the doorframe for support, mouth open, testing and testing that blade, staring into the shed's interior as if some answer is written in that darkness.

I hold my face in my hands, feel the blunt, cold reality of the knife against the side of my forehead – where Kelly's lips once touched me, where Alison once traced a circle with her hair.

And then that old familiar sense of falling is back, and the people walking down there in the street, and the cars passing, and the ocean's hushed whisper and that one piercing seagull's caw.

## Dead-Ends

By 1997 we were the seniors. The Oakleaf grounds belonged to us. We knew that the diluted silver nitrate we worked with in the labs could stain your skin. We knew that  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and  $\text{SO}_4$  made  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  which smelled like rotten eggs. And everyone in the lab went “Phew” and Oooh.” Billy and I made vomiting sounds to entice the girls. And we started sneaking chemicals out, first preparing the reeking gas and lobbing handfuls into the girls’ toilets, then holding the doors shut and laughing while they screamed to be let out. The teachers held no fear for us since we knew that soon we’d be out of their grasp. There were no seniors who we had to watch our step around, we could pretty much do what we liked, and we did.

We began to experiment with household chemicals at home, throwing things together which fizzed and bubbled and left yellow stains on the lawns. Soon that was not enough. We found chemicals that ignited when thrown together, causing bright yellow flames, or strange purple ones. Throwing household chemicals like Chlorine and milk together in a bottle created pressure and a satisfying explosion. So when final exams came round for us, Chemistry was the only paper I wasn’t really worried about. But schoolwork and worries about my future were very much peripheral to me that year. I had other things on my mind.

One afternoon when we were sitting around at Billy’s place, smoking cigarettes he said: “You’ll never guess who I saw at the Pick ‘n Pay this afternoon.”

Sarah Moore was the first name which came to mind, but I had heard through the grapevine that she’d left for England with her boyfriend after finishing school. I couldn’t guess and so Billy told me.

“Justin.”

“Really,” I said. “What, was he like in there shopping?”

“No,” Billy said, dragging on his cigarette. “He works there as a cashier.”

We were writing our final paper on Wednesday the following week. Over the weekend I went round to the grocery store and ambled through the aisles. I spotted Justin sitting behind one of the tills, ringing up merchandise. He’d grown his hair quite long since he didn’t have Mr Lehmann stopping him in the hallways every day and telling him to get a haircut and clean up his image. I walked over to the cigarette

counter, making sure he didn't see me, bought a packet of Chesterfield Filters and a can of Coca-Cola, then went to wait in the parking lot for his shift to end. It was around four when I sat down. I was pretty sure he would finish around six.

A security guard came up to me at one point and asked me to move along. I told him that I was waiting for a friend of mine who would finish at six. He didn't seem too happy about it but he sensed soon enough that I had no intention of leaving before then. He continued on his survey of the mall's interior and the parking lot, making sure to keep an eye on me.

It was a quarter past six when Justin appeared. I was sitting down so he couldn't see me. I waited for him to get going and then I got up and followed at a discreet distance. He walked out onto Kildare lane, then turned left at Warwick and crossed Main Road at the traffic light onto Newry street. He walked straight across Fir street and found a hole in the chain link fence there, through which he climbed. I paused on the corner of Newry and Fir, waiting there until he was through the fence and counting to ten. Then I rushed across and walked along the fence. He had climbed down to where the train tracks ran. He walked along them. He stopped and sat down on one of the concrete markers for a while, rolling what I presumed was a joint. I walked a little way along Fir street, then turned around and came back to the spot, trying to be inconspicuous.

When I passed close to where Justin sat I thought I could hear him singing to himself. I couldn't make out what the song was. He smoked the joint about halfway before he got up and set off along the tracks again. About 700 metres further along he crushed the joint in the dirt and climbed up the bank. There was a low wall there which he jumped to emerge onto the street on that side.

"Shit," I swore to myself and paused on my little route. There was no way to get from where I was on Fir street to where he had scaled that wall.

I turned around and ran back along Fir street. I found the gap in the fence and wriggled through. Then I rushed down the bank onto the tracks and ran along. A loud hooting whistle warned me that a train was approaching. I got off the track, ran along the rough gravel which was more precarious. The train whooshed past me, feeling like it wanted to suck me along. The driver waved his fist out the window at me. I popped him the one fingered salute, knowing it was futile since I didn't think he had a rearview mirror. I climbed the opposite bank and found my way to the low wall. I peeked over the top but couldn't see anyone. I scaled it and landed in the road, setting

off at a fast run. I passed the church and then came to the busy Palmyra road. Cars whizzed by in both directions, but the worst of peak hour traffic was already past. I read the sign board. I was on the corner of Stegman and Palmyra. I looked first to the right and then, when I looked to the left I could just make Justin out, far along Palmyra by then. I set off at a sprint.

Once I'd closed satisfactorily on him I slowed down, hung back, caught my breath. I followed him along Palmyra for a long time. He strolled along slowly, lighting a cigarette every so often. I knew the next big road we'd come to was Campground, but in the end he didn't make it there. He cut across an open piece of field to the right before he reached the big intersection. I sped up a little, closing more distance. A little footpath ran diagonally across the open field. Justin made his way straight to it.

I had to hang back a little, wait for him to get most of the way across before I could follow. A man came up from behind me and rushed past. My heart thundered loudly in my chest suddenly and it was all I could do to keep from shouting in alarm. But the man passed, the dog on the leash got a quick sniff at me and wagged its tail before the man yanked it back. He jogged away and the dog trailed after him. Justin was onto New Park road. He didn't set off along it in either direction. He crossed the road and entered the house directly opposite the open field.

I watched the man jogging off into the distance. I looked around the open field for a bit, judging how exposed it was. Then I set off home.

Upstairs, in my room, I trawled through the Chemistry section of my Science textbook, but there was nothing of use in there. I went downstairs and told Mom I needed to find something on the internet.

"It's for school," I said.

"All right, just be quick."

Upstairs again. I locked the door to the study and set about my business.

That night I lay awake in bed, waiting for all the puzzle pieces to fall in place. I retraced the day's route in my head. The train tracks made a slight bend at a point just before the exit onto Stegman road and I knew it would have to be there. The open field was too exposed. I would need Billy's help.

The alarm clock on Mom's bedside table ticked for a long time, during which she simply stared at me.



“What do you mean you want to leave?”

“Just that. I need to get out of here. I’m tired of this place, Mom. Nothing’s ever gone right here.”

“And you think it will be better somewhere else?”

“For a while.”

“And then?”

“I don’t know. We’ll see.”

She put the novel she’d been reading aside. Again she waited patiently before saying something. We had never talked much so I was sure on the one hand she was relishing this and trying to draw it out a little. I could sense how she was picking her words very carefully.

“But *where* will you go?”

“I thought I’d go stay with Aunt Gertrude and Uncle Mitch for a while. They always said if we were ever up in Pretoria we should drop by.”

Aunt Gertrude was Dad’s older sister. Mom’s hand tightened on her knee, squeezing and releasing, squeezing. “Drop by isn’t exactly the same as staying for a while.”

“Would you at least phone and ask her? Or is money the problem?”

“No, there’s no problem. Dad left you some money. It’s not much, but it’ll last you for a while, until you’re settled up there.”

Dad had left me some money. That was nice of him, until you thought about how carefully he must have planned abandoning us, to have left money.

“Are you sure about this, though?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything, Mom. It’s time for me to go.”

She nodded, reached out and put her hand on my knee, squeezed, let go. I got up and hugged her, gave her a quick peck on the cheek. “Thanks, mom,” I said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

I closed her door behind me when I left. If anyone would have heard from Dad it would be his sister, I thought.

It was a cloudy late afternoon almost two weeks after we finished our final paper when Billy sat waiting for me in Arlington Park. The wind was strong, but it was a strange gusting sort of wind, tugging first one way and then another. It was darker than it usually was by 5:30 on account of the rain clouds banked thickly all around. I

was glad Billy was on time. I was half-expecting him not to show. He squinted at me when I dropped my bike and sat down next to him on the grass. He was rubbing at his eyes.

“The wind’s bad,” he said. “Looks like it’s going to rain as well.”

“Hmnn,” I looked around, took the cigarette Billy held out and dragged deeply on it. “Did you bring the chlorine?”

Billy opened his backpack which was lying next to him on the grass and handed me the cup of chlorine he’d taken from his dad’s 5-litre container at home. I made sure the cup was properly sealed and then slipped it carefully into my backpack with the other ingredients.

“You ready to commence experiment, Doctor B?”

Billy smiled; a thin humourless stretch of the lips. “You mean to go through with it, Professor M?”

I rubbed my chin. “The conclusion, my dear Doctor B, is 100% certainty. I’m doing this whether you’re there or not.”

Billy sighed, smiled with a smidgen more humour. “All right, all right, Prof. I’m in.”

“Good man,” I smiled. “Let’s commence. The experiment has a small window in which to succeed. Let’s not slip up.”

“Exactly as we discussed?” Billy asked, finishing the cigarette and crushing it under his sole.

“To the letter,” I said and grabbed my bike.

“See you in a bit,” Billy said and we began pedalling away from each other, him to the northern exit of the park and me to the eastern.

A little while later I chained my bike in front of the church on Stegman and set off. Nobody saw me, which wasn’t vital but certainly helped. The wind was turning nasty. People were staying indoors right then.

I scaled the low wall and checked my backpack. Everything was there. I trod carefully down the slope. A train passed when I was halfway down. I sat, clutching my backpack to my chest, squeezed my eyes and mouth shut and waited for the train to pass and the dust to settle. Once down next to the tracks I zipped open the backpack and pushed it in among the grass where it was less visible. This was the only spot along this piece of railway that was reasonably well obscured. I looked across to the opposite bank, trying to pick out the hole in the fence. I couldn’t make it out exactly

from here, but I knew more or less where it was. I made sure I would be invisible from there.

I took out a two-litre Coke bottle from my backpack. I poured the brake fluid – taken from dad’s stuff in the garage, leftovers from when he used to service our cars himself. It filled the bottle to just more than one-third. I put the red bottle cap on and took the cup of chlorine out of the backpack. I pushed the Coke bottle back in the backpack. A strong whiff of chlorine hit me when I checked that the container could be unscrewed in a hurry. I took the plastic funnel out as well and then I sat back against the embankment and waited.

I anticipated having to calm myself down at this point, but my heart beat steadily in my chest. The wind snaked and whipped through the long grass growing up the embankment’s slope, making zig-zagging patterns, making the yellow grass seem alive. My skin broke out in gooseflesh, the wind lapping up the sweat from my arms and legs. Another train passed after a bit.

I checked my watch. It was twenty five minutes past six. Single drops of rain pattered here and there. What was going on? Did he get a lift home because of the rain? Did he maybe spot Billy and suspect something’s up? I had chosen Thursday afternoon, to be sure he wasn’t going out drinking with friends afterwards. But maybe he had tomorrow off, or just didn’t mind showing up at work with a hangover. But I’d followed him home every Thursday for three weeks and each time had been exactly the same.

Shit, maybe the rain was throwing us off. This was the one variable the planning for the experiment had not anticipated. But it had to be today. Tomorrow would be too late. How could I save this? What could I do? I didn’t like new variables or unpredictable conditions.

And then I heard the crunch-crunch-crunch of footsteps in the gravel, quite close. Shit, again. Where was Doctor B? Something was wrong, it was all going wrong! And then the train came by, rattling the rails, kicking up dust, drowning all sound. The driver hooted again, at whoever was crunching along the rails. I wasn’t visible to him from here. I risked a quick peek around the bend of the embankment. The train was between me and whoever was on the other side. I fell to my knees and looked through underneath the passing carriages. I saw black sneakers, the frayed pant-legs of Justin’s jeans. So, I was on my own. It was just me and him. Fair enough, I thought. I supposed this was how it had always been meant to play out.

I picked a fair-sized rock from among the gravel, one with a satisfyingly sharp edge at one end, and waited for the train to pass. And then, just as it did, I heard Doctor B's voice from somewhere to the left.

"Hey, Justin!"

It could not have been more perfect. The train exposed Justin to me just as he came within perfect throwing range. I was still half-obscured from him where I crouched, but even that didn't matter as he was looking around at Billy's voice. A half-finished joint dangled from the fingers of his right hand. I ran straight at him, brought the rock up above my head and shouted,

"Hey Justin!"

The rock smashed into his face. He fell to his knees without a sound. He tried to stay in that position but slumped over after a moment, hitting his head quite hard on the rail, and then groaned once. He turned around slowly, tried to get back up to his knees. There was blood pouring from his nose and mouth. A deep cut ran across his face from beneath his left eye all the way to his chin. He was looking around, trying to orientate himself. He brought his hand up to his face, still dazed.

"Fuck," he mumbled. "What the fuck?"

I grabbed him by his hair, pulled it back so he could look me in the eyes. He needed to see, he needed to understand. This was right. Still my heart rate was steady, control pulsed through me.

"Hey, motherfucker," I said. "Remember me?"

He looked at me and I waited for the recognition in his eyes before I brought the rock down on his face again.

"Who's the motherfucker now, motherfucker?"

I kicked him in the ribs twice, and fetched him a proper one in the kidneys.

"And that's what that feels like you piece of shit."

"Hey, dude," Billy said, arriving, out of breath. "I think you've made your point. I think he's scared. What are you doing down here?"

"Run, Doctor B," I said. "Get back to your bike. Meet me in Arlington." I threw the rock into the grass on the embankment. I took the Coke bottle out, unscrewed the cap, popped the funnel in the neck, looked round at Billy and said "Run, idiot."

"Mickey, what the fuck?" Billy said.

Justin groaned some incoherent plea from the gravel where he lay.

I unscrewed the chlorine, tipped the contents of the cup into the funnel. Billy had been advancing on me all the while, but he froze when he saw this.

“Fuck, dude. Fuck. You’re crazy, fuck!” He grabbed his hair.

“Run,” I said. I smiled faintly at the comical expression of shock, so melodramatic on his face. “Arlington park, meet me there.”

I tossed the funnel into the backpack and put the Coke bottle’s cap back on. It was already heating up in my hands when I finished. Billy turned around and ran. I shook the bottle twice and put it down next to Justin. He was still groaning, incoherently, clutching at his face.

I rolled him over so he lay on the bottle. “Enjoy, motherfucker,” I said and kicked him once more in the head.

Then I grabbed the backpack and sprinted, zipping it up and throwing it over my shoulder in the run. I leaped and bounded up the embankment, grabbed the low wall and vaulted it. It was just as my feet hit the tarmac of Stegman road that I heard a loud, WHOOP, sucking sound and then the tell-tale, WHAP-BANG.

I sprinted down Stegman, got to the church, untied my bike, and as I pedalled away I heard a woman from a nearby garden saying, “what was that?”

People were appearing at the church’s main door also. Nobody paid me any attention. Boys on bicycles and loud bangs had nothing in common. I smiled to myself as I rode away. *Acid-Burn Skullheads*, indeed.

Arlington Park was draped in shadows when I got there. The sky was a broiling, grey mass of clouds, spitting fat drops of rain. It still hadn’t struck full force but it would tip down soon. I looked at my watch. It was five minutes to seven. I hoped Billy would hurry. In all honesty I could have left right then, but I thought I owed him at least some form of goodbye. And besides, I needed to make sure he was going to keep his trap shut. I pushed my bike underneath the roof of the ablution blocks. I sat, listening to the thunk sounds as the big rain drops hit. It was a quarter past seven when I saw Billy coming in through the northern entrance. He cycled over to the BMX dirt track first. There he looked around and, not finding me, came towards the building in the centre of the park. I waved when he spotted me.

Billy leaned his bike against the wall and came straight at me.

“Hi,” I said when he was close.

He grabbed me by the collar. "Fuck, dude!" He lifted me, shoved me, until I was up against the wall. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

He shook me twice, banged the back of my head against the brick wall.

I brought my knee up into his crotch, not hard, merely enough for him to cough and stagger backwards a couple of steps. As he did I pushed him over so he sat down on his bum. He sucked in two big mouthfuls of air. "What the fuck, dude?" He said once he sat down, and then just stared at me. "What the fuck was that?"

I smiled. "Give us a cigarette, then," I said.

He took out the packet and shook one out, flicking it at me. Then he rolled the lighter so it lay on the tiled floor between us. I reached for it, lit the smoke and threw it back at him.

He looked up at me and shook his head. I felt very calm.

"You said we were just going to scare him," Billy moaned. "You said, once he's down by the tracks to get his attention so you could throw the bomb from the opposite side and scare him. Scare him, Mickey. Scare! What the fuck is this?"

"Calm down, damnit. You're taking all the fun out of this." I dragged on the smoke, looked out at the world, so alive in the wind. The trees danced and the rain was getting heavier. "Did anybody see you on your way here? Did anybody stop you and ask about the sounds by the railway line? Did anything strange happen?"

He shook his head slowly from side to side, pathetic anger still raging through him.

"Then we're fine, Doctor B. The experiment was a success. All you have to do now is go home and forget all about it. There is no way this can come back to us."

Billy seemed to consider this for a bit, then lit a cigarette for himself as well. "I suppose. But what about Quinton? He might remember you?"

"So what? They made trouble with so many guys, how will they come back to us? Quinton saw us like three times. Go home, forget about it."

"Fuck," Billy sighed. "Now what are we going to do? Do you want to come over to my place?"

"No," I said. "I've got to go pack. I'm leaving for Pretoria tomorrow."

"What?" Billy looked lost, the anger had been replaced by confusion.

"I'm going to Pretoria, to stay with my aunt and uncle," I said.

"For how long?"

I shrugged.

“What am I supposed to do now?” Billy asked. He was close to tears. The rain was beginning to come down seriously. It was time to go.

I walked over to him, pulled him to his feet and hugged him. “Thanks for your friendship, Doctor B,” I said. “Now go home, forget all about this. If you can keep this a secret, we’ll be in the clear.”

I broke the embrace, grabbed my bike and cycled off into the rain. When I exited the gate I saw Billy still standing where he was, a thin silhouette barely visible through the curtain of rain. I turned away and cycled the familiar way back home. The street lamps started coming on along the way. I imagined I could hear sirens off in the distance somewhere.

The next day I sat around at Jo’burg International airport, waiting for Uncle Mitch and Aunt Gertrude to come pick me up. She phoned shortly after I stepped off the plane and apologised, said they were running late. I bought a paper. I read it from cover to cover and knew I had done the right thing. Up here, kids who died on railroad tracks in Cape Town were not news. I smiled and turned to the entertainment section.

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*Come now, Mickey. You’re not gonna tell me you’re surprised now, Mickey. She could never have been yours. You knew this.*

I’m pacing around my room. Mom, Alison and Tannit are sitting downstairs. I can hear the soft murmur of their conversation, intermittent laughing. It’s Sunday. I’d woken up early this morning, had taken another stroll out to my spot, but nothing had wanted to wash out through the Heads. My thoughts were jumbled.

After lunch we packed up and put Knsyna behind us with unceremonious simplicity. It hovered in the rearview mirror for a bit, and then, as we rounded the first bend along the coast it was gone.

Now I’m back here, in my room, and it’s like everything is here with me again.

*Poor Charlie, Mickey, hey? They must have planned it, the two of them. They must have been in on this together. Don’t be surprised, Mickey. You’re cut from the same fabric, you and her.*

When we got home, Mom had invited Alison and Tannit in for tea. Alison had accepted, had said there was something important she wanted to talk about. I'd grabbed my luggage out of the boot and headed upstairs, pleaded fatigue.

*And have you ever thought about your dad, Mickey? Where's old Walter gone? He did a pretty outstanding job of disappearing, didn't he? And only mom and Alison were home, Mickey. Ever put two and two together on that one, Mickey? He had it coming, though.*

Shut up, shut up! I have to stop this.

*Remember what Aunt Gertrude said when you asked whether they'd heard from dad, Mickey? Do you remember? You have to let go, Mickey. Isn't that what she said, Mickey? But Dad was never a nice guy, was he? So, everyone turned a blind eye. Poor Marjorie and her kids, they'll be better off now.*

Billy. Of course. Billy. I have to get to Billy. He is my friend. He'd been there for me when I'd needed him. He had even been there when I came back. I have to get to Billy. As soon as my hand grips the door handle I am stopped cold, a high-pitched, cheerfully frightening sound in my ears. I stand there, reminding myself to breathe and then realise it's my cell phone, ringing.

I snatch it up and press 'Answer.'

"Yes," I whisper.

"Hello, Michael," Rebecca says.

I nearly scream, actually have to bite my tongue to keep from doing so.

"Michael, look. I've been doing a lot of soul-searching the last couple of weeks and really, you have to agree, we're long overdue for a chat."

"Hmnn, hmm." My voice trembles. It's all I can get out.

"Look," I hear her sigh, pushing on. "I think it's pretty obvious we've both moved on. I guess I'm just looking for some closure, in a way. But that night before you left. We never talked about that. And I'd like to know what exactly –"

I drop the phone on my bed and turn to go. Then I think better of it and put my pillow over the phone.

*Come on, Mickey, aren't you going to talk to Becky? Tell her all about how you were going to turn the sheets red with her blood?*

I make it onto the landing, crouch there. They are busy clearing the table. I think there is a moment when Alison looks up, but then she simply turns around and walks into the kitchen.



This is my only chance. I make it down the stairs, go into the garage. My old BMX is still there. I slide the garage door open, feeling its rough metallic grating tremble through me. Then I grab my bike by the handlebars and wheel it out. When I'm in the street I jump on and start pedalling. It is a bit wobbly at first, this way, then that. I almost fall at one point, but soon enough I get it all straightened out.

I drop the bike on the steps in front of Manor Towers, underneath the big chrome letters bolted into the concrete above the entrance. I recognise Harold, the big bouncer from the strip club, standing in the foyer. He has a couple of suitcases with him. I nod a perfunctory greeting, get in the elevator and press the number 15. The lift goes up and up.

Billy's apartment door is open. There are two more suitcases standing by the entrance. I find him and Fantasia in the kitchen, sorting through some paperwork that looks like plane tickets.

Billy looks up when I enter. "Mickey, hey. What a surprise. How was Knysna?"

"Informative," I say.

He smiles. "Okay. Well, what brings you round? You're covered in sweat, man. Are you all right?"

"Charlie," I say. "I know what happened."

"Yeah..." Billy seems hesitant, steps closer to me and takes me by the arm. He leads me to the couch. "Sit down, man."

Fantasia comes out of the kitchen, looks hard at Billy and taps her wrist watch.

"I'll be there now, baby," Billy says to her. "Take some of the hand luggage down to Harold. I'll bring the suitcases now."

She shakes her head and fetches a sigh from the pits of frustration, then takes the tickets and a vanity case and leaves.

"It was Alison," I say as soon as she's out the door. "She killed him, Billy. She fucking killed him. It's so obvious, I don't know why we hadn't caught on before. She was in love with this Tannit woman all along. I never knew. I mean, how could I? I was away. I found them in bed together in Knysna. It was plain as daylight then."

"Wait," Billy says. "What are you talking about? Charlie fell from the balcony. He broke his back or his neck or something. Nobody killed him."

“He just fell from the balcony, yes. And two weeks later Alison is in love with this Tannit person. It must have been going on before.”

Billy shakes his head. “Okay, hold on. Hold on. You found them in bed and now you think Alison killed Charlie. That’s a bit of a leap.”

“Don’t you see it?”

“Michael,” Billy shakes his head. “She’s grieving, she’s alone. She needs someone.”

I shake my head from side to side. I can’t believe this. I realise I should never have left. “You’re in on this, aren’t you?”

“Michael,” Billy reaches out, takes my hands in his, grips me tightly by the wrists.

I remember Tannit doing the same. My mind is racing again. I was always the quicker racer. I know what is going on here. They can’t fool me.

“Look,” Billy says. “Charlie fell. It was an accident. You can’t possibly think she would kill her husband. This is the last thing she needs right now.”

“She doesn’t need me. I always thought she did, but she doesn’t. Besides, what about my dad?”

“What?” Billy shakes his head. “Dude, stop this. You really aren’t making any sense. Have you spoken to her?”

“My dad. What ever happened to him? Why is nobody asking questions about that? People don’t just disappear like that.”

“Your dad died in a car accident when we were in high school. You stayed with me for the weekend. What’s wrong with you, should I drop you at a doctor?”

I sit back, break his grip. “We fucking killed him, Doctor B. We fucking killed him. What the hell were we thinking?”

Then Billy sits back also, looks out his window at the clouds drifting over the Atlantic. A silence hangs between us like a curtain.

“Look, I’ve got to go,” he says.

“What?” I look up. “Where are you going?”

He smiles, stands up. “I’m going to Romania. Fantasia’s dad wants a reconciliation. He wants to see her. She asked me to come along so I could meet him. We’re getting married next year.”

“You’re leaving,” I say. “Now what am I supposed to do?”

“I’m sorry to drop it on you like this, Mickey. I would have told you when we came back and once things were sorted with her dad. Will you be my best man, Professor M?”

“You’re leaving?”

“Look.” He walks over to the table, takes two keys off the key ring and places them on my palm. “Tell you what. You can stay here if you want. We’ll be back in two weeks. The number for the restaurant downstairs is by the phone. If you want to go home, just lock up behind you. I’ve got to go.”

He squeezes my shoulder, pats it twice. “Do yourself a favour,” he says. “Phone Alison and talk to her.” Then he turns away, walks to the door, picks up the two suitcases and walks out.

I look at the keys on my palm, throw them on the floor. I stand up and walk over to the window, open it and feel the breeze breathe all over me.

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I heard my father’s voice boom loudly in my ears, felt Alison’s skin on mine.

“You little barbarians!” His voice was worse than the thunder outside. I went cold, pushed away from Alison.

“No! Don’t take it out! If you want to be barbaric then you be barbaric. Go on! Go on!”

He grabbed me by the neck. Alison lay there, eyes round and big, beginning to glaze over with tears.

“Go on!” He shoved me back on top of her. “If this is what you are then get it out of your system.” He pushed me down on top of her, held my neck with his right hand and took my penis in his left, forced it back into her. “Show me what you were doing.”

We cried before it was over. He let it go on for two minutes, 120 seconds that changed everything. And once he was satisfied, he let go of me slowly, a bead of sweat running down my spine.

“And now, if I ever hear a word about this again, I swear...” And then he turned away from us and walked out the room. And we never found out what he would do.

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Tears run down my cheeks just like it had then.

I see the road, the promenade beyond, the beach and the ocean. Cars stop at the traffic lights. Ant-like people walk to and fro. I have seen this image a thousand times before. It has been with me in the quiet hours of the night. It has been lurking in the back of my mind, leaping forward at unsuspecting moments. I am here. I have arrived. This is the place I have always been meant to come.

Standing here, on the fifteenth floor of Manor Towers,  
the wind in my hair,  
the hum and drum of people and cars down below,  
that one piercing seagull's caw,  
and when that feeling of vertigo,  
that sensation of free-falling is back,  
I understand  
that my descent

is

finally

complete

## Alison: Epilogue

It's a grey, overcast day spitting with rain intermittently. The wind is kicking up little vortices of sand along Camps Bay beach. I walk on ahead and sit down on one of the benches on the grass verge running along the beach. The big palm trees whisper and creak at the wind's command. Conversation and laughter drift over from the bars and restaurants along the strip. Summer will come soon, bringing with it the influx of tourists and holiday makers, some coming here for the first time. But for now it still belongs to us, the locals. The ocean laps at the shore, playing its never-ending game of tag, touching these shores we call home. What does it feel, I wonder? How much does it know?

Can it taste the blood and sweat and tears we spilled here?

Can it sense something of the creatures on the land, or are we as much a mystery to the ocean as we are to ourselves?

We come and go, one by one, and we lead lives filled with passion and pain and hope... and love, if we're lucky. And the ocean laps the shore as we go about our business so fervently, with such futility.

And when we have come and gone, what do we leave behind? Michael left behind a gravestone, at a funeral I did not attend. I'd had too much of death in too short a space of time, so I stayed away.

But the dead leave other things behind also, like pages and pages of incoherent scribbles. There were unfinished newspaper articles and introspective diary entries, confessions and mad ramblings, all in one untidy pile of papers crammed into a box under his bed, which we discovered when we cleared out his room. It made me sad that this was all he would leave us. After all the passion and fervour of his life all he left were some papers, which would blow away in a light breeze, or succumb to flame so easily.

I kept the papers, stored that same box under my bed for a long time, meaning to read all of it someday, make some sense of why he did what he did.

But when we finally convinced mother to move to a retirement village, so she'd be seen to – "You can't sit alone in that house like you do day after day, there's no point in that" – I came to a different conclusion.

Tannit and I sat by the fireplace in our new Camps Bay apartment – bought with the money we got for the Hout Bay house – and tossed those pages, one by one into the flames, unread. A time came when moving on was necessary in order to find any kind of peace. It was like a ritual, the last rites of an unhappy life. We sat up late, drinking wine, not talking much.

Then Reinhardt, our adopted son, woke up and started crying. Tannit got up, touched my knee and said “Don’t worry, I’ll get him.”

Now I watch the two of them come striding along the beach, Reinhardt stopping every few steps to pick up a pebble or a broken bit of seashell he wants Tannit to put in the plastic Pick ‘n Pay bag for safekeeping, for posterity, so we can remember this rainy mid-morning on the beach.

I had seen Stefanos only once more. He came to an exhibition of mine again, appearing like a bad dream from an old, tired, leftover part of me. He took me outside, said he was going back to Japan, that he only came to say goodbye, and that he would apologise... if only he knew how.

I told him to go. I didn’t need an apology. It no longer mattered.

Tannit and Reinhardt reaches my bench.

“We got sea-sells, Alson,” he says and hops around excitedly. I pick him up onto my lap and comb his soft blond hair with my fingers.

“Broken bits of glass and rock, really,” Tannit says sitting down next to me.

“But it’ll do.”

I smile, kiss Tannit’s cheek and say, “Shall we go make some lunch, then?”

“Now that sounds like a plan,” Tannit says, getting up.

“Hoddoz!” Reinhardt exclaims.

“You had hot-dogs yesterday,” Tannit says.

“I like hoddoz.”

“All right, all right you two,” I smile. “We’re having hot-dogs.”

We set off up the hill, Reinhardt riding piggy-back, holding onto my shoulders. The bag filled with beach debris flutters noisily in Tannit’s hand. I think of the broken seashells inside, the little structures which had served as protection to the creatures that lived in them. Now they are broken, battered, weather-worn things. But they will go onto a mantelpiece in a living room where they will serve as souvenirs of a grey rainy mid-morning on the beach. A little collection of beautiful, broken things.