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THE BLANK SPACE ON THE MAP

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MNSJON001

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— 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 —

From the cold shores of Marion Island to the plains of the Great Karoo, this is a story about four South Africans, by birth or circumstance, who are marooned on the outskirts of society and trying to find their way back.

Livhu is a scientist who has been sent to a remote research station to study ocean currents. Besides the challenge of adjusting to the frozen island landscape, she also grapples with her feelings for a young seal researcher. When the relationship takes an unwanted turn, Livhu is forced to search deep inside herself and find the strength to survive a lonely year very far from home.

Casper is a sub-editor who works for the most trashy tabloid in Johannesburg. He's on cruise control, plugging away at a job he doesn't really enjoy, full of regret about previous opportunities he thinks he's squandered. When a strange assignment comes his way, and a new friend with it, he sees the hazy outline of a map that will lead him away from previous hurt towards a brighter, more ambitious future.

Garrick is a ski-boat skipper from Durban. He once captained cargo ships, but when his family fell apart and the rum took over, this was the only job he could get. Now he has a rare opportunity to make good money delivering a catamaran to the Seychelles and rekindle the bond with his estranged son at the same time. On the open ocean, however, tempers fray under skies brimming with thunderclouds, and the threat of pirates is ever present.

Jamal walked out of war-torn Somalia as a teenager with his brother. Now his brother has been killed in a xenophobic attack in a Johannesburg township and Jamal is all alone. With no other prospects, he carries on walking, south towards Cape Town, where he has a cousin who might be able to help him. Along the way, desperate and dehydrated, he is taken in by an elderly loner in a small Karoo town who has secrets of his own.

Unbeknownst to each other, the lives of these four strangers will touch each other in unexpected ways, suggesting that we are all closer than we'd like to admit, held together by the universal desire for redemption.

For Suzette and Jess

University of Cape Town

He felt a loneliness he'd not known since he was a child and he felt wholly alien to the world although he loved it still.

– *Cormac McCarthy*

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— LOVE AND OCEANOGRAPHY —

University of Cape Town

Livhu watched the giant petrels. They reminded her of the vultures that circled above Thohoyandou in September, when the veld was dry and the carcasses of the calves that didn't survive the winter had all been picked clean. The petrels weren't as big as the vultures but their eyes were more cunning, as pale and lifeless as the inside of an iceberg.

The sun came out, slanting through a gap in the clouds, then disappeared again. She listened to the slap of the waves against the hull of the ship and leaned over the rail to look down into the cold, dark water. She felt disorientated surrounded by so much emptiness. With nothing but sea all around, the world was enormous and suffocating at the same time. At the centre of it all was the ship, like a fairy castle in a plastic snow globe. She stuffed her hands into the pockets of her jacket and stamped her feet.

A few wandering albatrosses joined the petrels. They soared and dived, riding the swells, sometimes coming within a beak's length from the water, other times banking into the sun until Livhu lost them in the glare. They appeared small until they came close to the ship. That's when she realised how big they were.

But of all the strange, new birds that surrounded her, Livhu's favourites were the storm petrels, dancing in the wake of the ship above the froth churned up by the propeller. Totally different to their iceberg-eyed cousins, they looked like little pieces of black ribbon carried by the wind. How did such delicate creatures survive out here?

Livhu was standing on the back deck because she needed some air. It was her fifth day aboard the SA *Agulhas* and although the ship was within sight of Marion Island, high winds had prevented the helicopter from ferrying the scientists across. Most of them were holed up in the passenger lounge watching a Steven Seagal movie. Livhu could hear distant, stuffy sounds of gunfire and car chases and she was glad for the cold, clean wind blowing off the sea.

She looked at the island: 1 769km south of Port Elizabeth, halfway to Antarctica, black and ragged and covered with cloud; as remote and hostile as a mountain peak. She couldn't stop looking at it: the waves slamming into the cliffs, the snow-covered slopes. It seemed like a place unfit for human habitation, and yet here she was, about to devote a year of her life to studying the currents of the Southern Ocean. She was marooned, exiled, wrapped in half a Cape Union Mart store. She thought about her family. None of her relatives had seen a storm petrel or a wandering albatross and she doubted any of them ever would. Most hadn't even seen the sea. What if she couldn't handle it? What if she had made a mistake signing up for this expedition?

More gunshots echoed from the passenger lounge and Livhu started to cry; small, quiet tears that dried in the wind before they dropped from her cheeks. For the first time she realised how far away she was from home. She wiped her eyes angrily and told herself to stop being a baby.

That morning she had been excited to see the island. She had woken early, before dawn, and she had lain in her bunk behind the closed curtain, thinking about her lab in the new base. She walked through her research and imagined pages and pages spilling out beneath her fingertips daily. The thought of it thrilled her. Just then,

however, her sleepy reverie was disrupted by Devon, who yanked back the curtain on her bunk and flicked on the light.

“We’re here,” he whispered, centimetres from her face.

“You can’t do that,” Livhu protested, squinting her eyes against the sudden brightness. “What if I wasn’t dressed properly?”

“No one sleeps naked on the *Agulhas*. The duvets they give you are way too thin.”

He had a point. Livhu was wearing thermal underwear, hiking socks, fleece tracksuit pants and a long-sleeve top made from bamboo fibres. Bamboo! Her mother had clicked her tongue in astonishment when Livhu had told her.

“What time is it?” Livhu asked. She had learned to tell the time aboard the ship by the smells that wafted down the corridors. She couldn’t smell scrambled eggs yet so she guessed it was before 7am.

“Six,” Devon said.

“Please go away,” Rose whined from the opposite bunk.

Rose was Devon’s sister and the pair of them were seal researchers. They were both pale, with strawberry blonde hair and cheeks full of healthy red blood vessels – a Viking look that made them seem like they were designed for life at the far end of the earth. Devon’s hair was matted into dreadlocks and Rose’s was going that way too. Livhu liked her cabin mate, although Rose messed water all over the bathroom when she showered and she snored when she slept on her back.

“Don’t be such a loser,” Devon said. “I’ve come to show Liv one of the finest sights in the world.”

“Ignore him,” Rose said. “It’s probably snowing outside.”

But Livhu was already up, pulling on a thick down jacket and lacing up her hiking boots. She followed Devon out of the cabin and up the four flights of stairs to the officers’ deck, where Devon pushed the heavy steel door that led outside. The wind did the rest, yanking it open on its heavy, oiled hinges. The wind was alive, a fierce creature clawing at Livhu’s clothes, and the air smelled like sea spray and rain. She gripped the railing and followed Devon up the outside ladder to the monkey

deck. With each step she could feel her heart swelling, her narrow world view loosening from its moorings.

At the top they found Mark hunkered down in the watch seat. Devon cuffed him on the back of the head and he made space, shifting along the damp, salt-encrusted bench.

“Where’s the island?” Livhu yelled. The wind whipped the words from her mouth and carried them over the side of the ship. Such power! When she had learned about the Roaring Forties at school, she had always pictured something more sedate, colonial even: the face in the clouds huffing and puffing at the bottom of the map.

“Over there!” Mark shouted back.

On cue, the mist cleared and the island blazed into view, lit up by the first rays of the sun: black cliffs, cone-shaped mountains, wetter and greener than Livhu had imagined.

Mark sensed her excitement and edged closer to her on the bench. “It’s like Jurassic Park,” he said.

She could feel his body despite the layers of clothes they were both wearing. Mark was also a seal researcher and of all the scientists on board the ship, Livhu enjoyed his company the most. He was tall and wiry, with long, dark hair and a pointed beard that made him look like a wizard. He liked to listen to angry music that sounded like a stampede of buffalo. Livhu had never heard of Slayer before, but she had been given a crash course over the past few days. It wasn’t too bad. If you listened to it loudly it was like the wind – a force that filled your whole body. She had allowed Mark to listen to her Oliver Mtukudzi albums in return and he had closed his eyes and smiled.

Was she imagining it, or was Mark moving slowly back and forth, rubbing his leg against hers? The idea of it thrilled her. She glanced at him but she could only see the side of his hood. She sat dead still, too terrified to move in case she had misunderstood the whole thing. But if she didn’t respond, would it be considered rude? Luckily Devon put her out of her misery by standing up and declaring the first sighting of Marion Island a success. Mark helped Livhu out of the watch seat and

might have squeezed her hand a little too tightly. She beamed at him, maybe a little too willingly.

Mark.

In her sudden bout of homesickness she had completely forgotten about him. She would go and find him, even if he was watching the stupid Steven Seagal movie. She would sit close to him and try not to think about the challenges that lay ahead.

•

Dinner that night was a 'mixed grill' and the ship was full of the smell of meat. Livhu ate everything, even the tripe, although she thought it was a little overdone. Mark also wolfed his down. Rose pushed her food around and ate little. Devon made a skull and crossbones from the gnawed remains of his lamb chops and drank four cups of coffee. At one point during the meal, Livhu's knee brushed Mark's under the table. Both of them felt it but neither acknowledged it.

After dinner, there was a mandatory hour's wait until the passenger bar opened, and it was only open for two hours: from 8pm until 10pm. There had been some violent incidents aboard the SA *Agulhas* in the past and the limited bar hours were designed to cut down on binge drinking. However, this effort was largely offset by the price of the drinks: you could destroy an extraordinary amount of brain cells during those two hours for little more than R50.

To pass the time before the nightly ritual of cheap booze and tall stories began, Livhu climbed the stairs to the radio officer's cabin and checked the inbox for mail. All e-mail correspondence aboard the SA *Agulhas* was sent via a radio link that was opened twice daily – at 2pm and 6pm. The radio officer was in charge of all correspondence aboard the ship. You dropped a memory stick in the outbox loaded with your mail and he would send it to the recipients you specified. Likewise, if a mail was sent to the ship addressed to you, he would print it out, fold the paper once, leaving the address and subject line exposed, staple it and put it in the inbox. Livhu had only met the radio officer once, during lunch in the galley. He was overweight,

with thinning hair and a forehead that glistened like bacon fat. He probably read everything that came and went.

She rifled through the mail and she was pleased to find a piece of paper with her name in the subject line. It was an e-mail from her cousin Ezekial, the only other member of her extended family to have done time in Johannesburg. He was a photographer and he'd had some success with an image many years ago, but the money from that had dried up and now he paid the bills by freelancing for anyone who would hire him. He was older than Livhu but the two of them were close. When she was finishing her masters at Wits, he would come and see her and they would discuss the small-time soap opera that their mutual relatives enacted in Thohoyandou. They would talk about the latest funeral, where in the housing queue an aunt or uncle was, which cousin was pregnant... Incidental things that Livhu liked to think held people together.

She resisted the temptation to open the mail right there and devour it in a glance. Instead, she carried it back down to her cabin to read slowly. Rose was out, most probably counting down the minutes until the bar opened. Livhu lay down on her narrow bunk, shifting around until her spine wasn't digging into a wooden strut, and prised out the staples with her nails. She noticed that some of her nails were cracked and she thought about painting them. Did people paint their nails on Marion Island?

The e-mail from Easy started off with the usual family gossip. Mpumi's furniture had been repossessed by Lewis because he hadn't paid his instalments for a year and Gloria had a new boyfriend, an older man who was rumoured to own an sizeable herd of cattle. The ship rocked in the swells, creaking and groaning, and Livhu stemmed another rush of homesickness by imagining the red dust, the blue sky, the baobabs and the heat of a Limpopo summer sun on her bare arms.

Further down the page, the tone of Easy's e-mail soured. He told Livhu how had been involved in a riot in a township and described in too much detail how he had seen a man be burnt to death. Livhu read the paragraph twice. It made her angry. She understood that Easy might have needed to unburden his feelings, but to make

her worry when she was so far away – that was unfair. She was angry about the incident, too. All she wanted was a safe country to live in, just like everyone else, and yet these things kept happening. She was also angry on behalf of Easy. He wasn't young anymore and these assignments weren't good for him. Why couldn't the newspaper give him an easier job? A portrait shoot with a celebrity? Or a travel story? She knew that he was working for one of those horrible tabloids and wondered whether they covered anything except murder and mayhem.

She began to compose a response to Easy in her head. She would be upfront and honest and tell him directly to stop putting himself in danger. She would take a potshot at the tabloid, too. Working for such a publication was beneath him; a waste of his talents.

Fuelled by the idea, she climbed out of her bunk, took her laptop out of its bag and sat down at the small round table that she and Rose shared. Her outrage dissipated slightly while she waited for the ageing computer to boot up, and by the time the little hourglass had stopped spinning and Microsoft Word had finally opened, she had calmed down considerably. She decided not to launch right into her rant. Instead, she tried to start off politely but the words she put down seemed trivial: mixed grill; giant petrel; Southern Ocean. What could she possibly say in response, especially when the e-mail line was monitored? The last thing she wanted was for the radio officer to get a cultural hard-on reading her correspondence with her cousin. She thought of replying in Venda, but she wasn't sure if Easy could even understand it anymore. Fed up with herself, she closed her laptop, put it away and climbed back into bed, pulling the curtain around her bunk. Tonight she would give the bar a miss.

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It took three days for the wind to subside enough for the helicopter to fly. According to the older scientists aboard this *SA Agulhas*, this was perfectly normal for the Southern Ocean. After spending two years in Johannesburg chasing self-imposed deadlines for her masters thesis and living between coffee shops and visits with

friends, Livhu felt the delay like an ache in her bones. She craved exercise, a meal that didn't involve animal fat, waking up to face the day with a purpose. Mark sensed her frustration and they spent many hours playing Scrabble in the passenger lounge, while action movie after action movie blasted from the television. She could have played Scrabble with him forever, but inevitably he would be summoned by Devon and Rose to play table tennis in the helicopter hangar, or drink from a sneaky hip flask up on the monkey deck in the gale. Livhu tagged along but she wasn't a pack animal. The more people involved in the activity, the more alone she felt.

The nights were the worst. Livhu would drink a few glasses of wine with everyone else, but the closeness of the tables, the motion of the ship and the escalating crassness of the conversation would force her back down to her cabin long before last rounds were called. Mark always tried to get her to stay a little longer. He would squeeze her knee under the table and offer to buy her another drink, but she would always decline then lie awake in her bunk worrying about whether she had made the right decision.

Much later, she would wake up to Rose crashing around, smelling like a bottle of vodka spilled over a wet dog. She would listen to Rose climb clumsily into her bunk; sigh deeply and begin to snore. She would block her ears with her pillow, but the foreign bed no longer offered any comfort and she would lie awake with her eyes closed thinking about the year ahead, which gaped like the mouth of a bottomless cave.

Finally, the big Kamov helicopter was able to fly. The excitement aboard the ship was contagious and everybody gathered outside to watch it take off, sending shudders of noise through the hull from its four-bladed rotor. Now everything seemed to happen in fast-forward. The call came for Livhu's transfer and she packed hurriedly, stuffing things haphazardly into her duffel bag. She made her way up to the helicopter deck and ducked low as she jogged to the door, even though the rotors spun far above her head. At the door she was helped inside by a man wearing ear muffers who settled her in a seat next to the window. Rose, Mark and Devon

followed, and three meteorologists she didn't know very well. The Kamov lifted off the deck, tilted forwards and accelerated over the water.

From the air, Livhu could see the full extent of the island. She saw a colony of king penguins – thousands of them – on a black-sand beach, and a waterfall spilling off the edge of a cliff straight into the sea. She saw the barren, mountainous interior, and below her, getting closer and closer, she saw her home for the next year: the new research station that had been opened barely a year ago. It was a modular orange structure that looked like a prop from a sci-fi movie, brashly futuristic next to the prefab buildings of the old base.

From above, the island wasn't nearly as threatening as it had seemed from the ship. In fact, it was beautiful: wilderness as pure as anything that remained elsewhere in the world. Livhu smiled to herself. Few people got to see this.

The helicopter touched down and the whirlwind pace continued as the new arrivals were led through the new base. The accommodation block, research block, operations hub and mess hall were all connected by a series of clear tunnels, like a giant hamster playpen. Livhu was pleasantly surprised at the quality of the facilities and how warm it was inside. However, she was slightly shocked at how the members of the previous expedition looked, especially the men. They wore blue overalls and long beards, and their skin was leathery and tight – scoured by the sun and by days spent outside in the wind and rain. But their smiles were genuine, and Livhu returned them with gusto.

While a container was being unloaded, a pod of killer whales slipped into Transvaal Cove, their tall fins like the blades of carving knives slicing through the silvery water. Everyone stopped what they were doing and watched. The killer whales hadn't been seen for more than six months and their arrival today was a good omen for the takeover team. It would be a productive year. Livhu looked around at the other scientists and felt her nervousness lifting. She was with likeminded people here. She would be okay.

Her research would begin the following day, under the supervision of Johan, the oceanographer from the previous expedition. Johan and his colleagues would

depart on the SA *Agulhas* in a few weeks' time; until then, it was up to him to show Livhu around the lab and get her started on her projects.

In Livhu's experience, oceanography seemed to attract a particular kind of nerd and Johan was no different from her male classmates at Wits. Rangy and pale, with discount spectacles and bad skin, he was the complete opposite of Mark, whose dangerous field work with the seals gave him muscled arms and a confidence that the lab scientists lacked.

But Johan's earnestness was endearing and Livhu smiled on cue as he led her through the hamster tunnels into the research wing of the base. Maybe she was more similar to him than she thought. After all, it was in the oceanography lab that she felt safest, surrounded by humming computers, glass jars of seawater and Johan's flow models showing current direction and temperature. Her enthusiasm surprised her – it was as if all her studying had lead to this moment. And when Johan started talking about sample procurement, she had another positive realisation. Before winter set in, one of her main tasks would be to get a transponder fitted to the head of a male elephant seal, which would beam back data for her climate-change algorithms. More importantly, it would be a chance to work closely with Mark...

After dinner that night, Livhu realised that she hadn't replied to her cousin yet. She took her laptop to the wifi-enabled conference room and made a cup of Ricoffy and condensed milk. It was late and she was the only person in the room. Outside, a full moon was rising over the sea and the whole world was silver. Now that she was no longer trapped in her cabin aboard the ship, it felt childish to chastise Easy about his career choices. She deliberately ignored his paragraph about the township riot and wrote a breezy account of the island and the base, hoping that he would reply with something equally mundane. She had serious work to do – there was no time for outside distractions.

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The mire sucked at her gum boots and rain stung her face. She pulled her hood lower over her face but it didn't help. Her jacket was soaked through. Nobody had told her that walking around on Marion would be this difficult – in parts it was like wading through a spongy, soggy swamp.

“Come on, Liv!” Devon called.

She took another step and her leg sank up to her knee. Now what? Brown ooze seeped down the inside of her boot. She swore under her breath – a Venda word that she thought she had forgotten – and she smiled despite her predicament.

The plan that morning had been to walk down to a bay called Boulders, to see a vagrant elephant seal bull that had turned up the previous afternoon. The bay was barely a kilometre from the research station yet Livhu was already stuck.

She waved to Devon but he must have thought that she was just saying hello, because he turned around and jogged after the others – Rose, Mark and two sealers from the previous year's expedition. Livhu felt like that man in the poem. Not waving but drowning. She closed her eyes and imagined herself to be light as a feather. She willed her weight upwards. At the same time, she wriggled her foot and tried to free it from the mud. It didn't work – she was still trapped. Rain flew in at a horizontal angle and a slow-burning panic rose in her chest. She leant into the wind and tried to calm her breathing. People had died this close to the base. She wondered why none of her team mates had come back to look for her.

“Hey Liv, you okay?”

She spun around to see who was speaking. It was Mark. Where had he come from? He must have doubled back around the side of the hill.

“No, I'm not okay. I'm stuck.” She swallowed hard and tried to keep her voice under control. Mark pushed the hood of his jacket back and looked at her. He was laughing. Livhu was so surprised that she momentarily forgot that she had been on the verge of tears.

“It's not funny,” she said.

“It's a little bit funny. Here, let me help you.”

He squelched up to her, planted his feet wide, gripped her in a bear hug and lifted her up. She could feel the hardness of his chest and she was amazed at his strength. At the same time, she was worried about the extra weight she must have put on eating all those four-course meals aboard the *Agulhas*. She hoped he didn't think she was fat. Mark grunted as he lifted and Livhu closed her eyes, praying for her foot to come loose.

And then it did. With a loud slurp, her leg was freed from the mud. But the mire had taken her boot. She watched, powerless, as the hole closed up and swallowed it.

"You lost a boot," Mark said.

"Wow, you're observant."

"I'm serious, you can't walk around without a boot."

"I know that."

"So what are you going to do?"

For a moment Livhu was terrified that he was serious; that he would carry on with the others and leave her to make her way back to the base on her own, but then she saw his eyes crinkle and she knew he was joking.

"I'm not going to leave you," he said. "Here, lean on my shoulder."

While Livhu balanced on one leg, her foot lifted like a flamingo's, Mark pulled a two-way radio from a pocket inside his jacket and told the others about the incident. The device hissed and crackled in the rain. Livhu wasn't sure, but she thought she could hear Devon laughing.

Mark pressed a button and the radio went silent again. "They're at the beach," he said. "Seems like the seal took off."

He offered Livhu his shoulder, she slung her arm around his neck, and they hobbled back to the start of the raised boardwalk. Livhu could walk just fine on her own, even without a boot, but she said nothing. Only when they were within sight of the base did she let go and give him a little push. She was flirting openly now but she no longer cared.

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After the initial frenzy of new faces and introductions, the pace on the island slowed as the real work set in and the days became shorter and colder. Livhu spent most of her time indoors, marooned by the weather, working in the lab. She analysed the flow charts from the previous year and decided how best to plot her own. She could work like this for hours, getting lost in the numbers and colours and patterns, arranging the world outside into logical sequences. She even enjoyed the menial tasks like capturing the data. It was calming, meditative.

Days went by yet she still didn't have the language for Marion. What did you call those high, smooth clouds like blobs of cream, or the diminutive plants that clung to the rocks? Was there a name for the wind that came from the direction of Ship's Cove and always brought rain? The usual words that filled her thoughts – dust, thunder, heat – were absent here, as if they had never existed.

Livhu worked daily with data gathered by elephant seals but she had never actually seen one. The seal on the beach at Boulders would have been her first, and she was secretly glad it moved off before Devon and Rose could get to it. It had probably been a juvenile or an outcast. The pinniped breeding season only started in August. Livhu had read that the beaches of Marion turned into warzones as males fought for mating rights and territory. The alpha male was called the beachmaster: a red-eyed, jowly creature that stood eight-foot tall on its tail, with a mouth full of blood and a necklace of scarred skin from previous fights. The beachmaster would spend the breeding season fighting off pretenders and mating viciously with as many females as he could. Female elephant seals were much smaller than males and sometimes they would perish during coupling, crushed by four tonnes of blubber.

Until recently it was thought that females had little agency in the mating process. As members of the beachmaster's harem they merely took what came their way. But Livhu had read a journal article recently, which suggested that female elephant seals were not as obedient as scientists had assumed. They would mate at sea

and return to the harem to pup and to catch up with their girlfriends; they would move between harems and sometimes give the breeding season a miss altogether. And the best thing? Those lumbering beachmasters didn't have a clue.

It brought a smile to her face as she sat plugging numbers into a spreadsheet. She was sure that Mark would find it amusing and made a mental note to tell him about it, although he probably already knew everything there was to know about elephant seals. Maybe she would tell him about her own research instead, but isn't that what scientists always did? They became so absorbed in the micro-cosmos of their personal expertise that they ended up speaking a language that nobody else could understand. She decided to keep her tales of salinity tests on deep-water subantarctic samples to herself. She would talk to him about books. And music. Normal things.

It was time for the members of the previous expedition to return home. The evening before the SA *Agulhas* set sail back to Cape Town, everyone gathered for a party. Chops and steaks were grilled in the purpose-built braai room, which had big windows and view of distant mountains. When the clouds parted for a few minutes and a rainbow appeared, everybody applauded.

Alcohol was a precious commodity on the island. Some of the people going home had already finished their stash and they were begging drinks from the new arrivals. Others had ended their time on the island with a surplus and were doing their best to drink, or sell, the deficit.

The members of the construction team were in a jovial mode. They worked for danger pay like technicians on an oil rig or bodyguards in Iraq, and they were itching to get home to their families. Most of the younger scientists felt the opposite. Livhu's oceanographer colleague Johan, for example, was busy telling her that if he could, he would stay on Marion forever. He had trapped her in a corner next to the

pool table and he had a look in his eye like a farmer whose land was about to be taken away from him.

“I hate cities,” he said. “I can’t live in one. And I’ll never be able to come back here. I mean, it’s different for people like you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know. BEE people.”

Livhu was taken aback but she gathered herself quickly. “I expected more from you,” she said playfully, unsure if she was a willing accomplice in a joke or if they were having a serious debate.

“But it *is* different,” Johan said.

“Well, you can take my place. This is a once-off for me. I don’t think I’ll ever come back.”

“Marion is amazing, Liv. Give it time. I also didn’t like it at first, but now I’ve learnt that I don’t need Woolworths; I don’t need Engen Quick-Stops or dry cleaners or Ster Kinekor or cappuccinos or any of that stuff. I’m scared I’ll become a hermit when I get back. Move out to the Karoo or something. Lots of Marion guys do that. I think we’re all a bit antisocial.”

“A *bit*?”

Johan pushed his glasses back up onto the bridge of his nose, ignoring the joke. The lenses were greasy and Liv battled to see his eyes. “Seriously,” he said. “I don’t even remember how to drive.”

Livhu was hemmed in and getting bored. She felt sorry for Johan but this conversation was going nowhere. While he spoke about how depressing his life would be back in Port Elizabeth, where he had a temporary job lined up with the South African Weather Service, she scanned the room, looking for an escape route. Inevitably her eye landed on Mark, who was sitting at a table near the bar, deep in conversation with Devon and a senior zoology professor from the University of Pretoria called Calvin Steenkamp who had headed the cat extermination program on the island in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The cats had been brought to the island on the annexation voyage in 1948, with the idea that they would catch the mice that had arrived with the first sealing expeditions in the 1800s. Unfortunately not all the cats were female, as was originally thought, and those five cats bred so prolifically that by 1977 there were more than 3 000 on the island, decimating the resident populations of seabird chicks. Amongst the scientists, Steenkamp's extermination effort was the stuff of legend. He deliberately introduced a killer strain of cat flu into the population, which drastically reduced the numbers, but around 600 animals proved to be immune to the virus and had to be individually tracked down and shot.

There were framed photographs from the hunting days displayed prominently around the base, showing rake-thin boys in warrior poses, holding rifles and cat pelts, their beards encrusted with ice, grinning proudly at the camera. The photographs made Livhu uneasy. Not because the boys pictured looked so similar to those who had worn police uniforms and rode in Casspirs through the townships, but because it was all a big game. For the cat hunters and the generation of researchers who followed, the island was a blank space on the map where they could grow beards, play with science and escape the responsibilities of real life.

"Liv, are you listening to me?"

"Not really, Johan. Sorry. I need a drink." She pushed past him and angled around the pool table, careful not to bump into one of the construction guys who was lining up a shot on the black ball. Without looking behind her to check if Johan was following her, she walked purposely across the room, pulled up a bar stool and sat down next to Mark, Devon and Professor Steenkamp.

As she sat down she realised her mistake. She had interrupted something. The three men stopped talking and looked at her like she was some rare sort of albatross. Mark picked self-consciously at a scab on his elbow and Devon looked past her to where a group of other scientists were playing poker with chunks of volcanic rock for chips.

What had they been talking about? She was about to stand up and leave when the professor broke the silence. “I think Johan has taken a liking to you. He’ll be heartbroken when he leaves tomorrow. Poor man.”

The statement caught Livhu off guard and she had to think for a few seconds before she replied. Academic hierarchy ruled on Marion. Despite wanting to snap at the professor, she didn’t. She simply said: “Pardon?”

Devon obviously didn’t care for the hierarchy. Happy to have someone to pick on, he dived right in. “Mark will be stoked Johan’s gone,” he said, nudging his friend in the ribs.

A scarlet blush crept up Mark’s neck. “What do you mean?”

“Everyone knows you’re after Liv.”

“Bullshit, man.”

“Hey, Liv? Is it true?”

Before she could answer, the professor said: “It wouldn’t be the first pregnancy on the island.”

Livhu decided that the professor was drunk. Why else would he behave like a first-year res student? She looked at Mark, who refused to meet her gaze, and at Devon, who was laughing so hard that whiskey bubbled out of his nose. He wiped his face with the back of his hand.

Spurred on by Devon’s hysterics, the professor continued. “Whenever we get one of you girls from Venda on the program we have to watch you. Marion Island is not like a *skelm* weekend at the City Lodge, hey.”

Livhu swallowed hard and focussed. She was shaking with anger. “Tell me more about those Venda girls,” she said as calmly as she could. “I’d love to hear.”

The professor waved his hand dismissively. “No man, my girl, I’m just joking. Don’t get your panties in a knot. Come, have a drink with us.”

She would rather have swum with a leopard seal. “No thanks,” she said, then she stood up and went to the bar, filled her glass with ice from the ice machine and poured neat whiskey right up to the brim from Devon’s precious bottle of Jameson.

“Not cool, Liv!” Devon said, but he didn’t get up off his stool to stop her.

In acknowledgement, she tipped her glass in his direction and spilled some whiskey on the floor. Then she took her drink, pushed through the swing doors into the mess hall and walked down the passage. The hubbub of the party faded out behind her. She grabbed a random jacket hanging on one of the hooks in the locker room and went outside into the night. It was cold and clear and she could smell rotting kelp on the breeze. Down near the boat crane she could see the outlines of fuel tanks and she could feel the diesel generator vibrating through the metal catwalk beneath her feet. She thought of the ice machine guzzling electricity. All of it was excessive and wasteful: this fancy base in the middle of nowhere; the drinking and braaing. Who brings a pool table halfway to Antarctica? She looked up at the sky studded with stars and took a deep breath.

The swing doors slammed and another figure came outside.

“Jesus it’s cold,” Mark said, rubbing his hands together.

Livhu ignored him and walked further away, to the edge of the helipad. Far below, dark waves broke on the rocks. A seal barked.

Mark followed her. “You’re not meant to be out at night unless you’ve told the DCO,” he said.

“What were you talking about in there, when I sat down?” she asked him.

“Nothing. I mean, it was nothing serious. Steenkamp was being an idiot.”

“You should have stood up for me.”

“Liv...”

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

She turned away from the railing and set off down the catwalk towards the prefab buildings of the old base. Mark tried to take her arm but she pushed him away. Still, he came after her. Away from the base now, the cold was sharper and the darkness deeper. The wind whistled across the mire. They were close to where Livhu had lost her boot. She walked around the side of one of the old dorms and Mark, walking behind her, bumped into a wire-mesh crate hanging outside a window that

had once served as a fridge. He swore and rubbed his shoulder. Livhu pushed a door. It was unlocked.

“I really don’t think this is a good idea,” Mark said.

“I didn’t ask you to follow me.”

They went inside. Mark pulled a headlamp from his pocket and turned it on – the beam illuminated the room and dust danced in the light. When he realised that they were in the old bar he was suddenly enthusiastic. “Why haven’t we been down here?” he said. “It’s awesome. Look at the cat skins.” He shone his light above the bar counter, where the pelts of two flayed cats had been pegged to the wall: one grey, one brindled. Then he moved the beam along to where a whole cat had been stuffed and mounted on a pedestal. Red Christmas tinsel hung around its neck.

Mark took the lead now and set off further down the corridor. It was Livhu’s turn to follow and she did. Something in her chest was tingling. She felt reckless and wondered what her mother would think if she knew her daughter was following a boy down a dark corridor in a deserted base.

They were in the old accommodation wing and there were things on the walls here, too: a mural of a humpback whale arching its back against a technicolour sunset; a black-and-white photograph of a toilet standing on a windswept plain, with the words “Cape Davis 1986” below; and a yellowed page with a child’s drawing of three stick figures and a dog. Their footsteps were loud on the hollow floor.

Mark waited for her and took her hand in the darkness. He pulled her close and the tingling in Livhu’s chest moved into her throat. Then he kissed her and she kissed him back, feeling the roughness of his beard against her face, tasting beer and coalsmoke and a hint of tomato sauce. The kiss surprised her, but this was what she wanted, wasn’t it? She gave in to the moment as the wind shook the walls.

Then they were inside one of the rooms and Mark was on top of her. Musty mattress. Darkness. The beam of the headlamp shining limply on the floor. With one hand he tried to unzip her jacket; the other hand went for her pants. Her leg was wet where he had knocked her whisky over. Where was the glass? She didn’t even realise she had dropped it.

“No,” Livhu said gently, trying to ease out from beneath him.

“Come on,” Mark said.

“Not like this. Not here.”

He kissed her again but this time she felt like she was drowning, gagging for air. Mark pushed against her leg. His hands were everywhere. She tried to scream but it was muffled by his mouth. She could feel her jeans sliding down around her thighs, his cold hands.

Livhu pulled her face away and bit him. Something small and wet came away in her teeth. Mark jumped up, clutching his ear. Then he slapped her. It was almost funny, the look of revulsion on his face. She was giddy. Laughter seemed the most logical remedy.

“Fuck you laughing at?” Mark hissed.

Livhu could see blood running between his fingers in the gloom. She curled into a ball and the laughter quickly became deep sobs that shook her whole body.

“Fucking truth about you. Steenkamp was right.”

He bent down and picked up his headlamp and the beam wobbled drunkenly around the room as he attached it to his head. Then he was gone and everything was dark. Livhu heard the door at the end of the passage slam. Then silence. After the silence, the wind.

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A memory of the back seat of her father’s old Ford Escort, sunlight streaming through the open window and warming her legs on the brown vinyl seats. She was ten years old and about to see the sea for the first time. What did it smell like? How big was it? How warm would it be? She squirmed to get the best view as the car swept through the curves on the highway, going down and down. Around every bend, she hoped she would finally see the shimmering wonder her father had told her about. He had a good job as a foreman on a citrus farm. Even so, the decision to take the family

on holiday was a strange one considering that the country was on the brink of civil war. Maybe he thought the end had come? He had always done things differently.

In Durban, the sky was grey and the sea was a murky brown expanse that took her breath away. She couldn't stop looking at it, transfixed by the endless movement and the comforting roar of so much water. She walked among rickshaw men, breathing air that smelled of bananas while seagulls screeched and surfers jogged down into the waves. She squeezed her father's hand.

Down on the beach, however, the mood soured when her little sister hurt her foot on a rock buried in the sand. Livhu's father let go of her hand and turned his attention to the flood of tears. Livhu sighed, unsure about the legitimacy of her sister's hysterical crying. Her father sensed her frustration and sent her off to explore, so she set off to a nearby pier which was deserted except for a fisherman with white sideburns and a frayed cap. His rod was bent double. Livhu leaned against the railing and watched. The fisherman paid her no mind. He reeled the fish in patiently, allowing the rod to flex and release, giving slack. Eventually a dark shape passed close to the surface and the man realised it was a shark. He was disappointed, as if he had pinned all his hopes on a huge cob without ever thinking it could be anything else. Livhu watched as he reeled the shark in, lifting it over the rail and down onto the concrete with a wet slap. She had expected it to smell damp but it smelled like nothing. Its skin glowed and its ugly mouth opened and closed. She wanted to touch it but the fisherman shooed her away. He cut the line with his knife, then he unhitched a wooden club from his belt.

Livhu only heard the first blow. She ran off the pier as fast as she could, right into the arms of a lifeguard, a blonde teenage boy wearing red shorts.

"Whoah, girlie," the lifeguard said. "Are you lost?"

Livhu couldn't speak. She pointed down the pier to where the fisherman was rolling the carcass of the shark back into the sea.

"Did he do anything to you?"

She shook her head. Not me, the shark. But how to explain it?

She lay on the bed in the dark room of the old base for many hours, but nobody came to look for her. She shivered with cold, drifting in and out of the past. She couldn't control her thoughts. They elbowed in, stayed for a while then disappeared: happy thoughts, angry thoughts, her greatest embarrassments. She tried to think of Mark but some other memory would always arrive first and swell like a sponge until it filled her mind. She closed her eyes and opened them. The darkness was the same.

The sea again. This time more recently. A desolate bay on the west coast, north of Lamberts Bay; camping illegally behind the dune with friends on a road trip to celebrate graduation. She was alone at the water's edge and the sun had just set. A pink glow rested on the horizon, fading to blue.

"Liv, the fire's lit," someone called.

"Coming," she said, but she didn't move. She stood there until the darkness was complete, until the beach and the sky were only separated by the splash of white where the waves broke on the sand. The happy laughter coming from the campsite made her ache with loneliness. Right there, next to the sea, was the only place where the world didn't feel like it was spinning so fast that she might fall off.

But now she felt betrayed by the thing she loved the most. How could something so terrible happen to her here, surrounded by so much ocean? The sound of the waves was no longer soothing; it was like a mocking chant: stupid, stupid, stupid.

Eventually she had to get up. Her limbs ached with cold. If she didn't move now she would freeze. With enormous effort, she pushed herself into a sitting position and stood up. She felt her way down the passage to the door of the bar and panicked when she thought that Mark might have locked it somehow. But he hadn't; the door was open.

The wind was ferocious and storm clouds raced in from the west. She could feel spits of rain against her cheeks and she breathed deep lungfuls of cold air while she walked. Up at the new base the party was long dead. She went to her room,

climbed into her bed in all her clothes and held herself until she was warm again, while the memories went round and round.

•

Hi Cousin

It's been a long time since I last wrote to you. I'm sorry. How are things in Joburg? You might think I haven't written because I've been busy, but it's actually because I'm scared that you'll reply and I'll become too homesick to survive another day here.

We've been on the island for a month now. The other scientists have left and there's a small group of 20 remaining. Personal grooming has gone out the window. Most people wear variations of their pyjamas the whole day when they're working. I've given in, too. I doubt you'll recognise me when I get home.

Winter is almost here and it's getting cold. I mean, really cold. You know those days in Joburg when your finger cramps up and you can't take photos. You've told me about that before. Well, here it's much colder. Our ancestors got it right – what's the point of migrating to freezing places like Denmark and Russia and Argentina? Stay put in Africa is my advice.

We've got one final assignment before full-time lab work begins during the cold months. I have to go out with the seal people to an elephant seal colony down the coast and attach a new sensor to one of the animals. The beach is a day's walk away and we'll be spending as many nights as necessary at one of the field huts. I'm not looking forward to it.

I'm not doing well, Easy. I'm trying to make friends but I think I messed up a few nights ago at a party. Something happened with one of the guys and it didn't end well. It's my own fault. The other people on the island treat me like I'm made of glass. They don't look at me yet they give me a wide berth. When I'm working it's easy to keep to myself, but the meal times are difficult and the nights are so long. I've read just about every book in the library.

I wasn't hurt or anything but the whole thing is wrong. I would have done things differently if I could go back in time. That's such a stupid thing to say. Please tell me everything is okay at home. I need something to hold onto right now.

With love,

Livhu

•

The day of the tagging expedition was cold and clear. Dawn rode in on a rattling wind and the sky was a million shades of white. Livhu had been dreading the day but now she was forced to get out of bed and pull on her clothes. As she laced up her boots and brushed her teeth, she tried not to think about what it would be like to share a small cabin with Mark for three days. She hadn't spoken to him since the incident; she had tried not to even look at him, but when she did she felt something sharp and heavy in her chest. Mark seemed to be dealing with it better. He simply ignored her.

When she bit him she had torn his earlobe and he wore a plaster over it to hide the wound. Devon asked him about it one day in the mess hall and he made up a story about trying to pierce his ear with a seal tag. It wasn't very convincing.

Maybe Livhu should have told someone about what had happened at the old base, someone with influence. But she knew the truth: nobody had real influence on Marion. At its core, survival was all that mattered; every man for himself. And if you happened to be a woman, well, good luck. She could have asked to be taken off the expedition but then she would have had to explain why. What did you call the thing that had happened between her and Mark? Was there a word for it? What excuse could she have given? Excuse me, Professor Steenkamp, I have just lived up to all your bigoted assumptions.

But what hurt the most was the framed photograph that Livhu had noticed on Mark's bedside table when she walked past his room the day after the incident. It had never been there before. She had just come from the lab and she knew that Mark was still down there, so she went into his room for a closer look. It was one of those moments when you get the true measure of someone, when everything they are and ever will be becomes clear. The girl looked older than Mark – late twenties or early thirties – and she wore a red dress. Plump, dowdy, bottle-blond. Not his mother, not his sister; someone important enough to be framed but not important enough to come out of his trunk during the first round of unpacking. Livhu picked up the frame and

held it for a while. It was made from cheap wood and it was almost weightless. Then she put it face down and left the room.

With her pack on her back, Livhu made her way down to breakfast. She sat alone at a table near the window and ate little. Every time she lifted a mouthful of porridge to her mouth, her stomach clenched and she gagged with nervousness. At a table on the far side of the room, Mark, Rose and Devon wolfed down eggs and bacon and chatted easily with each other. Was Livhu imagining it, or were they talking about her? She was sure she saw Mark glance at her and snigger.

After breakfast they congregated in the wet room, which smelled like old shirts and deodorant. As soon as Livhu walked in, an uneasy silence descended. Without looking at anyone she began to suit up, starting with her waterproof pants, which she pulled over her fleece pants. She doubled up on socks before forcing her feet into a pair of gumboots; she tucked her long-sleeved vest into her pants and pulled on a fleece top, then she zipped herself into a waterproof jacket and put on a pair of gloves. Her body knew the cold was coming. Her muscles tightened and her breath quickened. Down the passage she could hear the other scientists having tea. She would have given anything to take a flask and a box of biscuits back to the warm lab and analyse data all day. On her own.

When everyone was done, they shouldered their packs and walked through the sliding doors into the brightness of the morning. Mark and Rose set off at a punishing pace and Livhu couldn't keep up. She thought of abandoning the whole event and turning back, but a stubborn pride kept her feet moving forwards, one step at a time through the mire along the path to Ship's Cove. Her backpack dug into her shoulders and she could feel individual objects prodding her: the sharp corner of the metal sensor unit, the waterproof case her camera was stored in, a loose can of baked beans. Despite this, she was amazed at how fit she had become since losing her boot on that first day, how adept she was at seeing danger in an unusual ripple of grass, how fast she could cover a distance that previously had taken much longer.

Once the base was out of sight, she came over a rise and was surprised to see Devon waiting for her.

“Hey Liv,” he said. His hands were shoved deep in his pockets and he tried a smile.

She looked at him coldly. “I’m fine on my own,” she said.

“I know, but I’ll stick with you anyway.”

Surprisingly, he was true to his word and he stayed with her even though he could walk much faster if he wanted to. His presence wasn’t threatening or sarcastic, he was just there and Livhu found it strangely comforting.

At Ship’s Cove, she and Devon walked to the edge of the stupendous cliff and paused for a while, watching as a sooty albatross waddled from its nest and dropped off into space, unfurling its wings and riding an updraft into the sky. This was as far as Livhu had walked previously. She looked at the path leading further along the coast. It was less trodden, sometimes invisible, and she shivered at the thought of being so far from the base. Devon waited while she ate an energy bar and drank some water.

“You good?” he asked.

Livhu nodded.

They walked on, taking slow, certain steps. Everything Livhu saw now was new and strange: unfamiliar rock formations, different angles on inland mountains and snowmelt streams that Devon helped her wade through.

Morning slid into afternoon and although the sun was present, it held little warmth. Soon it disappeared altogether. Livhu had checked the weather that morning and rain was predicted for later, but the storm seemed to be arriving early. Clouds began stacking up on the horizon and the sky went dark. The speed at which the weather changed was difficult to comprehend. Tussocks of grass glowed green in the electric light and the sea was slate grey. The wind became colder, carrying sleet, and it ripped through Livhu’s clothes.

They had reached a wide, empty plain and Devon picked up the pace, half jogging across the waterlogged ground and checking back every now and then to see if

Livhu was okay. She felt like they were the last two people on earth, fleeing some sort of apocalypse. The increased speed was killing her; she wouldn't be able to go this fast for much longer. What if they didn't reach the hut in time? She could already feel the fortress of her clothing being breached: water trickled down her back and her socks were wet in her boots. If they were forced to spend the night in the open they would certainly freeze to death.

Devon must have sensed Livhu's concern because he stopped again and waited for her. He put his arm around her shoulder and she didn't protest.

"It's not much further," he said. "We'll make it."

"I'm scared," she said.

"So am I."

He took her pack and hitched it to his front, then he checked the zips on her jacket and pulled the straps tight.

"Thank you," she said.

"Save it till we get to the hut."

Devon walked ahead, picking a path through the mire. Livhu followed, head low into the slanting rain. Half an hour passed like this, maybe an hour. The trickle down her back swelled to a flood and she could no longer feel her fingers or her lips. Getting warm was the only important thing. It occupied her thoughts like a huge, immovable boulder. What had happened in the old base now seemed ridiculous. A teenage triviality. She looked down at her boots and thought only of the next step. One foot in front of the other.

By the time they reached the field hut at Repetto's Hill, Livhu was exhausted and soaked through. She could feel the beginnings of chafe on her thighs and she was shivering uncontrollably. But the elation she felt at having made it to the shelter anaesthetised her physical discomfort. She hugged Devon and he smiled at her from under his hood.

Devon tried the door but it was locked. "Hello!" he shouted, banging loudly. "Open up!"

Livhu heard a latch slide back and the door opened a crack. Mark peered through.

“Why did you lock it?” Devon asked as he shouldered his way inside.

“The wind,” Mark said. Then he added: “It took you long enough.”

“Piss off,” Devon said, holding the door for Livhu.

The hut was a single room about the size of a shipping container. Now that she was safely out of the rain, the adrenaline began to dissipate. Livhu’s knees began to shake and she felt dizzy. On one side of the room was a rudimentary kitchen where Rose was trying to conjure a flame from the gas burner; on the other side two bunks were pushed up against the wall. Between the kitchen and the bunks there was barely space to turn around. One small window; a waft of mouse droppings. Devon dropped the backpacks he was carrying and he and Livhu stood there as rainwater streamed off their waterproof clothes onto the floor.

“Where’s the toilet?” Devon asked.

“Outside,” Rose muttered. Her voice was strained.

“Hectic weather.”

Nobody answered.

It looked like Mark and Rose had claimed the two top bunks, so Livhu hauled her bag over to a bottom bunk. The wind was almost worse inside. Even though she was protected from it, the noise was unbearable: a high-pitched whistle like a screaming pig being led to slaughter.

Mark radioed the base to let them know that Devon and Livhu had arrived.

“Yes,” he said. “Very strong wind...I’ll check the tie-downs...The mice didn’t get into the food...Yes, it would be difficult for a mouse to open a can...We’re fine, just tired...What’s the prediction on this storm?...Yes, thanks...Right...Over.”

He hung up the receiver and the room was quiet again except for the wind and the sound of Rose lighting match after match, trying to get the stove to take. Finally there was a pop and a hiss and a small blue flame danced around the rim of the burner. She wiped out the inside of a dented aluminium pot with her shirt, added some water and put the pot over the flame.

“Alfredo or Napoletana?” she asked, holding two bags of instant pasta.

Again, nobody answered. Rose sighed loudly and snipped the bag of alfredo, tipping the contents into the pot.

Mark was looking out of the window at the storm and Devon was busy removing his sodden outer layers. He found a dry shirt in his backpack, put it on and lay down on his bunk. Usually he and Mark would be jibing each other or making fun of Rose, but there was a tension between them that Livhu feared she had created. She felt like a giant in the tiny room; one of those people you see in an encyclopaedia – the Tallest Woman in the World. She wanted to sit down but there were no chairs.

After a long, strained silence, Mark eventually spoke. “I can’t do this,” he said.

“Do what?” Devon replied quickly, a confrontational edge to his voice. He stood up in his socks.

“This. I can’t be in the same room as her.”

“*Her?*”

“I didn’t ask for your input, Devon.”

“Did you ask Liv if she would mind sharing a cabin with *you?* After what you did?”

“What did I do?”

Rose chopped the air between them with a wooden spoon. “Enough!” she screamed.

Mark took his jacket from the hook behind the door. “I’m going out,” he said, pushing his arms into the sleeves. He opened the door and rain and cold rushed in.

“*Mark,*” Rose pleaded. Her eyes were red-rimmed and filled with tears.

“Devon, do something!”

Livhu was still standing in the middle of the room. The whole exchange had happened without anyone even looking at her. She was still dressed in all her layers. Without thinking she took two steps, three, and then she was running. Out the door and into the rain. She could see Mark up ahead. This was her moment: She would tell him that she had become stronger than she ever thought she could be; that if he just talked to her they could work it out. She would tell him that she still admired his skill

with the elephant seals and she needed him for her research. She would tell him about Slayer, how she actually missed listening to it.

And she would forgive him. They still had a long year together on the island. This was no way to live.

She ran after him down the path. The wind slammed into her and the rain stung her face. Be the bigger person, Livhu; he won't touch you again.

The ground gave way and she felt her leg slip. She pitched forwards and heard a noise like a tree branch snapping. High up, near her hip bone. She knew it was bad long before the pain came, before her eyes closed and she felt hands lifting her out of the mud. The last thing she saw was a giant petrel, high up in the sky, beak-first into the gale, searching for prey.

University of Cape Town

— THE SHRINKING GOAT —

University of Cape Town

On a Wednesday morning in May, Casper parked in the street, gave the Congolese car guard a ten-rand note, walked through the gate and pressed the button next to the lift. He worked as a junior sub-editor for a tabloid newspaper that was hawked to the grunt workers of the economy: the waste removal men, back-room cooks, taxi drivers, domestic workers, call centre agents, petrol attendants, construction workers and supermarket cashiers who kept Johannesburg in business. The actual paper felt flimsy, even by newspaper standards, with giant headlines and full-page pictures of criminal atrocities. Of course there were also photographs of slightly fat women in lurid bikinis and all the latest cars that none of its readers could afford. The paper was designed to be consumed in less than 10 minutes. That was the buzzword – “consumed” – as if it were a can of Coke. Once it had been consumed, it seldom found its way into a bin. The readers would simply cast it aside like a chip packet. After all, they were people on the move: riding taxis, catching trains, striding through the late-autumn sun with purpose, breathing steam. The paper would drift on the breeze, mingle with the other rubbish, settle in the nearest storm water drain and help cause a flash flood when summer’s first thunderclouds emptied themselves over the Highveld. If you looked closely you could see ink running in the streets.

Casper didn't hate his work but he battled to feel any kind of enthusiasm for it either. He had lost the urgency of journalism school, where his brain had fizzed and sparkled with ideas; where he and his classmates had deceived themselves into believing they could change the world. Many of them were now wondering what to do after teaching English in South Korea and Taiwan for the better part of a decade. An equal number were unemployed, scratching out a living writing angry pieces about music festivals for websites that nobody visited. At least Casper had a job, with a medical aid and a pension. Most days he could console himself with his modest paycheque, but every now and then he became despondent at the flatline trajectory his career had taken. He tried to pin down the exact moment when he had settled for mediocrity. It was impossible. It felt like he had been drifting sideways forever; a slow slump towards unhealthy food, bad television and conversations about the past. He worked with words but he couldn't remember the last time he had read a book.

The lift arrived and Casper stepped inside. It was a small lift, old and musty, with linoleum wallpaper and a mirror that was brown around the edges. There was nobody else inside, so Casper took a minute to examine his warped reflection. What he saw scared him: a pale, 30-year-old face with week-old stubble and a chin that was getting softer with every passing year. He looked away and watched the red number above the door instead, slowly counting floors. At the eighth floor the lift shuddered and the doors opened with a metallic screech. Without waiting for them to open fully, Casper squeezed out. He realised that he had been holding his breath and he exhaled with relief.

The building where Casper worked was the cheapest address in Sandton. Well, Marlboro. It was a relic from another time; a time of Ford Cortinas, brown suits, cigarette smoke and corridors. Some of the corridors on the eighth floor led to dead-end filing cabinets that hadn't been opened in years because the previous tenants had taken the keys. Casper often wondered what was hidden in the drawers. The neighbouring buildings were equally inauspicious: on one side was an aluminium anodising plant, on the other side was an abattoir that was strangely quiet considering the brutality that Casper imagined played out inside.

Casper's day had started off well enough. He had been dreaming about Ilse when his cellphone alarm played its xylophone tune, but the details of the dream faded as his eyes adjusted to the grainy dawn light and his brain tried to figure out what day of the week it was. However vague the dream might have been, though, it was enough to put Ilse at the forefront of his thoughts. Sleepy memories of happy times together played out as he ate his bowl of berry muesli and he carried those memories with him all the way to work, as he jolted along in the stop-start morning traffic along William Nicol.

As a result, Casper was almost smiling as he approached his desk, which was more of a clearing on a long, open-plan bench. The two senior sub-editors sat on either side of him and they continuously encroached on his space. They would leave their reference books open page-down and spine-up and allow their proof spreads to casually sprawl across the invisible line that separated one desk from another. They used his chair as a coat rack and left dribbles of coffee around his keyboard. Sometimes his mouse went missing. It had become something of a game.

Today he was greeted by a polystyrene container that had once held a Steers burger, standing next to his monitor. All thoughts of Ilse vanished like mist in the sun. The mouth of the container grinned like a shrunken head, emitting a faint smell of barbeque sauce. Casper sighed and picked it up delicately with his thumb and forefinger, holding it at arm's length like a nuclear specialist might deal with a piece of potentially radioactive waste. He walked to the small kitchen (at the end of another corridor) and threw it in the bin. The kitchen smelt of sour milk and decomposing plant matter. He washed his hands and dried them, then he walked back to his desk and set about cleaning it. He slid his neighbours' clutter back over the invisible lines and wiped the surface with his sleeve.

Finally, he sat down and turned on his computer. As usual, he was the first of the three subs to arrive, but did he ever get credit for his punctuality? Not a chance. He sometimes wondered if his colleagues would miss him if he didn't turn up. He fantasised about getting into his car and driving away, past the fringes of Johannesburg, through the toll gates on the N1, across the Limpopo and north, into

Africa. Or maybe the other direction: south and west, following the sun into the vastness of the Karoo.

But what would happen to the headlines? They were like living things that Casper worried about on a daily basis; rescued owls that needed to be tended, loved and set free into the world. Writing headlines for the tabloid was an exercise in creative denial, turning tragedy into carnival farce. These were the important words, the words that sold the papers. He could sub an entire story in half the time it took him to think up a headline worthy of decorating a lamp pole at rush hour:

BOOZERS BUST FOR GOGO HORROR

MODEL SQUASHED TO DEATH BY TRAIN

TERROR OF THE GAY TOKOLOSHE

DWARF LAWYER NAILS THUG

While he waited for his computer to boot up, already dreading the violence, chaos and gore lurking in his inbox, he felt something on his right shoulder. Without turning to look, he knew that it was the hand of Louis Viljoen, the founder and editor-in-chief of the tabloid. Viljoen only had four fingers on each hand, the index fingers swollen as if fused with the thumbs. No one knew why. Some said he had a genetic disorder, others said he had been injured by a grenade in Angola, or by a circular saw. Some said he had cancer. Viljoen didn't hide his disability, nor did he speak about it. He gripped pens and phones with a pincer-like motion and typed slowly but ferociously, the fingers slamming the keys with a downwards motion, like oil derricks in the desert.

Casper turned around slowly in his chair. "Yes, sir," he said.

"My office, please."

Casper stood up and followed his boss down one corridor, then another. Besides Viljoen's lack of thumbs, his other defining trait was a flair for braces. The uglier the better. Today, an army of cartoon power tools marched over each shoulder to the ample waist of his big-man jeans.

Like the rest of the floor, Viljoen's office was dark and gloomy. A broken bulb flickered almost imperceptibly and there were newspapers piled on every surface.

Through the small window, Casper could see an air conditioner on the wall of the anodising factory next door. Because of the gloominess, it took him a few seconds to realise that there was another person in the room, sitting with one leg crossed over the other, casually bouncing a foot clad in a mud-splattered hiking boot.

Viljoen sat down behind his desk. He pointed to the chair next to the strange man. "Sit," he said to Casper.

Casper did as he was told. The walls of Viljoen's office were bare except for a framed photograph hanging above the desk. It was a black-and-white shot of a young girl crouched in Khumalo Street in Thokoza during the township wars of the early 1990s, holding the limp hand of her teenage brother who was bleeding to death from a gunshot wound to his neck. The boy looked up into his sister's eyes, a whisper of a word on his lips.

Casper recognised the photograph. It was part of the historical fabric of South Africa, studied by anyone who had ever done a photojournalism course. The dying boy and his sister had been the faces of the township war between the ANC and Inkatha. Casper remembered that time clearly. He was still at primary school, eating Melrose-cheese sandwiches and doing biology projects while boys his own age ducked bullets on the other side of the city. He had loved the weekly bomb drills, when he could turn his desk into a fort and lie underneath it, hidden from the world. Like everyone else in the suburbs, he had never believed that he was actually in any danger.

The other man noticed Casper looking at the photograph. "I wish you would take it down," he said to Viljoen. "The past is the past."

Viljoen ignored him. "Casper, this is Ezekial Nkabinde," he said.

"Call me Easy." The guy turned in his chair and offered Casper his hand. The skin of his palm was cool and calloused and his voice was dark and heavy, like a chunk of volcanic rock. It was a voice for late-night radio and animated movies. Or a hostage negotiation.

"It's Ezekial's photograph," Viljoen said. "He's just being modest."

"I still wish you'd take it down."

“It’s not so simple. The young need to be educated. Take that new photographer you sent me, what’s his name? Camel something?”

“Khader.”

“That’s the one. I asked for a simple photograph of that high-profile guy they just arrested – the Mine Dump Murderer. He was in court yesterday. ‘Show me his eyes,’ I told Camel. You can always tell by the eyes. Dead eyes, he’s guilty. The idiot brought back fifty shots and told me to choose. Fifty! And you know the worst part? They were all of the side of the guy’s head. Said he couldn’t get around to the front of the courtroom. I brought him in here and showed him your photograph. Made him look long and hard. Then I gave him his final warning.

“That’s harsh,” Easy said.

“Is it? Why don’t you speak to him? Tell him how it was 20 years ago. How you and Justice and Ricky De Lange would shoot pictures of guys spraying rounds with AK47s. With a wide-angle lens! Young people these days know nothing.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Sorry to be blunt.”

“Justice and De Lange are dead,” Easy said.

“Yes, that is true.”

A silence fell over the room. Viljoen seemed to enjoy it. He smiled at his guests, drawing out the tension. Casper still had no idea why he had been summoned to the meeting. Finally, Viljoen decided that he had made his point, whatever that point might have been, and drew his chubby, four-fingered hands together in front of himself on the desk.

“Gentlemen,” he said. “The merits of Camel’s photography aside, I have an assignment for you today. A shrinking goat. One of the cleaners told me about it. It’s near her house in Diepsloot – number 27 Fourth Kiaat Street – that’s where the sangoma lives. There’s a healing ceremony today at 2pm. A goat that shrinks. Now *that’s* news.”

Casper felt his insides contract. An actual reporting assignment? This wasn’t part of his job description. All of a sudden his gripes with the mundane slog of panel-beating other people’s copy seemed irrelevant. He would much rather be hemmed in

by his messy colleagues, thinking up headlines, than actually go out and experience one of the tabloid's preposterous stories first-hand. The newspaper was fantasy, the stories fleeting and disposable, written and forgotten about over a mug of tea. Goats didn't really shrink. Or did they?

"What's the matter boy?" Viljoen said.

"Uh, I don't understand. What about Golden, our stringer in Diepsloot?"

"Funeral. All the other journalists are out."

"But sir, I..."

"Don't you want to get out of this place?"

"Yes, but..."

"Here's your chance. Ezekial, look after him. He seems delicate."

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Ilse had left him halfway into their year-long lease. They had chosen the two-bedroom unit together. It was in a good position – in a complex called Malibu Heights on the hill between Fourways and Lonehill – and the rent was cheap. A few years ago it was a bare hill in the veld, now a toy town of catalogue houses had sprung up with instant gardens and streetlights and traffic circles that none of the residents knew how to use. Malibu Heights was one of the newer developments in the area. After exhausting all possible variations of the Tuscan theme, the developers had chosen to go Californian, but Californian only in name; the complex looked identical to all the others in the hazy borderland of the northern suburbs: a huddle of beige buildings with terracotta roofs and stone cladding in all the wrong places. When Casper and Ilse had moved in, the paint on the walls had still been wet.

Casper thought about Malibu Heights as he sat in the passenger seat of Easy's low-slung BMW, edging along in the traffic towards Diepsloot. This was his morning commute in reverse and soon they would pass the turnoff to the complex. When Easy pulled up at the traffic light at Fourways Crossing, Casper could open the door and walk quickly between the cars to the other side of the road. From there, it

would be a five-minute jog up the hill. He wouldn't look back to see the expression on Easy's face; he wouldn't pause at the gate of the complex to worry about the dead fever tree sapling tethered to a stake, nor the sprinkler that sprayed a futile arc of water in the opposite direction; he wouldn't allow the steamy smell of pap emanating from the guardhouse to break his stride; he would beep his card and walk straight to unit 77 and climb the stairs to the front door, turn his key, slip inside and close the door on this ludicrous assignment. It would be simple. Nobody would be able to stop him.

Thinking about his escape made him think of Ilse again. Why was she plaguing him today? A few days ago he had found a box of photographs while he was looking for his takkies in the catastrophe of his bedroom cupboard. He had just showered and afterwards he'd spent a long time looking at himself in the mirror: thinning hair, an unhealthy potbelly developing, strange moles with ragged edges that he hadn't noticed before. He wondered if this is what Ilse had seen when she'd looked at him, or whether she had seen something else. He pulled at his eyelids and looked at the red veins running, the wrinkles, the patch of dry skin on his cheek. Outside, a cold wind was blowing and the sky was white with dust. To punish himself, he would go for a run. With his towel around his waist and water still drying on his shoulders, he went to look for his old Nikes, which he hadn't used since she'd left. He pulled things out of his cupboard that he hadn't seen in years: a hockey stick, a felt hat from the Oktoberfest, knee pads for skateboarding and a pair of boxing gloves from a juvenile phase when he thought he could be someone that he was not. Right at the bottom, he found a box that had once contained a breakfast set that someone had given to Ilse and him: two mugs, two egg cups, two small plates. Now it was filled with photographs. It was Ilse's box. She must have left it behind.

All thoughts of exercise dissipated as he sat down on his unmade bed in his damp towel and opened the box. Lying on top was a shot of him and Ilse at a game reserve near Port Elizabeth where they had spent two nights as part of a longer road trip in his old Mazda. Casper remembered taking the photograph. He had set the self-timer and balanced the camera on the deck of their safari tent, then he'd skipped

back to join her and they'd stood still in the dusklight, waiting for the sound of the shutter. It had been a warm evening and afterwards Casper had filled the big outdoor bath that was sunk into the deck behind the tent. The water from the taps was tea-coloured, drawn straight from the river and heated by a solar geyser. They stripped off their clothes and slipped in, listening to the night sounds of the bush and shreds of conversation from the family braaing on the deck of the neighbouring safari tent, hidden from view. Every now and then a cool breeze sighed through the grassland and Ilse's exposed skin turned to goosebumps. He kissed her shoulder and her neck and looked at her in the moonlight, her green eyes reflecting the fairy lights strung above the bath. His hand met hers under the water and he kissed her and moved on top of her and the water sloshed out of the bath. Ilse shrieked and he was worried that the neighbours would hear.

Casper had looked closely at Ilse's face in the photograph, searching for what? A trace of unhappiness? There was none. They were both smiling unselfconsciously, tanned after a week on the Wild Coast, ignorant of real life. There had been other photos in the box, too: shots of Ilse as a little girl, playing on the farm, riding an ostrich, baking a cake, her mouth full of chocolate icing; and shots of her as a teenager, dressed in unflattering tracksuits, riding a bicycle, posing on a rock in the Golden Gate National Park. There were no early shots of Casper. He arrived on the scene as a fully formed adult, appearing like a cut-out in the spaces next to her. Always smiling. He wondered what had happened to that smile?

Thinking about it now, maybe he should have been the better person and couriered the box to her, or at least taken the photos out and posted them to her in a padded envelope, but instead he threw the box away. The only photo he kept was the one of one from the game reserve. He'd folded it twice and slipped it into his wallet.

While Easy navigated the choked middle lane on William Nicol, just thinking about the photograph squashed up against his thigh made other memories float to the surface: the coconut smell of her shower gel in the bathroom and the way she had folded his T-shirts – messily – leaving a crease down the front. He thought of her new life in London: the pictures on Facebook of smiling people in dimly lit restaurants;

pale strangers wearing scarves; a braai under a grey-blue sky. Sometimes he wished that he had also been brave enough to leave. He envied the online snippets about this restaurant and that rock band. Life via status update seemed so simple.

Could he do it? Could he really just open the car door and walk away? He could pack a small bag, catch the bus to the Gautrain, take the Gautrain to the airport and board a flight. He could recline his seat after takeoff and order a whiskey from a red-skirted air hostess who didn't know his name. But where would he go? For some reason Thailand came to mind.

The traffic was bad. But when was the traffic ever *good* in Johannesburg? Easy drove with one hand on the steering wheel and the other moving between his mouth and a bucket of chicken pieces in his lap. Crumbs stuck to his stubble and there was a smear of oil on his chin.

At the intersection where William Nicol crossed over the highway, beggars and pamphlet hawkers trawled the lanes between the cars. Casper tried to ignore them. When that line of defence failed, he tried smiling and raising his hand to politely decline the wire dinosaur, the hand-painted greeting card, the tin cup in the hand of a blind man led by a small boy, the plastic coat hangers, the bin bags, the cellphone chargers, the superglue, the inflatable globe and the corduroy Stetson hat, all of which were displayed at his window in the half-kilometre crawl to the traffic light. Who decided that superglue was the product of choice to sell at a traffic light? Why not staplers? Or tin foil? No, it was superglue. You could buy a tube at any intersection in the city.

It struck Casper that these hawkers were the people who bought his newspaper. He studied them more closely. Some were chipper, with impossibly white teeth like the teeth in toothpaste adverts; others had a more angry demeanour, as if they expected a hand-out simply because they were standing there. Something about them made him uneasy. They were an embodiment of the desperate undercurrent that rippled beneath the surface of the city; a physical reminder of his privilege.

Diepsloot would be even worse. What right did he have to even go *into* the township? And to try and make sense of it by writing a story in the paper? Easy's chicken was making him feel ill.

They were close to the Fourways Crossing intersection. Casper eyed the door handle. Was it locked when you could see the red part of the latch, or when the red part was hidden? He could never remember. For a second he knew that he would do it, then his courage deserted him. It didn't matter. The traffic light was green and Easy drove straight through. The next light at Uranium Road was also green, and the one at Dainfern. Easy wound down his window and let out an oily burp. Then he turned to Casper in the passenger seat. "Why are you so nervous?" he said. "Calm down, bra."

Easy's GPS gave up as they drove into Diepsloot. "Make a U-turn when possible," it said, the screen showing a blank space where there should have been a map. The software obviously couldn't keep up with the new roads that appeared weekly, winding through the sprawl of shacks and their various wood-and-tin extensions, all connected, like a giant, singular organism. People stood and stared as they drove past. Were they sizing up the car and its occupants or were they just staring because they had nothing else to do? Easy stopped near the taxi rank and asked a man how to get to number 27 Fourth Kiaat Street. The man pointed to a distant hill dotted with RDP houses. Easy thanked him and they drove on. After a few wrong turns, he eventually pulled up opposite the house where the healing ceremony was supposed to take place. The air was surprisingly clear for an autumn day. From the hill, Casper could see the buildings of Sandton in the distance and the dark cardiogram of Johannesburg's skyline behind. A bank of clouds sat heavily on the horizon.

The sangoma's house was the only house in the street with a wall around it: a precast structure with 'Dial 27 for heven' painted sloppily next to the gate. Casper wondered if the sign was the act of a vandal or an attempt at a joke. The misspelling did not escape his sub-editor's eye.

“What now?” he said to Easy.

“We go in.”

Reluctantly, Casper climbed out of the car and followed Easy around to the boot. Easy opened the boot, unzipped his camera bag and took out a battered Nikon. He slung it over his shoulder and closed the boot.

“You ready?” he said.

Casper nodded, although he didn't feel very ready at all.

Easy walked across the road, pushed open the gate and rapped on the door of the house. There were a few other cars in the street, but nothing to suggest any sort of gathering. Casper began to doubt the lead that Viljoen had given them. Hadn't one of the office cleaners told him about it? The cleaners were always conspiring with each other while they drank tea in the sun outside. Could such people be trusted?

This part of Diepsloot had a scorched-earth feel about it: no trees, no grass, just yellow dust and the white-blue dome of sky above. The houses were small and box-like, each one painted the same shade of peach. A dog barked. A man walked past the gate and looked at Casper. Why was it so quiet?

Easy lifted his hand to knock again, but before he could do so, the door opened to reveal a woman dressed in a leopard-print skirt and a stained white vest. She was almost as wide as the doorframe. From three paces away, Casper was assaulted by the smell of Vaseline.

“Newspaper?” she said. Easy nodded and she smiled, showing three black teeth hanging like bats from her upper gum. She stepped aside and motioned for them to come in.

The crush of bodies inside was at odds with the strange quiet outside. There must have been 15 people in the small living room, sitting, standing, leaning against the walls. Either there was no furniture or it had been moved out to accommodate everyone. Casper hesitated on the threshold like a nervous bride, but Easy was behind him and shepherded him into the room. The woman pointed to a corner, where a small space had been left. Casper tried not to breathe as he stepped over legs and squeezed past bodies. A pot simmered on a gas burner, the lid propped open with a

chicken foot, and a creamy foam slid down the side and dripped onto the floor. The room smelt like fried onions and floor polish.

“Sorry,” Casper said as he pushed past. “Sorry.”

When he could go no further, he stopped. Everybody waited. Was this how it started? The story that would become a lamp-post headline tomorrow?

CURED BY A GOAT

THE GOAT DOCTOR

The whole thing seemed pointless. The goat didn’t talk. It didn’t change colour. No, of all the magical things it could do, it *shrank*. Where was the goat, anyway?

The woman next to Casper sniffed, a long raking sound like a spade being pulled through wet cement. He couldn’t help picturing the snotball as it cannoned up her nasal passages through the bony pink expanse of her sinuses and slid down the back of her throat. He imagined the sneeze particles suspended like miniature planets. What else was hanging malevolently in the air? What virus would he leave this house with, biding its time in his lungs before boring its proboscis through his cell walls? He buried his mouth and nose in the crook of his arm.

“What’s going on?” he said to Easy. It sounded like *Whassom*.

“Hey?”

Casper dropped his arm. “What’s happening?”

“It’s like going to the doctor,” the photographer said. “You come at the time the mama says, but she is late.”

“Didn’t she let us in?”

“She has gone to get ready.”

Casper covered his mouth again and slumped against the wall. The other people in the room sat like totem poles, accustomed to a life of waiting – for their benefit money at the end of the month, for a new ID book after a shack fire, for a taxi and now for a magical goat that would make their problems go away. Actually, Casper wasn’t sure what the point of the goat was. He would wait and see.

Eventually, the same woman who had let them in reappeared. She still wore the leopard print skirt and stained vest, but she had draped a threadbare pelt from some anonymous animal over her shoulders and she wore a headband decorated with guinea fowl feathers. Behind her came the goat, with a thick gold rope around its neck like something used to tie the curtains back in a fancy hotel. Without warning, a man in the opposite corner started banging a drum between his legs and the sangoma turned her face to the low ceiling like a prophet about to receive divine inspiration. The goat stared dumbly. Then, as quickly as it had started, the drumming stopped. The sangoma held out her hands, palms up.

Casper flipped his notebook open to a blank page and waited, pen hovering. It made him feel stupid, like an extra in a film-scene press conference. He should write something, but what? The sangoma started speaking but he had no idea what she was saying. Casper wrote: *Goat medium sized, brindle colouring.*

Next, the sangoma picked up a two-litre bottle filled with pale liquid, and a plastic cup like you'd drink Oros out of at a children's party. She made a beeline for Casper, half filled the cup and gave it to him. He took the cup with dismay. Everyone was staring at him.

"Drink," Easy said.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes, she is introducing you. This is the ritual."

Casper gave the cup a cautionary sniff. The liquid inside smelt like dishwashing powder dissolved in vodka. He noticed that the edge of the cup had been chewed.

"Drink it," Easy said, this time more urgently.

"What is it?"

"Medicine."

"I'm not sick."

"Medicine for the head."

What the hell, Casper thought. He closed his eyes, tipped the cup back and swallowed. The liquid scorched a fiery path down his throat, leaving a warmth in its

wake that spread through his whole body. Everything became more defined, like when you turn the focus knob on a pair of binoculars. He heard a distant thunderclap, or maybe it was a car backfiring. Rain in May would be very unusual.

Now the sangoma turned her attention away from Casper and moved around the room with the cup. Everyone drank in turn. Then she tied the goat to a hook on the wall and went into another room. She reappeared holding a live chicken.

“The chicken is a gift,” Easy whispered. “These people all want to be healed. They give her a gift and she heals them.”

“Do you believe in this stuff?”

“No way, bra. I’ve got Discovery.”

Now the people began to line up before the sangoma. Easy gave running commentary: “Some people have psychological issues, some have stomach illness, some have money problems.” He pointed to a woman third in the queue. “For her it is more complicated. There is a man, but he won’t pay *lobola*.”

It was almost too ridiculous to be true. Casper wondered if he was being set up. He looked around the room for the secret cameraman. The sangoma had a manly build – maybe she was Leon Schuster in disguise? He looked closely at Easy, at the lines around his mouth. The photographer was desperate to laugh, wasn’t he? Casper put his notebook away.

The ceremony wasn’t a joke. Nobody jumped out to surprise Casper; the people just carried on queuing with bovine patience, consulting with the sangoma in turn. The goat seemed to be merely a spectator, watching from the sidelines attached to its hook. The ceremony progressed until all the people in the room had been seen to. They tucked R10 and R20 notes into the sangoma’s headband before being examined. Those without money presented her with blankets, cleaning products, a house plant, worn sandals. There was even a Game voucher stuck among the notes.

“That man wants to get a job as a security guard in Dainfern but he is battling,” Easy said with his camera to his eye. The sangoma picked up her chicken again and held it aloft above the man’s head, making slow circles. “The mama is

telling him to burn a candle next to a glass of milk for a one night and drink the milk the next morning. Then he will get the job.”

Next in line was a sullen teenage girl in a school uniform. She whispered something to the sangoma and everyone in the room strained forwards to listen. Casper was starting to feel claustrophobic, like the time a bully called Ivan zipped him into a cricket bag and didn't let him out again until Casper told him he'd wet his pants. There it was again: a thunderclap. Unmistakable. The storm seemed to be getting closer. The sangoma raised her hand and smacked the girl on the shoulder. She didn't react. The sangoma smacked her again, then grabbed her chin and made her look up.

Easy made a balloon shape in front of his belly. “The mama will give her something to drink for the problem,” he whispered.

Casper was horrified. He knew these things happened, but in an abstract sense. He had read the vitriolic blogs on both sides of the debate about the government's decision to lower the age of abortion without consent to 12; he had watched *Yizo Yizo* back in the day and he had even attended a protest march at Zoo Lake with Ilse once, led by a group of chic middle-class lesbians campaigning for easier access to decent medical facilities in the townships. Surely this girl knew better than to consult a sangoma?

“What if it doesn't work?” Casper whispered.

“I don't know, bra. A coathanger?”

The sangoma was doing the thing with the chicken again, moving it in slow circles above the girl's head. Easy went in close for an emotional portrait, a ruler length from the action. His shutter fired three times in succession, documenting the journey of a single pale tear that rolled down the girl's cheek. Casper felt dizzy. Bile rose in his throat. The room began to blur around the edges. The sangoma tipped her head back and let out a sound that was more animal than human, the drumming started up again and the woman next to him began to ululate. At the same time there was a flash of lightning and a thunderous boom, then the staccato sound of rain

beating against the tin roof. The sangoma unhitched the goat and began to chant, her eyes tightly closed. The goat stood shivering, scanning the room with its occult eyes.

A long minute: drumming, rain, chanting. And then, either the sangoma seemed to grow, or something was happening to the goat: not shrinking; rather moving away incrementally, its feet stationary, as if it was being pushed down an invisible set of railway tracks. Centimetre by centimetre. Casper rubbed his eyes. The lid of the chicken pot clattered to the floor and the foamy broth boiled over the sides. The goat got smaller and smaller. Casper needed to throw up. With his hand over his mouth, he rushed outside into the downpour and fell to his knees, heaving, until his museli breakfast was splattered all over the driveway.

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Before Malibu Heights, before they became lovers, they had shared a fifth-floor flat in Killarney. Ilse answered Casper's ad on Gumtree and her parents helped her move. She came from a place called Memel in the Free State, with a bed, a chest of drawers and three small boxes, all loaded onto the back of a white Hilux bakkie. After they had carried everything up, Tannie Juanita and Oom André (they asked to be called that) stood solemnly with their hands clasped in front of them, until Casper offered them tea. They sat uneasily on the edge of the couch and sipped from stained mugs. Casper felt self-conscious, as if the second-hand furniture, bare walls and the mouldy ceiling in the bathroom were physical manifestations of his character flaws. But if Juanita and André were worried, they didn't show it. They told Casper that Ilse was in Johannesburg to study industrial psychology.

"Sorry for the trouble," André said. "We are waiting for our lift. Ilse's cousin is coming to fetch us."

"I get to keep the bakkie," Ilse said, beaming.

She was wearing a high-necked frock with a floral print that was probably last in fashion around the time the ox wagons crossed the Drakensberg and she sat with

her hands folded neatly in her lap. A halo of dusty blonde hair. Smallish eyes behind glasses with thick, plastic frames.

“*Het ma die stad gesien?*” she said, gesturing to Casper’s balcony with its view of eight lanes of traffic, usually going nowhere.

Juanita nodded. “*Wonderlik, skat,*” she said.

“*Nog ’n bietjie tee, pa?*” she asked André.

“*Nee, dankie.*”

It was so quiet Casper could almost hear the ants running across his kitchen counter. Eventually the doorbell rang and everyone sprang to their feet in a flurry of goodbyes. Juanita was teary, André rigid as a pallbearer. Casper walked them down to the gate where the cousin was waiting in another white bakkie. He was wearing a two-tone khaki shirt and crushed Casper’s hand when he shook it. Ilse waited on the balcony and they all waved to her.

When Casper got back upstairs she had undergone a metamorphosis. The glasses were gone and she had changed into a pair of jeans and a yellow T-shirt that read *Tonight on e*. She was lying lengthways across his couch, a dirty pair of Converse takkies propped up on a pillow.

“Sorry about the folks, they’re a bit backwards,” she said. “What’s your name again?”

“Casper.” He was so flummoxed by the con artist who had just flounced her way into his life that he battled to say his own name. She had sounded so innocent on the phone; a quiet person who would keep to herself, do her own thing and pay the rent on time.

She lit a cigarette and her face was obscured by a curl of blue smoke. Casper wanted to ask her not to smoke inside, but his voice seemed to have departed with her parents.

“Casper,” she said. “It’s Saturday. Why aren’t we out somewhere having fun?” She held her cigarette like a laser pointer, looking for a place to extinguish it. Casper just stared at her. Eventually she walked to the balcony and threw it off into space, where it spun in slow circles through the air above the highway.

They drove her bakkie down to Casper's local, a grungy bar called the Three-Way Divorce Club. The big diesel engine sounded out of place amidst the electric hum of the city. It was a sound from another place, where the horizon was an empty curve of mielie fields and the sky a universe of blue. They didn't talk much; Casper just gave directions. The bar was on the top floor of an anonymous retail block, with a laundromat, a Chicken Licken and a textbook company downstairs. There was a scrap yard across the road and a petrol station where you could get decent cocaine from a Nigerian called Kwento. But the main reason Casper went there was the view: from the roof deck, Ponte and the Joburg Tower loomed large over everything. The skyline was close enough to impart a sense of menace but far away enough to look pretty, too.

They parked and Ilse looked sceptical. "Nice place," she said sarcastically, picking her way around broken glass in the stairwell. "I'm glad my vaccinations are up to date."

She was sharp. Casper should watch himself. But he was captivated.

In the daylight, the griminess of the place was obvious: the stairwell smelt like urine and sour milk and you could map out the places where people had thrown up by the lingering whiff of puke. It was actually disgusting; Casper realised that he should have taken her to a nicer place in Melville or Greenside.

He held the door open for Ilse. It was still early and they were the only people in the bar. For now at least. It would fill up later, with teenagers in skinny jeans from the suburbs, risking a jol on Joburg's seedier side. There would be a lonely live music act just after midnight, as there was every Saturday night, the amp a little too loud and the singer a bit too tipsy to nail the high notes in the obligatory chorus about angst and longing and unrequited love. The teenagers would jump around in a circle in front of the small stage, watched by the serious drinkers at the bar who would slump forward incrementally after each song. Often, the place only cleared out when the sky lightened and a crepuscular light found its way through the block-out blinds. That's when some people went to find Kwento at the garage.

By the time the skinny jeans crowd arrived that Saturday night, Ilse and Casper were well on their way. He was drinking beer quarts, she was drinking

whiskey on the rocks. They had moved from the noise in the bar, onto the roof, where the lights of the city were so close that Casper felt like he could reach out and pluck them like grapes off a vine. Their conversation had entered dangerous territory: family, religion, failed romance. Casper felt exhilarated unburdening himself to a stranger, never mind that he would be sharing his flat with her from now on. He told her about his parents in Port Elizabeth and his six-month stint as a door-to-door salesman in Bournemouth for Southern Gas and Electric. She told him about the claustrophobia of growing up in a Dutch Reformed household, about her parents who had slowly been overtaken by the 21st century and about how she had always wanted to be a vet until the time she watched a young woman inseminate a cow on a neighbour's farm.

"She put her arm in all the way up to *here*," Ilse said, pointing at her elbow. She told the story while crunching on an ice block.

Casper told her about his awkward matric dance, when his date went off with the captain of the squash team behind the change rooms, and left him to fend for himself the whole night.

"Shame," she said, without much sympathy.

Casper felt like he was blushing. Was he blushing? Ilse didn't seem to notice. He looked at her across the table, her eyes reflecting streetlights and whiskey. "Have you got a boyfriend?" he asked.

"That's a very serious question."

"A six-foot flanker from Memel Hoër?"

"I went to St Andrews in Bloem; there's no flanker. Why do you ask? Are you planning to do something to me?"

"No, I..."

"What about you?" she asked. "Should I get used to sharing a bathroom with a first-year psychology student in a short skirt?"

"You study psychology."

"*Industrial* psychology."

"And I'm sure you own a couple of short skirts."

“I’m more of a jeans girl. Has anyone ever told you that you look like an ugly version of Johnny Depp?”

Casper pushed his lank hair off his forehead. “Is that a compliment?”

“Maybe.”

“Another drink?” he asked.

“Tequila,” she said. “I’m buying.”

Downstairs, Saturday night was in full swing. A band was leaping around on the stage, guitars screeching, and some guys with their underwear sticking out of their pants were smoking a joint in the shadowy alcove near the bathrooms.

“Two tequilas!” Casper shouted to the barman, who rummaged for some plastic shot glasses and sloshed Jose Quervo into them. Ilse paid.

“To unfinished thoughts,” Casper said.

“What? I can’t hear you.”

“Unfinished thoughts!” It didn’t sound as suave the second time around.

“Okay,” she said.

Casper pinched his face involuntarily as the liquor seared through him. Ilse didn’t even flinch.

They danced with the skinny jeans crowd and went back upstairs when it became too hot and smoky to breathe. Casper leant against the low wall with the city behind him and Ilse tipped her face towards him. He breathed her in: cigarette smoke and Pantene.

He had know her for less than a day, yet he already knew that she would break his heart.

•

He pushed himself up off his knees in the sangoma’s driveway in Diepsloot as rain ran down his collar. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He felt empty, as light as a helium balloon, and he wasn’t even worried about the specks of vomit on his shoes. The people inside the house were quiet and respectful when he walked back in,

as if what he'd done was as normal as sneezing. The goat watched him from where it was tied to the wall. Casper looked at it closely – it seemed to have returned to its normal dimensions.

He felt like he'd passed some sort of initiation test and he was filled with a calm confidence. If he was going to write a report about this damn goat he would do it properly. He took out his notebook and quizzed the sangoma about the purpose of the ceremony and she answered bashfully in broken English. He asked the name of the goat (Ronald) and he selected five people from the audience, whom he questioned about Ronald's magical powers. He asked Easy to shoot head-and-shoulder portraits and he matched the filenames of the photos with his interview notes. He passed around the office dictaphone and the interview subjects spelled out their names slowly. Afterwards, he paced out the room to gauge its size just like he'd been taught to do in journalism school all those years ago. While he paced, putting one foot carefully in front of the other, sentences began forming in his head; fresh sentences that belonged only to him. His skin felt membranous, as if a barrier between himself and the world had been stripped away. It was a wonderful feeling.

When he was done with his interviews, the sangoma came towards him and reached out. Casper took her hands.

"You are fine," she said, looking into his eyes.

"Yes."

"You are fine."

Casper was more than fine. He was buzzing. He and Easy said their goodbyes and they went outside. The storm had vanished as quickly as it had appeared and the late-afternoon sun glinted off the wet ground.

"Good work," Easy said as he started the car and did a U-turn in the street.

Casper slumped in the passenger seat and felt the stress of the day draining out of him. He looked at the scribbles in his notebook and he felt proud of how he had handled the situation, but he also felt a nagging scepticism. Already he was beginning to doubt himself.

"Did the goat really shrink?" he asked Easy.

“I don’t know what you saw, bra.”

“I saw it shrink.”

“Then it shrank.”

“Did *you* see it shrink?”

“To me it was just a goat.”

Easy drove down a series of dead ends before he eventually found the main road and he joined the cars moving slowly back towards the city. Casper watched the scenes scrolling past his window: damp grass behind sagging fences, litter in the vacant plots, rivers of traffic under a coalfire sky. The rain had washed away the smog and he could see hill upon hill of new housing developments: skeletons of buildings, golf courses outlined in the veld, horse paddocks and electric fences.

After a while, he said, “That girl – what do you think she’ll do?”

“She’ll do what the sangoma says.”

“But it’s wrong.”

Easy tried to change the subject. “I’m thirsty,” he said. “Are you thirsty?”

“I’m serious. Can’t we give her the name of a decent clinic, at least?”

“Let’s get a drink. A sundowner.”

Casper sighed. “I have to file this story.”

Easy snorted. “Bra, that goat is not news. You can write the story tomorrow and Viljoen can run it on Friday.”

“What does Viljoen say about your plan?”

“One drink is not going to kill you.”

“It might kill my job.”

“A journalist’s job is temporary.”

“I’m a sub-editor.”

“Come on, one drink.”

“If *you* explain to Viljoen.”

“Don’t worry. You must learn to relax.”

“Fine. One drink.” Casper smiled. He could feel the numbing routine of his life unravelling. For the first time since Ilse had left him, he had no idea what would happen next.

Near the intersection where Casper had nearly jumped out of the car earlier, Easy turned into the covered parking lot of a casino that Casper had often driven past but never been inside. The casino was built to look like a crumbling Tuscan hill town, or some architect’s fantasy of what a crumbling Tuscan hill town should look like. Everything was new but meant to look old: the earthenware flower pots, the deliberately cracked cobblestones, the artfully antique plaster, the laundry strung up across a balcony that led to nowhere, the ceiling painted a permanent shade of sunset. They walked up the stairs, emptied their pockets and lifted their arms for the security guards to frisk them. A flamenco guitarist sang Spanish love songs under a plastic palm tree while they elbowed their way through herds of teenagers in hooded tracksuits and falling down pants, girls in the shortest skirts imaginable, all of them standing around in the fake Tuscan twilight.

Easy chose a pub with an Irish name and they found a table inside, close to the window. Walking from the shopping centre into the pub was like stepping through a teleporter into a new universe. Italy gave way to wood panelling, a framed photograph of Joel Stransky kicking the winning drop goal in the 1995 World Cup, slimy glasses stacked on the bar counter and tables of balding men drinking after work, their collars loose. Casper ordered a draught. When it arrived and he took a sip, he couldn’t remember the last time he had tasted something so cold and delicious. The beer went straight to his head. While the huge, orange sun sank over the mock-terracotta roof outside, he spoke recklessly about his life and his job, gossiping openly about four-fingered Viljoen and how his dreams of being a proper journalist had been slowly eroded one tabloid headline at a time. He stopped himself before he got to Ilse. That would have been too much.

“Why do you work for Viljoen?” Casper asked.

“Work is work,” Easy said.

“But you took the Thokoza photograph. Why aren’t you shooting for *The New York Times* or something?”

For the first time that day, Casper saw a shadow flash across Easy’s face. He didn’t answer. Instead, he lifted his glass and took a long sip. Then he said: “Do you know what happened the last time Viljoen sent me to Diepsloot?”

Casper shook his head.

“I saw a man burn to death.”

“That was your photograph?” Casper remembered it clearly: a full-page image of a man on his hands and knees, engulfed in flames. He had been a Somali shopkeeper, a victim of a xenophobic attack during a service-delivery protest.

Easy nodded. “You’re lucky today was just a goat.”

Casper swallowed and his saliva tasted like metal. The photograph of the burning man had been so horrible that he had barely been affected by it, as if it had been a marketing poster for a Bruce Willis movie or a screenshot from a video game. It had never occurred to him that the event had actually happened in a real alleyway in a real township, a place where he had just thrown up on his shoes. He remembered obsessing about the placement and the size of the headline (BURNED ALIVE) and the jokes the other subs had made about Mr Biltong. Now he was so deeply embarrassed that he didn’t know what to say.

“People don’t care anymore,” Easy said. “I risked my life to take that photo, like I have done before, but it’s not framed in a gallery or printed in a coffee table book. Without the politics, if it’s not police doing the killing, a picture like that is just entertainment.”

To fill the uneasy silence that followed, and to prove something about his knowledge of suffering, or at least his awareness of it, Casper launched into a long, convoluted story about the first time he had seen the city – the proper Johannesburg – when a friend’s mother had taken a group of boys on an open-top Putco bus, a short-lived tourist attraction, to go ice-skating at the Carlton Centre. It had been around the time of the first elections and he told Easy how he had seen a newspaper lying on the seat of the bus with photos of men with gashes across their chests and necks, men

with pangas impaled in their backs, men on fire. The city had been deserted and he had thought of Russia for some reason, even though he had never been there and his geographical knowledge was based entirely on places in the *Hardy Boys* books. By the end of his story he had lost sight of the thing he was trying to say. He was gushing. Every nerve ending in his body was firing. He was drunk and dirty and the depression that had stalked him for months now seemed irrelevant reflected in the eyes of the man across the table.

Easy looked at him like a marine biologist might observe a strange mollusc. "Are you okay?" he said.

"I'm sorry. I haven't been out of the office for a while."

"I can see that."

Casper's wallet was lying on the table and the corner of the game reserve photograph was sticking out. Before Casper could do anything about it, Easy slid the photo out and looked at it. Casper blushed.

"What's her name?" Easy asked.

"Ilse."

"What happened?"

"I'd rather not talk about it."

But Easy was not so easily dissuaded. He tipped the photograph towards the light and examined it, as if he were evaluating the technical merits of the composition.

"Pretty girl," he said. "Where is she?"

"London."

"And you're here?"

"Exactly."

In the yellow light, Easy's skin hung dry and sallow around his eyes and Casper realised how old he was. Forty five at least.

"You asked me why I work for Viljoen?" Easy said, still holding the photograph. He spoke quietly, but his voice seemed to fill the whole room.

Casper nodded.

“Once you have seen a burning man, or a kid shot to death in the street, or even a shrinking goat, it puts everything else into perspective. Think about it.”

He passed the photo back to Casper and waved his hand for another round.

•

The truth of it, the sad reality that wounded Casper still, was that his relationship with Ilse didn't explode into a million pieces. It would have been easier to blame infidelity or selfish ambition, but all he had to blame was the atrophy of two people slowly drifting apart like ships in the night.

From the day they moved in, Ilse had hated Malibu Heights. She complained about the traffic, the sameness of everything, the young mothers and their entourage of toddlers at the local Woolworths. They had moved because they had wanted space, maybe a puppy, but the grass in the small courtyard grew longer and longer until one day Casper filled it in with river stones. Despite the security, Ilse refused to sleep with the windows open. She said that most crimes were committed by the people hired to protect you. They stopped going out and bought a huge TV instead, using the money from Casper's thirteenth cheque.

For Casper, settling felt natural – the logical next step. He enjoyed coming home and throwing his bag on the dining room table that they'd bought at Coricraft. He enjoyed drinking a beer on the small patio while go-away birds called from the blue gums in the empty stand next door. He felt successful in the uniform world of Malibu Heights, part of the tax-paying middle class. There was nothing here to remind him of the tabloid. His neighbours drove modest cars and also shopped at Coricraft. They also had big TVs. Ilse would come around eventually, he thought. It was just a matter of time.

And then one day she was gone. Casper came home from work and it was like she had never shared his life. Her cupboard was empty and her chewed pink toothbrush no longer stood in the glass on the basin. He phoned around and

discovered that she had quit her job the month before, and she had come to the end of her notice period.

“Who is calling, dear?” the secretary asked.

Casper hung up.

He called her parents. Tannie Juanita sounded cagey. “You know what, *skat*, maybe it’s for the best. You two are so young.”

He called Ilse’s friends and they spoke in hushed tones as if they were dealing with a mental patient or an alcoholic. They mumbled apologies and Casper knew he would probably never speak to them again.

Last of all he called Ilse and he was surprised when she answered on the first ring, as if she had been waiting for his call.

“Where are you?” Casper said.

“At the airport.”

“Why?”

There was silence on the line.

“What about the last three years?”

Ilse sighed. “It’s like I can’t breathe,” she said. “I need to feel things again. I need to sleep less, do more. I can’t...”

“Yes you can!” Casper said. He was almost shouting. “Please...”

She cut in: “Remember that night at that bar in Braamfontien?”

Casper swallowed back his tears. “Yes,” he said.

“Remember me like that, okay?”

Before he could say anything else the line went dead. Casper threw his phone into the off-white table lamp in the lounge, which toppled to the floor and smashed on the beige tiles. He sat with his head in his hands for a very long time, until night fell and darkness crept in through the windows of the lounge. Then he turned onto his side on the couch and closed his eyes.

The next morning he looked at the broken shards of porcelain and the cracked lampshade with a strange detachment, as if it were an accident that had occurred in

a supermarket and some employee would soon appear with a mop and bucket to clean it up.

•

Casper held his phone in the dim light of the Irish pub and thumbed the scuffed edge. Such a small scrape considering how hard he had thrown it. Equally miraculous was that the phone still worked perfectly. Every time Casper used it, he felt like it was mocking him for his childishness. Now it began to vibrate, skittering across the table, and Casper jumped with fright. He looked at the screen: Viljoen.

He pressed the answer button. "Hello."

"Where are you?" Viljoen growled. "I need that story for tomorrow."

"We're on our way."

"Where's Ezekial? Put him on."

Casper held out the phone with the receiver covered but Easy waved his arms in front of his face like a teenage girl declining a shot of apple sours.

"You promised," Casper hissed.

"Tell him we'll be there in half an hour," Easy whispered back. He was smiling a big, lopsided smile.

Casper put the phone back to his ear. "Hello? Yes, we'll be there in half an hour. Yes, I understand." He hung up.

"Another beer?" Easy asked.

"For sure."

"Now you're getting it."

By the time they left, Casper was drunk. He and Easy walked out through the Tuscan twilight to Easy's car and they drove out of the parking garage into the night.

"I promise you, that goat shrank," Casper said as Easy negotiated the traffic circles outside the casino and turned back towards Sandton.

"I believe you, bra."

Casper grinned and sat back in his seat, watching as more shopping malls and housing developments flashed past his window: Bellevue, La Domaine, Tezula, Ascot Heights. At one point the road ran next to the highway and he saw headlights and taillights dipping and rolling into the distance forever.

He opened his wallet and took out the photograph of Ilse and him. He looked at it for a while, then he rolled down the window a crack and pushed it into the darkness beyond. He held the edge of the print, feeling the waxy paper flap against his hand in the wind, then he let it go.

University of Cape Town

— PIRATE WATCH —

University of Cape Town

It was noisy inside The Whaler: Creedence on the old Pioneer hi-fi, ice cubes clinking in glasses, wooden bar stools on sandy tiles and a rugby match playing loudly on the TV in the corner, although no one was really watching. They were all listening to Mickey, who was holding court at the bar counter and telling anyone who would listen why Durban was a good place to be poor.

Garrick had heard it all before. He sat quietly, listening to his friend, and sipped his rum and Coke. He and Mickey drank Captain Morgan in the good times, Squadron in the lean times. They'd been on Squadron for the past few months but after the Seychelles job they'd be drinking all the Captain they liked.

"Why do you think there are so many white car guards?" Mickey said. "It's because Durbs has a much nicer climate than Wesdonaria or Brakpan. I'm serious!"

"I don't buy it," Barry Savage said. "No one's happy being poor. Like you. Why are you taking the yacht job when there's a good chance you'll be keelhaunched by pirates before you get past Mombasa?"

Mickey tried to answer but Savage interrupted him. “You’re doing it for the money. Because you’re unhappy with your shit job.”

“It’s the same shit job as yours.”

“That’s why I know how little it pays.”

“Don’t be a drama queen, Savage,” Mickey said. “We’re actually being paid peanuts. We’re doing it for the adventure.”

“Just be careful,” Savage said. “There’s no way I’m using my pension to pay for your ransom.”

“You have a pension?” Mickey’s eyes were wide with mock surprise.

“Of course I have a pension.”

“Don’t be so boring, Savage. Life’s too short.”

“I’m not boring. I’m a realist.”

“Same thing.”

Mickey swivelled on his bar stool to check the rugby score then he swivelled back and ordered another drink. “Make it a Captain this time,” he said. “Double.” He winked at Garrick. His face was a relief map of sun-scoured wrinkles.

Garrick nodded but he wasn’t in the mood to talk about pirates and paycheques. He and Mickey *had* been promised a fair payout for the delivery, but Savage didn’t need to know about it, otherwise he’d be scamming rum and Cokes of them forever. And besides, Garrick was thinking about the phone call again. While Mickey and Savage bantered on, he replayed the incident over in his mind. He couldn’t help himself; it consumed his waking life like an addiction.

The phone call had come while Garrick was winching the boat off the beach after a dive at Pinnacles. Usually he didn’t answer his phone when he heard it ring in the console, especially if he was busy with something else, but it kept ringing so he climbed onto the pontoon, opened the hatch and grabbed it, then he walked away down the beach with the sticky sun on his back to escape the diesel rattle of the old Land Rover.

“Hello,” he said.

“Dad?”

The word was unfamiliar. Other people were dads; he hadn't been a dad for a long time.

"Who is this?"

"Jeremy."

Garrick cupped his hand over the earpiece to block the wind. There was something wrong with the boy's voice. It was deep and earnest, the voice of an adult not a child. Not his child at least, the way Garrick remembered him. He hadn't seen his son in seven years.

"Dad?" Jeremy said. "Are you there?"

"I'm here." Garrick choked on the words, suddenly nervous. "What's wrong? Is there something wrong?"

"I'm coming back. I want to see you."

Garrick didn't know what to say and the long-distance line hissed into his ear. Eventually he managed to cough out a sentence: "That's great boy, really great. When do you arrive?"

"A week."

Garrick looked at the waves and thought about the implications of what Jeremy was saying. In a week he and Mickey were supposed to set off. He listened to the wind and the shuck of the shorebreak pulling back and he turned in a full circle while he thought, his footprints leaving amoeboid shapes in the sand. Then he said: "Come with me."

"What?"

"I'm delivering a yacht to the Seychelles. You can be my deck hand."

"The Seychelles?"

"If your mother agrees."

"She doesn't have to know."

Garrick chewed his sunburnt lip. "Pass her the phone. Let me speak to her."

"She's out."

"I don't believe you."

"Dad, I'm running out of airtime. This is an expensive call."

“Yes. Yes.”

“Bye dad. Come fetch me, okay? I’ll sms you the time.”

And then the line went dead, like a door shut at the end of a long corridor.

Thinking about it now for the thousandth time, Garrick wondered if he had done the right thing inviting his son to join them on the voyage. Mickey had reacted positively but it was a lot to ask of his friend. Then again, he had no other option. He could either sail to the Seychelles and make a suitcase full of money, or bail on Mickey and spend time with a boy he hardly knew anymore.

“Hey, wake up!” Mickey said as he slid a glass of Captain and Coke across the bar to where Garrick was sitting.

Garrick lined up the fresh drink next to the glass he was already nursing and tried not to think too much. Rum was good for that; it bludgeoned the worry out of you.

The next day, Garrick’s mouth was thick with booze and his head hurt. Even though he’d drunk so much he’d barely slept, worrying that the call had been some sort of prank. He still hadn’t received an sms from Jeremy and he had no way of contacting him. He got out of bed, went into his lounge and pushed open the big window until the place where it got stuck on the rail. The sun was already high in the sky, like a glittering disco ball from hazy memory of a Point Road night club. It filled the gap between the two tower blocks that crowded the view in front of his Amanzimtoti flat. He looked at the palm trees on the street, six storeys down, and watched the tips of their fronds dancing in the breeze. That’s how he judged the wind. It was a light westerly today, about five knots, probably picking up to ten knots later. He could handle ten knots. There was only one group of divers going out and they had pool work to do first. He didn’t have to rush.

He made some coffee in the kitchen and took his mug back to the window. He sipped the coffee but his hands wouldn’t stop shaking, so he went back into the

kitchen and found a halfjack of Squadron with about two shots left in it. He unscrewed the cap and poured in the rum – the coffee didn't even change colour – then he threw the empty bottle into the bin.

He sat down at the window again and took a long sip, feeling the sun on his face. He closed his eyes. Starla would come after both of them and wring their necks like village chickens, he was sure of it. When Garrick thought about his ex, the skin on his arms prickled. He remembered the first time he saw her. He was about Jeremy's age and he'd been drifting up and down the coast in his Datsun bakkie, doing odd jobs, living in a tent, surfing every day. In Port St Johns he fell in with a group of draft dodgers who lived in the forest behind the beach in a makeshift commune of chipboard and tin, fashioning jewellery from seashells which they sold to tourists. Starla arrived in town unaccompanied; she just stepped off the bus and picked her way past the potholes down to the beach in the fading sun. Garrick remembered how the light was like champagne that afternoon; like she was swimming inside a champagne bottle. She had short, dark hair, a hard, slim body and a tattoo of a dolphin going all the way down her left arm. He remembered the tattoo most clearly: it was a real work of art. She carried herself upright, like she had been taught how.

Garrick watched her from a distance, invisible in the deep shadow of the forest, and he felt something change inside him. He was not the person he was pretending to be, and neither was she.

When she had been in town for a week, having landed a job tending the bar in the big hotel on the river mouth, he finally plucked up the courage to go and introduce himself. She was surprisingly friendly, and after that first meeting Garrick visited the hotel as often as he could. Each time he would order a Lion lager and sip it for up to an hour, sitting alone, watching. She knew he had come for her and not for the beer and she would give him a little smile each time, her eyes wide and confused like she had seen too much of the world already.

Garrick started making plans to leave. He felt protective towards this girl he hardly knew, and he realised with painful certainty that he had to prevent her from

becoming one of those people that nice folks in Westville and Kloof are always whispering about: “You know Mandy? Oh, what a terrible story. She’s been living in the Transkei. Apparently she’s a *drug addict*. Can you imagine what her dear mother must be going through?”

Despite the stories that Starla liked to tell about him now, spun from anger and regret, Garrick still believed that he had saved her from a life she might never have escaped.

He looked at his watch. Half an hour had passed. He swirled the dregs of the coffee in the bottom of the mug and downed it cold. The rum was syrupy at the back of his throat and for a moment he was disgusted with himself, but then a calmness washed through his limbs and he thought, how bad can it be? That’s it until dinner. One drink. Hair of the dog.

His cellphone vibrated on the kitchen counter and he walked over to pick it up. Private number. Since the call from Jeremy, it thrilled him to answer, even though it was usually a telesales agent from Dial Direct or Standard Bank, or Mickey asking him to grab a can of two-stroke oil or a toasted chicken sandwich on his way down to the Whaler.

He pressed the green button. “Yes, china.”

“Is this Garrick Underwood?”

“At your service.”

“Garrick, old boy, long time no hear. It’s Jan Jooste. Remember me?”

“Jan-Jan. Of course. What’s news?”

“Same old. I’m still at Smit although it’s called something else these days. Big BEE deal, less pay, more days at sea. You know the drill.”

“I know it.”

“But that’s not why I’m calling. I’ve got a job for you.”

Garrick stifled a laugh. “I thought Smit was done with me,” he said. “The severance letter basically told me to bugger off.”

Silence on the end of the line. Garrick had never liked Jan Jooste. "Shoot, Jan-Jan, let's have it," he said. "What's the job?"

Jooste sighed. "We're short of staff for a rescue mission. Some kid fell over on Marion Island and broke her leg. Snapped the femur in two. If she doesn't have surgery she'll lose it. There's a medic on the island who says he'll do it but the government isn't taking any chances. They want to send the *Agulhas* back there."

"All the way to Marion for a broken leg? That'll cost something."

"Between you and me, the kid's from the University of Venda, doing a postgrad at Wits. She's an oceanographer or something, meant to be a poster child for the new base they built. They want to get down there and sort it out before it becomes a PR nightmare."

"Where do I fit in?"

"We're short of experienced officers. I'd take some of the young guys but they haven't been down into the Forties. You know how rough it can get."

Garrick could feel his heart beating in his chest, disconnected, like it was a separate animal. He leaned against the window and looked at the sea through the gap in the buildings, the same sea that smashed icily into the black cliffs of Marion.

"Garrick, you there? We leave on Thursday from Cape Town. It's late notice but I need to know. Are you in?"

Jooste's voice seemed far away. "I can't help you," Garrick said. "Sorry about your predicament and honoured that you thought of me, truly, but I'm going in the opposite direction. My boy's arriving in town tomorrow and we're delivering a yacht to the Seychelles."

"I see," Jooste said slowly. "But you haven't heard my offer yet."

"I don't care Jan-Jan."

"If you take this job it could lead to more work. Water under the bridge. Do you get what I'm saying?"

"After the way you treated me?"

"You did it to yourself Garrick."

Garrick snorted. “Good luck with the rescue,” he said. “I’ll watch it on the news.” Without waiting for his old colleague to respond, he hung up and gave Jooste the finger. Not that Jooste could see him, but it felt good nonetheless.

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At the airport, Garrick looked down at his bare feet and thought yet again that he should have worn shoes. At least this time. He had never enjoyed the feeling of having his feet kept prisoner and he’d given up wearing shoes completely when he started working for Clive because it had a start-again feeling that he enjoyed. Here in the airport, though, his bare feet were horrible against the polished grey tiles. His skin was brown and hard and his nails were yellow and curling. He could have worn a pair of slops at least. What would Jeremy think of his old man? That he was one of Mickey’s car-guard buddies? He pushed his hands through his hair, matted with salt, and rubbed his eyes.

While he stood in the arrivals hall watching passengers coming through the gates from the Johannesburg connecting flight, he worried that he wouldn’t recognise his son. Businessmen legged it to the car rental kiosks; an old woman came past using her trolley as a Zimmer frame; teenagers walked with their heads down embroiled in cellphone romances; porters stood like lazy wildebeest in the sun and a sweet-sounding intercom girl told everyone that Kulula flight MN457 to Lanseria was delayed until further notice. Clive had given him the afternoon off and he’d arrived at the terminal far too early – an hour before Jeremy’s flight was due to land. Potential delays caused by traffic and roadworks on the way to the new, distant airport had plagued him, but the highway had been as clear as a healthy artery.

As he shifted from foot to foot, stressing about his bare feet, he wondered how much he would be charged for parking. It was a long time since he had been to an airport, especially one this flashy. He looked around at the vaulted ceiling, the big glass windows and the arrivals hall lit up orange by the setting sun; it was like he was in another country.

The sliding doors closed and for a while no more people came through. Was that it? Had all the passengers come off the plane? He should have known that this wouldn't work out. Starla was probably behind the whole thing – another one of her cruel teases. Then someone tapped him on the shoulder and he turned around.

“Dad?”

The boy standing in front of Garrick was taller than he was, wearing cargo shorts and a T-shirt with a picture of Osama Bin Laden in a snorkel and mask, above the words ‘Buried at sea’. He had dark fuzz on his chin, the beginnings of a beard, and he was carrying a daypack on his back. Two white headphone buds dangled from a cord around his neck, which went under his shirt and disappeared into his pocket. He could have been anybody, but Garrick knew who he was.

“Jeremy,” he said and stepped forwards with his arms out.

The boy stepped back and held out his hand.

“Come on, give your old man a hug.”

Their embrace was strained. Garrick could feel the boy's ribs beneath his T-shirt and he let go as soon as Jeremy pulled away. He smelt like cigarette smoke and teenage sweat.

“Long flight...” Jeremy said.

Garrick stepped back and looked at him. He couldn't stop looking. His son! It was a miracle. “Where are your bags?” Garrick asked.

Jeremy reached behind himself and patted his daypack. “Here.”

Garrick smiled. “That's the way to travel,” he said, his voice cracking as he thought about how similar he had been when he was that age.

“Are you crying?” Jeremy asked.

Garrick sniffed and wiped his eyes, embarrassed by the emotion that had suddenly overtaken him. “It's the aircon,” he said. “I'm not an indoor species.”

Forgetting the earlier awkwardness, Garrick hugged Jeremy again – a loose lasso around the shoulders – and they walked together to the car park as thousands of barn swallows from the nearby wetland schooled like baitfish in the dusk.

If Jeremy disapproved of Garrick's flat in Amanzimtoti he didn't say anything. He dumped his bag on the rainbow-coloured rug from Mr Price Home, put his feet on the wonky pine table and lit a cigarette.

"Not inside please," Garrick said.

"Don't you smoke?"

"Not anymore."

Jeremy shrugged. "I remember you smoking." He went across to the window and tapped his ash into the humid night.

"Does Starla know you smoke?"

"I've barely arrived and you want to talk about her?"

"Okay, I take it back."

Jeremy shrugged again. He smoked. After a while he said, "So what do you want to know?"

Garrick looked at him.

"Surely you want to know stuff about me. What music I listen to, what food I like, what subjects I do at school."

"Okay, what subjects do you do?"

"I dropped out."

"Okay."

"Can I have a drink?"

Garrick went into the kitchen and got him a beer from the fridge. He opened one for himself too.

"So this is where you live?" Jeremy said as Garrick passed him the bottle. He took a sip and wiped foam off his lip.

"This is where I live."

He looked blankly around the room, drinking his beer. "Have you got a girlfriend?" he asked.

"I thought I was the one asking questions."

“Well, have you?”

“No.”

“Maybe you should try wearing shoes, that might help.”

“Maybe you should respect your elders.”

Jeremy turned his face into the breeze coming through the window. “I’d forgotten what Durban was like,” he said. “You can drink this air.”

•

Within a month of meeting each other, Garrick and Starla fled Port St Johns together. They moved back to Durban and rented a small flat at the top of Moore Road in Glenwood. Garrick started working on the cargo ships; right at the bottom as a cabin mate and then as a junior officer, and soon Starla was pregnant with Jeremy. She changed when the baby came. She dropped the lost-girl demeanour and dived into motherhood like it was a deep pool that she could swim to the bottom of and never have to breathe. The only thing that remained was the dolphin tattoo. She was embarrassed by it but Garrick would run his lips down the length of it, tasting the triumph of her marked skin, thinking how close they had come to another, more precarious life.

He wasn’t at home much while Jeremy was growing up, but Starla never complained. Whenever he returned from a long voyage to Jakarta or Hong Kong she would be there waiting with Jeremy in her arms, a strand of hair tucked behind her ear, the windows in the flat open and a warm wind wafting the curtains. To see his baby smiling, to smell something cooking in the kitchen, it was like he could feel his biological success in his blood.

Yes, those days in the Moore Road flat were the good times. But remembering them took effort. He wondered why it was always the bad memories that ambushed him while he was driving in traffic or frying an omelette, jumping up like a dorado from a dark sea.

Starla wanted another baby – a brother or sister for Jeremy. At first Garrick didn't know if it was him or her and Christ knows they tried. Eventually a doctor with an unnatural tan took him into an empty room with posters on the wall and told him he was shooting blanks.

“But what about Jeremy? How?”

The doctor tipped his head to the side and smiled through his white teeth. “A fluke,” he said.

Garrick thought of the moment he had held Jeremy's tiny hand on the day he was born. With his sleeping son in his arms, it was like a camera had zoomed out from the hospital room and given him a glimpse of humanity in all its wonder, cruelty, sadness and joy. Garrick had felt an irrational love for the messy world that he and Starla shared, and it had brought him to tears.

Now, knowing what he knew, it was like that moment had been cheapened. He wasn't proud of the things he said to Starla after that. He turned on her with a viciousness that surprised him, and every time he looked at Jeremy he felt like something had been stolen from him. Starla pleaded with him again and again, but instead of accepting the possibility that Jeremy's conception might indeed have been a miracle, he insisted on a paternity test. Starla consented and the test came back positive. The doctor was right despite his sarcasm – Jeremy was a fluke, a charmed birth.

Instead of forgiving each other, however, they laid into each other even harder, unpeeling layers of hurt and saying things without thinking. Garrick blamed her for being distant during the few moments they actually managed to spend together, and she countered by blaming him for the temptations of foreign ports. Jeremy grew up, as children do, and one day Garrick looked at her and they both realised it was too late. Garrick was watching a cricket match on TV and Starla was brushing her teeth. They looked at each other and in that moment they both knew it was over. Just like that: no fireworks or marching band or stirring violin soundtrack.

When Jeremy was ten, Starla inherited some money and she took off with the boy while Garrick was out of the country. First to a cousin in East London, then to a

friend in Johannesburg and later to Muscat in Oman, following some banker with slickback hair and a belly that hung over his belt. The relationship didn't last but Starla liked being a foreigner in a glass city and she decided to stay.

Garrick raged and fought and appealed the custody and drank through the night in the neon-lit bars around the harbour, but what could he say? He was at sea for eight months of the year. Yes, your Honour, for the other four months I make a damn fine dad.

He sold the flat, put the few possessions he had in storage and took on longer jobs. He saw Antarctica and South Georgia, icebergs like something from a dream; he sailed to Rio and Santiago and saw killer whales off the coast of Norway; he sailed to Perth and Sydney and even Hawaii. He saw the whole world.

He started getting reckless, going to work drunk, not ironing his shirts. Eventually they let him go. He didn't like to remember those times but they were etched into him like Starla's tattoo. At his lowest moment, running small-time drug errands and delivering pizzas on the Bluff, he turned into himself and pretended he didn't exist. He knew what everyone was thinking – that he'd done it to himself – and he hated them for their Toyotas and home loans and school fees, safe in the arms of normal life. That's why he was so grateful for Mickey. Mickey stood by him throughout – the only one.

He never married Starla, maybe that was his mistake. Maybe he should have gone down on bended knee with a ring from American Swiss and promised her eternity. But once she had Jeremy she had everything she needed from him. He could see that now.

It was Mickey who put him in touch with Clive Tucker. Clive ran a scuba school in Umkomaas and he was looking for skippers. If there's one thing Garrick could do it was skipper a boat, sober or not. Clive gave him a few shifts and for the past couple of years he'd been doing five a week. He rented the flat in Toti and tried to cut down on the rum. He was never late for a shift and it paid off. The Seychelles job came via a contact of Clive's at a yacht-refurbishment place in the harbour. A Russian oil billionaire had recently had his catamaran overhauled and he needed it

delivered to the Seychelles before spring. He was looking for two experienced sailors to do the job. The money was good – Clive would take half and Garrick would split the other half with Mickey. How could he turn down a job like that?

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Sometime in the early morning, when it was still dark and the street outside was silent, Garrick woke up. His throat was dry and his heart raced. Fragments of a dream came back to him. Starla was in it, so was Jeremy, but the finer details were already fading from memory like wet bricks drying in the sun. He went to the bathroom and pissed and drank water from the faucet, letting it pool into his cupped hand, then he walked soundlessly across the passage to the spare room where Jeremy was sleeping. The boy was tangled in a sleeping bag on the bare mattress, head back, mouth open, snoring softly in a square of moonlight coming through the window. Garrick could see himself in the curve of Jeremy's eyelids, in the jut of his bottom lip, in the tension of his clenched fist. He thought how strange it was that he had created this sleeping boy.

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The catamaran was a thing of beauty – 38 feet long, shiny as a sushi knife, with gleaming instruments and a sail unsullied by actual sailing. It was called the *Anna Pavlova*, after the ballet dancer not the pudding, and the interior was like a cocaine fantasy: mirrored surfaces, tasselled carpets and a faint smell of latex in the air. The master cabin was off-limits to the sailors: Garrick and Mickey had been given strict instructions to only use the two guest cabins. By the time Garrick arrived at the marina, Mickey had already shotgunned the bigger of the two cabins, and he supposed he would have to put Jeremy in the small cabin in the bow. That left the bench seat in the saloon for himself. He wasn't upset; he'd slept in worse places.

"You're late, china," Mickey said as he checked the straps on the lifeboat. "Clive has already come round. He's on my case. If we don't leave soon we'll have to wait until tomorrow. There's a container ship with a million Hiluxes on board that wants to come in."

"Clive must chill." Garrick reached across the narrow gap of greasy water between the boat and the jetty and passed Mickey a blister pack of long-life milk, shopping bags filled with canned food and a box containing six bottles of Squadron. "This enough?" he asked.

"You're the alcoholic, not me."

"Is everything else on board?"

"Aye, captain," Mickey said, doing a mock salute. "We're good to go."

"My clothes bag on board?"

"I put it on your bed."

"You mean my bench?"

"Of course."

"Have you got your passport?"

"Sorted, bud. I'm telling you." Mickey tapped his big, round scuba watch. "Where's your lightie?"

Garrick looked back down the jetty but Jeremy wasn't there. He shook his head. Jeremy was with him when he'd walked down to the cat ten minutes ago, now he'd disappeared. Garrick had a sudden, irrational vision of his son's body chopped up in a field and he was surprised by it. Also, by the way his heart was beating. While Mickey loosened the ropes, Garrick retraced his steps but he didn't find Jeremy at the marina office, nor did he find him in the long-term car park. Only when he walked down a parallel jetty did he see him, sitting cross-legged and smoking a cigarette in the shade of a skiboat called the *Zulu Princess*.

"I've been looking for you," he said angrily.

Jeremy pushed his hair out of his eyes and lifted his hand to shade his face. He squinted at his father in the glare. "I'm not sure about this," he said.

"What do you mean?"

“This trip. I’m not sure I want to come. I don’t know how to sail.”

“I’ll teach you.”

“But I get seasick.”

“You never used to.”

“How do you know?”

“We used to go out all the time. In the duck. Remember?”

Jeremy thought for a while then shook his head.

Garrick couldn’t believe it. Those days when he and Jeremy had gone out in the small rubber duck to fish and swim were some of the happiest of his life. How could the boy not remember? While Jeremy was growing up on the other side of the world in an air-conditioned skyscraper, Garrick had clung to a single memory from one of those trips; a mental snapshot of his son’s sunrise silhouette on the pontoon of the little boat, his line breaking the clean expanse of water and his head turned, smiling.

“The way I remember it, you were never there,” Jeremy said.

Garrick grabbed the cigarette from the boy’s mouth and crunched it under his bare foot, feeling a faint burn through the calluses, then he latched onto a wispy sideburn and raised Jeremy to his feet. He even thought of punching him but Jeremy started to cry so he let go.

“*Jesus*,” Garrick said. He was out of breath for some reason. He put his hands on his knees and leant forward. After a while, he said: “You know I tried as hard as I could.”

They walked to the *Anna Pavlova* without speaking. Jeremy climbed up and went straight to the empty cabin in the bow. Garrick heard the door slam.

“So, no introduction?” Mickey said as he cast off the lines and aimed for the breakwater, the expensive engines purring somewhere deep in the hull.

“Sorry Mick, he’s being a dickhead.”

“It is a girl thing?”

“I wish. He thinks he’ll get seasick.”

“Shame, man.”

“And he said I was a shit dad. Or, he didn’t say it, which was worse.”

Mickey looked at his friend. “You probably were a shit dad.”

“I know.”

Soon the catamaran was in the open ocean and the sugarcane fields of the North Coast were dark lumps on the vanishing horizon. Garrick’s mind calmed as he focussed on the mechanics of sailing. His eye gauged the tension in the sails and he could feel their power, the energy in the rig as the hull cut through the swells. His body worked automatically. Mickey was happy to fall into the role of second mate and pourer of rum and Cokes. It was an unsaid thing between them; Mickey had never questioned it.

The ocean was blue, ruffled by a late summer breeze and Garrick stripped down to his shorts.

Late in the afternoon he went downstairs to check if Jeremy was okay. The boy was curled on his side on his bunk and the cabin reeked of vomit – Jeremy had used a designer wastepaper bin as a sick bucket and his puke had oozed through the gaps and onto the carpet. Garrick stopped in the doorway for a moment, repulsed by the smell, then he went in and shook Jeremy awake.

“Don’t lie down here. Come up on deck. You’ll feel better there.”

“Does it go away?” Jeremy moaned.

“If you give yourself other things to think about.”

Garrick picked up the bin and led Jeremy out through the saloon onto the back deck. Mickey was at the helm, steadying himself with a half-drunk rum, which he raised in acknowledgement as they passed. Garrick leant over the stern and dipped the bin into the sea, washing out the vomit, and Jeremy collapsed onto a bench seat with his hands over his eyes. Garrick left him there, thinking that it would be easier to hose puke off the deck than vacuum it out of the carpet.

Two days passed like this. The wind was constant and they made good progress across the Mozambique Channel, aiming for the northern point of

Madagascar. They passed a Korean freight vessel sailing south and later a Japanese oil tanker. Both captains exchanged pleasantries over the radio in broken English. Garrick asked if they'd heard anything about pirates and they both answered negative. The Indian Ocean was as peaceful as a game of Sunday bowls at the country club.

However, Jeremy couldn't shake the seasickness. Garrick gave him Dramamine and wrist bands with built-in magnets, but the nausea wouldn't leave. Jeremy seldom moved from the back deck, except at night when he went down to his cabin. Garrick replaced the wastepaper bin with a cleaning bucket but Jeremy wasn't throwing up much anymore. The nausea just simmered below the surface, always there.

"Tomorrow," Garrick kept on saying. "You'll feel better tomorrow."

And on the third day he did. At sunrise Garrick found him sitting on the net spanning the pontoons, smoking a cigarette. He went over to join him as the sun rose white and hot in an empty sky. Below them, the limitless blue sea. Garrick didn't have to ask if Jeremy was feeling better; he could tell by the boy's freckled cheeks which were flushed with colour.

"I can see why you like it out here," Jeremy said.

"Not a bad office, hey?"

"How much longer till we get there?"

"Four days, tops. Depends on the wind. And it's going to get flatter too."

Jeremy nodded. He dragged on the cigarette and exhaled, self-consciously now that he was being watched. When the cigarette was half-smoked he broke the burning tip on the edge of the net and dropped the stompie into the water.

"Don't do that," Garrick said. "A turtle will eat it."

"I've done it now."

"And besides, you're killing your lungs."

Jeremy looked at him. "You're killing your liver."

They sat for a while. Then Garrick stood up. He offered Jeremy his hand and helped him off the unstable net. "Go get your smokes," he said.

"Why?"

“Just get them.”

While Jeremy fetched his carton of cigarettes from his cabin, Garrick got the box of rum bottles from the galley. He called Jeremy out onto the back deck and before the boy could ask what he was doing, he took a bottle of Squadron by the neck and hurled it spinning into the wake of the catamaran. The bottle splashed, bobbed and was lost in the sun shimmer. Garrick threw a second bottle, feeling the onrush of some strange destiny as yet unresolved.

“Your turn,” he said.

Jeremy cautiously took a box of cigarettes from his carton and pitched it into the sea. Garrick threw a third bottle and Jeremy threw another box of cigarettes.

“What about the turtles?” he said.

“Fuck the turtles.”

Jeremy laughed and tossed another box into the wake. He looked at his father expectantly, but the fourth and last bottle of Squadron wouldn't leave Garrick's hand. Garrick's fingers gripped the neck so tightly that the nails were white and he already knew he wouldn't be able to do it. He knew even as he reached for Jeremy's carton, snatched it and threw it as hard as he could. The carton caught the wind and tumbled in the air, dropping boxes of cigarettes like bombs from a B52. Jeremy tried to grab the bottle of rum but Garrick pushed him away.

“That's not fair,” Jeremy said, his voice breaking.

Garrick held the bottle close to his chest. “It's Mickey's,” he mumbled. Then he turned away from the brightening day and went to the main cabin where Mickey was sleeping and locked the rum in the safe.

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Contrary to Garrick's prediction, the sea didn't flatten out. Instead, it got steadily more humid as the day progressed and the sky began to fill with giant cumulonimbus clouds that coagulated purple and black above them. As darkness fell the swell picked

up and lightning blasted the water, sending explosions of sound across the featureless world.

Jeremy looked at Garrick with pure hate. His seasickness had returned and he moved uneasily between the bunk downstairs, cramped and claustrophobic in the rolling sea, and the back deck where Garrick insisted he be clipped onto a safety line.

Garrick hadn't had a drink all day and his nerve endings felt damaged. His mouth was dry and a headache was knocking around in the space behind his eyeballs. He felt slow, uncoordinated, out of control. He told Mickey about the incident from earlier in the day and Mickey shrugged his shoulders. Garrick knew that his friend wouldn't have cared if he'd pitched the last bottle over the side; Mickey had never been as dependent on the stuff as he was.

At midnight Garrick couldn't help himself. He staggered down from the wheelhouse to the main cabin but when he tried to open the safe, the four-digit code was repeatedly declined. He punched the smooth metal door with its smug little keypad.

"Calm down, bud," Mickey said, standing in the doorway. "Put it aside. I need you lucid – the barometer's gone mental. We're sailing into a big one."

Like a schoolboy, Garrick bowed his head and followed Mickey back up to the wheelhouse. Mickey tossed him a slicker and told him to stay the mainsail. Garrick obeyed, and just like that, their positions on the boat were reversed.

The storm struck an hour before sunrise. Mickey angled the cat bow-first into the fierce grey swells that broke over the gunwales and drenched the deck. The engine groaned as the boat tilted skyward, riding uphill along the face of a swell, and it screamed as the boat careened down the other side.

Earlier, Garrick had forced Jeremy into his wet-weather gear and now the boy was curled up under the awning on the back deck, clipped onto the safety line, retching into the crook of his arm. Garrick wanted to sit with him and tell him that it was just a storm and that everything would be okay, but his senses were occupied with rain and wind and breaking waves. He moved around the catamaran instinctively,

tying knots, shifting his weight unconsciously as the hull pitched and rolled. The rain was warm, tropical, heavy as hail.

There was a crash in the saloon and Mickey went to investigate. He came back to report that a cabinet had fallen off the wall and the crystal glasses inside were smashed to pieces. Garrick breathed through gritted teeth.

“It will come off our pay,” Mickey said.

“Clive can claim it. He’d be an idiot not to have insurance.”

“Especially with *us* at the helm.”

It was a joke and Garrick smiled, despite the circumstances. Mickey went back into the saloon and swept up the glass off the laminate floor then he came outside again, joined Garrick in the wheelhouse and patted him on the arm. “Keep us on course,” he said.

“Why, what are you doing?”

“Just keep us on course.”

Garrick obeyed and steered the boat through the rollercoaster swells. With his hand on the wheel, he watched as Mickey went around to where Jeremy was lying on the back deck. Mickey dropped to his haunches and said something to the boy then he took off all his clothes, looped the safety line around his waist and stood naked in the downpour with his arms raised at his sides like he was about to receive some sort of divine visitation. He hooted like a hyena as a wave broke over the starboard pontoon. Garrick spun the wheel to realign the boat then he looked back over his shoulder and there was Jeremy, wobbly with nausea, also removing his clothes. Jeremy shuffled out from under the awning, as pale as a salamander, and joined Mickey in the rain. He also tilted his head back and howled. Then Mickey howled. And Jeremy again.

The scene was so ridiculous that Garrick couldn’t stop laughing. He felt all the tension from the day draining out of him. Eventually he sounded the air horn and told them both to stop behaving like they were six years old.

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By 10am the worst of the storm was over and by 3pm it was calm again. At sunset the sky was on fire. Fat, fluffy clouds burnt red as the storm moved west towards Madagascar. Garrick had always been a fan of a post-storm sunset at sea; it had a way of putting things into perspective. The catamaran sailed proudly and the sails caught the afternoon light, glowing white as the gates of heaven themselves. Mickey took pity on Garrick and opened the safe but Garrick told him to lock it again. For a sundowner he drank straight Coke from a teacup, seeing as though all the glasses were wrecked.

The howling incident seemed to have done something to Jeremy. He came out to sit on the deck and he and Garrick even had a conversation about fishing: Mickey had been trawling every day but he hadn't caught anything yet; Garrick said it was because Mickey was a bad fisherman; Mickey said it was because they'd been travelling too fast. Garrick had to concede that they'd been making excellent progress despite the storm. A few hours earlier they'd come in line with the Comoros to the east and the next day they'd pass the Glorioso Islands and move into the ambit of the Seychelles archipelago.

Dinner that night was tinned spaghetti on toast. Jeremy ate everything on his plate and went back for seconds. Garrick realised it was the first time he'd seen his son eat aboard the boat. Mickey noticed too and smiled broadly like he'd solved the Meaning of Life. "What's the forecast?" he asked smugly. "Do we need to wrap the remaining crockery?"

"I don't think so," Garrick said. "If anything we'll struggle for wind."

"What do we do if there's no wind?" Jeremy asked, wiping a smear of tomato sauce from his mouth.

"We use the engine – it's not like we're paying for fuel."

The sea was calm and a reflected full moon wobbled in the wake of the boat. The back door of the saloon was open, flooding the room with humid air. For a while nobody spoke and the only sound was the slap of water against the hull and the flutter of the sail as the catamaran cut through the night. Garrick poured another dollop of

Coke into his teacup, making a show of it for Jeremy's sake, and looked at his sailing companions. "Enjoy your sleep tonight boys," he said. "Tomorrow we start pirate watch."

Jeremy's fork was coiled with spaghetti and it paused halfway to his mouth. "What?" he said.

"We'll sail dark and we'll turn everything off except the radar and the epirb," Mickey said. "We'll stay awake in shifts – six hours at a time."

"What's the epirb?" Jeremy asked.

"Emergency transmitter. In case something happens."

Garrick interrupted. "Don't worry. Nothing's going to happen."

But Jeremy was insistent. "What if we see pirates?"

Garrick looked at Mickey and his friend shook his head very slightly: there was no need to mention the automatic rifle under the bench seat that Clive had given them the day before they set sail, scored from one of his old border buddies, paid for by the Russian billionaire and helped through customs by an inspection agent called Jim who had also once ferried scuba divers back and forth to Aliwal Shoal. If the rifle wasn't needed, the deal was that they'd dump it in the sea when they got within sight of Mahe.

"We'll make a plan if we see pirates," Mickey said.

"What plan?"

"Well, the real plan is not to see any. That way we don't have to decide what to do. We've got enough fuel on board to go full tilt for at least half a day. Pirates are lazy. They like things easy. If we can keep moving and keep out of their range they won't chase us. They're all half-starved anyway."

"Do I also need to do shifts?" Jeremy asked.

"Your dad and I need to sleep sometimes," Mickey said.

"Don't worry, it's simple," Garrick said, but before he could finish explaining about pirate watch, Jeremy rushed out of the saloon with his hands over his mouth and they listened as he lost his dinner over the side of the boat.

Garrick sighed. “What did you say to him earlier to cheer him up? In the storm?”

“I told him that we were screwed. That the boat was going down and if we were all going to die we might as well do it in style.”

•

The next day the world was white. A thick fog bank had rolled in overnight and visibility was reduced to almost nothing. The sea was as flat as a steam-pressed sheet and there was no wind. Mickey set the course and motored for most of the day, peering into the murk and checking the radar so the catamaran didn't get mowed down by a freightliner sailing south. A frigate bird followed the boat for a while, flying confused loops, also disorientated in the white-out. It was impossible to be seasick in such flat conditions so Jeremy came outside and sat on the deck, listening to his iPod.

For most of the day Garrick tried to doze on his bench in the saloon. It was his turn to do pirate watch and he didn't want to fall asleep on the job and set a bad example for Jeremy. Not that there would be much to watch for if the fog didn't lift.

Late in the afternoon Jeremy shook Garrick awake. Mickey had finally caught a fish – a young barracuda almost a metre long. It lay on the deck snapping its ugly mouth, the stripes along its flanks rippling. Mickey severed the spinal cord by slicing the fish behind its head and the colour faded almost instantly; the silver eyes went cloudy as the blood drained off the deck and into the sea. Mickey gutted the fish and threw the entrails overboard, watched keenly by the frigate bird and also by Jeremy, who took great interest in the last moments of the barracuda's life. Mickey was patient with Jeremy. He explained each step of the process as he cleaned and filleted the fish, stacking the pink slabs of meat on top of each other. Garrick wondered if he had ever been as patient with his son.

“Watch this,” Mickey said. He threw the butchered fish carcass overboard and a grey shape rose in the water. The shark swam lazily over to the entrails, opened its mouth and swallowed them whole.

“It’s been following us for a few hours now,” Mickey said.

Jeremy wouldn’t stop smiling.

Mickey lit the braai and they grilled the fillets with salt and lemon and they ate until they were stuffed. Darkness fell and the catamaran was still marooned in fog. Mickey burped and said goodnight, followed obediently by Jeremy who now thought he was the best thing since Indiana Jones.

Garrick washed the dishes and took a cup of Coke out to the wheelhouse. He checked the course, adjusted the engine speed and turned off all the lights on the boat. In the green glow of the instrument panel, he sipped his Coke and listened to the news on the radio for a while, then he turned off the radio, walked along the pontoon and lay down on the net, spread-eagled above the dark sea. He didn’t enjoy quiet, solitary moments like this. There was too much space to weigh up his life, too much distance between the present and his past failures, too little time to make everything right. He should have taken Mickey up on his offer to open the safe earlier. Now he regretted it.

The net sagged and a shape appeared next to him in the darkness. Garrick jumped. “That’s a way to get your old man’s heart racing,” he said.

Jeremy didn’t answer. He was so close that Garrick could smell the Aquafresh he’d just used to brush his teeth.

After a while Jeremy spoke: “Mom’s sick. That’s why I came over here. She’s got skin cancer.”

Garrick sat in the darkness. “Is it serious?” he said.

“Of course it’s serious. It’s skin cancer.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. It’s not your fault.”

“What’s she going to do?”

“I don’t know. She’s got no-one. She doesn’t even know I came over here. I worked in a supermarket for six months to save up money for the plane ticket. It’s something I had to do. Mom thought I was saving for a motorbike.”

“That’s insane, Jeremy. She’s probably called the police by now.”

“She thinks I’m on holiday with Jack. My friend Jack. Even his parents are covering for me.”

“Jesus.” Garrick thought of Starla’s dolphin tattoo fading on her ruined skin and the past gaped like a sinkhole in the road. But very slowly, a selfish idea began to form in his head. “Would you think of moving back here?” he asked. “You know, after...” He let the sentence trail off. There was no need to say it out loud.

Jeremy didn’t seem offended by the proposal. “I don’t know,” he said.

“It might be fun.”

They sat for a while, cocooned in the misty night. After a while Jeremy said: “I think I remembered you wrong. I thought you were meaner. Mom always told me how mean you were. I was worried you wouldn’t remember me.”

“So I turned out better than you thought?”

“I think so.”

Garrick smiled to himself. “Get your seasickness under control and we can do more trips like this. Anywhere you like.”

“I’d have to go back first. For Mom.”

“Of course. There’s no need to rush.”

“I’d kill for a cigarette right now.”

“I hear you.”

“Hey, Dad?”

“Yes.”

“Give me your hand.”

Garrick reached out in the darkness and Jeremy passed him the last bottle of Squadron.

“How did...”

“Mickey gave me the code.”

Garrick's whole body started shaking. He felt sick and unsteady, like anything could happen. He ran his hand over the bottle, feeling the warm curve of the glass, the weight of the liquid inside, the sharpness of the cap edge. He thought of the burningsweet taste, the smell that caught in your throat, the foam that settled on top. Ice cubes tinkled in his head.

"Don't think, Dad."

Garrick stood up on the net and spaced his feet wide apart. Then he threw the bottle as hard as he could. It cartwheeled through the air and he lost it in the darkness, then it reappeared again as it splashed pale and silent in the dark sea some distance off the bow. Garrick stood for a while then he collapsed again and lay on his back. He closed his eyes but he opened them again when Jeremy shook him hard on the shoulder.

"Dad!"

"Give me a few minutes. I'm already regretting it."

"No, sit up. Is that another boat?"

Garrick pushed himself up on his elbows and peered out into the night.

"Where?"

"There, where the bottle landed."

Garrick sat up properly and looked in the direction that Jeremy was pointing. True as chips, darker than the surrounding darkness, another vessel was bearing down on the *Anna Pavlova*.

"Go wake Mickey," Garrick said.

Jeremy jumped up and ran around to the saloon. Garrick went into the wheelhouse and looked at the radar. There it was: a pulsating green dot almost on top of them, going blink-blink-blink. How had he not seen it approaching? He grabbed the binoculars from the console and turned the focus knob. It was a big boat, maybe a fishing trawler, but he couldn't see a name or any other insignia. All the lights were off, including the navigation lights.

Mickey came into the wheelhouse yawning. "This better be good because I was dreaming of Brooke Shields," he said. Garrick passed him the binoculars and

pointed off the starboard side of the bow. Mickey put them to his eyes and did a low whistle. "What do you think?"

"Not sure."

"Where's Jeremy?"

"In the saloon."

Garrick turned off all the lights except the blue solar-charged strip lights along the floor that led to the various evacuation points. A seedy glow illuminated the wheelhouse.

"What do we do, Captain?" Mickey asked.

"So I'm the captain again?"

"They're too close. Even on full crank they'll catch us."

"What about the rifle?"

"What do we shoot at? The hull? I can't see a single person."

For a full minute the two boats drifted closer and closer. Garrick felt rooted to his position behind the wheel, like he was a mould that had been poured full of cement. Then the radio came alive. "Unidentified vessel, do you copy?"

Garrick picked up the receiver. "Copy that. Identify yourself."

"Negative. We are armed."

"So are we."

"Tell them," Mickey whispered.

"Why?"

"Because they're bigger than us."

Garrick pressed the receiver button. "We're the *Anna Pavlova*, sailing out of Durban."

A crackly laugh came over the radio. "You scared us, boys. We were about to sink you. We're the *Ceylon Star*, sailing out of Colombo."

"Why are your lights off?"

"Why are *yours* off?"

"Same reason. Seen any activity?"

"None. Let's hope it stays that way."

A single light came on in the wheelhouse of the *Ceylon Star* and Garrick could see the outlines of people against the railings. They were waving. He and Mickey waved back and the two boats passed. Then the other boat went dark again and vanished into the misty night.

•

Garrick often thought of fate when he was at sea, at the mercy of tides, wind and weather. Could the course of a life be predetermined? He wasn't a religious man but sometimes he thought he knew what the outcome of a thing would be before that thing had actually happened. It had to do with too much good unbalancing the system: just when you thought you had it all sorted out, that's when you should watch for storm clouds on the horizon. Who made the decisions about fate? God? Or did every life have a built-in autopilot that would lead you from the wilderness on the edge of the map to your final destination, no matter how many detours you chose to take along the way?

The pirates didn't come at night, they didn't come in the mist, they came racing across the open ocean when the *Anna Pavlova* was one day out of Mahe. Garrick pushed the throttle until the catamaran was groaning. He unfurled every sail and stayed the lines at a dangerous tension for a recreational craft, but still the long, battered skiff reeled them in. Sweat poured off Mickey's forehead as he moved around the boat under Garrick's command but the plan of outrunning them had obviously been flawed from the start.

An hour later Garrick could make out details on the skiff through the binoculars. He could see eight men, all armed, sitting two abreast in rows, getting battered by the waves breaking over the sides. The skiff was powered by two huge outboard engines and there must have been a big fuel tank somewhere otherwise they would have turned back long ago.

"What do we do?" Jeremy asked.

"We've got to keep going."

“I hear Somalia is lovely in autumn,” Mickey said dryly.

Garrick put his hand on his son’s shoulder. “Go to your cabin and stay there until I come get you. Everything will be fine.”

But he knew the boy could tell he was lying through his teeth.

Half an hour later the skiff came broadside. A tall man dressed in green pants and a Nike shirt put his leg up on the prow of the pirate boat and signalled for the catamaran to stop. Mickey rose like a cobra from where he’d been stretched out prone on the deck and felled the man with a single shot to the chest. The pirate canted sideways and dropped into the ocean. The other men on the skiff watched their leader fall almost absentmindedly, but they didn’t stop. Another man took the helm, even lankier than the first and dressed all in white, his face wrapped in a white scarf. Where he’d been wet by the sea, Garrick could see dark skin through the fabric. Mickey fired another shot and missed and that’s when Garrick realised they’d made a mistake. The man in white was actually the man in charge. He cocked an ancient pistol and held it before him with both hands. Garrick ducked low in the wheelhouse and heard two shots ring out. Still crouched, he pushed open the door with his foot. Mickey was lying in a leopard-crawl position.

“Get inside,” Garrick hissed. But there was no response. “*Mickey.*”

Then Garrick saw the blood, pooling around his friend’s head and running in a thin rivulet across the white fibreglass floor. Garrick thought of the barracuda and he thought, why didn’t Mickey hose down the deck? But then he saw the rifle slide as the boat crested a swell and he knew that Mickey wasn’t holding it anymore. His best friend was dead.

The skiff was broadside again and the pirates were throwing lines over the pontoon. In seconds they were aboard the catamaran and the man in white was standing in the wheelhouse, a dark shape in the doorway, backlit so Garrick couldn’t see his face.

“I am sorry about the other one,” he said in good English, his voice strangely high. “Why did he shoot at us? We did not shoot at you.”

The man went over to the console and throttled back slowly, then he turned off the engine. Garrick's ears rang in the silence.

"How many more?"

"Just my son. He's downstairs. Please don't hurt him."

"You're worth much more to us alive." The man gave a sharp order and two pirates disappeared into the saloon. They came back holding Jeremy and brought him into the wheelhouse.

Garrick looked at him and he saw fear and trust and he knew that everything was different now. Nothing from before mattered. His day of judgement had come and this was it. The bloodrush was exhilarating. He choked on tears that came pouring from a deep paternal well that he thought had dried up many years before, in that flat in Moore Road, when the last of Starla's furniture had been removed and he had lain on his back on the bare lounge floor and listened to the cars passing in the street. He shook his head and mouthed the word over and over: "Sorry. Sorry."

Jeremy nodded and Garrick knew he understood.

"Hitch the boat," the pirate leader said. "We have a long way to travel."

— THE KAROO BOOKSTORE —

University of Cape Town

Jamal wasn't scared of a dead body. Without a spirit it was just a pile of meat, like a lamb or a goat. It was nothing to be afraid of. Even so, he found it unsettling to look at his brother, knowing he would never joke with Aadan again. He thought of all the things that they had survived together: the attack on the family business in Mogadishu; the death of their father and sister; the 24-hour truck ride, standing in the back as people fell down around them; the city of tents in Kenya where they had bought and sold UN rations and after a year made enough money to continue south; the roadside robberies and bribery and border beatings; the minibuses with clattering exhausts leaking fuel and oil; the hours of waiting; the hyenas and lions pulling smaller boys from their beds at night; the endless hunger.

When they'd arrived in South Africa he'd thought they were unbreakable. The Chosen Ones. But what did he know about anything back then?

A few hours ago the police had wanted to take Aadan's body away for tests but he'd said to them, "What do you need to test? You saw how he was killed. You even saw who killed him." They were difficult with him but then they became tired. "Go and bury your brother," an officer said, then he consulted with his colleagues about how best to file the paperwork.

Now Jamal turned away and warmed water in a kettle, which stood on a simple pine table in the shack in Diepsloot that he and Aadan had lived in for the past three years. When the water was warm, he washed Aadan's body with a sponge and straightened his legs and put his arms at his sides. He closed Aadan's eyes and mouth and best he could but the flames had made the skin curl – from a certain angle it looked like his brother was smiling.

He pulled the trunk out from underneath the bed and found the *adar* that he'd brought all the way from Mogadishu. The oily perfume was in a green glass bottle with a twisted neck and it was wrapped in a thin blanket that had been issued to Aadan at the camp in Kenya. He put the bottle down and shook out an old white tablecloth with a rim of frayed lace. He said a prayer then he cut a makeshift *karfan* using a kitchen knife and poured a few drops of *adar* onto it. As he worked the perfume into Aadan's skin, the musky smell transported him home, to the compound next to the sea in the days before the sewerage network collapsed and neighbours began stealing from each other to survive. He was a boy again and his father was tending to the body of his grandfather, wrinkly and solemn, his chest like an empty bird cage. Outside it was sunny and he could hear waves on the beach. He longed to be out there in the sunshine, and not in a stuffy room full of sadness and loss. His father sensed it and each time Jamal looked out of the small window he cuffed him and told him to watch. To listen. It's good that he did. Jamal was to learn much about death in the following years.

He used all the perfume in the bottle, then he cut strips from the tablecloth and bound Aadan's legs, neck and head. He used the last of the cloth to wrap his brother's midsection. There was a knock at the door and Jamal let the Imam inside. The old man cried quietly when he saw Aadan all wrapped up. He lifted his eyes to the roof and asked why this kept happening. Jamal said he didn't know.

Darkness was falling and they had to find a grave site in a hurry. The Imam walked the perimeter of the Somali block and chose a site on a low hill away from the dirty alleyways, facing north towards Mecca. Fields of grass rippled in the breeze and Jamal could see the afternoon traffic moving slowly along the Krugersdorp Highway

in the distance. He cleared the site of plastic bags, milk cartons, broken glass and toilet paper, then he dug a big rectangular hole with a second, deeper hole in the middle. The ground was hard and his shoulders and arms ached from the effort.

When the hole was dug, he and the Imam went back for the body. A body is heavy, even in death, and Jamal was thankful there were enough men to help him carry it, despite the fact that most Somalis had locked themselves in their houses, scared to show support in case they were also targeted. The sun had set by the time they got back to the grave site; some children ran ahead holding candles and a broken headlamp to light the way. The Imam said a prayer and they lowered Aadan's body into the grave, then Jamal tipped spadefuls of soil back into the hole and tried not to watch as the clods fell on his brother's nose and eyes.

The men who had helped carry the body were angry. They wanted TV cameras and crowds and they were frustrated when there were none. "Where are the politicians?" they asked. "Where are the policemen?"

Jamal was too tired to be angry and besides, he had learned that blind anger usually achieves nothing.

He looked at the mound of earth and thought that his brother had probably been doomed from the start. He was Somali, after all. In Somalia if you live to 30 you're considered old; if you have parents you are lucky. Those who can walk get out as fast as they can.

With Aadan dead, Jamal had no reason to stay in Diepsloot. The shop had been their livelihood and the township a good place to do business, but now he saw only a wasteland of shacks in the brown autumn light. He was completely alone, a stranger in a strange, angry country; as insignificant as an ant treading a lonely path along a garden wall. He was not yet 20 years old. He would leave Diepsloot, leave Johannesburg, and make his way to Cape Town where Aadan had told him there was a cousin who owned a fabric shop in a place called Du Noon. He turned the word over in his mouth and it tasted of wind and sand.

He gathered the few possessions he and Aadan had accumulated over the past year – the pine table, a wardrobe, an old television, the chest under the bed, the kettle, a microwave and a two-plate gas stove – and he put them in a pile for everyone in the township to see. Then he set the pile alight.

His neighbours came running, calling him names and trying to douse the flames, but they were unable to salvage anything. “You spoiled child!” one woman cried as she raked through the mess. Jamal recognised her from the mob – she had been at the front throwing stones.

With the remains of his past life still smouldering, he picked up the small bag he had packed and walked to the shop near the taxi rank on the main road. He approached from the back and wheeled a Shoprite trolley underneath the door handle, which he secured with stones under the wheels. Then he went around to the front. There were three young men behind the counter, about the same age as him, drinking beers and passing a bottleneck between them, trying to sell the remaining goods that hadn’t been looted. All the prices had been crossed out and increased.

“Hey *makwerekwere*,” one boy said. “There are no more Fritos and Kit Kats. Get us new stock. How are we supposed to run a shop without stock?”

Jamal reached behind his back.

“What have you got there, Somali? Don’t be cheeky with us.”

He lifted up the perfume bottle with its twisted neck like the necks of two swans. He had filled the bottle with petrol and stuffed the remains of the *karfan* cloth deep inside. He lit the end of the cloth and waited for the flame to take, then he threw the bottle into the shop.

The shop had no windows and Aadan had designed the counter in a clever way: it was a display area for goods and you could do business across it like you would at a bar; but it was also hinged so you could close it and lock it at night. Jamal pushed the hatch closed and bolted the padlock while the men inside screamed, banging and kicking against the walls. It didn’t take long for the shop to burn – it was just a cheap structure made of tin and chipboard.

A few people came out of the surrounding houses when they smelled the smoke, which rose in a thick black column over the township. They looked at Jamal then they went back inside.

Soon the cries from inside the shop died away and the only sounds were the rushing of flames and the clattering of tin as pieces of roof fell to the ground. Jamal picked up his bag, walked over to the taxi rank and climbed into the first taxi in the queue. The driver saw him coming and saw what he had done, but he seemed to be a man who also understood violence and he simply nodded.

Jamal gave the driver three R200 notes.

“Where to, boss?” the driver said.

“Cape Town.”

The driver snorted. “This is not enough for Cape Town!”

“Take me as far as it will go.”

The driver nodded. There were four other passengers waiting in the taxi and the driver told them to get out, which they did without asking questions. Jamal pulled the door and they drove away.

They drove in silence for more than an hour, slowly in the traffic and faster when the road opened up, until the buildings gave way to empty fields and tilled farmland. Jamal looked over his shoulder for police vehicles but none arrived. The sun got lower in the sky until it was hazy and orange behind a thin, polluted mist and Johannesburg was just a row of lights in the rear-view mirror. Jamal wanted the driver to carry on forever. He wanted to sit quietly in the back and lean his head against the window and watch the day become night. He wanted to close his eyes for a while and sleep. When he opened them again, maybe his life would be different.

Then the driver stopped. He said that the money had run out and he would only continue if Jamal paid more. Jamal said he didn't have any more money and the driver shrugged. So Jamal thanked him, took his bag from the seat and stepped out into the cold. The driver turned across the island in the middle of the road and drove back towards the city.

Jamal started walking away from the lights. The darkness deepened and cars and trucks flashed past, forcing him onto the verge of the road littered with chip packets and used condoms and the remains of animals mangled beyond recognition. Nobody stopped, but why would they? He was just another anonymous traveller, a shape in the headlights then gone.

He walked the whole night, stopping only to drink some water. Once, after midnight, he heard the faraway wail of a siren. He walked out into a field and ducked down until the police car passed. Then he carried on walking.

While he walked he thought about his family. He thought about his mother and his youngest sister. Were they still living in the camp in Kenya? He hadn't heard from them in eight months. He thought of his home in Mogadishu again, and how he and his friends used to go to the beach after mosque on Fridays and swim in the clear, green sea. He thought of Johannesburg and Diepsloot but there were no happy memories there.

He talked to Aadan too. He told him he would walk until he got to Cape Town and if necessary he would carry on walking, right out into the sea, until he found a place where fear did not exist. He told Aadan not to worry about him and the cold air dried the tears on his face.

Mid-morning the following day he came to a petrol station on the other side of a big river and he sat down at a concrete picnic table under an umbrella. He watched people coming and going: a man wearing khaki shorts and knee-length socks; a family on holiday with bicycles on the roof and a dog on the back seat; a bus full of school children; a long-distance cyclist with a beard; and a man on a motorbike wearing a leather jacket. None of them looked like they would give him a lift.

A petrol attendant came over. He said: "Hey, my friend. This is for customers. The boss says you must move on."

"Move on where?"

"I don't know. I am not the boss."

Jamal sighed. He picked up his bag and went into the shop and broke his last R100 note to buy a bag of Lays and a packet of wine gums. He took the Lays outside to the table and ate them slowly, letting each crisp go soft on his tongue, savouring the saltiness. Afterwards he was thirsty so he went into the bathroom and drank some water. When he came out, the same petrol attendant was waiting. "I told you to move on," the man said.

Another attendant was with him. This man had a wrinkly forehead and a fat neck and he had spilled something on his uniform. "Go home, foreigner," the second man said. "We don't want trouble here." His teeth were broken and his breath was foul.

Jamal turned away without answering and he walked until the two men were just small shapes on the forecourt. He simmered with rage and curled and uncurled his fists as he walked. He should go back there and set fire to the place, burn it down. He should burn it all down: the farmland and pylons and petrol station and fences. One spark, that's all it would take. There was smoke in the air and he could smell smoke on his clothes and when he closed his eyes he saw flames engulfing his brother and flames swallowing the shop they had built.

By sunset he knew he couldn't walk for another night. His feet were blistered and bleeding and he shivered in the cold. He slept for an hour in a ditch on the side of the road and when he woke up it was so cold he almost didn't get up. Night birds called in the darkness and the only things he could see were the reflectors in the road going on and on forever.

Near midnight he came to another garage, dirtier and more rundown than the place he'd stopped at earlier. He couldn't risk coming in off the road so he pushed aside a broken fence and cut across a field. He stepped on cow dung and tore his jacket on a strand of barbed wire. He fingered the hole and decided it wasn't too bad.

Around the back, three trucks were parked close to each other, lit up dimly by a security light. The drivers stood in a circle, laughing and drinking. One of the trucks was a removals truck and Jamal noticed that the back door was open. The driver of

that truck emerged from the back carrying a box, which he sliced open with a knife. He removed some glasses and passed them around. The other drivers poured in their drink then they all raised their glasses and made a toast.

Jamal stayed on the grass, crouched low, sucking on a wine gum, and waited for more than an hour while the men drank. Their conversation became louder and louder and at one point a cellphone rang that was never answered. Then one of the men walked over. Jamal froze. The man stopped at the edge of the light, unzipped his pants and pissed into the field. He burped and lit a cigarette then he turned around and went back. The driver of the removals truck said something to him and they all laughed. Jamal saw the flash of a lighter and smelled the sweet smoke and watched as they passed the joint around the circle until it was finished. That's when he knew it was safe.

He moved slowly, keeping the truck between himself and men, and jumped up through the back door, which the driver had left open. The chassis creaked slightly but none of the men came to investigate. The load bay was crammed with furniture. He pushed past a dresser, an office chair and some paintings wrapped in plastic, to the back corner next to the cabin, where he curled up in a space on the floor and hugged his knees.

He drifted in and out of sleep. Sometime in the night he heard the door being swung closed and the heavy clang as the bolt dropped into place. He slept again and woke when the driver started the engine. Light seeped in around the edges of the door and it occurred to him for the first time that the truck might be heading back to Johannesburg. He hugged his knees tighter and gave in to the sway of the vehicle as it picked up speed, hoping that all his walking hadn't been in vain.

Light. So much light. He was swimming in a deep pool of sunlight and someone was shouting at him. "Get out! Get out! What did you steal?"

Hands gripped his shirt and pulled him from the truck. His legs were weak; they buckled and he fell to the ground. The driver of the truck was standing over him, emptying the contents of his backpack onto the ground. Wine gums bounced in the

dirt and his remaining money fluttered down. When the driver saw the money, he bent over and picked the notes where they had fallen, bunching them in his fist and pushing them into his pocket. He shouted at Jamal again: “What did you steal? What are you hiding?”

Jamal covered his head, expecting to be kicked. “I am not hiding anything. I only wanted a lift.”

“Come, I am taking you to the police!”

“I will tell them you stole my money.”

The driver came closer and rolled Jamal over with his foot. Then he put his dusty black shoe on Jamal’s chest and pressed down hard. Jamal could feel small, sharp stones cutting into his back.

“You are lucky today,” the truck driver said. “Very lucky.”

The driver lifted his foot, releasing Jamal, then he climbed back into the cabin. The gears rattled and the engine roared and he pulled away slowly in a rising cloud of dust. Then everything was quiet again. High, high in the sky, an eagle circled.

Jamal stood up, feeling faint with hunger, and looked around. His first thought was that he was back in Somalia. A dry plain covered in small grey plants rolled away as far as he could see. On the horizon, purple mountains shimmered in the heat haze and the air was hot in his nostrils. He heard a humming noise that got louder and louder and then a car came past so fast it caused him to stumble. He was disorientated. Which way was Cape Town? The sun was directly overhead. He picked up his extra T-shirt and spare shoes and gathered the wine gums that had fallen from the packet. He couldn’t find his water bottle; he must have left it in the truck. He slung the bag over his shoulder and started walking again. He felt so light, as if he could just evaporate.

After two hours of walking, his throat was scratchy and his head throbbed. He needed water. He sucked his dry cheeks and took off his shirt to wrap around his head. His body was hunched, his stomach sunken, but he knew he had to keep going. Cars

came by so seldom and so fast that he had given up trying to hitch-hike. It was pointless anyway: he had learnt that South Africans were afraid of helping strangers.

However, he took consolation in the fact that he seemed to be walking in the right direction. As the sun dropped lower it fell directly ahead, causing his shadow to stretch out behind, long and thin like the shadow of a mantid. If he followed the setting sun west he would get to the coast and if he followed the coast he would get to Cape Town.

He could feel the warm tarmac beneath his shoes but the sky was clear, with no clouds to trap the heat of the day. He knew that come nightfall it would be very cold. He knew it instinctively, like an elephant knows when it will rain.

The sun dropped lower and the road bent away to the south. Now the sun was on his right shoulder and he turned as he walked, warming each side of his body like a chicken going round and round on a spike. He could feel the heat draining from the world as the day slipped into darkness. He tried to suck another wine gum but it was dry and rubbery in his mouth so he spat it out.

Sometime in the brief purple twilight, he thought he saw Aadan leaning against a fence pole with that skew grin on his face. Jamal ran to him, tripping over bushes that scratched his legs, but when he got to the fence Aadan had disappeared. He sat down, leant against the pole and closed his eyes. When he opened them again Aadan was standing at the roadside with his thumb out and his white shirt billowing in the breeze. He looked back over his shoulder and winked. Jamal stood up. If he allowed his mind to be fooled by visions he would die out here. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them, Aadan was gone and the sunset colours had been leached from the sky. The stars were like steel shavings on a soot-blackened floor.

Jamal held his arms tightly across his chest to stop shivering and he started walking again. He could feel his bones beneath his papery skin. The wind was a ceaseless roar in his ears.

Much later he saw lights in the distance and he walked faster. The sole of one of his shoes had separated and it slapped against the tar as he walked. Trucks came

past, their headlights bright and terrifying, and the town got closer and closer until suddenly he was upon it. A petrol station glowed neon on the highway but he turned down a side street. He was so hungry that he had lost the desire to eat and he was so cold that he was no longer shivering. The side street linked up with the main road through the town, which ran parallel to the highway. It was dark and deserted save for a place down at the far end where lights burned yellow in the windows. Jamal hobbled down the road towards the lights with his slapping shoe. When he got there he summoned his last remaining strength, lifted his arm and knocked on the door.

•

“When you came into the hotel last night you were as confused as a poisoned jackal,” the man said.

Jamal was lying under ragged blankets on a sagging couch and the words came to him slowly, like they were being pushed through a sieve. He tried to sit up but the man held out his hand and told him to lie down again.

“You’re dehydrated, you need to rest. Here, drink this.” He held a glass to Jamal’s lips and Jamal sipped slowly. The liquid was salty and sweet and he drank it all.

The man sat down again and filled a pipe with tobacco. He took the stem of the pipe between his lips, lit a match and puffed out his cheeks to get the pipe going. His eyes glowed blue in the half light and his skin was pale and deeply lined.

As Jamal’s own eyes adjusted to the gloominess, he noticed that the room was cluttered with more books than he’d ever seen: hardcover books, old paperbacks, books with photographs and children’s books. He tried to speak but his tongue was thick in his mouth and his head felt as empty and draughty as a cave.

“Go back to sleep,” the man said. “You’re safe here.”

Jamal closed his eyes again and fell headlong into darkness.

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The man was still there when he awoke. Outside, a wind stirred the trees and Jamal could see a square of white sky through a window. He had no idea what time it was or how long he had been lying there.

“Slowly,” the man said as Jamal tried to sit up on the couch. “Let me put the kettle on. “Do you want tea? I’m not sure I have any milk.”

Jamal nodded and waited while the man went into the kitchen. He heard some rummaging then the man came back with a tray, which he balanced on a pile of books. Jamal sat up. The man poured the tea and gave him a cup.

“I told Van Wyk not to kick you out,” the man said. “He usually tells the vagrants to bugger off but I told him you weren’t a vagrant.”

“Who is Van Wyk?”

“The owner of the hotel. You practically fell through the door.” The man looked at Jamal. “You don’t remember?”

Jamal shook his head. He sipped his tea. He felt like he had been asleep for a very long time. After a while, he said: “Please, sir, I will leave today. Please don’t tell the police.”

“Tell the police what?”

Jamal looked at him and he saw no malice in the man’s eyes. Before he could stop himself, the words came tumbling out. While he told his story, the man packed and lit another pipe. Smoke rose and gathered in clouds against the ceiling. When Jamal was done, the man was silent for a long time. The square of sky in the window had changed from white to a dusky blue. The man’s pipe was cold but he still gripped it between his teeth. Eventually, he said: “Let me get this straight. You killed three people and now you’re on the run?”

“I do not know if they were killed.”

“And that’s why you don’t want me to tell the police?”

Jamal dug some dirt out from under this thumbnail.

“Speak up, boy,” the man said.

“I told you, sir, I will leave today.”

“I don’t want you to leave. I think what you did is fair. And I’m sorry about your brother.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Call me Moose.”

“Thank you Mr Moose.”

“Just Moose, boy, I’m not your school teacher.” He started coughing, a horrible wet cough from deep inside his lungs that caused him to bend forward with effort. The coughing tired him out. He sat back in his chair, looked Jamal in the eye and said: “I’m not going to call the police.”

Jamal didn’t know what to say so he said nothing.

Moose pushed himself up out of his chair and straightened his back with a groan. It was dark in the room and Jamal could hear occasional trucks rumbling along a distant road.

“Do you want dinner?” Moose asked. “Lets have some dinner.”

Jamal nodded, unsure if he should help. He started to get up but Moose told him to rest some more. Moose went into the kitchen and Jamal could hear him moving around, opening drawers and closing cupboards. After a few minutes he came back with a plate stacked with toast, a block of cheese and a bottle of whiskey.

“This is all I got, boy. If you want anything else you go find it yourself. You know what I miss most out here? A damn Steers burger. I drive anywhere and it’s the first thing I eat.”

“Thank you, Moose.”

“Drink?” he asked, pouring himself a glass.

Jamal shook his head.

“Not a god-damn happy clapper, are you?”

“I am a Muslim.”

“Jesus Christ, that’s even worse.” Moose took a sip of his drink and wiped his mouth. “Go on, eat! What are you waiting for?”

Jamal sliced thick pieces of cheese and ate them with the bread and said a silent prayer to Aadan, telling his brother that he was safe.

Later, when it was properly dark, Moose brought out some hurricane lanterns and lit them. Jamal didn't ask why there was no electricity. Moose also fetched an old, battery-powered radio from one of the other rooms and turned the dial until voices resolved out of the hiss. The voices sounded like they were coming from far away. Moose drank and they listened. The presenter had a lawyer on air as a guest. The lawyer was a woman and her speciality was financial matters. People phoned in and asked advice. Some people were getting divorced, others had lost their houses and one man had a problem with his neighbour's dog, which barked too much. The lawyer said that she couldn't help with the barking dog but she tried her best to answer the other questions. Moose listened intently, sipping his whiskey, and he chuckled to himself every now and then.

"See, boy, everyone has problems," he said.

After about an hour, Moose fell asleep. His head slumped to the side and he dropped his empty glass onto the carpet. Jamal stood up and he realised it was the first time he had stood up the whole day. He needed to use the bathroom so he took a lantern and walked slowly through the house. The books weren't just in the lounge, they were everywhere: piled high in the passage, crowding the bedroom and stacked on the kitchen counter. When Jamal found the bathroom, he saw that there were even books in the bath.

After he was done, he flushed and lifted the handle again quickly to stop the noise, then he went into the bedroom and took a blanket off Moose's bed. He went back to the lounge and covered Moose, then he lay down on the couch under the rags with their faint animal smell and closed his eyes. It was very cold but the world was very close and he fell asleep easily, to the sound of Moose snoring.

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The town where Moose lived was spread out on the flank of a gentle hill, bordered on one side by the national road and on the other side by a dry riverbed. The road

hummed with traffic day and night but few cars turned off into the town. Those that did were mostly white pickups with sheep on the back, or pickups loaded with the carcasses of small antelope that had been hunted. The biggest building in town was the office of the towing company. Most people seemed to hang around there or at the petrol station. The residents of the town were big and gruff and moved slowly with little grace. When Jamal encountered them on his walks, they simply pretended he didn't exist.

Across the riverbed was a township where poor people lived in shacks. These people walked through the town with their heads bowed, like they were pulling a heavy, invisible thing behind them. They spoke Afrikaans, a language of grunts and throat sounds that Jamal didn't understand.

The houses in the part of town where Moose lived were either very old or very new. The new houses were simple squares of raw brick, more like shelters than homes. Jamal preferred the old houses; he imagined that the houses in England must look similar. Moose's house was one of the old ones: it had a roof made of tin, small windows and a place to sit outside in the shade with a view of the comings and goings in the street. Along the edge of the roof was a border of delicate ironwork, which didn't seem to serve any structural purpose but Jamal liked it regardless. He imagined that the person who thought it up must have had a sense of humour, or he was just looking for something to distract himself from the freezing nights and the wind that carried dust and no rain.

Of Moose himself, Jamal knew very little. In return for a place to sleep in the lounge, Jamal helped Moose sort through the piles of books that cluttered his house. He would unpack a shelf then moved the shelf into the front room, which Moose called the shop, although its official name, painted on the lintel above the door, was "The Karoo Bookstore".

After he had moved the shelf, Jamal would repack it with thick, paperback novels that featured the names of the authors in big, shiny letters on the cover. Moose told him that these were his top sellers; he said that people liked to read about murder and suffering because it made them feel better about the world they lived in. Jamal

wondered what Moose meant when he said “top sellers”. In the week that he’d been living there, Moose hadn’t sold a single book.

Moose blamed the government for the lack of tourists. He also blamed the government for the poor state of the streets and for the plight of the people in the township. When he spoke about the people in the township, he became angry and said it was because they drank too much. Jamal tried not to laugh, because Moose’s rants were usually accompanied by a tumbler of whiskey, which he sipped from angrily to punctuate his sentences.

Most white people Jamal had met in South Africa were surprised that he could read, and Moose was no exception. By way of explanation, Jamal told him about his English teacher at school, a young man called Samatar who had dressed in jeans and T-shirts and white Puma sneakers. Samatar had been to university in America and his favourite book was *The Old Man and the Sea*. He had a single copy that he would loan out and Jamal and his friends would practice their English on the old harbour wall in Mogadishu, reading sentences that described the smells and sounds of the ocean – an ocean that was right in front of them. Jamal had enjoyed the story and he was sad for the old man when the sharks ate his fish.

When Al-Shabab found out that Samatar was teaching a book other than the Quran, they tied him to a pole in the square and beat him with a whip. He was never the same afterwards.

Jamal could see that Moose enjoyed it when he talked. Moose liked to get worked up about the injustices of the world, but he couldn’t blame his own government for the problems in Somalia. In situations where he was unsure who to be angry with, he would throw back his drink and say, “Bunch of criminals. The lot of them.”

One afternoon, when Jamal was done telling Moose the story of Samatar, Moose went into the bathroom and rummaged for a while. He came back with a paperback copy of *The Old Man and the Sea*.

“Take this,” Moose said.

No one had ever given Jamal a book before. He thanked Moose and Moose could see how much the gesture meant and he told Jamal again what a monumentally backward country he came from.

Jamal slept with the book close to him and read it in the cold, dry afternoons when he was done sorting books. He thought often of moving on, continuing his journey to Cape Town, but he always ended up staying another day. Moose didn't question him; he seemed to like having Jamal around.

Moose started giving him other things: a pile of old shirts that were so big and stretched that they hung like grain sacks from Jamal's shoulders; and a thick, brown jacket with holes in the elbows. He said the jacket came from his days in the army. They ate one meal a day, sometimes two, but Jamal was used to eating little. Moose bought bread and tinned spaghetti and they ate early, in the cool dusk before the stars took over the sky. He never asked for Jamal to pay.

Now that they'd cleared the books from the kitchen it was much easier to wash dishes. This became Jamal's duty. He scrubbed plates by the light of a hurricane lantern and boiled the kettle for tea on a small gas stove. He was worried that Moose ate too little. The old man's skin was almost transparent and it drooped from his bones. Often Moose was overtaken by a coughing fit and he would have to lie down for a while. Jamal would fetch him water and sit with him until he could breathe again.

Most evenings they listened to the radio. Moose said the reception for the Johannesburg talk station was better at night, although he couldn't explain why. Some nights, if the news was bad or if there were no interesting callers, Moose would walk up the street to Van Wyk at the hotel bar and he would only come back much later. Usually, when he got home, he would open the door and curse the darkness and curse the government and stagger through to his bedroom where he would topple forwards onto the bed. But one night he lingered in the lounge, swaying, then he walked over to where Jamal was sleeping on the couch. He lifted the blanket and looked at the boy lying there. Jamal watched him through a squinted eye but he didn't move. All the while, a paraffin light made soft light patterns on the walls.

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Jamal had been living with Moose for nearly two weeks when he came to the last pile of books. The books in this pile were old, with old-fashioned pictures on the covers and spots of mould on the pages. They were mostly about sewing and cooking. Moose had been storing them inside a cupboard in his bedroom, which Jamal found strange. None of the other books were treated with such care. Moose took each book from this special pile and paged through it slowly. Jamal noticed that there was an inscription inside the front cover of each book and the handwriting was the same. When he looked at Moose again, the old man was crying.

“These were my mother’s books,” Moose said, wiping his eyes. “You need to wash your hands before you move them.”

Jamal went to the kitchen and squeezed some Sunlight onto his hands and scrubbed them in the steel sink. When he went back to the bedroom, Moose was still sitting on the floor and he had ripped up one of the books. The yellowed pages lay all around him like a misshapen archipelago and his tears fell freely, darkening the paper. He began to cough and he held up his hand, so Jamal closed the door and went to sit outside in the sun. Everyone has pain in their families; he did not have to ask about the details.

Jamal slept badly that night, worried about what would happen to him now that the book sorting was done. Would Moose still require his help? If not, where would he go? In the cold hours before dawn, he decided on a plan: he would make himself useful in other ways. So, as soon as the sun rose, Jamal started working on the garden. He pulled weeds from between the pavers at the front of the house then set to work slashing at hard, spiky bushes behind the house with a blunt spade. Moose’s yard was an overgrown mess; it took him two full days to establish some sort of order. He never asked Moose’s permission and the old man never questioned him.

Once Jamal had tamed the overgrown bush, he spent another two days carrying rocks from the hill at the end of the street back to the garden. He sorted the rocks into shapes and used flat rocks to make a pathway to the kitchen door. With the smaller rocks he marked out two beds, which he filled with succulents that he also dug from the hillside. Jamal didn't know the names of these plants but he liked that they were hard but also gentle, with a tough kind of beauty. They were not easy to find. Jamal walked up and over the hill and around it many times and gathered as many as he could, releasing their roots carefully from the dry ground and planting them in new soil that he'd turned and watered.

Still, the beds he'd created looked empty, so he went up to the petrol station and crossed the national road to the empty veld on the other side. He climbed the fence and looked around but the sheep had eaten everything and the ground was devoid of life. The petrol attendants pointed and laughed at the crazy man on his hands and knees and they made sheep noises at him. Jamal remembered the men from the garage who had chased him off but he no longer felt angry. If anything, he felt curiously disconnected from his life, as if he'd woken up as a different person that day on Moose's couch.

Getting the garden into shape was hard work. Jamal's arms ached like they'd ached when he buried Aadan and the pain gave him energy to work even harder. He broke bigger rocks with the spade to fill the gaps where there were no plants and he used the off-cuts to make patterns in the sand. He made the moon, a fish, a horse and a row of people holding hands.

One afternoon, Moose brought out a can of tinned peaches and tipped some into a bowl. He gave the tin with the rest to Jamal and they ate the sweet, slippery pieces together in the sun. Moose looked at the garden and nodded slowly. Jamal was proud of his work and he began to tell Moose about his plans for a small pond, which would attract frogs and birds, but Moose interrupted him.

"Leave it," Moose said. "I don't want you in the garden. I'm going away for a few days and I need you to look after the shop."

"Where are you going?" Jamal asked.

Moose shifted some dirt around with the heel of his boot. He didn't answer. "Come inside and clean yourself up," he said.

Jamal obeyed. He washed his hands at the garden tap then he went inside and put on a clean shirt. Moose was waiting for him in the shop. He showed Jamal the ledger for recording details of a sale and he gave him a key for the cash drawer, which was empty. Jamal wondered how he would give change to anyone who wished to buy a book, but he didn't say anything. Moose also showed Jamal where he kept the eggs, jam, spaghetti and bread in the kitchen. Jamal had made his own food before, on the nights when Moose went to the hotel bar, but he nodded politely nonetheless.

Moose went into the bathroom and Jamal listened to sounds of washing and shaving. When Moose reappeared, he was wearing a collared shirt and a jacket and he was holding a small tog bag.

"Come help me take the tarp off the car," Moose said.

Since Jamal had been there, he had never seen Moose drive the car parked outside. Now he pulled at the tarpaulin, which was dusty and brittle, and folded it as best he could. Underneath was a white Nissan, the paint on the bonnet and roof cracked and yellowing from age. Moose put his bag in the boot, slammed the boot shut and climbed into the driver's seat. "Come on you old bitch," he muttered as he turned the key in the ignition. The engine whined but it wouldn't take. Moose tried again but the battery was flat. He got out of the car.

"Help me push," he said.

Jamal put the folded tarpaulin down and together they wheeled the car out into the street. Moose got behind the wheel again and gave Jamal the signal to push. Jamal heaved, feeling his muscles strain against the weight of the car. He had become stronger since he'd arrived. The car gathered momentum and he started running as he pushed, faster and faster. Near the derelict church hall on the corner, Moose released the clutch and the car stuttered to a halt. It caught Jamal off guard and he thumped into the boot.

"Idiot!" Moose shouted. "Again."

Jamal repeated the process and this time Moose signalled before he released the clutch, but still the engine wouldn't take. They tried twice more, until the street ran out and they came to the intersection with the national road. Moose got out of the car and stood next to it with his hands on his hips, looking west towards the setting sun. Jamal stood next to him, bent forwards, trying to catch his breath, while a cold wind tugged at his shirt. They stood like that for a long time.

Eventually, Moose said: "How did we get here?"

Jamal thought for a while, then he pointed up the highway towards Johannesburg.

Moose laughed a sad laugh. "Let's go home," he said. "I'll help you push."

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The policeman arrived early, during the hour when the morning sun cut bright slats through the dusty air in the shop. Jamal had woken at dawn as he usually did and marked out the boundaries of the pond; now he was sitting behind the desk that faced the street, reading *The Old Man and the Sea*. Moose had gone out to get groceries and he'd asked Jamal to take care of the shop until he got back. Jamal heard the bell at the door jangle and looked up, expecting it to be Moose, but it was a stocky man with a short beard and hairy arms, wearing a blue uniform and a cap that was too big for his head. He walked over to the shelf of crime novels and scanned it, rubbing his rough cheeks. A smell of sweat came off him – sweat and tobacco. Jamal felt a coldness seep into his legs. Had the police in Johannesburg finally found him? The man had seen him; he must have a patrol car outside. Jamal wondered how far he would get if he ran.

"Can I help you?" Jamal asked.

The policeman looked at him and smiled. His smile had no warmth. He said something to Jamal in Afrikaans.

"Excuse me, I don't understand," Jamal said.

"The owner. Ian. Where is he?"

“I don’t know Ian. Mr Moose is out.”

The policeman snorted. “Moose? Is that what he’s calling himself these days?”

“I don’t understand what you are asking.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Jamal Ghedi, I work for Mr Moose. I have all my papers.”

“Yes, yes.” The policeman picked up a book off the shelf and put it back. He rubbed his cheeks. “I have a meeting with Ian... Moose. Where is he?”

Jamal knew that Moose was out getting groceries but instead he said: “I don’t know.”

Now the policeman came closer. He had a pair of handcuffs attached to his belt and they clinked as he walked. Jamal could smell something else beneath the sweat and tobacco – sour chewing gum. The policeman put both hands on the desk and leant forward. When he spoke, his voice was soft and strange. “What has the old man being doing to you?” he asked. “You can tell me. Tell me what he’s been doing to you.”

Jamal looked blankly at the policeman.

“Does he touch you?”

Jamal thought about this, unsure how to answer. Eventually, he said, “Yes, we have touched each other.”

“Each other? *Jissus!*” The policeman stepped back from the desk and crossed his arms, disgusted.

Jamal was didn’t understand the policeman’s reaction. He qualified his statement: “There is no electricity here and at night the house is very dark. We have walked into each other.”

The policeman looked at Jamal like he was a very young child. He said something in Afrikaans again, then he looked out the window. Eventually, he sat down on the edge of the desk. The wood strained under his weight.

“You know why your friend Moose is here?” the policeman asked. “In this town here in the Karoo?”

Jamal shook his head.

“He used to be a school teacher in Gauteng. At a very fancy school. You understand?”

Jamal nodded.

“That was more than 10 years ago. Maybe 15 years. Can you imagine Moose as a school teacher?”

Jamal nodded again.

The policeman faked a shiver. “The sickness of it,” he said.

Jamal noticed that there were stripes of sweat on the policeman’s shirt, where it had been sucked into the folds of his stomach. It was not a hot day.

The policeman tapped the desk with his finger. “Yes,” he said. “Your friend Moose is a very sick man.” He stood up abruptly and walked over to the shelf of crime thrillers again. “I think I’ll wait for him here, is that okay?”

But before Jamal could answer, the door jangled and Moose walked in. The policeman also heard the door and he turned towards it. He opened his arms in a gesture of mock surprise. “Good morning, Ian.” he said. “Did you forget about our parole meeting today?”

Moose was carrying two bags of groceries. He closed the door with his foot and put the bags on the table where Jamal was sitting. One of the bags was damp with condensation from the cold milk inside.

“I didn’t know it was illegal to go to the shop,” Moose said.

The policeman laughed an unconvincing laugh. “I know what you’re up to with this young man here. You always liked them dark, hey?”

“Jamal? Oh come on. He walked out of the night a month ago, man. He would have died if I didn’t help him.”

The two men seemed to have forgotten that Jamal was sitting there.

“He works for me,” Moose said. “He’s my shop assistant and gardener.”

The policeman smiled his lukewarm smile. “You must watch these Somalis, hey Ian. Bunch of pirates. I heard on the TV just the other day that they’ve taken two more people hostage. This one, too. He’ll take *you* hostage if you’re not careful.”

Jamal shook his head and he was about to say something when Moose raised his hand. He turned to face the policeman. "You come into my house and you insult me like this? Then you insult the boy? He's done nothing wrong. If you want to tell me something then come outside and tell me."

"No, I think I've seen enough, thank you," the policeman said. "You can read about it in my report." He pushed past Moose to the door then he stepped out into the glare of the day and the door jangled as it swung shut. A car engine started outside then everything was quiet again.

Moose was pale as a cloud. "What did he say to you?" he asked Jamal.

"That you were a teacher."

Moose shook his head.

"I promise Mr Moose, I am not a pirate."

"I know." He walked over to Jamal and Jamal could see that his hands were shaking. "How far did you get with the pond?" he asked.

Jamal took Moose outside and showed him where he had marked out the boundaries and explained how he would begin digging the next day, even though he knew he would never finish the pond; it would remain a hard patch of earth forever. He also understood why Moose had tried to run the previous day and for the first time since he arrived, his feet felt restless.

"It looks good," Moose said, smiling. "I think it will be a very good pond."

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Jamal woke early, before sunrise. Moose had been out late and when he came home he'd smashed the lamp in the lounge. The lounge smelled like paraffin. Moose had been very drunk and he'd tried to talk to Jamal, but Jamal had pretended to be asleep. Moose kept on asking for forgiveness, to be forgiven for the things he'd done. He said that he'd been kind to Jamal and he asked Jamal to judge him only on that.

Now a grey light came through the windows and Jamal could hear Moose snoring in his room. It was very cold; Jamal's breath made clouds of steam as he

folded the blankets he'd been sleeping under and put them in a pile on the couch. He was wearing all the clothes he owned: two pairs of Moose's old trousers; three shirts; old leather shoes and Moose's army jacket. Despite all the layers, he could feel the cold fighting to get in. He went into the kitchen and made tea and drank it standing up as the day's first birds started calling and the light changed from grey to pale yellow. He heard the bedsprings creak as Moose turned over, then the snoring again.

Once he'd finished his tea, he washed the mug and put it upside down on the rusted wash stand. He took a loaf of bread from the cupboard and filled an old Oros bottle with water. He put both in his bag. He knew he was stealing and he hoped that Moose would understand. Then he slung his bag over his shoulder and walked through the shop to the front door. Through the windows he could see the day brightening outside, and a white crust of frost on the ground. At the front door he stopped, held back by some invisible force. He listened to Moose snoring and a heaviness pressed down on him. He worried what Moose would do on his own, at the mercy of people like the policeman. Moose's body was slowly failing him and soon he'd be too frail to walk up the street to the hotel. Who would come and visit him? But then Jamal thought of the town and the desolate landscape surrounding it and he knew it was not a place for a young man like himself.

He put down his bag and went over to the desk in the shop. He opened the empty cash drawer and took out the sales ledger, with its pen clipped neatly to the cover, and flexed his fingers in the cold. He looked at the blank invoice page then he began to write. He struggled with the English letters and wrote slowly, forming the words in his head before he pushed down on the paper. He wrote a single sentence, one of his favourites from the Hemingway book: *Man is not made for defeat*. And then, right at the bottom: *Your friend, Jamal*.

When he was done, he tore out the invoice page and left it on the desk. As an afterthought, he tore out the duplicate page and put it in his bag.

The weight on him lifted a little when he opened the front door. He stepped outside and breathed the cold morning air, then he pulled the door closed and listened for the click of the latch. He turned away from the house and walked up the hill to

the national road, only looking back once. He walked past the petrol station and away, with the rising sun against his back. He could feel its warmth and it was like he was being made anew. He walked faster, feeling the blood pump through his body, as the flanks of the distant mountains burnt brightly in the morning light. He said another prayer for Aadan, a prayer of thanks, and he knew his brother was somewhere in that huge sky, watching him. He said a prayer for Moose, and a prayer for the cousin in Du Noon that he had never met, and for the road that came to a point far away on the horizon. He said a prayer for the birds that sat on the fence posts and for the reassuring bounce of bread in his bag. He walked until he could no longer see the town and only then did he pause. He closed his eyes and said a prayer for the future.

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