The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.
Far from Any Ocean

By

Francois Spies
Standing amid the post-Easter chocolate bunny collection in the corner Greek café, Dirk Vermeer felt the remnants of summer that he had clung to fall away. He had entered looking for ice cream, but then absent-mindedly wandered down the candy aisle and ended up among an impressive display of brightly foiled rabbits. He saw a few ears bent at odd angles, a torso that had collapsed.

At two weeks past their sell by date, he considered salvaging some, but knew his mother would object to the choice of dessert. The rabbits served as a reminder that it was almost the end of April, that the near endless Highveld summer had in fact ended, and suddenly the flip-flops and shorts he wore seemed inadequate. His feet were cold.

At the front of the cafe he placed a two-liter tub of mint chocolate ice cream on the counter.

The young girl at the till had one hand on the keys but her head was buried in a thick paperback, and she made a show of ignoring him. He drummed two fingers on the counter, until an exasperated sigh came from behind the book, and it was lowered to reveal a scowl.

"Hello Maria," Dirk said, and gave a friendly smile.

"The prodigal son has returned," she said curtly, and carefully placed a laminated bookmark between the pages and laid the book on the counter.

"It hasn’t been that long?"

She pursed her lips at him, unconvinced. She had recently turned twelve, and he noticed the beginnings of a moustache on her upper lip. She saw him looking at it, so he pointed to the book, a library copy of *Middlemarch*, and asked: "How do you like that so far?"

When his parents moved into a house close to the café four years ago, she was already working there. Dirk remembered her: perched atop three Encyclopedia Britannica's on the high stool to reach the keys. Even then she had been determined to present her intellectual concern. But when she thought he
wasn't looking she would sway on the stool from side to side like a bored noontime alcoholic. A little girl after all.

“It's been two months,” she said, ignoring his question. “Maybe nine weeks. Maybe ten.”

“You know, sometimes I visit my parents without coming to your shop,” he lied. “So you could be wrong.” He was a bad liar. He could tell his fib made her uncomfortable, because she picked up the ice cream and punched in the price on the till to reassert control over the conversation.

“I like it,” she said softly, speaking straight into the tub of ice cream.

“Mm, it's not a bad flavour,” he said. She stopped mid-tap, and stared at him intently, trying to decide whether he was stupid or making fun of her.

“I'm kidding. It's a good book, you should like it,” he said, feeling strangely afraid of hurting her even in jest. The intense look remained, but she eventually seemed convinced that he was telling the truth, and resumed ringing up the ice cream.

As he was leaving she called after him.

“Happy twenty-sixth birthday!”

He stopped at the entrance and looked back, surprised at her memory, and embarrassed at what it might mean.

“Thanks,” he said, aiming for nonchalance, and drifted out onto the pavement.

Café Kos was an anachronism in a neighbourhood undergoing change. Dirk crossed Oxford Road from Corlett Drive and looked back at the shop. A decade ago the corner was the traditional clutch of stores catering to the working class needs of the residents that lived in the blocks of flats in the area.

But as the city split its seams and exploded northwards and eastwards faster than roads could be built, the property value of the inner suburbs rose. A designer furniture store and a boutique dressmaker now flanked Café Kos.

In the previous year Dirk had seen Mr. Ionakis, Maria’s father and the owner, pacing the aisles like the captain of a sinking ship.

As he walked westwards on the leafy streets into deeper Dunkeld, the din of traffic on Oxford Road receded.
In the kitchen he watched Anna, his mother, rummaging in the fridge for a sauce or condiment, the top half of her body hidden by the refrigerator door. She wasn’t very tall, and so had to stand on her tiptoes to reach the back of the top shelf, and he saw her running shoes squelch this way and then the other as she felt her way along the shelf. He was about to push himself away from the kitchen counter to help when his father called.

“Dirk, come help me here with this,” his voice came from outside.

Phillip Vermeer stood outside on the patio, his body crouched over with his face pressed against the receding flames of a coal fire. His cheeks puffed as he leaned towards the flames, then he exhaled a whoosh of air into the kindle.

The braai was a freestanding brick turret, the kind that you see in public parks, and from it you could look out over the pool. A large metal grill stood propped against the bricks, and it was this that Phillip wanted help with.

It wasn’t particularly heavy, but it was wide enough to be difficult to carry by one person, although Dirk had seen Phillip do so many times. Dirk grabbed the other end and they positioned themselves on both sides of the fire and dropped it down into place.

“Thanks,” Phillip said. Dirk had not seen his father for two months, and he interpreted the request for help as a shortcut towards familiarity. Task accomplished, they stood watching the flames rise to lick the residue grease.

“How was your birthday?” Philip asked.

“It was pretty low-key,” Dirk replied, “I had to cover a story on the day, and so it wasn’t much of a celebration.”

“Which story was that?”

“The polo one,” Dirk said, and took a sip of beer. His voice had a querying lilt in the end, unsure whether his father was familiar with it.

“Ah, yes,” Phillip said seemingly remembering, “the one with the horses?”

Dirk popped his lips as he finished swallowing. “That’s the one. It was pretty close to here actually,” he said, and pointed with one hand back across his shoulder to the northeast.

The day in question, his birthday, had been on the previous Saturday. The newspaper that he wrote features for had sent him to cover an extravagant
international polo tournament. Tonight was a belated birthday celebration that his parents had arranged for him.

Anna walked through the sliding doors carrying a tray of appetizers. She put the tray down on the patio table and rubbed her hands together, testing the temperature.

“Too cold?” she asked, her mind already made up. She wore a red jersey that matched the red stripes on her sneakers, which Dirk noticed and found endearing. Colour coding was one of her defenses against the world; things might go to pot at some point, but at least I’ll be matching.

Phillip gave a small closed-mouth grunt of agreement as he pulled the beer back to his throat.

Anna went back to the kitchen and Phillip walked over to the table, snapping the braai tongs open and shut. He peered at the appetizers and then popped an olive with some biltong into his mouth.

“How is old Ionakis?” Phillip asked.

“I didn’t see him, but I don’t suppose he’s sleeping too well. I see the launderette is now a coffee shop?”

“Poor Greek,” Phillip said and let out a laugh, more out of incredulity than humour. “He doesn’t stand a chance. When we moved here it was a quiet neighbourhood. Now: it’s a construction site.”

“Well, I guess that’s progress,” Dirk said, playing his role accustomed of realist. His father, opinionated, shrewd and most importantly, bored in retirement, welcomed any counterpoint to argue against.

“Hah! It can only be progress if it actually ends somewhere. Otherwise you’re just running.”

“Maybe that’s modern progress.” Giving ballast to the sway of his father’s opinions, that was his role.

“You just wait. When you can’t afford a house within fifty kilometers of your office, we’ll see how you like modern progress.” Phillip went quiet, contemplating the flames. Then he said: “Damn good coffee though,” and with a smile, nudged an elbow into Dirk’s shoulder.

“Can you please get the potatoes from inside?” Phillip asked, pushing his elbow into Dirk’s side, shunting him playfully in the direction of the kitchen.
“Ja, Vader,” he said, a rare but purposeful slip into his father’s language, giving a resigned smile over his shoulder as he walked away.

In the kitchen his mother was busy with several dishes on the counter while his father stood outside. He could feel himself shrugging off the years, back in a familiar sequence of events.

His mother used to have fine hands, and even though she moved with swift gestures, their texture was rougher now. From across the kitchen he could see the veins that had grown more prominent every year.

For dinner she was dressed fashionably, with tight-fitting jeans accentuating a figure that was slim and well maintained for her age. Her hair was coloured and modern, and kept in perfect form through a hairdryer and took a considerable time to be recreated after each wash.

But while her graceful appearance seemed natural, Dirk knew that it was a new and evolving character. Anna had spent most of her life living in the Free State, raised in an English-speaking home in a small town. She had been one of the best dressed woman in town, up to date with the newest trends, but when they moved to Johannesburg she realised it was not up to the standards of the women she saw at the malls and gyms.

Dirk had observed the small but meaningful changes over the past few years. She wore slightly more make-up, but the way she coloured her cheeks and slimmed her eyebrows now was more in line with the dedication to youthfulness that the city required. She wore newer jewelry and more of it. He did not disapprove, but found it interesting that she felt the need to adapt to a new environment even at her age.

She picked up a glass of wine, half empty, took a sip from it, and placed it back on the counter with care.

“So, is everything going well?” she asked. Her accent was English, the same as his own, and different from Phillip’s.

“Of course,” he said.

“It’s just that,” she started, and then paused, picking up a disc of feta and breaking it into the salad, “I’ve noticed over time, that when you are happy we talk often. But when you are not, we have these,” she looked at him, “breaks in communication?”
His parents, he knew, were always wary of addressing his feelings directly. It was something to do with being an only child, that with the absence of intermediaries in the form of siblings they had to grasp at situational information, as opposed to direct testimony of filial confidants.

“And lately you’ve been very quiet?” This was as close as they could come to judging his moods.

He shrugged casually.

“I’ve been busy.”

Anna picked up the salad bowl and held it in both hands in front of her. She turned to face him, and gave the bowl a vigorous and expert series of vertical shakes. The lettuce rushed into the air, and stayed there caught by gravity, before being swallowed by the bowl.

“You’re still young,” she said abruptly, with a friendly smile and tone, “you have plenty of time.”

Dirk did not know what the motivation for her words were, except possibly a conversation between her and Phillip. He wanted to feel defensive about being discussed, because he was content, and their concern was unfounded.

But he laughed, and walked over and touched her arm and gave her shoulder a squeeze, and smiled, then opened the fridge and took out another beer.

“Robyn should be here in a little while,” he said turning around.

“That’s good,” she said, her back turned to him, rubbing a handful of sea salt between her palms. “How do you feel about your relationship? You should have a shower before dinner.”

“Things are great. She has interesting friends, it’s going well with her job,” he held up both hands like a scale, and nodded his head. He took notice that she had mentioned the shower after asking a personal question, but decided it was motherly quirk rather than significant.

“That’s nice, but it doesn’t really answer my question.”

He laughed. “Why is everyone insisting on direct answers from me? I don’t think it’s a good sign.”

“Who is ‘everyone’?”
“Just,” he waved his hand and took a sip of beer with the other, “Maria at the café. Never mind. I’m going to go take a shower.”

“First take these,” she said and handed him a bowl of potatoes covered in aluminum foil. He had forgotten his task. “Before your father starts complaining about the coals getting too cold.”

After the shower he stood in his room drying his hair. He put on jeans and a t-shirt and a left a jumper on unzipped. Still flushed with heat he opened the doors to his balcony, risking a cold but eager to smell the freshness outside.

He sat on his bed. The beer and hot shower made him feel lazy, and he took his time putting on his shoes. Dressed, he stood outside on the balcony, and took in the view to the north.

He gazed to the different parts of the city, represented above the trees by varying luminosity of the sky. Johannesburg is a city of trees, but unnaturally so, to the order that when you leave the watered ground of the suburbs to the regions beyond the peripheral highway you are astonished at the bareness. It is unthinkable that before the city was founded, the brown landscape stretched everywhere.

He peered at the horizon, staring straight up Africa. He tried to will images of the bush into his mind, but the air was scentless, and the hum of cars defeated him. He thought of the people sharing the city, and then of the people he knew.

There was little mystery their lives. But then, it wasn’t a time of mystery here. Birds warbled unseen and unnoticed, the rivers clogged and ran dry, and where nature was not a commodity, it was forgotten.

He left his room and walked down the hall to return downstairs. Anna had a way of lighting rooms that gave you pleasure to move from one to another. The soft glow from the bedside lamps in empty rooms he passed was like heat from her body. The walls in the corridor held framed paintings. As an exchange student she had visited France, the oil prints depicted Parisian street scenes: navy figures clutching umbrellas staggering in a storm.
Dirk had traveled across most of the continents. He had visited the great cities of the world, but traveling from small town to town, talking to guesthouse owners as they made his breakfast, had made the more significant impact.

It had taught him to recognize that since most people live small lives, one had to believe tiny events add up to a fulfilled life. Else how could he enjoy that morning conversation with them, that inconsequential cold beer?

At the end of the passage he turned and looked back to the room his parents had created for him, surprised anew to see it there, like discovering a jacket you’d forgotten you owned.

He turned back to the stairs. He wondered whether Robyn had arrived yet.

Throughout his life, and particularly recently, he had no serious girlfriends. He dated intermittently and opportunistically, which for a time he felt added to his particular perspective. There were girls and women - he found that in their mid-twenties females could be one or the other – which he collided with for brief periods. Often he would meet a girl of twenty-three and a few weeks later a woman of twenty-three.

As he headed downstairs he heard the chime of the gate intercom sound. He reached it first.

“Hey, it’s me,” came Robyn’s voice.

He let her inside and they went to the kitchen first. Robyn wore a green dress, a brown jacket and a beige scarf. Her skin was light and smooth as porcelain, and her brown hair was cut to just above her shoulders. It was very fine and shone in even the softest light.

Robyn and his parents greeted one another awkwardly in the kitchen. The four of them had met once before, in a stuffy restaurant close to the stock exchange that, looking back, he remembered Robyn picking for them.

Phillip had cut up a lemon in anticipation of playing host, and the slices were laid out on a cutting board. He glided his upturned hand over them like a croupier and offered Robyn a gin and tonic, but she rarely drank and asked for juice instead.
Dirk noticed for the first time that the brand of gin his parents drank was at the bottom of the midrange, and felt a flush of annoyance that he could not place.

"How was the drive over?" Anna asked Robyn.

"Oh, no problems," Robyn replied, taking a glass from Phillip.

Car journeys in Johannesburg had always been the near de facto small talk icebreaker in conversations. The suburbs, although not entirely flat, were devoid of any significant geological or architectural markers, which made getting lost a real possibility. In recent years a surge in traffic and the closing of many roads for security reasons meant that discussing the merits of one route over another had almost become a competitive sport.

But it was the fear of being hijacked that was the subtext of most inquiries. One did not simply arrive anymore, but arrived safely, or as Robyn did, without problems.

Many parents refused to let their daughters drive alone at night, which Dirk found ludicrous, but had to admit was a precaution not without statistical merits.

"That's good," Anna said. "Where did you drive from?"

This kind of prosaic curiosity by Anna was familiar to Dirk, but he knew it was deceptive. It had taken him many years to notice, but hidden beneath the banality of her small talk, which was really a product of her personality but not a descriptor of it, was a mind full of judgments and opinions.

Robyn, Dirk could tell, had no inclination of this, as she gave Anna a warm but shallow smile.

"Oh, my home isn't too far from here."

"Robyn's just moved into a new apartment," Dirk said, opening the fridge for another beer.

Unlike Anna, Robyn was born and raised in the city. She had spent all her life in the same house in an upper-class neighbourhood in the northern suburbs of the city, until her father had recently bought her an apartment and furnished it in a new building.

"I'm staying in Morningside now," she said.
Phillip had left to attend to the fire but re-entered, carrying a large dinner plate with a blackened spatchcock chicken and a pile of potatoes. He was a tall and broad Afrikaner, with grainy light-brown hair and the bulkiness of a lifelong sportsman. It was only after they had moved to Johannesburg from the small town in the Free State, and Dirk observed the Phillip’s countenance change from a surly wariness to a jocular openness, that he realised his father had disliked the narrowness of the society he’d left behind.

Their choice to move to Johannesburg, a city they did not know and had few friends in, was inexplicable to the acquaintances they left behind. In the ensuing years they had discovered the art galleries in Simmons Street, dined on the sidewalks on Peking duck in Cyrildene or curries in Fordsburg, and generally behaved like no one else’s parents Dirk knew. As far he could tell, they were far happier than before.

Once, after classes during his third year at Witwatersrand University, he’d ran into them as they trudged past the swimming pool on the way to a launch of a political biography. On greeting them they had seemed annoyed that he was trespassing on their hobbies.

Phillip dumped the plate next to the basin and rubbed his hands with a cloth.

“Darling,” he addressed Anna, “how is the rest of the food coming?” As far as Dirk could remember, there were only a handful of times that Phillip had spoken in Afrikaans to them. If he was a different person in his mother tongue, Dirk did not know.

“It’s ready,” she said.

They went outside and Anna dished up the meal.

“Robyn, so tell me” Phillip said while leaning across the table to pour himself more wine, “who do you work for again and what do you do there?”

“Well,” she said, but glanced at Dirk and in it he read that she questioned why he had not briefed them before. He had, in fact in some detail, but it was Phillip’s custom to let people speak for themselves.

“I work for a non-profit organization dealing with community awareness and education of HIV/Aids. I’m the fundraiser, although I get involved in
anything that needs done. We’re a pretty small group, so it’s usually all hands on
deck.” She smiled and put a baby carrot in her mouth.

“Is it difficult raising money? Where do you get it from?” Phillip asked.

Robyn bobbed her head from side to side.

“Yes and no. Sometimes big multinationals are already looking for people
to partner with on projects, and if we fit the profile, then it is easy. Other times
you can call tens of big companies and funding institutions for a project and get
nothing but kind words and apologies. The man who started the organization,
the man I work for, Tebalo,” she paused, to Dirk’s mind, reverentially, “he is quite
well know and respected so that makes it easier.”

Dirk found himself studying Robyn’s eyes, and lowered his own to his
plate. The name Tebalo was his fears distilled and concentrated into a single
experience. Robyn talked of Tebalo in nearly every conversation. He was ever
present. Dirk felt as if he already knew him, even though they had never met.

As far as Dirk could ascertain through what she had told him about
Tebalo, he had been a political activist in his youth. He had been successful as a
businessman after 1994, and had eventually started the charity for which Robyn
worked. He was well connected politically and socially. Dirk, with no evidence
except the frequency of his name being mentioned, often worried over whether
Robyn was sleeping with him.

His obsession, which he refused to call jealousy, was destructive. He knew
this. It was a valley between them, which he widened from his end. With every
imagined fantasy he constructed of them together, he caused more soil to fall
over the precipice. Widening the gap. He looked at her face again. It was pure and
honest as she listened to Anna, but even in the face of this evidence he could not
be sure.

“How did you end up working there? And do you like it?” Anna asked.

“Well, I wanted to work in the development field. My personal belief is
that, the big development organizations are necessary, but the money isn’t going
to the right places. And I’m not convinced the trickle-down method really works.
So I wanted to work in smaller, more manageable projects.” She spoke to the
table but now turned to Anna. “I like it, yes.”
“Do you think that the smaller development organizations would be more effective under a larger, more structured umbrella?” Phillip asked. “I read an article that counted up the money wasted because all these different organizations didn’t share any services. They all have their own internal human resources, procurement and so on departments. If the organizations were operating in a commercial market, they would have merged into a smaller and more effective groups.”

Dirk moved his glass on the table a few centimeters to the left and looked at the lawn. He held his breath nervously. He hoped that Phillip didn’t press too hard with the topic of conversation. He had seen Robyn dig in to occupy the moral high ground against anyone who challenges the efficacy of her organization’s approach.

Robyn reached for her glass of juice.

“There are problems with sharing of resources, I agree. It’s difficult to get a consensus for what methodology to use and what strategy across different organizations. From the funding side, there is also so many ideologies and hidden agendas that it’s almost impossible to combine the money into a larger, collective pool.”

“Tomorrow she is going to Mthatha,” Dirk volunteered.

“Oh really?” Anna said eagerly, sensing Dirk’s intention, “what are you going to do there?”

“Well, it’s part of our community education. In the Transkei – actually in many areas – there’s still a lot of stigma around admitting that someone died of HIV/AIDS. One way we try to counter this is by convincing family members of someone who has died of Aids to wear t-shirts at the funeral stating that fact.”

“That sounds…” Anna paused, trying to find the right word, “not crude, but, somehow blunt?”

“It can seem that way,” Robyn nodded, “but that’s the level of visibility that we need to resort to. People are dying, and the community leaders aren’t doing anything about it.” Her voice had an edge to it, which made them all pause.

“Anyway, so some of us are going down there tomorrow to a funeral. We have quite a prominent family whose son has died, and have agreed to have mourners who want to, to wear the shirts. We’re taking down the shirts, and
coordinating counseling and inviting some other groups in the area to participate.”

“How early is the flight?” Dirk asked.

“Early,” Robyn smiled at him, “I think I have to wake up at four to be at the airport by five-thirty.”

After dinner Robyn excused herself to go to the bathroom, and then later appeared at the doorway with a frown on her face and a hand laid across her stomach.

“Oh honey, are you OK?” Anna’s said and shifted her attention fully to Robyn.

“I’m feeling a little under the weather. I think I’m going to have to call it a night so that I’m ready for the trip tomorrow.”

Dirk swiveled around in his chair to look at her.

“Of course, you don’t look well.”

She said her goodbyes while Phillip and Anna looked on with worry. They were at the age where ailment and frailty of the body were never far form their thoughts.

As they walked outside Robyn turned to him.

“Oh, I forgot to ask. If you’re not doing anything tomorrow, can you go to Jason’s rugby game? It’s at the school. Around eleven?”

Jason was her seventeen-year-old brother. He thought of a way to refuse, but there he felt a tinge of sadness at her leaving early, and reacting from it, he agreed.

“And,” she added, as they walked to the driveway, “I have a work party tomorrow evening. It’s at Tebalo’s apartment. Do you want to come along?”

There was no way he would let her go alone to that.

“Sounds great,” he said.

Dirk held the door of her car open while she sat in the driver’s seat. A new Volkswagen, far above her means but not bourgeois enough for her to refuse. Her wealthy father bought it for because, she told him, in what he perceived was her father’s voice: “you can’t be too careful with the lunatics out there driving.”

Safety, in this dangerous city, was a glass bubble and steel beams.

He leant on her door with his elbow.
“You know, I was hoping you would come back to my place tonight. I won’t see you until tomorrow and that’s a long time for a twenty six year old.”

“I know, I’m so sorry. But even if I was feeling well, I have to be at the airport at seven in the morning, so it wouldn’t have worked out anyway.”

“That’s too bad, I would have made it worth your while.” His words feel meek to him. He’s had one glass too much wine. The door creaks under his elbow as he inches it forwards and backwards.

She looked tired but managed one stellar smile up at him.

“You’ll just have to wait until tomorrow night then.” They grinned for an open moment.

“Alright then.”

“Now give me a kiss,” and he did, before watching her red taillights race up towards Café Kos.

Back indoor Anna had put away the dishes and she and Phillip retired upstairs. Dirk was not tired, so he finished what was left of the bottle of wine and then poured himself whiskey from Phillip’s collection.

He went upstairs and sat on his bed and sipped the whiskey.

Although he had committed to spending the night at his mother’s request, because he was sure he wouldn’t be missing any social events, or in the mood to go on a Thursday evening, he suddenly felt like phoning a friend or two to see if anything was going on.

The clock on his bedside read 23:30, which had just dissuaded him from making a call when his phone rang. The caller identification read James.

“Is this any time to call?” Dirk asked.

“What are you, my girlfriend?”

They both laughed.

“What’s up?” Dirk asked, already with a vague idea of what it might be. Out of their group of friends, James was the most socially connected.

“I’ve got great news. I got us on the list at an exclusive event tonight. You know Sup-Star is in town right?”

Dirk rubbed his eyes. James had a rat-tat-tat staccato voice, demanding to be heard.
“Who?”

“I thought you might say that. It’s a really famous artist, you know, the rapper from the Caribbean. Like, from Kingston or somewhere. He’s won a Grammy.”

“You’re not ringing any bells, Quasimodo” In the background he could hear a rush of wind and assumed James was driving.

“You are useless,” was James’ response. “Listen, it doesn’t matter how clueless you are, you just need to know this is a big ticket event. It’s a post-production party some charity is throwing. They had him out here doing a fund raising song-recording thing. I’m coming to your place now to pick you up.”

“Slow down James, I’m not really following what you’re saying, but you need to know I’m not at my place. I’m at my parents.”

“That’s great. I’m just on Oxford Road now, heading south. I can be there in five minutes.”

Dirk looked at his glass of whiskey and tried to determine whether he had the energy to go to a place where he didn’t know anyone. He took another sip, and the ice cubes rattled in the empty glass. He felt like a refill.

“OK, I’ll come.”

“I wasn’t asking. Be outside in five,” and the phone clicked off.

Dirk walked downstairs and put his whiskey glass in the dishwasher. At the front door there was a keypad for the house’s alarm system. He punched the keys to activate it. It was a complicated sequence: he had to set the alarm, but exclude the infra red beams that ran across the driveway so he could walk down it, and also exclude his parents’ bedroom in case they set it off rolling around in their sleep, but keep all other motion sensors armed.

The panel beeped twice in confirmation, and he opened the door and locked it behind him.

He waited by the gate, and when he saw the headlights of James’ car stop outside, he opened it electronically and went through, closing it again behind him.

He opened the door of the new black Audi and slipped into the leather seats. They shook hands.

“Howsit,” James said, and accelerated down the dark street.
“Where’s Paul?” Dirk asked. Paul was one of their close friends from university. Together they formed the core of their close friends.

“Clients,” James said, and pulled a face.

“Say no more,” Dirk replied. Paul had recently returned from overseas to be trained take over his father’s company. No one knew exactly what they did to make their considerable money, but Paul was regularly occupied with entertaining clients who wanted to pay money for whatever Paul’s father sold.

James tore down the deserted streets in his car at considerable speed and with the skill that comes from doing so frequently.

“It’s not far. The party is in Houghton,” he said, taking a corner with the tires squealing. They came to the boom gate at the end of the neighbourhood and Dirk waved at the security guard to let them through.

After five minutes of speeding through suburbs, part of a ‘drunk route’ known by everyone that avoided main road and thus the police, they turned into a street with row after row of parked luxury cars, and parked where a bibbed security guard motioned them into. They walked a hundred meters back the way they came to a lighted gate.

At the gate there were three security guards from a private company, all of them tall and serious looking, and they glared at James and Dirk as they walked up. Standing amongst them were two beautiful girls, their hair coloured blonde and wearing matching red coats. Dirk figured they were hostesses working for an events organizing company.

“Good evening, ladies” James said. They asked for his name and the girls checked it against an electronic device shaped like a clipboard. The girl’s face, illuminated by the blue electronic light of the screen, was serious until she found James’ name and then it broke into a smile.

“James Spark plus one?” she asked, looking at them both and smiling.

“That’s us,” James said, glancing at Dirk.

“He’s my personal assistant,” Dirk said, jerking a thumb in James’ direction. “I like to remain anonymous.”

“Of course,” the girl said, laughing.

“Don’t worry about him. He’s an idiot,” James said.
They walked up the driveway, which had a curve in it after thirty meters, and beyond it perched on the hill was a large house. Invisible from the street, they could now see that the entire front was made of glass, like a three-storey office building. Each floor had its own balcony with many people standing on every level, and on the ground floor was a wooden deck surrounding a pool with a marquee covering it. A steady stream of chatter increased in volume as the got closer.

In front of the house was a pair of Ferraris, standing like lions on the Danube. They went through the front door and to the bar that had been set up in the lounge. Dirk could see through to adjoining rooms, a mass of slim bodies crammed together.

"Who owns this place?" Dirk asked, after they had ordered drinks. He looked around and estimated that there were at least a hundred people in sight.

James shrugged.

"I think some guy from here who works in New York now. Or his parents, who are retired in Auckland."

"Quite a Thursday night," Dirk said.

James sipped from his glass, bringing it up to eye level with the back of his hand arched in a reverse grip. He adopted a businesslike tone. "So part of the reason I came here is to try and meet some producers and artists. I might disappear every now and then, but there's plenty to keep you occupied." James pointed his glass around the room. A woman tapped James on the shoulder and giving Dirk a collegial wink he followed her towards a group of people.

Dirk stayed by the bar, and since the scotch was rare and free, he decided to indulge himself. Between double-on-the-rocks number two and five, he spotted a ruling party politician, a continuity presenter form a satellite channel and a famous singer.

He was about to explore the floors upstairs when something caught his eye. Across the room stood a very tall black man, with darker skin than anyone else and wearing a silver suit. He was in deep conversation with a slim brunette. A crowd hovered close to the man, seemingly waiting for instructions.
The brunette laughed at something the man said, and then her gaze moved across the room, and when he saw her full face, Dirk realised that he knew her.

She saw him looking and there was a moment of mutual recognition. She gave him a smile. Dirk picked up his glass from the counter and walked over to where they were standing. His legs felt numb as he weaved between the bodies.

“Don’t I know you from somewhere?” he asked her when he reached them.

She looked at him with the same grin she’d held ever since he spotted her across the room. The tall black man was about to say something to her, but stopped when he saw her attention diverted.

“Yes,” she said, and smiled warmly at him.

He leant forward and was about to say more when someone tapped his shoulder from the back and he turned around. It was a short guy, his age, wearing a trucker cap and expensive branded jeans. Another face he recognized from somewhere but couldn’t place.

“Hey man, weren’t you at our polo tent the other day?” the boy asked him.

Dirk searched his suddenly clouded mind. He wanted to ignore the interruption and return to the girl, but was frozen trying to place the face. Then he remembered. It was the son of an industrialist who sponsored the polo tournament that he covered in his feature.

“Yes man, you were there from some paper. You interviewed my dad,” he shouted into Dirk’s ear above the music.

“Oh yeah. Your family owns the polo fields down in the Garden Route,” Dirk replied robotically, clicking drunkenly into his professional voice.

“I hear it’s lovely down there,” came a baritone voice. It was the silver-suited black man. He had a thick Caribbean accent, which even in his dazed state Dirk realised must be the man who the party was in honour of.

“Yes, yeah!” the boy shouted with condensed amphetamine energy.

“Whatever,” Dirk said, ignoring the interjection, “This is Joburg man, everywhere else in the country is irrelevant,”
The boy rocked back and looked confused. The Jamaican laughed. Someone in the group said something to Sup-Star and the brunette, and before Dirk could say anything more she was propelled away by the group.

As she walked away she looked over her shoulder and smiled at him again, and disappeared into another room.

The boy looked longingly at them, and then back at Dirk.

“You know them?” he asked.

Dirk felt a hot sense of annoyance flood his face, but decided to leave the perimeter instead of continuing the conversation. He went in the opposite direction from the group and climbed a set of wood and steel stairs.

He found James in a Jacuzzi on the second floor. He’d stripped down to his underwear and was holding a bottle of champagne. A group of five was inside besides James, and as Dirk approached a couple got out of the water and walked hand in hand towards a bedroom.

He crouched by the edge and tapped James on his bare shoulder, interrupting him mid-sentence. James looked around.

“Hey man, get in. It’s warm. There are bubbles,” James said, and giggled.

“James,” he slurred, “I need to get out of here. I’m getting a taxi.”

“Too bad man. How good is this?” James said, swinging the bottle around and spilling champagne into the water.

“I just like, need to take off.”

“OK, drive safe,” he said, even though Dirk wasn’t driving. James started to slide back into the Jacuzzi when he seemed to remember something and turned back to Dirk. “Oh, one thing. I need to tell you something about Robyn. I found out tonight. I need to tell you, but I’ll talk to you later,” he said.

“Why don’t you tell me now?”

“Just, remind me. Not now,” he said, and smiled mischievously, his mouth half in the water, like a newborn crocodile.

Dirk phoned a taxi and waited fifteen minutes at the bar for it to arrive. He tried to spot Valerie again but she wasn’t in sight.

He spent the ride home with his head against the cold window, watching the darkened trees float by. He could not say why, but he felt that the surface of his awareness of himself had been lightly disturbed. Like a motionless lakeshore
interrupted by a sudden series of lapping waves, evidence of a boat unseen and long past.
Dirk woke up and stared at the wall. It was an unfamiliar texture and a meter closer to his bed than normal. He blinked a few times and then rolled over, in the act remembering that he had stayed over at his parents, and it was not his own wall.

He looked down at his overnight bag and saw his jeans and t-shirt folded neatly and placed on top of it, and his socks tucked into his shoes. He couldn't remember placing the objects as neatly, but over the years he’d learned to interpret this as a sign that he was very drunk when going to bed. His sober self would never bother tidying up.

A soft, leaf-shadowed light inhabited his room. Tiny specks of dust swirled in a convection stream close to the window. Dirk followed one drifting in a lazy circle, first up to the roof, then back to the wall and down, coming slightly towards him and starting the cycle again.

When he was young he would wake like this on weekends, with no thoughts in his head, just the expectation of games in the yard and dirty feet at the end of the day.

Outside were the sounds of a typical workday beginning. Cars sped past before slowing for the intersection with the main road. The ambient drone of rush hour traffic on the M1 heading towards the CBD.

On the kitchen table was a glass of water and two aspirins and a note from Anne saying they had gone to play golf and would be back lunchtime. Even though he felt relieved at finding the house to himself, it was sobering that his parents’ retirement hobbies took precedence over his presence. He ate an apple standing against the kitchen counter gazing at a bougainvillea bush trying to reach the sunlight.
He went back upstairs and from his bag pulled out his running shoes. His watch read a few minutes before eight, but he locked the house and set the alarm and started running down the street, away from the direction of Oxford Road and Café Kos.

Autumn on the Highveld does not produce pleasing colours. Johannesburg in winter alternates between two hues: maize field orange on sunny days and flat-out gray on cloudy ones. April was a steady descent from humidity to dusty temperance. Pretty soon it would be so dry he’d have to begin putting petroleum jelly in his nostrils to avoid nosebleeds.

He ran south, always staying a block away from the congested Jan Smuts, until he reached the zoo. He crossed over at the lake and then climbed the steep ascent to the top of Westcliff. At the summit he paused to catch his breath, walking passed a school for children with special needs and several extravagant mansions with circular driveways.

He found a bench that faced north and sat down. He stared for a while at the Magaliesberg outline until he found the tall radio antenna. In the summer after a rainstorm it could seem close enough to touch, but without rain for a few weeks, the air was dusty and polluted and he could barely see it.

Close behind him he heard a crunch of gravel, and an old man dressed in exercise gear sat down on the opposite side of the bench.

He released what Dirk interpreted as a portentous sigh, and crooked an elbow over the back of the bench and laid one ankle over his knee. They sat in silence for a while, but at the last possible moment at which it could still be construed as a greeting, he looked at Dirk and gave him a nod.

They exchanged words about the view, when last it had rained, and about a particular blue plastic trash bin tied to a telephone pole. They both agreed used to be absolutely everywhere the city up until the early nineties, and had since disappeared. To further enhance its oddity, the wording on it was only in Afrikaans, something that could not have gone out of fashion in this part of the city because it had never been common in the first place.

He pointed out a few landmarks to Dirk. The Nestle building, which according to him served no purpose except as eyesore. Rosebank Mall, built in an area that was still a farm in the sixties. Sandton Towers, which was still a farm in
the seventies. Kilometers of farmland, although you’d never think it now. In the distance lay Rivonia, no longer famous for Mandela’s farm hide out, but rather, strip clubs. Then he pointed to the bottom of the hill at a rectangular four-storey building, whitewashed walls with a navy tiled roof.

“That’s Summerfield Retirement Village. I had a friend who ended up there. Knew him for forty years. We used to play rugby together for Jeppe club, out on Johannesburg College rugby grounds. You know the fields, there at the top of Braamfontein?”

Dirk nodded.

“We lost touch. I went to visit him two weeks ago. He asked me if I still had our club Zippo lighter. I don’t smoke anymore, but I had it in my suitcase. I suppose in that way you can call me prepared. He was quite sick, but when the nurses weren’t looking, he begged for a cigarette.

“He has his cigarette and I leave him there with the lighter and his machines. I told him I’d come back in a few weeks. We’re friends but I have things to do. But I mean, he has no one. A son in Canada who pays for this but that’s it right, he’s there alone.

“So I get a call the next morning from the retirement home. My number was on the security records. It’s one of the nurses. I know something is up, she sounds rattled, and you know someone who deals with the people in that place, who shit all over themselves and then die or first die and then shit themselves, this happening on a regular basis I’m sure, these nurses shouldn’t easily be rattled.

“It turns out Jack wanted out so badly, he took my sports club lighter and set his blanket on fire. Self-immolation they call it. How’s that hey? Lit himself up like a bonfire, no morphine or anything and he didn’t let out a whimper.”

The man stared ahead at the horizon so Dirk did too. He waited for some explanation, he expected the man to say, and I’ve never told anyone that. Life is strange. Take care of your friends. Or even, Hang on to your sports club Zippo. But no explanation came. He sat there for a while, like a character in an Edward Hopper painting waiting for a bus, and then picked up his bowls bag and walked around the next bend.
Dirk tightened his laces and ran down the tree-bonneted streets towards Dunkeld.

In his parents’ kitchen he found a pen in a drawer and below his mother’s name he wrote a thank you note for the dinner. Then he brought his bag down, deciding to shower in his own apartment.

His car was a white ex-rental Japanese hatchback, and what he liked about it was it’s complete lack of personality. He suspected that, given a barge-assisted river crossing or two, he could get in it right this moment and drive to Cairo.

He drove to the intersection and headed south, flipping through the radio stations, searching for music that could accompany him. A decades old rock or pop song that made everyone on the road seem to be participating in one pleasant urban purpose. Which was the get to where they were going with minimal rage.

He drove down Oxford Road, an undulating tunnel of tar between Jacarandas. At this time of day, in the neighbourhoods south of Illovo and north of Kilarney, the traffic consisted of housewives in casual gear on their way to the gym. With the children deposited tied and blazered to their private schools, husbands at work, they were starting a busy day of ordering the maid around, taking tea, attending book clubs or golf lessons, learning the Alexander Technique and coming up with pro-vasectomy arguments. He stayed well clear of the median.

Like many landlocked cities Johannesburg’s age can be judged like a tree, in concentric circles, sprouting out from the center. Except that it is really only half a circle, since the mine dumps south of the city turned everything directly beyond the M2 highway into a barren wasteland treacherously burrowed for kilometers below.

At the turn of the century the city began to grow north, first slowly but rapidly expanding until it became the thirty kilometers of swimming pools and al fresco dining that exists today. Within a few minutes he left Dunkeld behind, which until the 1950s, on the outskirts of the city but was now, relatively
speaking, near the center. As he drove south, the neighbourhoods became older, the trees lush and larger.

Up ahead he could see blue and red lights and cars stopped nose-to-tail, so before being caught up in the accident he turned west through one of the small suburban roads and picked up the route again after a turn on Jan Smuts.

Dirk’s apartment building was a twelve-storey affair in Killarney. The colour of the brick was a seared light orange to yellow, fired up in furnaces on the East Rand and piled together as homogenous flats during the seventies construction boom. They made a good backdrop for a photo if you were heading out to a dress-up party as the Bee Gees, but were otherwise an aesthetic nuisance.

In the foyer Dirk pried out the plastic covered newspaper from his pigeonhole. Three envelopes fell out with the paper and he picked them up. He looked at the elevator and considered power climbing the twelve flights of stairs to the top, but decided against it.

His apartment was at the end of a rackety elevator ride, a two bedroom, one lounge, two-bathroom spread with a wraparound balcony large enough to hold plants as tall as himself.

He opened the door and slid his keys along the kitchen counter where they came to rest against a spotless dish dryer. A note was on the dining table weighted down with a flower vase. It was from Gloria, his maid. She came on Thursdays and he’d missed her while she was cleaning. She let herself in with her own key, and was a terrific cleaner.

The note said: No more black bags, window cleaner. No sugar for my coffee. Please buy for next week. No happy birthday for him. She’d been cleaning his apartment for two years but they weren’t familiar around each other.

When he was going through a single spell he would look up at the packets of condoms placed next to his shirts, and imagine her smirking every week at their unchanged state.

She had one child who was ill about five Thursdays per year. This was what he knew about her.

Dirk took off his shoes and socks and rubbed his bare feet on a coarse rug. The building might be ugly from the outside, but the advantage was that not only
was the rent cheap because of the proximity to town, but they were spacious as a church and had parquet floors, features extinct in any new development towards the northern suburbs.

Securing the apartment was a matter of extreme luck. An agent had shown it to him but the asking price was almost twice what he was looking to pay. He told the agent he couldn’t afford it, but she, a twitchy fortyish woman with graying brown hair, unmarried with a clapped-out yellow Honda from the early eighties, looked him in the eye and said ‘make an offer’, which he did. And, the only possible reason it was accepted had to be that his was the first offer in.

For a long period he believed the owner had to be a market-price ignorant pensioner, one of the Jewish grandmothers left to themselves he saw drinking tea on the lower balconies. But the previous July they geyser broke and he had trouble arranging for it to be fixed. He called over the agent, and she told him sitting inside her rusted Honda, him standing on the sidewalk, that the owner was in rural Nigeria and couldn’t be reached easily.

He saw who he believed was the owner a few months later. On a dry Sunday afternoon August, one of those winter afternoons when it felt like it hadn’t rained in years, there was an old but pristine black Mercedes sedan parked on the street. Next to it stood a tall black man, much darker in tone than the Southern African features, dressed in a ministerial grey suit.

Dirk was standing on his balcony taking in the view and blowing air on a cup-of-soup, when he saw first the shining black car, and then the figure, with a face peering straight up at him leaning over the balcony. They looked at each other for at least thirty unbroken seconds, and then the man turned and drove away.

Dirk ran through a shower in the time it took the kettle to boil and still in a towel he sliced a mango, trying to decide whether the East Coast mango season was over in which case the mango would be imported, but from where – Tanzania? South East Asia?

He pulled on a shirt bought at a cultural festival in Oudtshoorn seven years before and his second-string pair of jeans, and took his mango outside with a bowl of bran flakes and coffee.
Facing east over a mall and the high walls of the American embassy he could still hear the cars swooshing on the M1. It was nine ‘o clock and he couldn’t imagine being expected at a desk somewhere, a list of tasks on your to-do lists ticking away in your mind as you walk through a secure turnstile. Yet at the same time it wouldn’t be terrible to be expected somewhere, which he wasn’t.

He sat on a plastic lawn chair, a set of four he’d bought from a bulk store in Woodmead which now only had three left, one having had a terminal leg failure when Dave, a friend, leant back too far and he was spit backwards like a collapsing pinball flipper.

He opened the newspaper. On page five there was a story of a Johannesburg man who’s car was hijacked by four men, who he managed to fight off and, incredibly, fled the scene in their car. While reporting the events at the police station, in walked the four robbers wanting to report their car stolen. Where they were promptly arrested on theft and outstanding rape charges. He flipped to the sports section but there were no results, sports on a Friday only revolved around predictions for the weekend.

The day lay ahead of him, there were no obligations, he was untethered from any schedule or expectation. He took a sip of his coffee, a muddy Kenyan blend that tasted a bit of dirt, which he wasn’t convinced he would buy again.

He picked up his cellphone and called James. There were six long rings and then the phone was answered but the other end remained silent.

“Good morning, this is emergency service. We received a call from your liver regarding a disturbance,” Dirk said.

James laughed. “Send the cavalry, I don’t know where I am.”

“Is there a bright white light or, alternatively, lava anywhere?”

“No.”

“Well, the good news is you’re not dead. What do you see?”

“It’s dark, but fluffy.”

“You’re under your duvet.” Dirk heard the rustle of fabric.

“Right you are. What would I do without you?”

“Well, you’d still be sleeping.”

“Right again. Bastard.”
Dirk got to the reason for his call. “Do you remember seeing anyone at that party last night that we knew from university?”

“I remember eating dinner. Then it gets hazy.”

“I saw Valerie there, but I didn’t get a chance to talk to her.”

“Who? Oh, wait, from university? Didn’t you date her, for like, a few weeks? Third year.”

“Yeah. I thought maybe you knew what she was doing these days?” Dirk took a sip of coffee and tapped a finger on the table. If anyone knew, it would be James.

“No. Why? I thought you had a girlfriend?”

Dirk ignored the question.

“She was talking to your Jamaican hero.”

James suddenly sounded more awake.

“You saw him?”

“Yeah. Valerie seemed to know him well. I had a few words with him.”

“What did you say?”

“I think I said the rest of the country besides Johannesburg was irrelevant.”

“You are an idiot. You didn’t tell him that you knew a brilliant music producer named James Sparks?”

“I didn’t have your business card on me.”

“This friendship is over.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Dirk breathed a laugh into the phone, and then remembered. “Oh, last night, at the Jacuzzi. You said that you needed to tell me something about Robyn. Someone told you something at the party.”

There was a pause at the other end. Then James said, “Wait, there was a Jacuzzi? No wonder my skin is so soft.”

“So you don’t remember?”

“Sorry, I must have been confused. Or I can’t remember. It’s a blur.”

“You’re sure?” Dirk sounded disbelieving.

“Yeah.”

He decided to let it go.

“All right. Probably nothing then”
“Listen, I'll call you when my brain reappears.”
“I don’t think the lithium in my battery lasts that long.”
"Is that sexual innuendo?"

Dirk laughed, said goodbye and hung up. He put his phone on the table and it beeped immediately.

He looked at it with concern, unsure of how the would impact his day.

It was a message from his newspaper editor’s secretary. It stated that his meeting with Koos, the editor, had moved to ten, from nine-thirty. He stared at the screen for far longer than it took to read the simple message.

What meeting?
In a corner of his mind he felt a little chime of remembrance, just a small ting. It wasn’t so much remembering a detail as remembering that he had to remember something.

He checked the time. Nine twenty-five. If he rushed, he could make it by ten.

He poured the coffee down his throat, and spooned a bowl of bran flakes into his mouth, which clung to his teeth so he had to rinse his mouth of toothpaste twice.

In the car he flipped between radio stations before punching in a worn mix-tape a work colleague, his photographer, had compiled for him. It was a loop of rap songs. He switched off the radio.

For the first time since waking he thought of Robyn, who would now be traveling from Mthatha airport in a hired van with the rest of their group, winding along the Transkei roads that went up and down the hilly terrain so often it felt like you’d traveled further vertically than horizontally once you arrived at your destination.

They were far apart, but still connected in some way: while she was in the dirt poor but traditional Pondo villages, he drove towards Hillbrow. Both functioned below the developed veneer of the country. If she were lying on a beach in Cape Town or taking tea in Hyde Park, they would lack a common thread. There was at least a harmony to their locations, or more importantly he supposed, in what within themselves had motivated them to these positions.
Downtown Johannesburg started with a desire to be beautiful, and that desire is still visible: the odd Victorian railing on a second floor balcony about to collapse, or the thick sandstone rectangles of an art deco building. But not long into the twentieth century these good intentions were overwhelmed by the city's growth as a machine.

Looking in the direction of the Queen Victoria bridge, all Dirk saw was a cluster of buildings set in a bowl, that fortified the northern suburbs against the dusty mine dumps of the south.

During the nineteen nineties business fled the city, the urban sprawl meant there was ample room for new migrants but no reason to congregate in a single point. Which meant that the city was left to anarchy, slumlords and drug dealers.

Dirk was heading for the newspaper's offices, which was in the north east of the inner city. Dirk turned back onto Jan Smuts and then turned left into Empire Road at the northeastern edge of his alma mater, the University of the Witwatersrand.

At the top of Empire he hit Brent Cross Hospital, turned left and then eased his way through leafy streets that were once held middle class families in newly built apartment buildings, but were now littered and neglected.

This was a short cut he had developed over the past year to avoid the occasional traffic. On Joubert Street was Hillbrow Swimming Pool, perhaps the most striking evidence of time having left the area behind.

He went inside, once. Two levels below street level, the air was heated and smelled of salt, sweat, and rubber carpets and he imagined, the 1950s.

Inside a very old woman, with grey-layered skin, sat on the edge of the pool with her feet in the water. She had goggles propped on her head and was heaving for air. He didn't stay long.

Driving passed the pool, he saw street kids not more than ten years old peered at him through a chain-linked parking lot, plastic glue bottles pressed to their chests.

The newspaper's offices were close to the stadium district of downtown, behind Ellis Park and the newish athletics stadium that was never used, but by
all accounts preferable to an empty park for drug pushers apartment building to decay. Some buildings had been turned into giant billboards – abandoned structures sold for a pittance and were then converted to profitable advertising space, ensuring that the money was kept in Sandton and there was even less motivation to renovate.

There was much talk of an impending large-scale urban regeneration project starting, which was both a cause for optimism and a sure sign that the city had hit rock bottom.

Businesses that had small margins or a large labour force – retail banks, newspapers, mining houses – had stayed on, which had more to do with profitability than a moral obligation as they (especially the newspapers) chose to position the decision. Were it not some tenants such as the newspaper remaining, the city would likely have destroyed itself.

Given the area surrounding it, the offices inside were rather luxurious, with a wood paneled reception area and well lit industrial design inside with modern carpeting. The aim was to make them feel part of a process, of being the point of interface between society and the higher world of politics and economics. They were meant to be the link between the everyday and those who allowed the everyday to exist.

This high-mindedness naturally was not expected of all departments, certainly not the travel feature section. He found his desk and chair and flicked on his computer. A new chrome wall clock said it was nine fifty-five so he scanned through his e-mails. He hoped to find one from Koos that perhaps outlined what the meeting was for, but before he could fine one, Koos himself loomed over the cubicle divider.

“Dirk,” he smiled down, giving the R a solid roll, “sorry for moving the meeting, hey. Let’s go to,” he looked up at the row of glass encased meeting rooms, searching for an open one “meeting room three.”

Koos was a big-boned Afrikaner with yellow teeth and hooded brow overhanging his eyes. This feature gave him a slightly hurt look, as if he had recently received unfortunate news. During the struggle years he had been a giant in the liberal media, but had since then drifted into isolation. Dirk had decided that his sadness must emanate from the glory days being past. That, as
thankful as he was that the struggle was over, there seemed to be little to fight for and not enough left in him to fight at all.

Even though his had an imposing mass, he retained a thinness inherited from the Dutch, with fine narrow fingers and blonde hair that you could tell was wispy even though he cut it very short. But that’s where genetics ended. The rest was muscled bulk of a childhood fueled by red meat and roughhousing outside on sun-kissed days.

Koos closed the door behind them, silencing the tapping and chatting. They sat down and Koos folded his hands together with his forearms on the desk, leaning forward.

Dirk realised he needed to put on an expression appropriate for the meeting subject, but not having an idea what it was, held his pen in hand and adopted a half-grin.

“Good piece last week,” he began, “the polo thing.”

“Not exactly my thing, but thank you, I try to make the most of any event.”

“Right, that’s good. Now, I wanted to talk to you about something. You might be interested, you might not, but I thought I’d run it past you.” He paused. Dirk, bewildered, hoped his grin wouldn’t falter.

“We’ve been happy with your progress, we’ve done some market research and there’s been a general upswing in readership numbers since you’ve started writing for us. Marginal, but evidence supported by a survey we did.”

Dirk tried to remain passive, to brush off the compliment, and felt that he had succeeded in keeping his face calm.

“Yes, I hoped you’d be pleased.” He doesn’t miss much, Dirk thought. “Anyway, I’m not here to lick your arse, there’s a point to this. The issue is with Johnson. He’s requested to be grounded for a while.”

Pat Johnson was the international travel writer. It was a luxury for a newspaper to retain a writer dedicated to international features but Johnson, or PJ, as he was known in the office. Koos would probably look ridiculous saying PJ so he stuck to Johnson as if they were in the military.

“His children are now in high school, the wife isn’t so keen on the idea of him going to junkets in Tenerife and so forth, so he’s requested a gradual phasing out of his travel so he could focus on domestic features. Management has had a
meeting and they’d like to retain the role. They’ll be looking to contract outside the paper’s current writers but your name came up as a possible candidate.”

This time Dirk did not even try to hide a smile. Free international travel to interesting destinations. Feted by hotels and agencies. The best treats are unexpected, and Dirk realized this is something he wanted without ever having considered it.

“Now, don’t get ahead of yourself. It’s still a while off and your chances are only so-so. But I just thought you’d want to know about it.” Koos tapped the desk lightly with his open palm. A light slap to say: OK, box checked, task taken care of.

“Obviously we’ll be evaluating your features closely, and also your adherence to expense policies, deadlines and those things.”

Koos’ tone of voice became resigned as he was forced to sink to administrative trivialities, but Dirk was scarcely listening. He was trying to decide which to do first, Rio Carnival or Munich Oktoberfest. The newspaper could use some fresh young perspectives on these crowd pullers. Surely he could motivate it. Koos was still talking.

“Naturally starting with this weekend’s assignment.” This returned Dirk’s attention to the present. Wait. What? He must have looked confused since Koos raised his eyebrows.

“You haven’t forgotten about the Jagtersrus piece have you? You’re going down there to cover it tomorrow?” A skeptical lilt at the end. Dirk blinked at him, running through the week’s events.

“Remember? On Monday morning? I sat you down and told you about it? You even wrote it down.” Koos pointed to the notebook in Dirk’s hand.

Monday? Monday morning. Monday. Dirk ran through the week. Oh yes, he remembered Monday morning. It had not been a particularly concentrative period. He’d been preoccupied with thought of Robyn, who he’d called on Sunday night twice without answer. No word, not even on Monday morning.

She had spent Sunday afternoon at a colleague’s birthday party. A picnic at Zoo Lake, drifting around on paddleboats, necking with the director of the NGO, what was his name, Tebalo, and after two bottles of Franschoek Sauvignon Blanc, going home to sleep with him.

At least that’s how it played out in Dirk’s mind.
In reality, he had no reason to doubt her fidelity. It was a subjective view he took, his judgment that she wasn’t a candidate for infidelity, because he also held the view that everyone was a candidate. Mostly his position relied on his belief that the act of cheating would be viewed as an indiscretion in her social circle, and he held the view that Robyn was driven enough by the norms of that circle to avoid the tackiness and banality of an affair.

And that was where his conviction fell short. Because, what if the context of the infidelity was neither tacky or ordinary, but exceptional, and meaningful? Because, Dirk could too easily imagine a scenario that would allow her to justify the act.

In Dirk’s mind, he knew that Robyn was the type of girl who had to sleep with a black man at some point in her life. Liberalness and open-mindedness (not nearly the same thing) was what she built her identity on, and interracial romance was a component thereof.

Except he couldn’t phrase it that way, since it indicated something to overcome, or a challenge, which wasn’t derogatory but wasn’t not either.

Dirk had spent, he realised regrettably, an inordinate amount of time thinking about the subject. When he asked her directly whether she had had sex with someone non-white, she said no, but the 'No' had sort of a hanging tail, an unspoken 'But!', which if you are to be politically correct had to have hanging in the air.

So it was in his mind constantly that it was only a matter of time before she had to complete this part of her maturing into who she would one day become. To achieve the state where no audible ‘No’ to the question existed, and definitely no inaudible ‘But!’.

Except of course you couldn’t ever think about it in this way because it implied that the action she had to perform was exceptional, which belied your prejudice. It made his head hurt just thinking about it.

And it must have been when this was running circles around his head when Koos told him about, what was it, Jagtersrus? What on earth could that be about?

Koos was still waiting for an expression of recognition to appear on Dirk’s face, so Dirk, back from his reverie and in an attempt to look competent, flipped
open his notebook to the last entry, which did in fact feature the word ‘Jagtersrus’ with a spiraling doodle around it, the circles spreading out in, he was pleased to see, identical distances.

A bizarre set up, he remembered. A farm in the Free State near the Northern Cape border. People were paying a lot of money to go live there for a month or more and, well, help to farm.

“The, uh, pay-to-farm thing,” Dirk said.


“You’ve told Tau you need him tomorrow?”

Tau was his assigned photographer. He hadn’t spoken to him in a week.

“Sure, sure. He’s from the Free State, you know, so he won’t mind. I mean he doesn’t mind.”

“Well that’s good, because I don’t care if he’s from Mars, you two are going.”

Koos tapped the desk again, harder this time, a good thwack, and in the process raised himself from the seat.

“I look forward to hearing how it went.”

“Sure, of course,” Dirk mumbled, walking back into the office noise. His feet felt heavy as he tried to think, but the clacking and chuckling in the open space drowned out all thought.

He started going back to his desk, frantically considering options how to tell Tau that in twenty-four hours he would be spending his Saturday morning on a three-hour drive. He set upon a fruit juice from the vending machine and a few minutes on the open balcony on the sixth floor to come up with a tactic, but then Tau appeared right in front of him, one arm rested against a cubicle wall.

Tau Tsasanyane was a photographer, and had frequently been partnered with Dirk on assignment. He hailed from Parys, Free State and was a tall, slim, twenty-three year old aspiring fashion photographer with the typical Sotho friendlier-than-most face. His expression was often worrisome, which Dirk decided was from constant pondering how to extricate himself from the undesirable job of working with unfashionable people such as Dirk.
His dress sense for his torso was tight and bright, whether button-up-shirts or sweaters. This immediately set him apart from the other photographers, many of whom were white, and always wore khaki and brown pastels like they were going on a game drive.

He was leaning down, talking softly to a girl sitting at her desk. His posture conspiratorially flirtatious, a tactic he employed regularly on the female staff and the effectiveness decreased nil in spite of its transparency.

He glanced up and his expression instantly broadened into a wary smile that said: ‘Hey man, give me a second to finish what I’m doing’.

Dirk got closer and saw that the object of Tau’s assault was Mariette, a junior fashion writer, who sometimes wore miniskirts with knee-length coats, or cuffed shirts with ties and had the ends of her hair dyed pink over their black roots, all in a meticulous constructed message of respect the avant-garde.

“So if anything comes up, or anyone is sick, you know, or you’re looking for a different style or you’re under resourced, or you need something fresh,” Tau had fixed his smile back on Mariette, “you know who to call.”

“Sure, I got it. If we equal trouble, Tau equals fresh.” Mariette deadpanned in what Dirk guessed was fashion-speak, or perhaps it was their generation, things were changing so rapidly every year felt like a new decade. Mariette was twenty-two but to Dirk the four years seemed like gulf. She sounded like she’d heard this all before from Tau, which she probably had.

Tau’s plea to Mariette was clearly another sortie in the ongoing battle to claim a spot as photographer in the fashion feature. From there, it’s the story of how a young man from a disadvantaged background ended up being the eminent fashion photographer of his generation. From Parys to Paris, a Hollywood musical, based on the three-act play, based on the biography compiled from Time features. Which is what Dirk imagined Tau recited before falling asleep.

Mariette had turned back to her keyboard and Tau straightened and looked at Dirk.

In a second hand bookshop Dirk once found a book on Sotho names and read that ‘Tau’ means ‘lion’, knowledge he tried to work into conversation a few times. On a specific trip to the Waterberg his requested sunset photograph
turned out very successful and Dirk exclaimed, “Tau...you lion, you” but the only reaction he got was a look of concern as if he’d gone crazy.

He had the same reaction when he suggested TT as a fillip for the photographic tagline, instead of his full name.

“Tau, listen,” Dirk started but Tau cut him off.

“Dirk, did you see what they did to my photos in Sunday’s feature? They cut out all the dresses, all the suits, all the style, man. And you know what was left? Horses.” Tau snorted like he was a horse himself. “Horses. Do you think it takes talent to photograph horses?”

“I don’t know Tau, one of the most famous photos in the world is of a horse. You know, that sequence, in England I suppose, where you can see all...four...hooves,” Dirk ineptly motioned a two-fingered gallop in the space between their faces, “off the ground?”

“Hau,” Tau shook his head at him. This meant he was truly upset.

The offense in question to Tau’s talent, which was a regular occurrence, was the feature they did on the polo tournament. The article was not meant to be about the tournament, but rather on the community of players, horses, spectators and administrators who travel the world following important polo matches. A cottage industry had sprung up to service the travel logistics of all of this, although the money involved made it more of an ocean-facing-mansion industry.

Tau knew the connection between horses and royalty, royalty and society, society and money, and money and fashion well enough to be nearly overcome with opportunistic excitement at the prospect when Dirk told him about the assignment. On the day, after a double espresso and two glasses of champagne, Tau was uncontrollable so Dirk let him run around the stands taking photos of the people while he interviewed organisers and participants, and learnt that Manila has a surprisingly plush polo facility and how to get over jetlag in Buenos Aires if you have an infinite budget, but not much else.

“You knew the subject of the piece Tau, it wasn’t about the spectators.”

Tau scowled. “You know what I found when I came home? On my new shoes?” Tau’s indignation was more unrelenting that usual. “Horse manure.” He said it as if it was worse than any four-lettered curse word. “But I thought to
myself: When they publish my photo of Miss SA, the sunlight glinting just so off her sunglasses, it will be worth it. Only to open the newspaper and instead of cleavage and beautiful dresses there’s some travel consultant, a polo club owner and a beady-eyed horse looking like equestrian nightmare.”

Tau threw up both hands in mock-horror except his horror seemed quite real. He looked like he was about to explode into another tirade so Dirk changed tact. “Have you thought about giving your photos to the society page editor?”

Tau was stopped mid tantrum and peered at Dirk. “No, I haven’t. But why would Helen even look at them.”

“Well, she’s in my tennis club. I see her all the time. I’ll talk to her on Sunday.” This was a whopping lie. Dirk didn’t know Helen from a bar of soap and had never spoken to her. He also was not a member of a tennis club but believed it fit in with Tau’s idea of what suburbanites did on Sundays.

Tau seemed mollified. “Really? That would be cool. You owe me. I had to clean my shoes and my car. I smelt like the SPCA.”

Dirk had an idea. “Listen, why don’t we go downstairs and I’ll buy you a cup of coffee.”

Their relationship was one of contingency, in the sense that behind their communication was the expectation that a misunderstanding could occur at any point. Toward each other they were friendly, sometimes spontaneously humorous, grave when required, steadfast when challenged, curious when discovering something new in the other, angry when wronged - in fact, they exhibited the whole range of typical reactions with someone you both know well but also need to rely on for a common goal.

With the contingency that at any moment either of them could accidentally trip over a cultural tree-root and bring the entire artifice crashing down.

Taking the elevator down to the foyer Dirk was conscious of the delicate balance that needed to be maintained.

In the lobby of the building was a cafeteria, the décor silver with exposed red steel beams running along the roof and polished cement as a floor, all in keeping with the overall lean production theme.
There was a patio outside where the sun shined in the morning, a quaint cut of greenery in the concrete surroundings, which was the designated smoking area and thus reeked of stale cigarette buts. “Let’s go outside,” Tau said motioning towards the sliding doors.

“What’s up man, why are you buying me coffee?” Tau slid down in his seat until his neck was almost on the back of it, and pushed his feet underneath the table until they nudged against Dirk’s toe. He looked like he was trying to get something out of his pocket, but since he already had his wallet, phone and keys splayed around the ashtray Dirk couldn’t imagine what he could be looking for.

Tau did not smoke, Dirk knew, which is why it surprised him that it almost looked like he would pull out a pack of cigarettes, such was his urgency. A scowl curtained his forehead and then he pried whatever it was out of his jeans.

To Dirk’s surprise it was a pack of cigarettes, the hard box crumpled at the corners.

“Problems with the girlfriends?”

“Ja, ag,” Tau’s expletives had a more guttural Free State sound than those raised in the English environment of Johannesburg, “don’t change the subject.”

“You smoke now?” Dirk persisted. This was not the way to go about breaking bad news to anyone, he realized, but he could not help himself. Tau pulled one out of the packet and bumped it filter side down on the table five times.

“Dirk, I started and stopped smoking before you noticed breasts were interesting. I was drinking beer when you discovered Yogi Sip.”

“OK, OK, I get it. Township rebellion. Just curious.” This was not going the way that Dirk had planned. He needed to soften the tone. He looked at the sky and said innocently, “Do you still support Celtics?”

“Does Kimberley have a divot?”

“Right. When’s their next game in Bloemfontein?” Dirk sent a silent prayer to the soccer scheduling gods.

Tau glared at him like he had gone off the rails, a look of did-you-drink-a-cup-of-white-guilt-this-morning.

“Tomorrow. I’ve got a braai with my tjommies where we’re watching it. How come you suddenly have an interest?”
Dirk hesitated then took the plunge.

"Koos just told me that we need to cover something in the Free State tomorrow." He paused, and lying to Tau felt wrong, somehow more than if he was someone else, and more wrong than lying about playing tennis with Helen. 

"Or, rather, he just reminded me. Anyway, it sounds like an interesting assignment. So I was wondering if you were keen for a free ride to the game, petrol money on the paper's tab, even a stay in the City Lodge?"

Dirk held his breath. This could be a thick, plantation-pine of a cultural tree-root to trip over. Not only had he nearly lied, and sort of did go down the road far enough for Tau to notice, he was also trying to appease Tau's anger with the oldest and tamest whitey offering possible: a soccer match.

Tau looked like he was considering whether to burn his cigarette into Dirk's arm or throw the coffee at his face. He knew that Dirk wasn't asking, since Koos didn't ask: he told.

"Do you think that you can tell me twenty-four hours before we need to drive all the way there that we have to go?" Tau said, indignation building in his tone. He looked at his watch. "Twenty hours actually. Hm? You think I don't have plans tonight, that would require sleeping in late? And what about my arranged braai tomorrow? You think that's not important?"

Dirk blanched. This was going badly. He'd crossed a number of lines, and was now at the net taking volleys in the face. Tau was silent but still looked at him questioningly.

"I understand it's short notice, but," he grasped helplessly for a word that would provide clarity, "but this is an unusual assignment. No one has covered this story before. It could easily go on to the front page of the section."

Tau eyed him skeptically. If he blew off on another rant, unfazed by Dirk's words, Dirk had no more angles.

"Well, what the hell is it?" Tau said with a resigned sigh.

Relieved, Dirk gave him the detailed about the farming scheme. He tried to balance the pastoral with the political.

At the end of it Tau looked annoyed. To Dirk, visiting some bizarre commune in the middle of nowhere on a Saturday was an irritation but would be a good story. Tau seemed concerned about how this would reflect on his
reputation. What would his friends think of him, ditching them to take photos of unbathed whiteys prancing around a farm? This would not enhance his career in fashion and would not end up in his portfolio either.

Dirk paid the bill as Tau tossed his empty packet of smokes into the ashtray.

Dirk had a vision of Tau arriving at the farm in full Celtics kit, a black leprechaun crouching around a mielie field taking photos, and couldn’t help to wonder how all of them, him included, had arrived at this scenario.

Dirk left Tau and went back through the foyer. He was satisfied that in convincing Tau he had rescued the situation, and decided to take the rest of the day off.

At least he didn’t have to worry about where his next story was going to come from, he told himself.

Dirk had just gotten onto the M1 north at Jan Smuts on his way home when he spotted a poster tied to a lamppost. It was an advertisement for a rugby festival, and he remembered his promise to Robyn the previous evening.

Jason, Robyn’s brother, was seventeen and played rugby for the first team of a local private school. An annual rugby festival was being held at one of their rival schools, with the top teams from across the country.

He left the city and drove with speed north on the M1, joined the N1 going south and shot off the highway onto William Nicol. He parked on the stretch of rugby, hockey and cricket fields on the school grounds, amongst hundreds of cars, most of them sleek, recent models of luxury brands.

The school’s grounds covered an area large enough to qualify as a university. He mulched over the wet earth to the main stadium. There was a cold bite in the air on the open fields. Orange and red oak leaves were trampled into the muddy path. In the distance Dirk could see a large crowd, and he could feel the noise that they generated, but for the moment he was alone, walking under the trees.
There was a corporeal mood among the crowd. Mother’s stood next to the field with concerned looks on their faces. But the sensation Dirk felt was of a group witnessing an opportunity for violence, the thrill of the anticipation of it, and with every tackle, the possibility, and pleasure, of pain.

“Boerewors rolls, samoosas, hamburgers!” a vendor shouted next to Dirk.

On a stomach that still tried to remind him of the whiskey from the previous evening, the smell of fried grease was too much to resist. He walked over and took out his wallet.

“Who’s winning?” Dirk asked, hooking a thumb across his shoulder towards the field.

“The team from Pretoria,” the man said. He was a Coloured and spoke with the warm tone that was familiar yet out of place in this city. With a spatula thick with onions and oil he motioned towards the scoreboard. “It’s been one way traffic.”

Dirk turned around and saw that he was late. Jason’s team was the one playing, and the game was already well into the second half. They were down by twelve points, with only ten minutes left.

Dirk took a boerewors roll from the man and handed him money.

“How’s the flyhalf playing?” he asked, enquiring about Jason’s position.

“The Bourchier boy? Not too bad today, but you know,” he held his hand palm-down and rocked it from side to side like a stricken boat, indicating that he wasn’t the greatest player.

“You here often?” Dirk asked, ratcheting his grip on the roll and taking a bite. He felt sauce on his chin and dabbed a serviette across it.

“Every game for five years,” but before Dirk could ask more details another customer grabbed the man’s attention. Dirk moved closer to the touchline.

A warm hub of chatter emitted from the spectators standing next to the field. Behind them waves of vocals suddenly rolled over everything as hundreds
of boys in knitted scarves and boatmen hats started singing and clapping school songs in perfect unison. At the end of each song the silence was confronted by their echo as it bounced off the dining hall on the other side of the field. This echo was somehow more intimidating than the songs, it confirmed how loud they were, how committed their calls.

On the pitch the referee blew his whistle. The thudding feet petered out to silence as the players assembled for a scrum. A moment’s anticipating was broken by the loud thud of shoulders hitting shoulders and a collective ffsssh, like a tyre deflating, as their breath was expunged by the impact. The ball was swung wide to the center and he was tackled, hard, on the advantage line. The rising footfalls reached a pointed crescendo where the ruck formed, like a herd of wildebeest descending on a riverbank.

Jason’s school was private and close to Sandton, and one year’s tuition for a twelve-year old was equivalent to Dirk’s entire four-year university fees. They were up against an Afrikaans government school from Pretoria. Despite the hometown support, the Pretoria school’s ascendency on the field was evident.

Jason, a lanky flyhalf fond of kicking, received the ball from a scrum. By evidence of the previous three times Dirk had seen him receive the ball, he was being bossed around by the opposing openside flanker who attacked his channel and was on him before he could pass or kick. But this time he came from greater depth, feinted a pass to the inside center, and the flanker was foxed. Jason broke through an outstretched forearm and suddenly was through the gap and in open space.

The crowd started shouting in encouragement and the singing boys abandoned their rehearsed song and broke into spontaneous higher pitched support. If they could score a converted try, the difference would be four points with enough time remaining for another score.

Jason managed to fend off the right wing that had sprinted across to stop him. In front of him remained the fullback, already crouched to brace the impact of the tackle. Beyond the fullback was nothing but twenty meters of open turf and the white try line.

The volume increased dramatically. Next to Jason his inside center ran a calculated line, perfectly positioned to receive a pass to score. Jason appeared to
spot him, and motioned to pass, but then dummied again. Instead of taking the dummy, the fullback lowered his shoulder and in a sickening collision tackled Jason chest high with enough force to whip Jason’s feet forward towards his goal, but leaving the rest of his body in midair.

The ball spat out of his hands and dribbled forward. The crowd groaned collectively, and then grew silent to comment on the failed opportunity, when the opposing left wing swept around from the back, collected the ball and ignoring the protestations from the spectators, ran eighty meters through the space left by absent defenders and dotted down the ball underneath the uprights.

Dirk looked around at the disappointed expressions. He felt unexpected glee. The game ended and the victors from Pretoria gathered in a circle to give their thanks in prayer for the win.

Dirk’s phone rang. It was Robyn.

“Hey,” she said. In the background he heard loud commotion, the hooting of cars and many people talking loudly close to Robyn.

“Where are you? Not at the funeral I’m guessing?” He wondered what the sounds at his end – the boys on the stands singing the school anthem, the chatter of families on holiday, the Amen! of the team from Pretoria as they released each other from their huddle – indicated.

“The funeral is done. We’re just buying some supplies. I’m at a Boxer’s supermarket in the middle of Mthatha. It’s a Friday so it is busy.”

He had been in the same supermarket once on a trip through the Transkei. That time it had been packed with huge, blanketed Pondo women buying truckloads of flower and maize wholesale.

“By the sounds of it you made it to Jason’s match?”

“I’m not sure. As far as I can tell I’m at a rich kids convention. There are lectures on how to park your Range Rover and dealing with Alps-or-Rockies indecision stress. And apparently they apply a law of economics here that makes boerewors rolls twice as expensive.”

She said his name, with a hint of frustration. She was always ready to pull him back into line.

“Yeah, I’m here. They lost, but he played fine,” he lied.
“That’s good to hear. Thanks for making the effort. I appreciate it. Are my parents there?”

“Nowhere that I can see, but perhaps. It’s fairly crowded here.” Not having run into them was the best part of his day thus far. “How was the funeral?”

“It’s going OK. We’re not getting a lot of support, but what else is new. I’ll tell you more later if you want to hear.”

“Sure.”

“OK.” Her voice drifted away and she sounded distracted.

Dirk spotted a group of girls walking past, wearing a short skirts despite the cold. One of them broke away when they walked past the defeated rugby team, and embraced the eighth man. They had a brief kiss and he patted her on the bum before turning back to his teammates.

Dirk decided to engineer time together in Robyn’s apartment.

“Oh, listen, I have an idea. I was thinking that I could pick you up at the airport. I can take you straight home and that way we can have dinner and afterwards that party of yours. So you don’t have to do the whole carpool routine.” Dirk expected her to sound unsure but she was enthusiastic.

“Great idea, thanks, that would be really helpful.”

“All right. You’re landing at five?”

“Yep.”

“OK, I’ll see you later.”

He hung up and at that moment Jason spotted him from within a group of teammates.

As a family living in the northern suburbs, the Bourchiers were as good as indigenous. Their home, family traditions, vocations and personalities were grafted squarely to the surrounding environment.

Bob Bourchier, Robyn’s father, was an engineer with an MBA from Europe and a director at a large mining company. He’d worked there for thirty years and through salary, stocks and savings could afford to pay for the lifestyle – private schools, exclusive golf club memberships, a secure home, new cars, a beach house in the Eastern Cape – that was demanded of him to provide.
Robyn’s mother was a housewife, and as far as Dirk could understand it, her principle activity seemed to be moving in black-clothed and bejeweled cavalcades from coffee shops to book club with similar women.

Jason walked over. At seventeen he had the breezy confidence of the privileged young that have been told that they deserved their lifestyle. Being born in the 1990s he did not even feel guilty about it. The English schooling system had taught him politeness if not humility, and he Sir’d anyone in authority and was the first to take off his cap at the hint of meal. He was expected to attend college in the USA and become a business leader somewhere in the English-speaking world. He was due a BMW for his final term of high school.

Dirk did not envy him, although he might have when he was seventeen.

“Dirk,” Jason said accompanied by an overly firm handshake.

“Good game.”

“Too bad we lost.”

“You win some. You know.” This was how they talked, Dirk thought. In platitudes that must be painful even to a seventeen year old.

“They start going to gym when they are twelve.” He pointed to player in the team from Pretoria, who were noticeably larger than Jason’s team.

“That’s probably a bad idea.”

“That’s how it is though.” Dirk’s journalist mind clicked through the story angles: High School Steroids, or, Rugby: The dark side.

“I just spoke to your sis.” Dirk said, and Jason perked up at this, a familiar route they knew through an awkward path.

“She’s in East London today, right?” Jason asked.

“Well, Mtatha. Close enough.”

The two teams for the next match had run onto the field and were doing stretches.

“You’re still living there in Killarney, right?” Jason said, and unsure of why he would bring this fact up, Dirk tried to detect a sense of superiority in his tone. But Jason seemed to be asking a genuine question. A few weeks prior, Robyn had dropped something off at his apartment and Jason was in the car, so he knew the building.
“Yebo,” Dirk said, scanning the crowd for any other approaching Bourchiers that he would rather avoid.

“Next time I’m around in that area we should go for a beer.”

It’s not Lagos, that you’re being there would be unlikely enough to warrant a beer, Dirk felt like saying, but bit his tongue. Instead he grimaced involuntarily, which Jason noticed and remarked: “What, are you a hung over?”

“I was at this party last night.” Dirk waved his hand dismissively. “For some Jamaican rapper or something,” Dirk said, hoping this would diffuse Jason’s interest, but his eyes widened.

“You mean the party for Sup-Star? I heard it was amazing. Wow. How was it?”

What grapevine is everyone connected to that excludes me, Dirk wondered.

“It was drunk,” Dirk said, and then wondered if that was an appropriate response to your girlfriend’s underage brother.

Behind Jason the coach yelled his name from inside the huddle and he looked back.

“I’ve got to go.”

They shook hands again. Dirk looked in Jason’s eyes for information about himself, but there was nothing but an urgency to return to his team.

It was now three in the afternoon, and he needed to get to the airport.

There was something degrading about the trip to the airport from the city being longer than a flight from the coast, but that was the reality.

The N3 was packed with bumper-to-bumper Friday afternoon traffic. He got stuck just beyond Buccleu, and pondered the concrete beyond the steering wheel.

The section between Marlboro and Linksfield was a ruse to make you believe you were out of the city, a segue between the northern suburbs to the industrial southeast. On the right a concrete wall lined the highway, hiding Alexandra township from view. The only clue to its location was floodlights twice as tall as standard lamp posts, communal light to stave off the dangerous dark. To the left another concrete wall hid a large landfill.
Ninety minutes after leaving the rugby, and cursing the road works, he arrived at O.R. Tambo airport.

He rushed to the arrivals area, but the board listed the flight delayed by twenty-five minutes. He noted the new arrival time. Traffic on the way had made him anxious, and he felt ready to savour the unexpectedly gifted minutes to compose himself.

At a restaurant he ordered a coffee at the counter and sat down. He took two sips and then noticed a familiar presence next to him. It took him ten seconds of staring to convince himself that the coincidence was real.

It was Valerie, sitting a few tables away from his own. Her brunette hair was brought together in a ponytail, and instead of the knee-length dress she had worn the previous evening, she wore brown corduroy pants and a green turtleneck.

Dirk took a moment to replay the events from their brief interactions the previous evening. It took some concentration to penetrate the haze of the memory, but he concluded that he had not done or said anything untoward. And that, if Sup-Star had not taken her arm and led her away, she would have said more than just that she recognized him.

"Val?" he asked, leaning towards her.

She looked over at him.

It had been four years since he’d last seen her before the previous evening. Their time together had not been long but not insignificant. Three months of synergy in which each of their pods of friends circled around each other. Like two whirlpools briefly combined in a stream. Until they were spun apart again, and their time together ended ineluctably and quietly as it does on campus, carried with the current of being young. And when the sense of timelessness evaporated near graduation the experience and memories of their acquaintance was deposited somewhere else.

"My god," she said, and smiled. "Dirk Vermeer. Twice in two days."

"Well, technically twice in one day," he said, and it sounded trite so he asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Meeting models from an agency in Cape Town. Our driver is sick." She made a face.
“So you went into advertising then?”

“Well, sort of. It’s difficult to explain.”

“Like why you were in the inner circle of Grammy winners last night?”

She smiled. “Yes, exactly.”

“Ok,” he conceded. “But picking up models on a Friday evening?”

She grimaced. “We’re filming a television advert tomorrow. The set is on Nelson Mandela Bridge, so we needed it empty. Like, really empty. Saturday morning, sunrise empty.”

“That sounds very glamorous.”

“You still abhor sarcasm I see.”

“I read in a women’s magazine you shouldn’t change your best quality.”

She laughed dryly as held his hands up in mock defense. There was a pause at her mention of the past. She said:

“Speaking of which, I’ve seen your writing in the newspaper. Where did that come from?”

“It’s an accident that keeps happening.”

“Isn’t that the male response to being caught having an affair?”

“Well, as a career it also involves hotel rooms and questioning your motives.”

“So is this it? Is this your career?” To Dirk it sounded like an accusation. That he had fallen short of his promise.

“And for you? Advertising? A cog in the great inadequacy machine?”

She laughed, easily deflecting his jab.

“Don’t get defensive,” she said. “As for me, it’s not like that.”

Dirk was still leaning sideways in his chair, and they were speaking across an open table. He wasn’t sure whether to move over, or whether that would be a gesture that implied too much familiarity. At the same time, he felt a very real desire to continue talking. Within the first few sentences she spoke he felt drawn in.

Her phone rang, and on the other end he heard two young voices shouting “We’re here!” followed by sustained giggling. She raised her eyebrows to say ‘What-can-I-do?’ She hung up the phone and they looked at each other.

“Maybe I’ll run into you again somewhere?” he said.
“I’d like that,” she said, and with a farewell wave she was gone towards arrivals.

He watched her walking away for a long time, and then turned to his coffee, but he no longer wanted it.

He waited for five minutes after the flight board changed from ‘Delayed’ to ‘Landed’, and then walked back to arrivals.

Greetings at domestic arrivals does not hold the same atmosphere of anticipation as international. The late-afternoon flights were all bunched together, so it was a motley group who appeared through the automatic doors, representative of different departures: Bored-looking tourists with golf clubs; black pinstriped businessmen from a big city; government officials from the former homelands.

And then Robyn, looking slightly haggard after the journey, wedged between two surfboard-carrying boys, through which she weaved past. She rolled a small carry-on suitcase behind her. Dirk straightened to make himself taller, and moved his head to the side.

There was a moment’s confusion on her face as she searched the crowd for someone familiar. She walked slower until she was almost stationary, and then she saw him and broke into a self-conscious grin.

They embraced and he reached down to take the suitcase from her.

“Dirk,” a deep voice said. Dirk had been bending down to reach the handle set for Robyn’s height, and he had to straighten to meet the source of the voice.

A tall broad-chested black man with confident features smiled at him, hand extended. This, he realised, was Robyn’s imaginary lover. The man’s presence was even more muscular than Dirk had feared, and his smile was charming.

‘Tebalo,’ Dirk replied.

Dirk fumbled awkwardly to switch hands on the suitcase before extending his right hand. The grip was firm, Tebalo’s hand larger than his own and slightly damp.

Then from behind them moved a small woman, and Tebalo’s expression changed from politeness to vulnerable joy. The woman was beautiful, with smooth chocolate skin and a stylish but revealing outfit.
Dirk was introduced to Nomvulo, and she gave him a brief but warm smile, before laying four long fingernails on Tebalos chest. They were clearly infatuated with each other, and Dirk felt a strong sense of shame and juvenility that he had spent so much time going over a fantasy of Robyn and Tebalos as lovers.

They were in the car going home. Robyn had loosened her hair, which made her look more alluring.

“Did you do anything last night after I left?” Robyn asked.

“No,” he said, and then hesitated. There was no reason to lie. No reason at all. “No, I just went to sleep.”

“Nothing at all?”

“Nope,” he shook his head, wishing he hadn’t lied, but knowing contradicting himself would be worse.

“Sorry I couldn’t stay later.”

“Oh, no, of course that was understandable. So, how was the funeral?”

Robyn frowned and bit down on her bottom lip.

“It didn’t really go as planned. Our contact person there, well, there seemed to have been some miscommunication. The family ended up objecting to the HIV-Positive t-shirts. So nobody wore them. And, actually, I couldn’t even go to the funeral.”

“What? I thought that was the whole point of the trip?”

“No, it was OK. We went to some clinics to observe the work they are doing, and we spoke to several nurses. One of them told us a crazy story. She says that quite often, women will come in to be tested for HIV, and when they test negative, they freak out, and start shouting ‘No! I must be positive. I am sleeping with my boyfriend, unprotected, and he is positive,’ and basically start assaulting the nurse.”

“What’s that all about?”

“There’s a government grant you get for when you are on anti-retroviral treatment. They want the money.”

“That’s nuts. You think they would be incentivised to remain negative.”
“Yeah. Well that would require being able to track the history of a patient’s testing, so you’ll need computers, uninterrupted electricity. You get the picture.”

Dirk shook his head. He was actually enjoying this insight into the problem. Enjoyment is not the right word, he thought. It felt empowering.

“What else? What else did they tell you?”

“Well, we found out that the practice of dry sex is still far more common than we thought. There’s still debate about whether it increases the risk of infection, but it seems logical.”

“Dry sex?”

“Like, no lubrication. Initial anyway. No foreplay. The women also rub specific herbs on,” she paused, “themselves, which supposedly heightens the pleasure for men.”

“Like rape?”

“No, it’s...” she searched for the word, “a cultural practice.”

“But the idea is to simulate the rape scenario?”

She looked exasperated. “No, it’s more complicated than that.”

Dirk gave up. “Sounds like a political correctness minefield just talking about it.”

Robyn nodded.

They drove on in silence for a while. In spite of the context, Dirk found himself aroused at the talk of sex. He wondered whether it would be impromptu to suggest a visit to the bed before dinner. Robyn was hard to read regarding these suggestions, sometimes she was open to them, and sometimes she wasn’t. Dirk realised that Robyn had started to speak again.

“Anyway, I said ‘we’ learned but obviously this was Tebalo talking to some of the men in the community. What we really need is for community leaders to take the lead role on this discussion. Until we have that all of what we nongovernmental and development agencies do is worthless. That’s what will stop the disease.”

Disease. Right. They were not talking about sex. Dirk repeated it in his head. Disease, not sex.

She shook her hair and smiled at him. She stretched out and patted his leg.
“But enough of that. It’s the weekend now. I was thinking that tomorrow we could stay in, do nothing.” Her hand stayed on his thigh.

He pulled a face at her and she froze.

“Oh no, what. Bad news?”

“I have to go to a story in the Free State tomorrow. It’s this like, thing where people pay to live on a farm for a month.”

She shook her head cartoonishly and opened her eyes wide.

“What? You’re joking.”

“I wish I was, but I’m not. It’s ridiculous,” He told her more about the group’s background.

“Oh, no, I get it, you love it. You love this stuff. You love going out there to meet these whack-jobs. The weirder the better.” She was putting on a good performance of appearing to be joking, but there was truth in what she said, and they both knew it.

“No, no I don’t. It’s just a job.”

“Please tell me your taking Tau as your photographer.”

Dirk said nothing but smiled. Robyn burst out laughing.

“I’ll be back on Sunday.”

“Wait, you’re staying over?” she checked her laugh.

“Sure. Either I’ll find a hotel or I’ll stay with them.”

“OK, I suppose that makes sense.”

“It’s a bloody long drive anyway.”

“Well, OK. We’ll have to try living in the same city next week then.” Her tone was suggestive.

“Well there’s still tonight?” he offered.

“That there is.”

He dropped her off at her apartment in Morningside, set behind an up-market Szechuan restaurant and a Mediterranean delicatessen. He drove home, changed into a collared shirt and then drove back and picked her up again. It was twenty minutes past seven. He parked in a visitor’s bay and when he was at her door she opened it and motioned him to retreat.
“I’ve already called the taxi and I think it’s here,” she said, and they found it parked outside, idling with its lights on, ready to spirit them away.

Robyn picked a Japanese restaurant close to Catherine Drive. The waiters were mostly black or South-East Asian, but the one who served them was white, and they ordered warm sake and miso soup.

They made a striking couple, because, Dirk saw anew, Robyn was arrestingly beautiful. She was wearing delicate and expensive clothes, but the colours were muted. And while she wore make-up, it was only a little, and compared to the piled-on plasticity of the women and girls around them, her beauty was nearly completely natural.

“Do you think they’re going to serve us?” she asked sarcastically, after five minutes of being seated without attention. Dirk had been mid-sentence, but he demurred any sense of being interrupted, and held up a hand. A waiter acknowledged it from across the room.

The waiter, the lone white one, came across the table to them. He was young, around twenty, with highlighted blonde hair and slim arms, which he folded behind his back when he reached the table.

“Good evening. What can I help you with?” he asked. Dirk was surprised to discover he had a thick Afrikaans accent. It was rare to hear Afrikaans in the area, and even rarer to find one working as a waiter at an expensive restaurant.

“Thanks for deciding to drop by,” Robyn said. Her tone either did not register with him, or he ignored it remarkably well. His expression remained unchanged: raised eyebrows, half a smile, head titled to the side, awaiting instructions. She gave up on receiving contrition and placed her order.

When the plate was placed in front of Robyn she poked it with a chopstick.

“Are these glass noodles?”

“Yes?” he asked while placing Dirk’s plate in front of him.

“I ordered Chinese wheat noodles. I specifically said so.”

The waiter swept away her plate and after apologizing, retreated towards the kitchen.

“Dutchmen,” Robyn muttered under her breath.

“He’s just useless,” she said, dismissing his question by picking up her chopsticks.

After dinner Dirk excused himself to go to the bathroom. He had to walk past the bar to get there, and he found the waiter placing an order with a tall African with equatorial features.

His eyes met the waiter’s and he smiled.

“I’m sorry, she’s being a bit of a bitch,” Dirk said. Then he paused at the word, feeling some pleasure.

The waiter looked at him confused.

“She’s fine,” he said, in a reassuring tone. “I messed up.”

“What do you do when you’re not waitering?” Dirk asked to move the conversation along, but realised it was a strange thing to ask. He wanted to ask the waiter where he was from, due to his strong accent, but in doing so he would be acknowledging it.

But the waiter looked pleased.

“I study at a drama school during the day. This is just for rent.”

“Are you from out of town?”

“I’m from Welkom,” the waiter said, sheepishly.

“I’m also from the Free State,” Dirk responded enthusiastically. “What are you doing up here?” Dirk heard himself repeating the same line of questioning. The waiter ignored his question.

“I’m sorry about the screw up. It’s been a long day.” Then he paused, seemingly considering whether to say more. “We’re rehearsing for a play at school.” And then, seeing that Dirk wasn’t going anywhere. “I hope to get a role on television, you know? On one of the Afrikaans shows first, and then, who knows?”

Back at the table Dirk watched Robyn slide her chopsticks onto her plate and place her palms on the tablecloth.

The pitch of the volume in the restaurant had increased. Empty bottles of wine were replaced by full ones, and around them diners leant forward closer both in inebriated intimacy and just to hear what the other person was saying. It was Friday evening, the people of the city were slowly pushing themselves out of
their role of temperance and stability towards something else, freer and less predictable.

Dirk felt momentarily frightened by the change in character. The waves were lapping again on the lakeshore. Something within him had shifted between getting up to go to the bathroom and returning, quite likely simply the reorientation of his blood flow was the cause, but it was there nonetheless.

“So, shall we go to the party?” Robyn said, putting a scrunched up serviette on the table and leant back, out of earshot.
As they walked up the stairs to the top floor of the apartment in Parktown North, Dirk looked at the shoes of a girl walking in front of them. They were high top cloth sneakers, and emblazoned across them in black Helvetica were the words: This is not a shoe.

He looked at Robyn and rolled his eyes but she only gave him a confused look, and then they were through the door.

Tebalo’s apartment was renovated, lifted from its 1950s design past the millennium. When they arrived there were at least sixty people inside. The apartment took up the entire floor, and the crowd was split between two levels. Some were on the entrance level spilling out from the lounge onto a patio, while others were on the mezzanine level with its own balcony facing the opposite direction.

It was large and crowded enough to lose sight of someone, which he soon happened with Robyn.

In the kitchen he met Mike, leaning against the island staring at the oven. Dirk went over to a large steel tub filled with ice water propped against he kitchen island, and when he stood up with a cold hand and a fresh beer Mike was still staring at the oven.

“You alright?” Mike looked at him. “You look really tired.” Mike blinked a few times but did not respond, so Dirk went on, “I mean that in a positive, non-insulting manner. Nothing to do with your regular appearance.”

“Jetlag,” he said, and gave a small smile.

“Oh yeah? From where?”

Mike paused and seemed to be making a decision about Dirk. Dirk took a large sip of his beer and scratched the emerging stubble on his jaw.

“Shanghai. Been over there teaching English for a while. Got back this morning.”
Dirk could sense his reticence and considered a polite retreat, but the thought of returning to the unknown groups of people in the lounge made him press on.

"Wow, interesting. How is it there? Isn’t it weird, you know,” he said and realised uncomfortably that he was overstepping some invisible boundary again, as Mike looked at him expectantly, and since there was no turning back continued, “for a black guy. In China.”

Dirk wiggled his toes in his shoes. How was it, he asked himself, that he could go weeks with perfect tone and context in all his communication, and in one day make two blunders?

But Mike was not perturbed at all.

“It’s fine actually. It’s a big international city now. There are lots of black people from all over. In the beginning the children in my class were nervous, but once I realised they expected me to be American, I pretended to be from California and they were more at ease.”

“That’s bizarre,” Dirk said.

“Not really. They watch a lot of movies. It makes more sense for me to be from California than from Africa.”

“Can I ask you something? Why did you hesitate before telling me where you had flown in from?”

Mike nodded his head towards the lounge.

“Not all the people outside have a neutral opinion of China. I’m too tired to talk about Tibet or Zambian copper mines being privatized. Which is what everyone out there eventually insists on discussing.”

“I can imagine that.” There was a pause. Dirk had an urge. “Say, can you do me a favour?” He hesitated. “Can you tell me one funny story?” Mike looked at him tiredly. “Just one.”

“All right. I don’t know if this is funny or not.” Mike screwed his eyes to the left to gather the thread of the story and then continues speaking. “I was at a party once, invited by some of the guys I studied with at the university.”

“You studied there at university?”

“Yeah, yeah, Chinese. Anyway,” Mike waved a hand dismissively.

“You speak Chinese? Fluently?”
“Sure. Sure, but anyway,” he was still waving Dirk’s comments away, “I end up getting a bit hammered. There are some other South Africans at this party, so we’re all hanging out and automatically we revert back to the way of speaking back home, the slang back home, you know. So we’re telling each other stories, and we keep saying, you know, ‘my China’, at the end, meaning ‘my mate’, as we all do, right?

“So after a while we go back to the main party with all the Chinese and I forgot to revert back to normal English. I mean, not only with my American accent, I’m talking about slang. I forget the situation completely. So I’m talking to these guys and I keep saying things like ‘You know what I mean, my China?’

“So after about five minutes of this, one of them finally gets the courage to come up to me, to say something. He comes up to me like this, right,” Mike moves away from the sink and crouches down so he’s twenty centimeters shorter, and in a thick Chinese accent he scolds, “You racist American. We not all called ‘China’, and we not your China”

“So what happened then?”

“Well, I suddenly realised why no one had said anything for five minutes, and I called the other South Africans over and started explaining, but I don’t think they believed a word of it. They just thought I had drunk too much and let out my true racist nature.”

“That is hilarious.”

“Yeah, well, you throw me in China funny things are bound to happen. Apparently anyway…” his voice trailed off. Mike looked at his wristwatch.

They shook hands and exchanged names, and then Mike excused himself to look for his sister in the lounge to go home.

Dirk looked into murky water in the iron tub and spotted a few more beers, so he opened it and leaned against the sink. When it was finished he took out another one and wandered back to the lounge.

Dirk saw Tebalo standing alone, away from the groups of conversation. He was older than the rest of the crowd. He wore an expensive suit, and was leaning against the wall.
Dirk walked in his vicinity and Tebalo spotted him, and called him over. They clinked their bottlenecks together and looked at the crowd.

“Are you enjoying the party?” he asked Dirk.

Dirk, his hand over the beer like a holster, drew the outline of the room with it in a lazy circle. “This is a really nice place you have.”

“Thank you.”

“It must be quite wild to be in the Transkei a few hours ago and to be standing here now.”

“You're correct,” Tebalo said, and took a sip of beer,” it’s hard to imagine it’s the same country.”

“Well,” someone changed the song, French electronica filled the room, and the volume was turned up so Dirk had to begin again, “well at least you are doing something about the inequality?” The same person turned down the music again, presumably.

“It’s a beginning,” Tebalo said modestly. “We do very little considering the scale. But, hopefully what we do will grow. And more people will do more.”

There was a pause, and then Tebalo spoke again.

“How about you?”

Dirk eyed him over the rim of the can.

“How do you mean?”

“What do you do for inequality?” Tebalo said, with a glint in his eye.

Dirk thought for a moment. “Nothing. I give to charity now and then. I volunteered at a reading group for young kids displaced by xenophobic violence. To integrate them. But really, nothing.”

Tebalo nodded.

“I fear that we in the city are drifting further and further apart from the rest of the country. Or rather, the privileged are leaving the poor behind.”

“It’s true.”

“All of us here, you, me” he pointed to Dirk’s chest then his own, “all the people here. We need to do more. We’re more the same than we think.”

“You know, you’re right,” Dirk said, with a sudden swell of emotion. He recognized that it was the alcohol beginning to talk, but Tebalo’s deep voice and
empathetic expression made him push the realization aside. He felt the need to confess.

“But it’s difficult. I have this guy I work with, Tau.” Dirk floundered for a second, unsure of why he had opened this new channel. “A Sotho guy. I feel like we’re occupying two lighthouses, and we can signal to each other, but that’s about it. We can’t communicate, not really. We can see each other, we can work together, but we’re isolated.”

Tebalo laughed. He had moved with Dirk’s sudden change in meaning with ease. “You’re a sentimentalist. Why don’t you do something, reach out.”

“I know. It’s ridiculous. I know nothing about his culture. Nothing really. The only black people I really connect with are just like me. Same accent, same clothes, same background. The rest, only through alcohol, and that’s like being a scuba diver and thinking you understand how a fish feels.”

“Interesting,” Tebalo said, still wearing a smile, but weary now. Dirk, not noticing, warmed to the subject. Eager to have someone listen.

“I feel like it’s too late to learn. To connect. I’ve lost my chance. I’m like one of those dyslexics who will do anything they can to pretend to be able to read. Who would rather leave school, isolate themselves from society, than admit their deficiency.”

There was silence from Tebalo, but it was not judgmental. Dirk noticed he seemed slightly taken aback by his admission, but not unpleasantly so. In the silence, Dirk spoke again, hoping to clear the air.

“How do you know all these people,” he said, hooking a thumb over his shoulder.

Tebalo smiled. “Some I know, many I know through Nomvulo. Or rather, she knows.

“It’s quite a mix,” Dirk said, in what he hoped was appreciation. Because it was quite a mix. Dirk couldn’t place all the different styles, races and personalities, but by all accounts it cut through a generous swath of Johannesburg society.

“Let me give you a piece of advice,” Tebalo said, and though normally the choice of words, the paternal and authoritative phrasing would have made Dirk suspicious, in this instance he felt receptive. “What people do, how they choose
to spend their time, is not as important as you may think. When you are young, you think each decision seems paramount and concrete. Well, maybe not your generation."

"How old are you?" Dirk ventured to ask.

"Thirty eight," Tebalo said, and looked him in the eye. It carried the meaning that Tebalo had implied it should, because Dirk counted down the years, he made the connection between Tebalo's age at various points of his life and the political situation at that juncture. It was intended to cause reassessment, and the comment reached its target.

Dirk, unsure of what to say next, said what was on his mind. "I hate the phrase the new...you know, the new country, because it implies an improvement." He realised how this could be interpreted and backpedalled immediately. "I mean, it is an improvement. But new doesn't quite define what the newness is. I guess what I'm saying, or what I'm asking, is whether this is what you had envisioned things would look like. Back in the day."

Tebalo regarded him for a moment, seemed to broaden his chest even more, and then spoke. "Look at this party," he gestured around the room. "One third involved in the finance of global corporations, one third in advertising and marketing, and one third working for development agencies. Can you tell the difference between them?"

Dirk shook his head.

"Exactly. You think this is what we had in mind in the struggle? Do you think this is what anyone predicted in the dark days of the eighties?"

"Probably not," Dirk smiled.

"Damn right this wasn't it." Tebalo rubbed his forehead. "It's baffling really."

"Were you a socialist then?" Dirk asked. Tebalo pulled a face.

"Of course. But, it turned out, we had the wrong model. For revolution, I mean. The only models we thought of were the Russian revolution, the Paris Commune, maybe the French revolution. Some crazy cats even punted the Chinese Revolution. Turns out, the American Revolution and the subsequent American Civil War was the model we should have been looking at."

"Why's that?"
“That was a revolution fought over the wording of a constitution. There was no revolution here. We wrote a new constitution and that was that. The Marxist-Leninists and Trotskyites packed it in.”

Dirk looked into his beer. “So, do you think we’ll still have our civil war?”

“In America, they fought over the inequality of slavery. Over the freedom of slaves. The Union fought against the Confederates’ refusal to gravitate towards the Union’s perception of the Missouri Compromise.

“Our inequality is information. Our inequality is education. Our inequality is poverty. The compromise was CODESA. I don’t think we’ll have our civil war, because I believe our leaders will learn from history. But I do believe that we’re in the learning process, and it’s going to be ugly.”

Tebalo had moved on from the conversation and Dirk was staring at an abstract painting against a wall covered in opaline glass, when Robyn came up behind him and grabbed his elbow. She had a broad smile and pulled him back a few steps away.

“I’ve got a surprise for you,” she whispered into his ear.

“Oh yeah?”

“What’s that band you like so much? The electronic group.”

“The Abbey Cats?”

“Right. So they’re playing a secret show tonight. On the top floor of the Carlton Centre.”

“No way.”

“Yes. And I can get us in.” She smiled at his smile. “With those guys over there.” She jerked her head backwards and Dirk looked behind her at a group of three blonde men in impeccable dress. “They’re Swedes. They know the organizer or something.”

“That’s awesome. But we just got here?” Dirk wondered why he was raising the idea of staying here.

“We’ve been here long enough. Come on, I thought you’d be all over this? They’ve got a car and they’re leaving in five minutes.”

Dirk consented and they went over to the three men. Dirk guessed them all to be in their late twenties. On the way down the staircase to the apartment
building entrance he was introduced to all three and immediately forgot their names. They got into the car, a turbo-charged new BMW. Dirk and Robyn squeezed into the back with one other Swede.

On the raised highway after the Smit Street off ramp Dirk asked Robyn, “Who exactly are these guys?”

“I think one of them is the ambassador’s son. The other two work for telecoms or something.”

“Which one is the ambassador’s son? Driver Swede or Passenger Swede?”

“I think Driver Swede.” She smiled at his nomenclature.

“Hey, you guys want some pills?” Passenger Swede had turned around and proffered his palm.

“Uh, no, we’re fine,” Robyn said.

“Suit yourself man.” All three Swedes put cupped hands to their mouths and drew their heads back.

Heading over the elevated highway with the city laid out to their left, Driver Swede lowered his window, pointed to the lit up CBD and let out a yelp. Cold Highveld air filled the car. It smelled of frosted savannah grass, coal-smoke and dust.

They took the Mooi Road off ramp, and then turned up Commissioner Street. The city, a mini Manhattan but devoid of any neon, or nocturnal enterprise or, for that matter, any people, was eerily silent. Ahead the Carlton Center loomed above everything.

The city seemed lonely. It itself had committed no crime, but had been abandoned, rebuked. Like a depressed person, Dirk felt, it allowed you to love it briefly but then lashed out as soon as you convinced yourself that the love was real. It acted as if it needed nothing from its people, that it would continue on alone, a brave figure against the Highveld elements.

If you are a city person, then no matter what you believe, it is the city nourishes you. If you leave it and return, it fills you up with energy. It replenishes you. But Dirk no longer felt that Johannesburg did that. It took from him. It was like a child, ripping out tufts of his hair.

They parked in the cavernous underground parking lot of what was the tallest building in the Southern Hemisphere for a decade, and was still the tallest
in Africa after nearly forty years. In the foyer, the lift for the observation deck was decorated with a glittered frame, a red carpet and three Herculean bouncers.

Driver Swede tapped one of the bouncers on the shoulder. They bumped chests and the bouncer said, “Anders, good to see you again. All of these with you?” Driver Swede, or Anders, nodded, and they piled into the lift.

The doors opened on the fiftieth floor onto a wall of sound and colourful lights. The moment they stepped outside Anders moved immediately towards a group of tall women, Passenger Swede went to the bar and Backseat Swede to the dance floor.

“I need to go to the bathroom first,” Robyn said, touching his arm. “I’ll meet you at the bar over there.” She pointed at a doorway leading to another part of the venue, and he nodded.

He moved through the back of the dance floor, and looked out over the dancing bodies to a phenomenal sight. The walls were glass, and at a height of fifty storeys, the city was spread out below in every direction. To the south he could see the flames of Vereeniging power plants and iron smelters. To the north the tops of the Sandton high-rises looked like crayons.

The girl was leaning towards Dirk with her shoulder nearly touching his chest. They were at the bar, around the corner of the stage, and while the music was ear splittingly loud at the front, here it was only deafening. And through this he could hear her yelling into a pink cell phone.

“I’m at the Carlton Centre.” The listener was clearly disbelieving as the girl started shaking her head vigorously in self-defense. “No, I’m serious.” She pantomimed faux shock by dolling her head, mimicking the surprised tone of the listener. “These guys called The Alley Cats. They’re awesome.” In a surprisingly graceful gesture she raised her arm, slid her handbag from her wrist up to her shoulder and clutched it there. With the freed hand she motioned to the bartender for service.

“What? It’s loud here, I can’t hear you.” She squinted her eyes for a few seconds in concentration, and then satisfied with having persisted, said, “Listen, I can’t hear you. I’ll call you tomorrow.”
Dirk’s drink arrived and he slid a note across the bar and motioned for the bartender to keep the rest. The girl clicked shut her phone.

“It’s ‘The Abbey Cats’. Not ‘The Alley Cats’,” he said while she looked in the mirror behind the bar. She turned and looked at him.

“Who are you? The band-name police?"

Her voice should have been tetchy, but it wasn’t, and as far as Dirk could tell it had to be something with his demeanor. He felt sanguinely apathetic, and in his mind this imputed on himself a certain sexuality.

He tried to think of the next thing to say, but his mind was clouded. He couldn’t keep up the pretence. From the dance floor the Abbey Cats segued into another song. It had a familiar beat, one that was making a rotation on the radio. The girl’s expression changed into one of pleasant surprise, and giving Dirk a quick smile, she moved towards the source of it.

Dirk saw that his drink was finished, so he ordered another. He scanned the crowd coming into the room, waiting for Robyn, but she didn’t appear by the time he had finished his drink. He clattered the ice cubes in the glass and ordered another for the walk.

When he had it in hand, he moved through the throng of bodies, his feet slightly unsteady. It felt like walking on a trampoline. He scanned the room for Robyn or any other familiar face, including the Swedes.

He saw her on the dance floor. Her arms were folded across Anders’ shoulders, and they were moving their hips together to the beat. As he watched with concern, the scene evolved in slow motion. First Anders moved his head closer to Robyn’s, and whispered something in her ear. She immediately smiled, and then waved an index finger in front of his face in recrimination.

But he only laughed, and with persistence, leaned in once more and whispered again. It was longer this time, and from the side he could see her expression remain in a smiling pose as she listened.

Then the moment came. Anders moved his mouth from her ear to her mouth, and Robyn did not resist. They kissed playfully first, then for a few seconds he could see her open her mouth, and it lasted five seconds, then she pulled back and waved her finger at him again.

They moved towards the bar.
Dirk felt his stomach drop down. His legs, already week, felt suddenly removed of any blood or stability. Incongruously, he did not feel angry or upset, but shamed. His cheeks flushed and he blushed uncontrollably.

He strode back to the other bar, this time taking no care with the bodies in the way. He looked for the girl with the pink cell phone, but she was gone.

He moved back and walked through the crowd. He found Robyn exiting the bathroom and lightly grasped her wrist.

“Let’s go downstairs,” he said, and surprisingly she consented.

Once they were outside the revolving doors of the building he turned to her.

“I saw you kiss the Swede.”

He expected surprise but she showed none. Instead she moved closer and spoke into his face.

“Why didn’t you tell me you went to a party last night? Why did you lie about it?”

The banality of her accusation made him furious. He wondered how she knew he had been out, and then remembered that he had told Jason. But any number of her friends may have seen him there. He had been an idiot to lie, but he was already poured full of anger without any room for remorse.

“Why do I need to tell you if I go out with my friends?”

“You don’t have to tell me, but you don’t have to lie about it.”

Robyn was shouting now.

“How can you even consider criticizing me? You’re kissing Andres the Swede while I’m in the same venue? Do you even realise how traitorous that is?”

She folded her arms.

“He kissed me. Where were you anyway?”

Dirk threw up his hands.

“What is your problem?” she demanded.

“Whatever. You and your holier-than-thou, condescending attitude. I’ve had enough.”

“What are you talking about?” She looked genuinely perplexed.

“There is right and wrong. And you were wrong.”
“You’re being a child Dirk. The world isn’t such a simple place.” She hugged herself and let out a sarcastic laugh to the side. “I don’t need this.”

Before he could say anything more she went back into the foyer through the rotating doors.

“Yeah. Go. Go away,” he said to the door.

Dirk had never been this part of downtown after dark. He looked at his phone: two in the morning. Not surprisingly there were no people around. In the distance he could see the brake lights of a car before it turned down a side street, but that was the only human activity around. He looked up to see if he could discern from street level at all that there was something happening on the top floor. After the twentieth floor, the building was as good as invisible. He leant further back and let his eyes adjust to the dark, and then nearly fell straight backwards.

He wanted to anywhere except back through the doors. On the other side of the street he saw a lit up Coca-Cola sign in a window. Perhaps an all-night café. He crossed the street and walked over to the sign. From the outside he could tell it was a café, with glass painted a plastic red and protected with chicken wire. He traced the glass a few steps down the pavement until he came to a security gate.

He pulled at the gate expecting it to be locked, but it gave way and he nearly tumbled backwards again. A hand-written sign next to the gate said: *Ishmail’s Café: Samoosas. Pap. Coke.*

He looked up and down the deserted street and then went inside.

He was in a dark, concrete corridor that smelled of damp. To the right he could tell that the entrance to the café was locked. He was simply standing in a covered alley, and was about to turn around when an open doorway further down the corridor caught his eye. He swiveled his head to observe from a better angle, and through a sliver of light he could see a bright zebra-skin spread over the far wall beyond the doorway.

He took a few cautious steps forward, until he was standing right in front of the door where he remained, uncertain. Inside was a tiny room, but what was more striking than its smallness was the decorations. It wasn’t just one animal skin: zebra skins lined two walls. What looked like an impala head was mounted on a wall. A leopard skin was on the floor.
“What you doing here white boy?” Dirk jumped into the air.

The voice was slow, deep and calm. It came from beyond the wall of the small room. Dirk recovered his composure and looked into the room. The far end was not a wall after all, but a thick curtain made of very dark fabric.

The voice contained irreproachable confidence. Dirk felt a small trickle of sweat slide down his temple.

“What?”

And then from behind a curtain appeared a bare-chested man. He walked to the doorway and Dirk stepped back two steps. The man crooked one arm outside and with a finger tapped on a sign that hung outside.

It read: *Traditional Healer. 24 Hours.*

“I was looking for the café.”

“That’s next door but it is closed. It happens, you’re not the first. Usually it’s a drunk good-for-nothing *tsotsi*, or taxi driver. Every now and then, it’s a beautiful girl, lost.” He paused, and licked his lips. “My friend once had the same telephone number as a Pick ‘n Pay customer service line except the last digit was a 6 and not a 9. He got about fifty phone calls a day screaming complaints at him.”

This, Dirk observed, was already one of the strangest conversation he had ever had.

“There’s nothing worse than an upset dyslexic.”

“Yebo.”

“You’re a witch doctor.”

“No, no. I don’t call myself that. I am a healer, and a teller of fortunes.”

Dirk was still drunk, still reckless.

“Does anyone ever ask you to put spells on soccer matches? You know, on the Chiefs-Pirates game, at the goal line.”

“Yes. By idiots.”

They were still standing in the doorway. The healer spoke.

“You are ignorant whitey, but that’s OK. I help you anyhow.”

“Help me? I don’t need help.”
“Sure. Sure. Come through here.” He moved back and held the curtain to the side and motioned with his other hand.

Not wanting to appear rude, Dirk bent down and disappeared into the darkness on the other side.

He sat on his bum with his knees crossed. In front of him the healer sat on his haunches, knees pointing at forty-five degree angles to the roof. He shook bones in a skin-covered cup like in a casino and tossed them on the floor in front of them. He pushed the bones with a finger, separating them apart. Then he grunted and looked up.

“You are not who you think you are,” he said.

“What does that mean?”

“You are lost. This is not a good place for you.”

“No kidding. I’m in downtown Jo’burg at three in the morning surrounded by dead animal skins.”

The healer shook his head.

“You must respect what I say. You must respect what I see.”

He looked back down at the bones and then picked one up, a smooth one that tapered to a point at one end, the size and shape of a bishop. He spoke again.

“It is because you are lost. That’s why you drift so. That’s why you are here tonight, walking around town at night when you shouldn’t.”

“Why do you say that?”

The man waved his hand in front of his face.

“It’s not important why.”

Dirk felt uneasy. It felt as if the cold water with his whiskey had somehow reformed as ice in his stomach. He shivered and realised he needed to leave. He started to stand up but the healer grabbed his wrist.

“Where are you going?” his voice rose. “You have not heard the future yet!” he was yelling now, his voice angry.

“I need to go. I need to go.”

“Well, fuck off then. But first you pay.” He still gripped the wrist tight and cupped his other hand in front of Dirk’s face.
Dirk dropped R100 onto the floor, and as the healer let him go he went through the front room and stumbled out of the gate. The clock on his phone read three o’clock, and outside the streets were deserted.

A metered taxi drove by, and he waved it down frantically. It stopped and he got into the back. The driver did not turn around or say anything, but immediately started driving.

“This is not a good place for you,” the driver said, in a heavy French accent. The repetition of the phrase made him pause. And then for a second Dirk thought he meant inside the taxi, but then realised he meant this part of the city.

“I know, trust me, it wasn’t part of the plan.”
“You go to Sandton, no? To the north.”
“Yes, please.” Dirk waited ten seconds then said, “can you turn on the meter? Please?”

The driver waved a hand dismissively.

“What are you going to do? Get out here? Don’t worry, good price.”

Dirk was on the verge of arguing out of principle, but decided he was fortunate enough to be off the streets. They drove west down a deserted Commissioner Street. Dirk waited for him to turn right to cross the bridge over the railway tracks, but they kept on going straight. One, two, three possible turns passed.

“Excuse me, can you take the Nelson Mandela Bridge? It’s faster. Well, actually it’s the only way.”

The driver did not say anything.

“Excuse me, sir?” Dirk tapped him on the shoulder.
“We make one stop. Quick stop.”
“What? No, we don’t make any stops. Not until you take me home.”
“One stop, close, just a little further.”
“Stop for what?”
“Stop for stopping. We stop, then we go.”

This is ridiculous, Dirk thought. His stomach started to turn cold.

“No, I don’t want to stop. I’ll pay you more if we don’t stop.”

The bare-chested healer still fresh in his mind, images of muti murders came to him. Chopped up bodies that turn up in swamps and hidden in the
newspaper: the heart used for this, the brain for that, the testicles for something else.

He opened the door, expecting the driver to slow down. The driver whipped his head back to check what was happening, and then started accelerating. The forward jerk of the car pulled the door shut and Dirk hit his forehead on the window.

“What are you doing? We stop, then you get out. We driving, you stay inside. We not stop here, we stop further.”

Dirk put a hand to his head, bright spots blinding his vision. He was scared now.

Suddenly a car pulled out of a side street right in front of them. The taxi driver swore and slammed on the brakes. Spotting his chance, Dirk shoved open the door and flung himself from the car and was running immediately.

He ran back to the last side street, and rounding the corner he could see the lit Mary Fitzgerald Square. He crossed the empty square, feeling safer in the light but terrified at who could be watching him, and re-entered the dark alleys, going in the direction of the bridge. Dark shapes moved in the night. There was a gunshot. He heard shouting behind him. Homeless figures rose beneath blankets as his footsteps passed.

The bridge. He just needed to get to the bridge. There it was light. And once over the bridge it was safer.

He tripped over a loose cobblestone and sprawled to the ground. Small pebbles cut into his hand. He got back up, rounded a corner and the bridge, mercifully, was in front of him.

He was halfway across the bridge when he saw something was wrong. He should be able to see the traffic lights at the end of the bridge, but they weren’t there. Something was blocking them.

He kept on running regardless.

As he got closer, he became more concerned. Shapes started to appear out of the darkness: blocking the exit were two minibus taxis parked across the width of the bridge. He stopped, scared. What was going on? A hijacking?
He looked back, and was shocked to see that the same had happened at the other end of the bridge. After he had crossed onto the bridge, two minibuses now blocked the route back.

Behind him, to where he was running, he heard a car start up. Two headlights approached him.

What now, he thought.

He looked over the edge of the bridge. A twenty-meter drop to the railway tracks below. That was no escape. He looked back and the minibus was close now, slowing down as it reached him.

A window opened. His heart raced, prepared for the worst. He drew his fingers to form a fist. Ready for anything.

An astonished voice came from inside.

“Dirk?” it said. “Is that you?”
Sitting in the passenger seat Dirk sipped a cup of instant chicken and noodle soup. The first rays from the sun rising over the city warmed his face.

Valerie walked over from where she had been talking to a group of gaffers.

"Right, two more minutes and I'll take you home. You OK?"

"Yeah, thanks."

The voice from the minibus had been hers. He had forgotten that she had mentioned filming a commercial on the bridge at sunrise. They were busy closing the bridge for traffic when he appeared. He sought out the bridge only because it was the most well lit place in downtown Johannesburg, it's towering white pillars a beacon of modernity and progress in the slum around it.

On the bridge were about forty people. He could not imagine it took so many people to film a scene shorter than thirty seconds. A series of stage lights were set up, cables were strewn everywhere. There were people for make-up, wardrobe, sound technicians, camera operators – but for most he could not assign a role.

After Dirk recovered from the surprise of hearing his name called in such an unlikely situation, he’d climbed inside the minibus through the sliding door and sat in the back. Valerie, as surprised as he was, told him they were busy setting up the lights when they saw him sprinting up the pedestrian section of the bridge as if being chased by the devil.

Dirk explained what had happened, although he slightly increased the possible menace of the situation: in his version the taxi driver definitely had malicious intent even though inwardly he wasn’t sure. He left out the part about leaving the Carlton Centre alone and his motivation, the part about seeing a traditional healer, and getting into the first car that stopped for him at three in the morning in downtown Johannesburg.
Altogether Dirk felt that he came through the story with his credibility intact, and neither Valerie nor her colleagues considered him overly reckless or crazy.

Back at the northern end of the bridge, Valerie arranged a seat for him in a camping chair, as even more of the film crew steadily arrived in car-pools. He tried three times to insist on phoning a taxi but Valerie refused, bringing him coffee and then noodles without fuss and every time telling him to shush about taxis and that she would take him in a minute. She needed a break, she said.

For all his concern over how he presented himself, Dirk realised that Valerie asked him surprisingly few questions, and seemed to take his re-reappearance in her life in stride. Particularly considering the place and time. The feeling of continuation he experienced at the airport the day before, where they had slipped into familiar conversation as if they’d been jawing away at weekend braais since graduation, continued.

“OK buster, let me take you home,” she jangled the keys and then silenced them with a karumph in her closed fist. Dirk stood up and tossed the dregs of the soup into a nearby dustbin and set the cup on a fold-up table the caterers had brought.

She hauled herself expertly into the minibus, while he dragged himself across the unusually high seat. By the time he was inside she had the clutch pressed in and was wiggling the long gear lever into neutral before finding reverse. The inside smelt of sweat and cracked faux-leather seats.

She turned the minibus around and they headed off back towards the suburbs, the sun now glinting off the tops of the buildings.

Dirk observed Valerie’s driving, which was natural and carefree yet skilled. He’d bet money that their family had a farm somewhere. He could imagine her sitting in her father’s lap as a seven year-old, steering an old bakkie over dirt roads while her father looked out for stray cattle while doing the clutch.

“I didn’t get a chance at the airport to tell you about the work that we do,” she said.

“I thought you were being reticent.” He’d nearly said evasive. “So lay it on me. Who’s the client? Maybe I can guess my way from there.” She gave him a look and he noticed the haughtiness in his tone.
“You presume too much, Dirk,” she said and stared straight at the road ahead. “Too much.”

It sounded like a rebuke, which made Dirk sorry that he’d said it. He calculated when he’d had his last drink. Around two. It seemed a very long time but he realised was only four hours. The house party in Rosebank, the China story in the kitchen, felt like events from a different week, and had not happened within the previous ten hours.

But she wasn’t annoyed, he saw in her expression, just amused. Perhaps no one questioned what she did so it was nice to meet someone who did. Which would be him. Maybe he should try being rude more often, he thought, and realised this would be what the drunk him would think.

She stayed silent with a retained smile as they passed the planetarium so he said, “OK, let’s try again. Who is the benefactor-slash-sponsor of the melee back there? Besides being a search and rescue part for myself.”

She flicked on an indicator and it clicked in the space between them.

“Actually we’re our own client. It’s complicated. It’s actually theoretically a non-profit. The purpose is to create social awareness of how profit-driven we are as a society. That the problems and challenges here won’t be solved through state or donor intervention but through creating a culture of giving back.”

“You know how you sound, right?”

Now she did look annoyed. He wasn’t supposed to spoil the pitch, he decided.

“No,” she said carefully, “like what?”

“Like an extremist.”

“That’s technically not a criticism.”

“No,” he said evenly, and then looked away through his passenger window, as they passed through an intersection driving too close, he thought, to a raggedy newspaper seller straddling the dotted line, “just an observation.”

“Basically, the point is, this situation, all of it, the state cannot fix it. Stop and think about it. Think about how extreme the disparity is, how much money it would take, how many honest politicians. Are you thinking about it?”

Dirk thought about it and then looked at her.
“I’m not saying you’re wrong. Not at all.” And he knew he wasn’t lying. But admitting the enormity of a problem did not immediately give your opinion greater value.

“So,” he went on when she didn’t respond, “what is the name of this non-profit?”

“It’s called ‘Galvinate’. But with the number eight at the end, not A-T-E.”

She drew an eight in the air with her hand.

Dirk clapped his hands together and laughed.

“Galvinise. Activate. OK, I get it. Sounds like they’re trying too hard,” he said cynically, ad laughed.

“So?” she asked, but was laughing too. “Look, there are these eight guys. Some South Africans. A couple of foreigners. They all met at business school, made a lot of money, and now they’re back with it. They’re all quite brilliant. I need to tell you more.”

“Please tell me one of them is called ‘Gavin’. Or ‘Calvin’.”

She stayed very silent in expectation of another outburst from him. He duly laughed.

“That’s just a coincidence,” she had to yell to be heard, but laughed with him.

“So what exactly does the organisation do?”

“It’s difficult to explain. We run social awareness campaigns, so in that way we’re kind of a public special interest group. We advocate better government, greater transparency. One of our aims is to democratise local government authorities so that the ruling party does not simply deploy loyalists. We do HIV prevention. We fund charities.”

“And in all this, what do you do exactly. For example, how was Thursday evening’s party with Sup-Star linked to this morning’s advertisement shoot?”

“Well, I do a lot of things. Creative director, producer, marketing strategist - different things every day. I was with Sup-Star because we contracted him along with government to do an HIV-testing campaign song, and to be the face of it. I was simply coordinating the song production, but he, sort of, took a liking to me.” She smiled self-consciously. “Today, I’m involved in other ways. The
advertisement we’re doing today will screen across the world, to market foreign investment and advocate the reduction of trade tariffs.”

Dirk stayed silent, slightly astonished. The woman next to him, flicking between gears on the Jan Smuts ascent to Rosebank and talking about free trade, was not the girl he remembered. She seemed to take his silence for doubt.

“Well, Mr. Judgemental, what makes your position so elevated that allows you to criticize mine? What makes your occupation so much better?”

“Well, I’ve got a new job lined up, actually,” he said, but realised it sounded timid and selfish and wished he hadn’t said anything.

“Oh yeah? What is it?”

“It’s not official or anything. It’s still in the works. It’s to be the international travel feature writer.”

“So, like, junkets in hotels. You fly off to exotic locations paid for by global corporations and report on it so that the rich upper-class South Africans know where to go?”

He had not framed it this way in his mind. Not remotely.

“No, it wouldn’t be like that. It would be more adventurous, more interesting.”

“I’ll believe that when I read it.”

“Well, it would.”

“OK, let’s say you do somehow get it your way. So what? It’s more interesting for you. You get to lead a more interesting life. Is that your prerogative? Is that how you should be making decisions about your life? About what you want?”

“Do you see anyone not doing that?”

“Yes. Not many. Especially in this city. But yes.”

Dirk rubbed his eyes.

“Let’s dial back the intensity of this conversation. This is all a little too much for six in the morning.”

Valerie shrugged and seemed to take it for the cop-out that Dirk had intended to hide. She turned sharply to the left to take a corner, and not being prepared for it, Dirk slid to the right and had to balance himself with a hand on
her shoulder. The car straightened and he moved back to his seat. She gave him an estimating look.

"Why don’t you come work for us? I still remember the ideas you had four years ago, even though you seem to have forgotten them. Back then you talked about taking civil action, of making a contribution. That emigrating was not an option, and that staying and just paying your taxes wasn’t enough. And I bet you have built up a network of contacts in the publishing industry."

Dirk looked skeptically at her.

“You could write, you could raise funds.”

“I don’t know Valerie. I’ve just signed this contract, and I’ve just gotten the hang of what I’m doing. I’m building a brand name. The next year or so could be crucial.”

They stopped at an intersection. A forlorn looking beggar in tattered clothes approached their car with a small cup. Dirk remembered how cold it was outside. From the side he saw her giving him an angling look.

“Think about it. Do you want to write more about the polo industry for another few years,” she raised her eyebrows questioningly, and he felt a mixture of pride and shame that she’d read the piece, “or do something about this?” She tapped on the window where the beggar stood next to her. The man looked at her hopefully as she tapped, and then disappointed when she morphed her hand into an apologetic wave. He turned around and shuffled back to the median.

To Dirk the high-mindedness and impracticality of her words were infuriating. It was also impossible to argue against. If someone presented you with a practical plan, with steps and actions laid out, it would be easy to shoot down one of the steps with cynicism. Listening to her words felt like reading some of the letters they got at the newspaper, that involved phrases such as ‘activating the nascent power of the middle-class’ to ‘facilitate poverty alleviation’ and so on. An ever-increasing stream of commentary on South African culture’s lack of giving back to the community. He did not disagree, but found it all too abstract and without practical ideas.

From the start of the trip he had been directing her towards Robyn’s apartment, since that was where his car was parked, without actually indicating that he did or did not live there.
They were on Robyn’s street now. His silence must have indicated to her that her words had reached him, because when she stopped she said: “Please, think about it. We could use you. That sounds wrong. You could contribute. Here’s my number,” she gave him a card. “Do you have one?” Her calmness was gone now. She was already thinking of being back on the bridge, working.

“Sure,” he took her card dumbly and gave her one of his own, and they exchanged waves as he walked along the garden path. She drove off and he waited by the gate, feeling conspicuous in the previous night’s clothes.

The security guard looking after the cars was sitting on his chair with his arms folded across his chest. Dirk thought him asleep but when he crunched a piece of gravel underfoot the man quickly raised his head to look at him, alert. The man knew his face and Dirk his, and at Dirk’s hand raise he gave a curt nod and clicked the gate open.

Dirk got his car and slipped out of the parking lot. The road was empty this early on a Saturday. He drove down Oxford Road in silence.

Reaching home he tumbled into bed, pulled the covers over him and set his alarm for two hours hence and was asleep within a minute.

Klerksdorp, 150kms southeast from the last dust blown mine dump outside Johannesburg, was not a meeting point Dirk would ever have envisioned arranging. But that was the day before, when he had also not thought of running over bridges in Johannesburg or visiting a farming community in the middle of nowhere.

As he drove towards Klerksdorp, the maize fields lay flat and marigold to the horizon. Here and there a grain silo dotted the landscape. He stopped at a picnic area next to road under a large bluegum, and the silence was complete and unnerving, the sky blue and dome-like. He sat on his bonnet taking in the scene, until a car approached, and when it finally swooshed by it took the moment with it.

At Klerksdorp Dirk pulled in to the arranged petrol station. He immediately saw Tau sitting in his black VW hatchback. Tau was slouched low in his seat, wore large reflective wraparound sunglasses while he idly ashed a cigarette out of the window.
“You,” Tau addressed Dirk as he approached the VW on foot, “look like shit.”

“Have you pissed off any Boers yet?” Dirk said by way of reply, waving his hand around to include the entire scene: car, occupant, posture and surroundings.

Tau grunted and flicked the cigarette and some ash drifted on Dirk’s shoe, so Dirk explained: “I was out until six. It was an eventful night.”

“So what? I was out until five, and look at me, fresh as daisies,” as he said this he pulled his sunglasses to rest on his nose to let Dirk see his eyes.

“Yeah, well, wait until you hit twenty-five.” Dirk snapped his fingers. “You go from being invincible to crippled after a few beers.”

“Well, the only thing that makes you look so bad is those dark blue rings under your eyes. Something tells me I don’t have to worry about that spoiling my morning face.”

Well, good morning to you too Tau, Dirk thought, annoyed. Tau reached down to the cup holder and held out a paper cup to Dirk.

“Here, I got you some coffee.”

They drove the rest of the way in convoy. Through Wolmaranstad, where they crossed the Mkwassie, a river named after natural spearmint. Before Bloemhof at the Sandveld Nature reserve they left the highway and carried on to Hoopstad. Dirk was reminded of an old joke: If you lie flat on the ground in the Free State, you can see fourteen days into the future.

Every so often Dirk checked his phone, even though it had not made a sound or vibrated and was set to do both, but there was nothing from Robyn.

Just before the R708 turn-off, where the N12 was still heading strong for Kimberley and the Northern Cape, they passed a donkey-cart with two men and colourful plastic buckets on the trailer filled with wild flowers. Dirk slowed and let Tau build up a lead so that he could observe the spectacle: an ironic yet legally required license plate slapped haphazardly onto the trailer; the donkey with its head down, straining against the harness; the two Coloured men, their skin worn but their manner youthful and jovial, chattering to each other, both wearing blue
overalls with leather hats with wide brims that gave them a frontiersman sagacity.

But the flowers were what struck Dirk. Orange River and chandelier lilies, and a few bright red ploegbrekers bopping in the back. He remembered an image he held of his future when he was younger. That he would resist the husband stereotype, that he would not be ordinary, he would buy his wife a bouquet of flowers whenever he felt like it, and if he wanted to evade it because it felt stale he would nonetheless ensure that he bought flowers once a month. And it wasn’t so much that this would be something that he forced on himself, no, it would be that he would find the kind of woman who brought this urge up from within himself. He wanted to feel strongly enough to do this. He wanted to bring gestures of, not his devotion, no, but gestures of recognition that what they had found in each other was extraordinary.

Dirk slowed the car and stared at the flowers and remembered this desire within himself and realised he had not thought about it in years. He shook his head at the naiveté of his past self, and swerved past the clicking donkey hooves.

He carried on and caught up with Tau. The directions he’d received instructed him to exit the N12 not far from where it barreled its way over the provincial border towards Kimberley. After twenty minutes he was meant to turn left onto a dirt road, and then the directions mentioned a wind pump, and he was to turn left and drive through a small valley to a farmhouse called Jagtersrus.

On the eastern horizon a dark cloud had formed, which has somehow gone unnoticed by him until he pointed the car north again. At first he assumed it was a thunderhead closing in from the north, but then remembered the time of year, when it hardly ever rained, and looking closer confirmed that it was a large dust-cloud. He stared out at the motionless grass around him, and tried to decide whether the scene was good augury for the day.

The gate was open, which Dirk registered was unusual these days for a farm. The haphazard dirt road became a smoother ride with the appearance of
man-lain gravel, and after a few more minutes he pulled in front of a battered-looking farmhouse.

There were only three cars already parked there, which he thought strange since he was expecting several people to be living on the farm. Dirk pulled his notebook from a pocket and jotted down the models and makes. There was a Peugeot hatchback with two missing hubcaps, a flat tire and streaks of orange rendering the white paint almost invisible. A Toyota bakkie from the early nineties covered in rust, but Dirk noted with a bit of pride that it would likely still go for many years. And a maroon, round-booted BMW 518 model from the early 1980s.

Tau pulled in next to him and they stood looking around unsure of what to do. The highway was a forgotten road here, after the series of dirt roads and winding turns it was left behind far enough to be silent. Silence, actually, was the dominant feature Dirk noted.

“Where the hell have you brought me?” Tau asked with a sigh. He fiddled with the shoulder strap of his camera equipment bag and then raised both arms as if in blessing and performed a dramatic three-sixty degree turn. The dirt squelched under his sneakers. “This looks like a great setting for a serial killer. Like, Capote-style, who were those guys again?”

Dirk was about to answer when from inside the house he heard a door being closed, and then the front door was opened.

“Oh, you've arrived,” the man in the doorway bellowed, and then marched over to where Dirk and Tau stood and shook their hands. “Pieter van der Bijl,” he said, and they introduced themselves in a daze.

To Dirk, Pieter looked almost exactly what he expected, bar one feature. For starters, he was large, with thick calves visible beneath his knee-length shorts, a tall frame that nonetheless seemed stocky from afar because of his bulk until he came close and then he was just big. Proof that his girth was not a lifestyle result, his hand was a bucket that enveloped Dirk’s but the pressure was restrained.

Besides the shorts he wore a two-tone khaki shirt, and a type of sleeveless hunting jacket with an array of pockets on the front. His socks were pulled up to his knees and he wore worn but still sturdy ankle-length hiking boots.
Distracting attention from this traditional attire was a black felt beret pulled over his head. It was made of fine material and seemed new.

“Tau,” he repeated the name after Tau let go of his camera’s strap and held out his hand, “isn’t that Sotho for lion?”

Tau nodded and then threw a look at Dirk that implied all whiteys were crazy and Dirk was part of the conspiracy.

“Koos told me that you would be visiting us today, but to be honest I was expecting a phone call first.”

“How do you know Koos?” Dirk asked.

“Friend of a friend. He heard of us somehow and I guess decided it would be interesting.” He paused, blinking at Dirk. “Come, come” he finally let out, “let’s go inside and I’ll tell you more.”

Dirk wanted to ask what ‘us’ was but refrained.

The lounge furniture was from the seventies, with wooden frames and padded pillows. They sat down and Pieter offered them uncut biltong, which they both accepted.

“How was the drive down?” Pieter asked. He was sitting on a double couch, and had set himself quite deep into it with his neck resting against the frame. The position made him appear relaxed, the owner, presiding over the room.

“Fine, fine,” Dirk said, yanking off a piece of meat with his teeth.

“You know there are some interesting second Boer War sites around here. I can remember as a child many veterans from England who had fought around here visiting. As a kind of abreaction.”

Dirk found the word choice interesting. Pieter spoke English with a pronounced Afrikaans accent, and the use of an obscure English word seemed to be directed at Dirk, the writer, and conveyed the message that he was no fool.

It made Dirk feel that he could be frank with Pieter.

“So, Pieter. What do we have going on here? What have we come to see?”

Pieter looked at him for a second and seemed to be deciding something. Then he sat straight up as if hearing an intruder, but simply smiled and said, “Let’s go for a walk.”
Outside the sun was at its apex and it was warm enough for Dirk to pull off his jersey and tie it around his waist.

“Pieter,” Tau said, speaking from behind the viewfinder as he snapped a picture of a battered yard fence, “so tell us, the idea is basically that people come here to farm. Get all muddy, you know, harvesting and so on. And they pay for this?”

“That’s the general theme. This farm was in my family, and when I inherited, it I didn’t know what to do with it. I wanted to stay out here, but I have no real idea how to run a farm. We hadn’t grown any produce here for decades, we just had livestock. Some cattle mostly.”

“Then how did you end up setting this up?” Tau clasped the biltong stick in his mouth and mumbled through the clench.

“It actually came about because of my wife. She had a friend in Pretoria, who grew up on a farm but his family had sold it. He wanted to experience that again, but didn’t have the money to do it. So she told him to come down, farm his heart out.” Pieter held his hands upturned close to his shoulders as he said this.

“So he did that for a month, and he said he knew some people who would enjoy the same thing. It kind of escalated from there. Two years ago we put in an advertisement in some magazines and we’ve been getting a steady stream of people since then.”

They were walking at the edge of the property surrounding the house. A tall wooden fence separated the yard from the rest of the farm. Beyond the fence Dirk could make out a field the sloped up towards a koppie a few kilometers to the north.

Pieter opened a gate and they walked through it. Spread across a few fields Dirk saw a number of people working on it, all dressed in various coloured overalls.

“Are those the,” Dirk started, trying to find the right word, “the guests?”

“Yep,” Pieter nodded. “We’ve got about twenty five here at present. Last year we built accommodation for them,” and he pointed to a barn at the edge of the field. It was a thatch lapa with a braai area and ablution housing.

“It’s actually nicer inside than it looks,” he said, and smiled.

Tau stood still for a moment to shoot the fields and the barn.
“What’s their motivation?” he asked.

Pieter stopped walking and turned to face Tau. “You know, it took me a while to understand. But at the end of the day, I think there’s a great need to connect to the soil. You guys are from Johannesburg, correct?”

Tau and Dirk looked at each other. Tau spoke: “Is that where most of your customers are from?”

“We prefer to call them guests, but yes, even though we have people from all over, that’s where most are from.” Pieter paused and looked at them expectantly.

Tau said: “For all intents and purposes, I suppose you could say, yes, we are from Johannesburg.”

“Right. You see, in other cities, the geography forms part of the landscape, and so part of the inhabitants’ consciousness. In Durban you have the humidity and the beach. In Cape Town you have the mountain and the ocean. You have a point of reference.

“But in Johannesburg, the only change you witness is human enacted. And the only progress is human progress. There are no tides. There are no storms.”

Pieter crouched down on the ground. He picked up a handful of dirt.

“People have a need to remember the feel of the soil,” he said, and rubbed the dirt between his fingers. “The weight of it,” and he bounced his hand up and down. “The smell of it,” and he brought it close to his nose.

“The taste of it,” Tau said, watching Pieter carefully. Pieter smiled at the joke.

“Well, that too, yes. But maybe another time. When I was young, we used to take mud when it had rained and shape them into cakes. They really looked like chocolate cakes with thick, moist icing. Didn’t you used to do that?” Pieter asked Tau.

Tau nodded. “Yeah, we did that.”

“I can still remember how it tasted. I’m sure it tastes the same everywhere. What did yours taste like?”

“Chicken shit,” Tau said.

Dirk suppressed a snort of laughter. He waited to see what Pieter would do.
He smiled, and straightened up.

"Ja, julle jong manne," he said. “Come, let’s go have a look at the work.”

Dirk talked to several of the guests on the field while Tau snapped photographs. Contrary to his expectations, he found people from all cultures, races and backgrounds. There was an estate agent from Tzaneen fixing the irrigation pipe. A Pedi investment banker earning interest on his bonus while spraying insecticide on lettuce. An Indian couple from Durban, both in the tourism industry, tending to the cattle feed. And a man whose children thought he was retired in a caravan in Keerboom but was forking hay from a wheelbarrow.

A woman in jeans and a t-shirt approached them, and Pieter took her arm. “This is my wife, Martinette," he said, and Dirk and Tau shook hands with her.

“So, do you know Koos?” she asked.

“Yes,” Dirk said. “How do you know him?”

“Oh, he’s my little brother.”

Dirk looked at Tau and found his eyes wide and accusatory. When they were out of earshot Tau hissed at Dirk: “This is some nepotistic bullshit.”

Dirk was in full agreement, but he felt he had to placate Tau. They may have been sent out on a Saturday to the middle of nowhere on a soft assignment, but he still had the new job to think about it. And Tau sabotaging it would not be beneficial.

“You’re right. But, bullshit or not, Koos is going to run it. So we may as well get it right. Do a good job and you may be able to use this as leverage in the future," Dirk said, and waited, and then saw Tau relax.

“OK. But I’m gonna snap away like mad and then I’m getting out of here.”

Their whispering was interrupted by Pieter.

“Come, it’s time for lunch. My wife has made a fillet and you can taste some of what we farm here.”

Dirk, realizing that he was starving, and that eating the food produced from the land would make a valuable angle to the story, immediately said yes. At that moment he heard Tau clearing his throat, and a look in his direction told him that Tau had been about to make an excuse.
Tau stopped when Dirk started speaking, and glared at him.

“That sounds great,” Dirk said, and shrugged at Tau.

A large gong sounded, and the guests moved from the fields towards the barn. Dirk thought they would all eat together, him and Tau and Pieter and all the guests, but Pieter directed the three of them up the hill past the barn towards a wooden bench underneath a tree. The table was set with wine glasses, plates, and a tablecloth. There had to be a kitchen in the barn, Dirk realised, and as they set down at the Martinette appeared from the barn carrying a large tray.

After a glass of white wine and a braaied fillet, Dirk was ready to forgive Koos for misleading him. It had turned out to be a pleasant day. Tau had wine as well but did not participate in the conversation as often as the rest. He picked at his steak for a while and took a while longer to finish his plate.

When there was a lull in conversation, he spoke.

“Pieter, I was wondering. Don’t you feel that you could be hiring some of the local population to work on this farm?”

“The thing is, Tau, this is not a commercially viable farm. If we had to employ labourers and pay them and sell the produce, we wouldn’t be making a profit. It’s not like the past: the margins for farmers these days are small.”

Tau seemed unconvinced.

“What do you do with the crops that you grow?”

“What we don’t eat, we sell to a big co-operative. If we weren’t running this scheme, we would have to sell the whole bloody farm to the co-operative.”

“Can’t you give some of that food to the community around here? I know there are lots of poor people without access to nutrition.”

Pieter gave him a strange look.

“I don’t know. Things aren’t free in this world. We don’t live like kings here either, it’s hard work,” he said. Pieter picked up the last piece of fillet from his plate and put it in his mouth.

“Do you think it is strange that a minority group still owns the vast majority of the arable land in the country?” Tau asked. Dirk felt his face flush with nervousness. It was, of course, a fair question. And it wasn’t necessarily a confrontational one either. It was just loaded with history.
Pieter put down his wine glass and folded his hands across his stomach. He stared to the horizon, seemingly lost in thought. Finally he said, “I suppose, if you look internationally in the present day, then yes, it is anomalous.”

Tau still didn’t look convinced but seemed satisfied with having voiced his concern. The conversation moved on to other things. Eventually Tau said: “Thank you, Mister and Misses van der Bijl. That was delicious. I’m going to excuse myself and take some more photographs.”

Tau got up and wandered off across the field towards the stream.

“Sorry about that,” Dirk said, wondering what he was apologizing for.

“No,” Pieter said, “at least he thinks about the situation. There’s nothing wrong with being angry if you can formulate a solution to that anger that is of greater benefit. I’m not so sure if that’s always the case...” his voice trailed off and he became silent. When he spoke again he had a wistful tone.

“You know, this farm has been in my family for one hundred and twenty years. Four generations. You know what the strange thing is? I don’t feel like I deserve it.” He sat up in his chair with a chuckle.

“What do you mean,” Dirk asked.

“Well, I inherited it. But I didn’t do anything to receive it. I am not able to feel any link to the legal deed that says, this piece of earth, from there to there to there,” he pointed in various directions, “belongs to me.

“So, when Tau says what he said, I don’t feel that he is wrong. OK, he didn’t say it outright, but you and me both know what he means,” Pieter said, raising his eyebrows to check if Dirk understood. Dirk nodded.

“What I do feel a connection to is what is produced here.” Pieter laid a hand on the bark of the tree. “I remember when we planted this tree. It was thirty five years ago.” He took his fork and picked up a piece of broccoli. “I feel ownership of this meal, in a way. I care about the fact that we can produce these products as efficiently and bountifully as we can, and it can feed all these people.”

He pointed to the large table where his guests were sitting.

“I don’t know how one can sensibly redistribute land that never really belonged to anyone. But I know that one should start with what is being produced.”

Pieter took a last sip from his wine glass. He looked at Dirk.
Dirk was hesitant about being drawn into a debate. He considered his words, and then said: "I don’t think the goal of redistribution is fairness. I think the goal is progress."

Pieter mulled this over and then nodding, he said: "If I believed that to be the case, and believed it was realizable, I would support it." And he smiled into his empty glass, and Dirk interpreted his words as an agnostic’s defense: he could never be convinced to believe, and so, never be supportive.

Dirk excused himself to go to the bathroom. He walked across the lawn and entered the farmhouse.

He must have taken a wrong turn because he ended up in the main bedroom. He was about to turn around when he saw a series of photos displayed in frames on a desk against the mirror.

There was one of Pieter and Martinette at their wedding. They looked very young. There was a picture of them in front of the farmhouse, along with what must be Pieter’s extended family. There was one of Pieter in military uniform, standing at attention, one hand resting on a large rifle.

He returned to the table and found Martinette had joined Pieter.

"Where did you two meet?" Dirk asked, and popped a piece of steak into his mouth. He sat back and chewed.

"In Bloemfontein. I was in the army, and I had just been sent on leave. There was a dance at the town hall."

"When was this?"

"Well, we were married in 1978. It was two years before that. So 1976. It was to celebrate becoming a Republic. What day was that again?" Pieter looked at Dirk.

"I have no idea," Dirk said.

"May 31," Martinette said, and smiled.

"Ja. It was a big thing, there were flags and banners and marching bands and the whole works. It went on the whole day. Anyway, that night there was a ball. Martinette was the best looking thing there." Husband and wife grinned at each other.

"So, if this was in 1976, were you involved in Angola?"
Pieter nodded. “Yeah. I’d spent a lot of time training in Namibia, before we crossed over the border. But we had to get out of Angola and back into Namibia before the set independence day, which was,” he put a finger to his lips in thought, “the eleventh of December.”

“It was a pretty complicated situation,” Dirk said, hoping to goad Pieter on.

“Hell, you’ve got that right. Everyone was in bed with everyone else over there, and at the same time against everyone. We were helping Savimbi and he was helping us, which was pretty unpalatable to both sides. And then the Cubans arrived, and Pretoria was being backed by the Americans. Chaos.”

“How do you feel about it in retrospect?”

Pieter shrugged. “We kept the communists out.”

“You know, today not a lot of people feel that way.”

“Look, I’m not saying there weren’t other motivations. But there was a general lack of information. Maybe not in Havana, Pretoria, Moscow or Washington. But for us in the army, we couldn’t afford to think too broadly. There they were, across my gun sight: the Cubans, with Soviet missiles. What were we going to do?”

“You know,” Dirk said, “I find it funny that these days those wars are forgotten. It’s dropped from the public consciousness.”

“It’s not funny. It’s natural.” Pieter picked a piece of fat from his plate and threw it onto the ground. A pigeon hopped form the shadows to investigate. “My father’s generation: they had the end of the World War and the beginning of Nationalism here. Your generation, you have freedom. My generation – who wants to remember that? And I’m talking about people fighting on all sides.”

There was a call from the field, where a group of people were clustered around what looked like a young calf.

“Uh oh, looks like the calf is sick. I’m just going to have a look at it,” he said, and he walked off. Martinette cleared the table, and Dirk decided to go looking for Tau.

He found Tau on the far side of the hill photographing the scene below.
“I’ll wash out the colours,” Tau explained to Dirk, “so the photos look really bleak. Maybe I’ll keep the colour in their eyes. Well, the ones with blue eyes maybe. It’ll be dramatic.”

“Hm,” Dirk replied, not really listening. He was thinking about whether there would be a message from Robyn once he got back into cellular range. He felt the need to plan ahead, to be prepared to act dependent on her reaction. He ran through the outcomes:

She would either not have called; had called contrite but not asking forgiveness; had called to apologise but that it would be ‘better for all involved’ that they should move on to see other people; called in tears (unlikely) and asked him to come over immediately so that she could make it up to him.

He stopped constructing permutations. It might seem like a survival instinct, he told himself, to rehearse preparations, but it was actually cowardly. He needed to be able to act decisively no matter what attitude she displayed or proposition she made. Decisiveness is something more important than doing the right thing, he decided, and then immediately doubted that.

Tau kicked a small pebble down the hill, and looked at the horizon. A flock of ducks took off from the dam below and quacking their way into a V-formation, started heading to the bigger dam to the north. Something seemed to be on Tau’s mind, Dirk thought, and just then Tau looked at him again and spoke.

“You know I’ve always wondered – what’s with your name? It sounds really Afrikaans for an English dude?”

‘Why do you ask?’

Tau gave a small shrug.

“No reason.”

“My father is Afrikaans, my mom’s English. Strange I guess. You get the name from your father, and that’s for life, but unless they make a concerted effort to send you to Afrikaans schools you’ll turn out English.”

“So, this shit here,” Tau waved his hand around with some flamboyance at the countryside, “is like in your blood. This farming and boeresport and outdoorsy stuff.”
Dirk gave Tau a skeptical look meant to imply ridiculousness. Tau observed the look for a second and then laughed extravagantly, taking time to catch his breath.

“Ah, man,” he said finally, “you would suck at farming.”

“What did your father do?” Dirk asked. Tau gave a small shrug, still smiling, but stayed silent. Dirk wondered how to get to the personal with Tau. There was a chasm between them with no route across.

“Come,” Dirk said with a smile, putting a hand on Tau’s shoulder, “let’s go back to the house,” and they trudged their way down the hill.

They stood in the driveway and shook hands. Martinette handed them a milk tart each, which they held awkwardly as they said their goodbyes. Pieter and Martinette walked back to the stoep and stood there arm in arm. Dirk and Tau set their tarts on their respective front seats, and then regarded each other over the roofs of their cars.

“Thanks, Tau,” Dirk started and stopped.

“No, look, it was fine.”

“Are you still going to make the game?”

“Yeah, there’s plenty of time,” he said, and then opened the door and slid inside. Dirk did the same. They drove off through the valley. The sun had set behind the hills to the West, but there was still a golden glow on the tops of the trees.

When they reached the tar road Tau turned left, and Dirk right.

At Hertzogville Dirk pulled over to fill up the car at a petrol station. Flakes of white paint were peeling from the petrol pumps, displaying rust underneath. The orange, blue and white logo of the French energy company was almost rusted off the pumps.

The colours reminded him of a documentary he saw on Republiek-wording, of a packed Church Square in Pretoria, with hundreds of flags marking the perimeter, and a giant banner a hundred meters long stretched across the front of the city hall. Men in dark suits with fedoras and horn-rimmed spectacles.
A different time, a different place. He switched off the car and was glad to be in the present.

A bakkie pulled up, and a barrel-chested man with red hair and a full-faced but neat beard stepped from the cabin just as the vehicle came to a stop. He slipped the door shut behind him and without looking at what his hand reached for, he scooped up a bundle of firewood and took three strides and laid the wood next to a stand of briquettes.

“Henry,” he called loudly to someone inside the shop, and a black man in overalls came scurrying out. He went over to the back of the bakkie and started carrying armloads of firewood and placed them where the first man had placed his.

Both parties movements were so smooth and their communications so brief Dirk was sure this was a regular occurrence. Dirk presumed that the bakkie-driver was the owner of the petrol station, and Henry his long-time employee.

Dirk leaned against the car waiting for the click of the pump to indicate that the tank was full. The sun’s final rays felt warm on his face, and the dry chill of the night was already in the shadows. He became aware that the owner was standing at the shop-window. He was standing very still, and looking right at Dirk.

“Ken ek jou van erens?” the garage owner asked him. Do I know you? Dirk’s Afrikaans was average, but proficient enough to appreciate that the question was phrased more personally than translated into English.

“Ja man, jou broer is mos Hennie. Jy is ‘n Viljoen.” Dirk noticed a slur in the voice that he had missed somehow. And a stain on his stomach that was probably brandy.

And so Dirk said in English, with exaggerated clipped consonants, that he did not have a brother, and drove off.

Halfway back to Johannesburg with the sun long set, Dirk caught himself with a sudden desire to communicate.

For the hundredth time that day he checked his phone but there was nothing from Robyn. For the last three months if he wanted to tell someone
about an event, the first person he thought about was Robyn. But in the dark, and
cresting a hill he couldn’t see another car on the road, he found that it wasn’t her
he wanted to call. He wanted to tell Valerie.

Instead he called Tau. On the other end it sounded like a party was going
on, with loud music in a small space. A moment after Tau answered the phone
but did not say anything, and in the background someone asked him a question
and Tau answered him a question in Sotho. There was a brief interchange and
then Tau moved away from the noise.

“I just wanted to say thanks,” Dirk said, unsure of why he had called.

“It’s a job, man,” Tau said evenly.

“Life is strange, isn’t it?” and realised he may have meant the country.

“What?”

“I said ‘That was a strange day?’” Dirk realised that the strangeness he felt
extended right up to Thursday evening. As such, Tau could not relate.

Tau seemed unsure of what to say. “Well, not really. How else is it
supposed to be?”

“True.” The party seemed to have moved to the car before going to the
stadium.

“I’ve got to go man,”

“All right. Enjoy the game. I’ll see you next week.”

“Shaw-shaw. Cheers.”

The edge of the city was still seventy-five kilometers away. Dirk made one
more phone call.

“Hello?”

“Hey. It’s me, Dirk.”

“Hey there, hang on a second.” She sounded neither surprised nor
displeased to have him phone. In the background there was the sound of plates
clinking against plates and multiple conversations, all of which were muted with
the click of a door.

“Where are you?”

“Big dinner party at one of the crew’s house. Greenside. By the lake. It’s
lovely out here.”
“That sounds really nice,” Dirk felt he said this tamely. And then suddenly he was lonely, contained in the dark bubble of his car with the cold night outside. The warmth of the scene he sketched based on her description seemed to be exactly where he wanted to be. To smell the lake, to listen to the wind through the willows, to have a group of interesting people in one room staving off the autumn with red wine and crowded couches.

“Where are you?”

The flow of the conversation implied such familiarity that Dirk smiled.

“I’m driving, heading back to the city. I’m just passing,” he paused and stared out of the window and then at the odometer, “Soweto. So not far to go.”

“How was your day?”

“Did you know there are investment bankers growing their own cabbage in the Free State? Not to sell. To eat.”

“That sounds like something you would know.”

Dirk put his head against the headrest.

“So I just wanted to say thanks again for this morning. There was a lot going on at the time so I may not have seemed appreciative enough.”

“Don’t mention it. You can make it up to me some time.”

“I’d like to.”

“What are you doing tonight?”

“I’m not sure yet. Based on all that’s happened today I wonder if I shouldn’t bury my head in the couch and watch something harmless. An animated movie. Re-center my being. Tap into the inner child.”

“That sounds very mature. Or you could come join us later on? We’re watching a band in Milpark.”

Dirk felt his heart briefly beat faster and a nervous knot formed in his stomach. His scalp crinkled.

“What type of band?”

“It’s a group from northern Mozambique. Apparently they were cut off there during the civil war, and developed this whole unique blues and jazz influenced style. I’ve got a friend who went to Maputo a while back and saw them and booked them some gigs down here. That’s what I’ve been told,” she gave an easy laugh as a caveat.
Dirk glanced at the luminous clock on the dashboard. It was nearly eight.
“Sounds interesting. What time are they playing?
“We'll go around ten, ten-thirty. They'll play around eleven. So, you're coming?” She finished the sentence with an up-beat tone.
"If they're terrible, we're even."
She laughed again. “It’s a deal.”
The band, whose name Dirk didn’t know, was set up on a tiny stage in the corner of the venue. They had played two songs, both rickety Latin-African whirlwinds of jemba drums, dry-toned guitars and vocals matching the walkabout scales of a xylophone. In between songs the singer spoke exclusively in Portuguese and from the laughs it elicited from the crowd of fifty or so, it seemed that was the majority language.

Dirk was seated at the far end of a long table in the back of the room. Valerie sat opposite him, and her colleagues were spread down the length of the table. They were an odd mix: there were some with long beards; some white guys with jeans, jackets and collared shirts that looked like they’d just left a golf estate plot auction; women in pastel kaftans and girls in cocktail dresses.

Next to Dirk sat Dave, one of the ‘founding eight’ in Galvin8, and apparently the band’s makeshift agent. When he was introduced Dave had shaken his hand and looked sincerely in his eyes and asked him a few pointed questions about his background, his job, which quickly turned into a brief discussion on the future of the print industry, ending with the obligatory discussion about their respective neighbourhoods (Dirk’s: up-and-coming but dingy. His: pretentious but convenient).

Throughout Dirk knew he was being probed, judged, his social network evaluated, but the apparent sincerity made him feel flattered. He knew nothing of Dave when Dave was pulled into another conversation, but felt that he had somehow really met him. He was going to go far, Dirk decided.
For all the mesmerizing company and energetic conversation, Valerie appeared intent to focus her attention on Dirk. At some point during the third song, Dirk had a sudden realization that he did not know these people, that he and Valerie shared the flimsiest of connection, that he had no idea how the day’s events had deposited him here and with momentary panic he wondered what they were going to talk about.

But at that moment the music shifted tempo, and the helter-skelter jamming segued into a fluid bass groove, the singer pulled out a trombone and the drummer sashayed the symbols for a jazz number.

Dirk took a sip of the medium-range red wine he’d ordered and felt himself ease into the moment.

“They’re really good,” he said to Valerie, and pointed towards the band. She nodded and leant over and poured herself more wine from his bottle.

The tables were a combination of reed and wood with a glass-top of imperfect glass. Brown tablecloths were laid over them, onto which white wax dripped steadily from household candles pressed onto cheap candleholders in the center. Dirk pried a stick-like section of dried wax from the candle and melting one end in the flame, he poked it against the ashtray leaving bits of wax clinging to the sides.

He looked around and could see at each table at least one person playing with a candle, sometimes two. Valerie leant forward and took the wax from his hand and putting it aside, smiled at him.

Dirk stared at her scapula emerging from the red wool and suddenly had an intense desire, not to touch it or the joining slim neck, or to have the prospect of discovering what lay further down, but to have already done those things in the immediate past.

What he wanted was to sit across from her, but with the space between them more familiar, atmospherically. Where there was no confusion or expectations or possibility of disappointment for either of them.

Dirk recognized the feeling was a function of being tired and pulled in different directions by various forces. That what he wanted was intimacy, or more specifically, the result of intimacy: inner stillness. Having someone important and capable in the weeds with you mucking out life’s problems.
But for all the self-actualizing cognizance that his desire stemmed from
tiredness, he couldn’t shake it, and so rather embraced it. He took a sip of the
warming red wine, felt it glow down to his stomach, and listening to the jemba
drummers move into a hypnotic down-tempo bridge, imagined that they were on
an island somewhere far away, that they’d made love and it was good, and that
nothing lay ahead except endless sunshine days and isolated togetherness.

He must have had a strange look on his face because he caught her
looking at him. She assessed him with a sideways gaze, and as the drummers
moved back to the battering rhythm of the chorus it was too loud to speak, so it
looked to Dirk that she was considering him without the expectation that they
could say anything. He felt that he had passed a test, because her smile looked
involuntary and her gaze shifted to the tablecloth.

“I saw these guys in Pemba last year,” Valerie told him later across the
table. “On the beach. We were there for a HIV-prevention initiative for pregnant
mothers, taking volunteers up from Johannesburg to help. You know, stop the
transmission of HIV from mother to child. Mostly helping create supply chains
between purified water and baby formula from donors to local logistics guys.
You know, long-range bus companies there.”

Valerie paused to take a sip of wine, and putting a hand on the table,
leaned in a bit closer.

“We were drinking this amazing rum there. Have you been? And at this
impromptu gig thing these guys played. They would be great at the Cape Town
jazz festival don’t you think?”

Dirk had trouble following the various jumps in her story. Which question
to answer? He carried on smiling.

She reached over and refilled her wine glass from the bottle.

“Ask me something unique,” she smiled coyly at him.

Dirk leant back and laughed. He looked at her for a moment to determine
whether she was serious, and seeing that she was, thought for a moment and
leaned back in.

“Which do you choose: A good red wine by a fire or wild spring water
during a hike?”

“What?” she laughed, “How are those related?”
He shook his head. “Choose.”

“Wine.”

“Jumping into water from high or driving fast at night?”

“Driving fast at night.”

“Thunderstorm or starry night?”

“Thunderstorm. What is with all these sensory questions?”

Dirk smiled but went on.

“Clean cold sheets or warm clothes from the dryer?”

“I don’t know. Am I naked?” Dirk laughed self-consciously and then quickly asked another to hide it.

“Classic rock or indie?”


Dirk raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“My dad. He was a big hippie. You’d like him. He plays Zeppelin and Paul Simon on his acoustic guitar and reads Theroux travel books.”

Dirk, a minor knee-jerk reaction to her surety in assuming his taste in fathers-of-friends that made him want to disagree out of principle notwithstanding, he had to admit that it sounded like someone he could get along with.

“Where are your parents these days?” he asked.

“They’re retired. They visited my younger sister in Bolivia last year. She was on some volunteer programme building houses and teaching English. And they do some other oversees travel. But mostly they tour around Southern Africa in this big van-slash-overlander they bought. Right now I think they’re in Botswana.”

“Are you sure? I met a guy today whose children thought he was playing lawn bowls in Plett but meanwhile he’s doing subsistence farming in the sticks.”

“They installed a espresso machine in the van. And a tent on the roof.”

“Ah,” Dirk grinned, “point taken.”

“So how did I do on my answers,” Valerie asked him.

“You did well. It bumped you up to forty five points for the evening.” He said somberly.
“What? Have you been keeping score,” she looked around as if to share her question with an audience. “Out of what?”

“It’s a threshold system.”

“What’s the threshold?”

“I’ll let you know when you reach it.”

“What do I win if I reach it?”

Dirk felt her foot touch his under the table.

“You’ll have to wait and see,” he said, and held her gaze.

Suddenly there was a figure standing right next to them. Dirk looked up and was surprised to find the band finished, the stage empty, and the restaurant nearly empty. All of Valerie’s friends had left.

“Hello, hello,” the figure, a man, spoke in an Eastern European accent, “my name is Vlatko. Welcome to my restaurant.”

“Oh, hi there,” Valerie said enthusiastically.

“I hope you enjoyed the food and atmosphere?” Even though neither of them had eaten they nodded.

“That’s great. It’s a new restaurant, and you know how many fail in the first year. So you’re very welcome,” he smiled a bit sadder. Dirk guessed him at about forty, with a thick neck and large hands, but a slim body.

“Where are you originally from?” Dirk asked, hoping it wasn’t rude.

“I came from Bosnia in 1994. That’s my wife, Sarah. We were married when I left but only I could get out first. She came in 1996.”

Dirk had managed to have a look at the menu, which was heavy on pastas and pizzas. The décor, he also noticed, had a Venetian theme to it.

“Why an Italian restaurant he asked?”

“I used to own a restaurant in Sarajevo. Bosnian food, Czech beer, Vlatko’s magical conversation.” He smiled at his own joke. “It was a great success. Then of course, you know, things went bad, and I came here. The only job I could find for me and my wife was in an Italian restaurant. Joburgers fucking love Italian food, eh?” He shook his head.

“But what was I going to do? Open a Bosnian restaurant?” Again he laughed.

“Was the plan to have live music?”
“No, that’s temporary. The band, it brings in people. People eat and hopefully people tell their friends. The band is not too loud. Maybe one or two more shows, then just restaurant. Maybe you are in a big company that wants to do a team-builder?” He placed both palms on his chest, now the businessman. “Maybe you bring them here? Maybe you have big birthday party? Maybe engagement or wedding party?” He looked from one to the other and laughed at their expressions. “What do you do?”

“I write for a newspaper.”

“Oh that’s perfect. Maybe you write about this place?”

Dirk glanced at Valerie to see whether she had noted the excitement in Vlatko’s voice at his vocation.

“Sure,” Dirk smiled confidently and he hoped, professionally at Vlatko.

“All right. Here’s my card,” he handed one over from a stack in his hand, “please come again.” He walked over to the next table.

“Sometimes this city pleasantly surprises me,” Dirk said turning back to Valerie, but she was already getting up from the table.

“Let’s go slow-poke,” she said with a smile.

The street outside was now nearly devoid of parked cars.

“How about a drink, at my place?” Valerie asked, “It’s actually just around the corner.”

Dirk, tired from no sleep, weary from a day that required his mood and attention to be elevated, wanted nothing more than a dark room and crisp sheets. However, the Dirk that stared at her shoulder, the one that wondered what she was thinking when she held his gaze for a fraction of a second longer than necessary – he wanted to carry on.

He caught his cheeks pulled by what he was sure was a mawkish grin, and tried to correct the expression to something more suave and illegible but she noticed and let out a breathy laugh.

She stepped forward and to his utter surprise, actually gave him a playful punch on the shoulder. She miscalculated slightly and her fist bounced off his arm and her follow through propelled her towards him. She was about to fall when he caught her by the shoulders.

“Ah, there you are,” she said.
He noticed now, with them standing, without the music and bustle of the crowd, that she was drunk. The change from being assertive to near-dependence was endearing. He thought of mentioning it, but decided that her sexual bias radar was likely the last to be overcome by alcohol and she would probably snap into sobriety to defend her independence.

“How are you getting home?” he asked instead, still holding both her shoulders.

“Hm, driving.”

“How’s this neighbourhood? Where are you parked?”

By way of answering she pointed down the street do a French made car. It was newish, and he knew by way of emails sent by his insurance company, low on the list of cars that were stolen in the city.

“It’ll be fine here. Come, I’ll take you home.”

She sat with her back against the wall, clutching a pillow to her stomach. He sat down on the side of the bed. Music played softly from a laptop open on a desk.

“What do you look for in somebody?” she asked, and yet again he had to check her eyes to make sure she was asking him a question she wanted answered.

It occurred to him for the first time that she might be recently hurt. That she had just had her heart broken by a man and this question was an entry into a séance where they would prod and poke the just-dead relationship that was still in the front of her thoughts.

But no, she was simply curious and ultimately naïve to either the weight or banality of the question. It was, he realised, a quality quite rare: to ask blunt questions that others talked around with sincerity and without ulterior meanings.

“I would have to say,” he started, and in his mind flipped through a range of answers, starting with the most conventional and then moving towards what he felt were truer ones, “uniqueness. Then cleverness. Then the desire to learn. Then knowledge learned.” As he said this it felt true. But being true it also seemed hopelessly pretentious and unmanly. “Then breasts,” he added.
She reached forward with one arm and patted his left pectoral three times.

“That’s a nice answer,” she said sleepily, ignoring his addendum. “Do you know what’s also nice? Coffee. Coffee tastes nice.”

“Do you want some?”

Valerie gave a slow motion and exaggerated up-then-down nod and let her chin rest on her chest.

In the kitchen he boiled water, found some instant coffee and cups. He warmed up milk in the microwave, and made the coffee very weak with lots of hot milk. He returned to the room with the cups and found her asleep under the covers. He went back to the kitchen, poured the coffee down the drain, filled a glass of water and set it next to her.

Then he closed the top of the laptop silencing the music. He switched off the light and shut the door. In a hallway closet he found a blanket and pillow, and stretched out on the couch.

As he lay in the dark there was a moment’s reflection, a glint of foreboding that he had been in control of events up until a few days previously. That events were moving swifter than he could comfortably contextualise.

It was worrisome, but he closed his eyes and was asleep almost instantly.
After what amounted to a six-hour nap on an unfamiliar couch, Dirk expected to feel exhausted, given the lack of sleep the previous nights. But he didn’t. He felt refreshed, almost exhilarated.

He heard Valerie’s door open and her shuffling feet. She appeared in the hall doorway and leaned against the wall, looking at him. She smiled and then rubbed her eyes. Dirk was aware that he held the blanket with his fingers curling over the end near his face, which made him look like a marsupial. He stretched his hands upwards in a fake yawn and put them by his side.

“Good morning, lush,” he said softly with a smile, and she laughed. She walked to the kitchen with a hand sideways to her face so that he couldn’t see it.

“Stop looking at me.”

“You’d make a pretty cheap date, I’ll give you that.”

Her heard her click on the kettle and open the fridge, and then watched her sit down on a barstool at the kitchen counter with a carton of orange juice. She took a swig and observed Dirk from above.

“Nice blanket, Linus.” she said, and Dirk looked down at the turquoise fabric.

“I love a good Charlie Brown reference in the morning.”

“Cheers to that,” she said and held the juice aloft.

Then, silence.

For ten seconds Dirk watched her. First she held the juice in her mouth while looking to the side out of the window. Her hands were clasped around the juice box, and she seemed to be unaware that the juice moved from one cheek to
the other. Then she swallowed, and he noticed again the slimness of her neck, like an elegant bird. She held a pensive expression while maintaining her stare out of the window, her forehead slightly creased as if inexpertly following a foreign language.

She seemed to him completely at ease and oblivious to anything he might observe or think. And then, for a moment, a look passed across her face, like a shadow moving across a window, a look that went from pensiveness to sadness to a pragmatic acceptance. And maybe it was just because it was Sunday morning, that she felt alone and misunderstood because that’s we’re all meant to feel, and it didn’t mean anything at all, but at the look Dirk felt his stomach drop as if pulled by a rope. He wanted in. He wanted to know what she felt in that moment.

That was ten seconds, and then she pushed herself up with a slight smile at him, oblivious clearly – but how could he know? – to his thoughts. She disappeared from his view and then there was nothing but the hum of the refrigerator and the steady rising gaggle of the kettle.

He heard a cupboard clip open, and the dull thud of ceramic mugs clanking together.

“Coffee?” she said, breaking the silence. He worried that it seemed strange, his position unmoved on the couch, like some kind of convalescent, and his silence, so he raised himself on two elbows. But her tone was light, and when her face reappeared behind the kitchen counter her gaze at him was warm and open and fresh.

He nodded, and she retreated back to the kettle, out of sight.

And he realised that he had achieved what he had wanted, albeit by accident. Their interplay this morning was kind of a result of intimacy.

But this level of familiarity without any basis was dangerous for the suitor. It was unrooted, it had no origin, and could quickly become rooted in friendship.

They drank their coffee and talked of travel in foreign countries, while he considered a way to determine their next encounter.

"Listen," he said, stopping at the door on the way out, hoping that his voice wasn't too serious. It was, as always, a difficult balance. Do you go with the
direct route, and risk coming off as a eager, at best, and desperate at worst, or ambiguous and socially busy, and risk missing the window of opportunity.

“Yes?” she held one hand on the door, and it seemed to Dirk, stood closer to him than strictly required. So close that he could smell her hair, a mixture of coconut shampoo and cigarette smoke, a scent of an unknown woman’s head on a pillow and thus surprisingly alluring. The cold air at his back contrasted so much with the heat from her body that he could actually feel it radiating through her pajamas.

Unless it wasn’t closer than normal, but simply a regulation distance for her. At a loss Dirk grabbed for a half-truth.

“So I need to go into work tomorrow to talk about this new job. And to be honest, hearing you talk about your work, and seeing how much it means to you. Perhaps it would be good to talk more about it. Before Monday. For perspective.” Dirk hoped short sentences made it all seem more plausible than how straw clutching it sounded in his head. “So I was hoping to take you to dinner tonight, and you could give me some more information.”

“Sure,” she said with a smile, and then – quite perceptibly indeed – placed four fingers on his upper-arm, a reassuring touch that lasted one second, “give me a call later and we’ll talk details.”

And then he was off.

As Dirk swung the car door shut his phone rang. It was mother, with a customary Sunday morning check-in call.

“Hi mom,” he said, holding up his car keys to face-level in order to select the gearlock key with one hand.

“Good morning son!” her voice rang out fresh and clear as the morning. “How are you doing? You weren’t still sleeping I hope?”

Dirk glanced at the Toyota’s green clock and saw that it was a few minutes before nine. At which time on a Sunday, he would normally be asleep.

“Of course not mom. I’m out and about. Getting the newspaper.”

“That’s good. Did you have a nice weekend with Robyn?”
“Actually, it turned out that I had to cover a story in the Free State yesterday. So I was down there close to Kimberley. So I didn’t really see her.” No need for details.

“That’s too bad. Although it sounds like an interesting weekend, you’ll have to tell us more. The reason I’m calling is your father wondered whether you could come over for an afternoon braai.” This was not true, Dirk knew. Each one always used the other as the one who needed to see him.

“Say, come around two-thirty?”

“Sure,” he said. Strangely, the idea of their company was comforting.

He hung up and was about to release the gear lock when his phone beeped. A new message that read: Hello Mr. Nowhere. Where have you been? Fancy losing at tennis this afternoon? At 1, my court. Paul.

Paul was an old friend and tennis foe, the one that was absent from their trio when James picked him up on Thursday evening. The suggestion of competition and focusing on a match and the travails of Paul’s deteriorating backhand sounded like a good way to blow off some steam.

Sure. Bring the beers you’ll be buying me for losing he replied.

Then a voice message, quick and to the point.

“Dirk it’s me, Robyn, nine’o clock Sunday morning. Call me please. I’d like to meet up. Bye.” Silence and then the intruding voice of the cell phone company’s female voice-over.

She must have called while he was talking to his mother. It would have gone straight to his voicemail. He pictured her picturing him sleeping off a drunken hangover, having drowned his sorrows over what happened between them, and tapped redial immediately.

“Hi there,” she said, sounding friendly but guarded.

“Hey. Sorry I missed your call. I was talking to someone else.” He opened the window to enhance the ambient noise.

“That’s fine. How are things? How was the Free State yesterday?”

“It was great actually. Very interesting. Great opportunity for a story.” He sounded so upbeat he nearly convinced himself.
“That’s great.” Super, everything is great with everyone. Dirk drummed his fingers on the steering wheel waiting for her to get to the point.

“So I was hoping we could meet up. Just to chat,” she said hesitantly, with a questioning looping tone at the end.

Dirk considered refusing. It would be petty, but probably satisfying. But he had already phoned her back so he’d devalued any vindictive act of ignoring her. And he realised that he did want to see her, at least to have it over and done with. But if it was to happen, he wanted it over soon and on his terms. Definitely today. Which, considering he had arranged three events for the day in the last five minutes, meant very soon.

"OK. I’ve got some things on today so the only time that’s good for me is around,” he paused, meaning to appear disinterested, “around eleven.”

“That’s fine,” she sounded relieved, and then hit back with her own terms, “let’s have coffee or something at Nelson Mandela Square. That good?”

He wanted to conversation over.

“Sure, see you just now,” and hung up.

As a public space, the square in Sandton was purpose built and like most places in these parts, did not develop organically. Dirk parked underground and ascended to the ground level in the elevator with an Indian family. The parents were young, around his own age, and their child, a boy about three years old, looked up and banged his small fist against his father’s thigh.

Noticing him looking at the boy, they smiled, and when he noticed them looking, he smiled as well. It seemed that he should say something, but he had no idea what would be acceptable, so he nodded instead.

The doors opened and the bottled atmosphere of anywhere was replaced by an industrious noise of table chatter, cutlery and laughter. Dirk motioned for the family to exit first, and then followed them.

He stepped out to the edge of the square, and within a few steps he was walking in bright sunshine. He crossed the width of the square, as wide as a school rugby pitch, towards a continuous series of restaurants and coffee shops demarcated with different coloured cloth umbrellas.
Different points in the city had a different mix of foreign languages and accents. Winding his way between tables towards where he saw Robyn sitting, he counted five unique European or East Asian languages. The source of every one however, had much in common: leather stitching, glittering wristwatches and mouths finely coloured with expensive make up.

Robyn looked impeccable. She wore expensive clothes and her hair was straightened. She had slightly more make-up on than usual. Or was it an illusion, brought on by his feeling of self-doubt? Or did he simply never notice before?

She sat alone at a table at the edge of the square claimed by the restaurants. Only one half of the table was covered in shade, and she sat on the border between sunlight and shade. When she moved her head, strands of her hair crossed over towards the light, and shone healthily for a moment.

He reached the table and she looked up and smiled but there was no motion for contact. He pulled out a chair, struggled for a moment to scrape it beyond the edge of a concrete umbrella foot, and then sat down.

“Nice, sunny winter day?” she commented, and he felt all energy drain from his body. It was to end with banalities and civility, the worst way to mark the conclusion of anything.

“This place is ridiculous,” he countered, motioning with his hand in the sunlight to take in the scene.

“Oh, Dirk,” she smiled with expert condescension. He was in the dragon’s lair here he saw, in territory that put him at a huge disadvantage. He realised, for the first time and naively late, that this was to be a contest. To win what? Pride, he decided. To claim the right to feel vindicated, to have been correct.

“What did you do yesterday?” he asked, because he had no idea what to say. He was sitting in the sun, and even though it was freezing only hours previously, direct sunlight was deceivingly hot. Sweat trickled down his flanks, but taking off his jumper was not an option.

“Oh, you know, I went out with the old school crowd.” This was code for the social group he was not part of and had no desire to be. She mentioned the name of a club, one that was impersonal and catering to a clientele of considerable wealth.
There was to be no apology, Dirk foresaw. Not even an acknowledgement that the possibility of an apology was a reasonable topic. He had underestimated her.

This meeting was so that she could ensure that she kept her social reputation intact. To create a context from which they could part ways on amicable terms, one in which she had not broken any social conventions and could move on without fear of repercussions in the form of dinner table gossip.

There would be no deposition of her actions, and the resultant judgment that he was hoping for they would agree upon - he was right, she was wrong – would not be made.

She kept on talking, mentioning names and events and planned gatherings and gossip that he was vaguely aware of cared little for. The conversation quickly became a catch-up between friends. Dirk gave up wondering how to steer the conversation towards anything with substance about the last three months.

Depressingly he felt that the very fact that he was there was a sign of great weakness in his own character.

Then she mentioned something significant.

“Oh, and I haven’t told you. My family is moving to Ireland.”

She said it lightly. Off-the-cuff almost. As if he was a fringe acquaintance.

“Ireland? All of you?”

She seemed surprised at his question.

“Of course.”

“Ireland?”

Dirk could count at least twenty families he knew personally that had emigrated. Most, if not all, would have called it ‘leaving the country’. He had never thought of the nuanced difference between moving somewhere and leaving, but hearing this news in the middle of a break-up had given him a new perspective.

But for those twenty that had left, he had never questioned their motives. It seemed a reasonable choice of activity. For some reason he could not immediately understand within himself, the idea of Robyn moving away left him angry.
It was clear that she saw it in his face because she immediately went on the defensive.

“It’s all very recent,” she said, raising her eyebrows and holding up her hands.

“How long is ‘recent’?” he asked, trying to find the source of his anger.

“A few months. I didn’t really believe it would happen. You know how much they love it here? But, this job came up, my dad feels like it’s a good move,” her voice trailed off.

“And somehow this never came up as something that I would need to know?” Dirk retained what he imagined was an indignant and righteous pose, but in truth this line of questioning was heading away from the birth of his anger. The fact that he couldn’t figure out what really bothered him about the news was an irritation.

“They also shielded it from me. I thought they were still looking, but I guess they didn’t want to bother us with the stress of making the decision.”

It came to him that it could serve as an explanation for her actions. That, knowing she would be leaving, she created a situation where the break would be clean and unquestioned. Whether this was conscious or not, he couldn’t decide.

“What about your brother? He’s still needs to finish school?” Moving ever further away from that initial pang of anger. What was the cause?

“He’ll attend boarding school here until the end of the year. He can do a bridging Level A’s and start university in the UK next September.”

It all seemed highly considered to Dirk for all the suddenness she insisted on. He sounded her words within himself, but still no idea about why it all upset him so.

“What about your job?”

Dirk felt a rush of blood to his hands and face. Bingo.

“Well I’m just volunteering with expenses so it’s easy to transfer it to someone else. The organization will be fine.”

“But,” Dirk spluttered now, “don’t you feel like you are able to do some good here? Isn’t this an all-hands-on-deck kind of problem? Are you just going to pack it all in?”
Robyn’s face formed a tut-tut expression as if explaining something to a child.

"It has been a great experience. And there is so much more to be done. But you know, I’m very close to my family. I need to be with them, and they need me for support. There’s plenty of time for me to figure out what I want to do, and I can always come back to this if I want to."

“I just thought it meant more to you. They way you talked about it. You seemed so sincere.”

Her tone changed.

“I can’t understand why it’s this that’s bothering you so much. Friday you were talking about being in line for a cushy travel-writing job. You know what they say about people in glass houses.”

Dirk nearly said, Well that was Friday, something that he couldn’t possibly explain, but instead said: “Your job was what I liked most about you.”

It sounded meek, and ridiculous, but at that moment he realised it wasn’t just another aspect he had liked that about her, it was the only thing he had liked.

“It’s not easy for me, it’s what my parents want,” she said, although from what Dirk read in her eyes told him it wasn’t difficult at all.

“Well, you are twenty-five. Your life shouldn’t be about what they want.”

She started to speak and stopped. Instead, she gave a resigned sigh and grimace, and excused herself to go to the restroom.

A small black girl wandered over from an adjacent table. The parents didn’t notice. She was no more than five, and reached across the table and picked two small sugar packets from the assortment in front of Dirk.

“My mommy won’t let me play with their sugar,” she said, in perfect clipped consonants.

The girl seemed oblivious to Dirk’s predicament, even though he felt it had to be visible to anyone who looked at his face for more than a second. The girl looked left then right then back at him, and smiled. He slowly felt the inner anger subside, and then disappear. The girl wandered back, clutching her treasure.
He slipped the money for the coffee he’d had under Robyn’s plate, pulled his chair back and walked away. For a second he felt a painful pang knowing that Robyn would picture him having left distraught, shamed, defeated. But he felt liberated, at peace, and above her. He slowed his walk and contemplated returning to the table so that she could witness it.

But he realised there was no way to make her realise it. She would believe what she believed no matter what he did, unless it was an act in her language. Say, if he managed to start dating someone who she considered her social superior. But he had no appetite for that motivation.

Walking to his car there was an incident. A light-blue Mercedes had taken the parking spot that a black BMW had been waiting for. The driver left his BMW with the indicator on and the door open while he walked over to the Mercedes. The man looked immensely strong, with a shaved head and tight fitting t-shirt.

He reached the Mercedes and punched a fist through the driver window. The glass did not shatter, but glued together by a film of anti-theft tint, crumpled into the interior of the car like cardboard.

Dirk rounded the corner. Behind him he heard hooting and shouting. Security guards ran past him towards the noise. He got into his car and drove into the sunlight.

Paul Janowitz lived in a large mansion in River Club, bordering on the golf course. The house had two armed guards present twenty-four hours a day, a chef and, the one time Dirk bothered to count, nine toilets.

Officially Paul lived in a penthouse apartment in West Street, close to Nelson Mandela Square. Dirk had been to the apartment once: it was a chrome, glass and leather ensemble that looked unlived in and the kind of space that an international businessman might retain for his kept women. Which Dirk suspected wasn’t too far from the truth.

Rather, whenever Dirk looked for Paul he could be found here in River Club, with his parents.

The two guards opened the automatic gate for him, unsmiling, even though they knew him well and Dirk suspected no one made a house call in a
cheaper car, so it wasn’t that he was difficult to recognise. He waved his tennis racquet at them as a hello but they remained unmoved.

He found Paul by the tennis court. He was dressed in immaculate matching tennis gear, Nike from head to toe with a red headband colour coded to his shirt. It stood out n contrast to his black hair and Mediterranean complexion.

“Avantage Federer,” Dirk announced as a greeting.

“If I play as good as I look, you’re fucked mate,” Paul said with a smile and they shook hands. The last stop on his round-the-world business experience trip – a position with an exclusive Private Equity firm – was in Sydney, and he had retained some of the vernacular.

They knew each other from university, when they were randomly selected as project partners for an economics class assignment, and were close ever since. Paul had finished his three years in Johannesburg, staying with his parents and working part time for the construction arm of his father’s company.

Then he was whisked away to America for an Ivy League graduate degree, then time on Wall Street, the City, Dubai, Singapore and finally Australia. He’d returned six months before, the prodigal son, ready to be bred as successor and all that came with it.

Dirk changed clothes in the pool room cum sauna house next to the tennis court, his gear decidedly more scrappy than Paul’s, his racquet the same one he’d had since high school.

As he stepped back into the sunshine he felt his mind already leaving behind his frustration at Robyn, and focus on the task at hand: to maintain his two year unbeaten run against Paul.

The knocked up for five minutes from the baseline, then took turns volleying, and finished off with serves into both courts.

“Best of three sets?” Paul called from over the net.

“When’s the last time you made it to three?” Dirk mocked back.

The first set started off even, with Paul serving. Their styles contrasted. Paul’s technique was carefully nurtured by a combination of expensive coaches and an affinity for Mediterranean clay-courters that he identified with. This gave his game a coached, persistent precision, but with a loopy topspin that made him vulnerable in the thin Highveld air and fast courts.
Dirk’s game relied on everything being correct – his feet, the timing, the racquet speed, point of impact – because he tried to overpower his opponents. He played with instinct. If a tiny component in his action was not clicking on the day, he could be erratic, and vulnerable. But if everything worked, it was destruction. It was a sight to behold.

Paul was serving unusually well, but Dirk made up for his own errors by thumping several aces against the back fence. At four-all, thirty-all, Dirk framed a second serve that sent it smack into the net pole. He double-faulted the next point, and netted four returns in a row the next game, to lose the set.

Fifteen minutes and a continuous string of unforced errors later, Dirk was down love-three. Only three games away from defeat. He linked his fingers through the fence and stared out at the lawn, trying to focus his mind on the game. But he couldn’t get rid of the voice in his head telling him that this was just like him – a failed relationship, unsure about his occupation, and now capitulation and humiliation against his enemy.

Dirk tried to block the voice, but it persisted. It told him to be angry at Paul’s new equipment, which was surely an advantage. And having a tennis court at the house you grew up in, with the best coaches available, made the match unfair. The voice in his head did not care that Paul had not beaten him in years. It said, give up, you are useless.

"Time violation!" Paul yelled gleefully from across the court. Dirk stormed back to the baseline T and bounced the ball five times hard enough to make his palm sting. He tried one more time to block out the voice, and failing, tossed the ball in the air and swung with all his might.

He looked up, having hardly felt the impact on the strings the timing was so sweet, to a dazed looking Paul. An ace.

Paul regained his cocky demeanor and sauntered over to the advantage court. Dirk, not even caring to make sure he had a ball for a second serve in pocket, tossed up the one ball and tried to hit the cover off it. Another ace.

The voice, sensing an attack to its position, immediately changed its tune. Now it urged Dirk to punish this rich, spoilt twat. To knock him off his high horse, so that he could see Dirk’s superiority.
He tossed the ball, bent his back and pronated his wrist beautifully through the impact. Thwack. Paul was mid-split when the ball nearly took his head off, and he had to duck to avoid wearing a welt.

Paul netted the next return, and they changed ends wordlessly.

Suddenly Dirk found every ounce of instinctive talent that he had within him but had gone missing. He stormed through the next five games taking the second set six-four. Up five-two in the third, Dirk could relax, and he served out to win the match comfortably.

Afterwards they took off their shoes and cooled their weary feet in the swimming pool. Their relationship now on familiar territory, Paul took the loss with the good grace he always did. Dirk could not recall the dark thoughts he had standing on the baseline.

Inside the kitchen Paul passed him a beer from the fridge and they stood leaning against the kitchen counter. Dirk took a deep pull, and then one more, and set the empty bottle down.

“Another?” Paul asked, eyeing him over his still full beer.

“Thirsty,” Dirk smiled, and accepted the new beer.

“How’s things with the bird?”

Dirk made a face.

“Ah, fuck her. Well, the other way,” he said and they both smiled. There was little grey area for Paul. And little time for emotional deliberation. Aspects that made him very good at his job, and Dirk presumed, perhaps a family trait and a reason for the success.

“How’s work?” Dirk asked, finally.

It was Paul’s turn to make a face.

“Long hours. Incompetent staff. But money is rolling in. The old man is happy.”

“It must be nice,” Dirk said, looking to the side, “to have found your stability. You know, after going around the world. To be back here, to settle down.”

Paul shrugged.
“You know what? It’s OK most of the time. Things are not complicated. But, do I regret not going off and doing my own thing somewhere? A bit. But you would hate to be in my position.”

Dirk, who was at that moment thinking the exact opposite, looked surprised.

Paul said: “Oh, yes, you would. Look, I might look free and on top of the world, but I’m not free. I’m indebted here, to my family, to my friends and network here. But you, you’re free. You can get on a plane tomorrow for anywhere, couldn’t you?”

This was why Paul could be tolerated. He was born with a silver spoon, but he was not blind to the situation. And that he could display interest, even envy, in someone like Dirk.

“Can’t you?” Dirk said, but still felt Paul’s words lifted a weight off his shoulders. He was freer than he thought.

“No,” Paul shook his head, “what about the lonely single ladies?”

Outside in the circular driveway Paul followed Dirk to where he was parked but then veered off the path.

“Hold on, I’m just getting something from my car,” he said.

His was parked next to Dirk’s. He clicked open the car and leant inside the passenger door. When he straightened he was holding a rectangular box.

“Here you go bro, happy birthday.”

Dirk looked at it. It was a thirty-year-old single malt scotch. The kind that they talked about drinking in their student days, as if it was a myth. It must have cost a fortune.

“You should really stop stealing gifts for me from your old man,” Dirk joked, and then saw the hurt look on Paul’s face.

“No mate,” Paul said, and then just hid the hurt behind a smile.

“Shit man, this is awesome. Thanks, I really appreciate it. Really.” Dirk stepped forward and palmed Paul on the shoulder a few times. Paul smiled broadly, appeased and pleased.
“Hey, this Friday,” he said, as Dirk got into his car. “My cousin is opening a new club. Big party. Bottle service, I’ll get you VIP. And maybe some new woman. Just bring your game for once.”

“Why don’t you bring your game next time we play tennis?” Dirk retorted, and Paul laughed.

The gate closed behind him, and then it was just Dirk, his Toyota, the surly guards and the cul de sac. He accelerated away, as lightning from a rare autumn thundercloud blitzed down in the southern sky.

VIII

When he was five minutes away from his parent’s house, his father phoned.

“Where are you now?” his father asked, without preamble. Dirk told him.

“Can you please pick up some charcoal? I’ve got some here but I don’t think it will be enough.” Dirk could hear the clinking of plates in the background.

“Sure. I’ll get some at Café Kos.”

Dirk found parking right in front of the café, and picked up a bag sitting conveniently on the pavement outside. He went inside and found Maria sitting on the high chair by the till. She watched his approach with raised eyebrows.

“Why so glum, chum?”

“What’s with the English accent?”

She sat perched on the stool twirling a half-dissolved sucker between two fingers and shrugged.

“There was a documentary on Wimbledon this morning on TV,” she said and laid her head on her shoulder. “But that’s not an answer.”

“I’m not glum, I’m perfectly chipper,” he said, putting on what he hoped was a convincing enough smile to deter her prodding.

“Sure, sure” she let out an exaggerated sigh, not fooled.
Her father, Mr. Ionakis walked in from the back room, an apron around his waist, a broom in one hand and a damp flattened cardboard box in the other. He looked at the two of them for a few seconds, shrugged and then walked outside to presumably throw away the box.

"How’s Dorothea?" Dirk asked her, pointing to the copy of *Middlemarch* placed next to the till. The bookmark had progressed significantly since Thursday, now placed nearly three quarters of the way through the book.

Maria gave him a serious look.

“She’s learning. Slowly.”

“You seem to be reading the good novels for the right reason,” Dirk smiled at her.

He placed the charcoal on the counter and she punched in the amount.

“Second time in a week? You haven’t moved back in with your parents have you?” There was a hint of hope in her voice that Dirk ignored.

“No. Just being a good son.”

“Yeah, right,” she said, sounding doubtful.

“Take care,” he said, picking up the bag and his change and giving a small wave.

She pursed her lips and nodding, picked up her book and started reading.

While his father lit the fire and his mother re-arranged the wine glasses on the table, Dirk wandered between picture frames in the lounge.

The three of them, when he was seven, on holiday in Uvongo. One at the dinner table, the camera timer having been set, knives and forks at the ready, sun burnt faces smiling over a freshly braaied snoek. Dirk instantly recalled the smell of the rented house, an unaccustomed musky dampness that made it difficult to sleep and made the wooden furniture soft and pliant.

Next to it was a photo taken at his parents’ wedding. Black and white, the two vaguely familiar faces, beaming with bob haircuts and staring slightly to the left.

There were many pictures from when they lived in the Free State. Hikes up the outlying koppies, in each one a golden late afternoon light, the high orange grass reaching to their waists.
Midway through the third bottle of wine, they had pushed away their plates greasy with fat, and sat stretched low into their chair, warming in the winter sun.

Dirk rearranged the serviette on his plate, folding it into rudimentary kind of origami volcano, and pondered upon the wisdom of his next question.

“Dad, can I ask you something?” he started, having decided to continue. “How was it back in the old days. Why didn’t you leave or resist or do something?”

From the corner of his eye he saw his mother look down slightly, uncomforted by the question. His father however, laughed.

“What would leaving have accomplished? Our friends and family were here. We’d been cut off from the world so we didn’t know anyone anywhere else. And now, I’m here, paying taxes for the new government. I created wealth here.” He spoke animatedly but not defensively.

“Ignorance is not neutral. Apathy isn’t neutral.”

“True. We were blindfolded back then. I wasn’t educated on the finer moral lines in life, and I suppose I’m not predisposed to seeking them out either. But then, how many people are?

“Look at it this way. The generation in England that defeated the Germans in the Second World War – they’re regarded as heroes. But weren’t they also supporting colonialism here in Africa and around the world? So which were they? And should that moral test fall on the individual member of society?”

Dirk knew what comparison he was trying to make. It was the logical next question – the border wars in Angola, among others. Phillip had been stationed in then South West Africa. A fierce war was taking place in Angola between Cuban and Soviet backed forces against the South African military for what was then for all intents and purposes a colony of South Africa.

The South Africans painted the war as a preventing the spread of communism in Southern Africa, which is how the CIA also phrased its involvement, which consisted of tacit support for the South Africans while the American government publically criticized the apartheid regime. All the while gold rolled out and products rolled in.
“I don’t think that the Second World War is a applicable metaphor for Angola.”

Phillip laughed, and Dirk was relieved that he did not take the conversation as a challenge to his moral position. Dirk was merely curious. It was not possible for him to judge so far across time in such a murky scenario, and he did not intend to.

“You know there have been times when people try to paint me under the same crude brush of the Nats simply because I speak Afrikaans. Is every Hebrew speaker a West Bank imperialist? Did every Texan support the war in Iraq?”

Phillip shrugged that this was a humourous aspect of life, such as a female friend being mistaken for your wife.

Dirk felt sure that he would have had the conviction fight back against the apartheid system. But, he admitted, there was no way to know for sure. Place yourself in a dark vacuum, and what could you determine of the surroundings. He had heard of inhabitants of tropical islands ask: ‘What is humidity?’

“Whatever you do, don’t feel guilty son. You can leave that with us. Do Americans, Canadians or Australians your age feel guilt at wiping out the native population and taking the resources for themselves? Do Europeans your age feel guilty about the countries they’ve built plundering colonies? Life isn’t fair. Don’t be blind to it, but don’t let it consume you.”

There was a pause after Phillips speech. Dirk crunched a serviette into his fist and looked out across the lawn, unsure of how to feel about the argument. It seemed too convenient to absolve oneself purely based on the common attitude.

When he was young and ran with a crowd that got into trouble at school his parents would demand: If they jumped off a bridge, would you? Now it seemed they were saying, the majority is right, go with them.

Dirk realised that he had been confusing two different concepts. The history of the country had infiltrated his sense of fairness. Phillip had muddled the two completely, like two fluids poured into a cup, so that you can’t tell the two were ever distinct.

Dirk saw that his mistake was to think that the past could have an impact on the idea of fairness in the present. The one, it was clear now, had nothing to
do with the other. Using it as an excuse for inaction, as Phillip suggested, was a
deceit. It was to invite numbness. To embrace paralysis.

To change the atmosphere his mother asked: “What is this you said about
a possible new job? Tell us about it.”

Dirk filled them in on the conversation with Koos, and the details of the
job. They were enthusiastic, but instead of it encouraging him, it made him angry.
It frustrated him that they couldn’t see the questions that he had been struggling
with. Questions that only came about because Valerie raised them.

“The new job, well, it would be a great opportunity. More exposure, lots of
travel naturally. But I’ve just recently been asking myself some new questions.
Like what is it that I am supposed to be doing. What are any of us meant to be
doing? Not in a fatalistic sense, but, in a moral sense. And the only answer that I
can come up with is that, the world isn’t fair, sure, like you said dad.”

As Dirk spoke, he became aware of reaching the source of his concern
with his new job.

“But it seems to me that there are only two sides to this. Either you are on
the side that perpetuates the unfairness, or you are on the side that tries to
correct it. If your actions are neutral you are in the first group. That’s it. All of our
life’s occupations can be fit into those two groups.”

Dirk’s parents looked at him with, Dirk felt, sad eyes. They didn’t agree, he
saw, but whether it was his choice of diametric viewpoint that they considered
immature, or the realization that he was unlikely to achieve peace, he wasn’t
sure.

But then his father tilted his head and contracted the muscles on one side
of his face as if to say, ‘close enough’, and said: “You are right. But don’t let your
guard down. Just because you’re on the right side doesn’t mean life won’t
bulldoze over you. Like you said, it’s not fair.”

Back in his apartment Dirk slid open the door to his balcony and stepped
out into the cold. All around him the lights from houses flickered through the
jacaranda trees. It was very dark, and the stars shone a wintry brightness by
which you could tell the change in temperature.

With his cell phone he called Valerie.
“Hello bridge walker,” was how she answered, making him smile.
“I know you mean that pejoratively, but it has a heroic ring to it. Like a trapeze artist. Or some other kind of daredevil.”
“Names can be so deceiving.”
“I am going to choose to disagree in this instance.”
“Go ahead, Mr. Delusional,” she laughed. A pause.
“So,” he started, “I’m sorry for calling so late when I said I would earlier. I’m sure you’ve been tied to the phone.”
“Refer to the previous proper noun,” she deadpanned. He listened for background noise that would inform her setting, but it was silent.
“Right,” he laughed, but then left a pause, hoping to change the tone of the conversation. “Anyway. What are you doing?”
“I’m standing on my balcony.”
“Oh? So am I.”
“What do you see?”
Dirk looked around.
“I see lots of lights on in houses. I think families are watching the Sunday night movie. I can’t see them, but I know there are many children who haven’t done their homework for tomorrow and are stressing out. I see cars going south on the M1. I can’t imagine where they are going. And I can see Scorpio. What do you see?”
“Your view sounds better than mine. I see a drunken homeless guy leaning against a streetlamp. And I see, let me see, wait, OK, I see Orion.”
“No you don’t.”
“How do you know?”
“Well, firstly, it’s the same sky.”
“Thanks, Professor.”
“Secondly, Orion and Scorpio were placed in directly opposite each other in the heavens by the gods. That’s if your gods are Greek.”
“Why?”
“Well, one explanation is that Orion was in love with one of Atlas’ daughters. That’s one of the seven daughters that make up the seven stars in Taurus’ body. He traipsed over for a romantic rendezvous, stepped on a
scorpion, and wound up dead. The gods took pity on him and placed him as far away from Scorpio as possible."

"Well, where is Scorpio then?"
He directed her from the Southern Cross until she found it.
"What's the bright red star?" she then asked.
"As endearing as this is, I think it would be better to show you in person. I was hoping sometime tonight. I still have that job situation tomorrow. Can I convince you to have a drink?"

"Well, I don’t know. I’m having wine right now, so you’d have to be quite a bad convincer to fail."
"Your place?"
"Sure. Bring your astronomy knowledge."

He was just getting ready to leave, when the phone rang again. He looked at the screen, but did not know the number.

"Dirk," the voice on the other end said. It was familiar yet he couldn’t place it.

"Hi, yes? Who is this?"

"It’s…it’s…" the voice was hesitant, and for a moment Dirk thought he would just hang up, but then went on. “It’s Jason.” Of course, he recognized it now. The smooth tone was there, but the confidence was replaced by a tremor.

He remembered Jason taking his number a few weeks prior. They were having dinner at Robyn’s apartment, and Jason had gone to rent a movie. He had wanted to call them to confirm that they had not seen what he selected, and Robyn’s cell phone battery was empty.

"Jason," he said, putting one foot up on the couch. "What’s up?" he asked, since Jason would not be calling for a chat. He was immediately wary of what the call could be about. Robyn and Jason were superficially close, full of hugs and faux enthusiasm but as far as Dirk could gather little substance, so he did not imagine that Jason was informed yet about their break-up.

"Are you home?" he asked, surprising Dirk.
"Yeah? Yes I am, why?"
“Look, I need a favour. I’m in trouble. Can you not ask questions and come over to the golf course.” Jason gave him a staccato list of directions to a disused park being turned into an apartment complex, next to a nearby private course.

“I know where that is,” Dirk found himself saying, even though he wished he had not answered the phone.

“Can you come now?”

Dirk stayed silent and considered remonstrating. The link between himself and Jason, tenuous at best, and often illuminated for what it was – a mimicry of a type of sitcom familiarity that their respective roles required – was now broken. Thankfully broken, Dirk found himself feeling about it.

“Dirk?” Jason’s voice protested against his silence. It was full of expectation, with a lilt of incredulity at the end that the request would be denied. “This is serious,” he added, the vulnerability back in his voice, which was what triggered Dirk out of his inaction.

“OK. Alright man, I’ll come on over.”

In the background Dirk heard a new voice, this one not familiar in the slightest.

“Four minuuuuutes,” he heard. The tone was what caught his attention. Mocking and authoritative, yet at the same time laconic but used to being obeyed. Dirk couldn’t explain why, but the voice made the hair on his body rise up.

Then Jason’s voice came back.

“Dirk, I can’t explain why, but could you please be here in four minutes.”

The drive across to where Jason instructed was so short the Toyota’s heater hadn’t warmed up when he arrived. Dirk drove into the parking lot adjoining the construction site, and spotted two cars pulled up close to the fence to the golf course.

The area was deserted and pitch black. The street was thirty meters behind them, and even there the few working streetlights were ineffectual against the darkness rolling down from the koppies over the eighteen holes of lush greenery.
Dirk dealt with his growing unease by speeding up his movements. It was likely the wrong thing to do, he felt, but to pause and think would welcome anxiety into his demeanor and he was afraid of that. So he flipped the key out of the ignition and leapt from the car, closing the door closed behind him.

He slipped both hands into the back pockets of his jeans and strode over to the cars, hoping his casualness would diffuse whatever danger or problems lurked there.

As he got closer he could make out more of the cars. The one in front was a black Audi A3, a new model, and even in the darkness he could make out the gleaming silver rims on the wheels. The car behind it was an old 1980s VW Jetta, silver metallic with dark windows.

He had to walk past the Jetta to get to the Audi, which is where he expected Jason to be. On the way past it he saw a face following him through the windshield, becoming just a pair of eyes he couldn’t take his own off. They seemed impassive and robotic, and never left his as he looked over his shoulder.

Before he reached the back-left window of the Audi, he heard the electronic mechanism engage and it started to descend. Looking through the window was not Jason but a strange face, one he knew belonged to the Four Minutes voice.

“Slow down cowboy,” the voice said, and Dirk obeyed. He stopped by the open window.

“Where’s Jason?” he asked.

“The phoner? He’s in the passenger seat. Open your window, phoner.”

The front window opened with a gliding whir and Dirk saw Jason sitting in the passenger seat. Next to him was another boy, Dirk guessed a schoolmate.

“Jason?” Dirk asked, and Jason looked at him, but he said nothing.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” the voice in the back commanded. Dirk heard the clank of a heavy object hitting metal and saw that the man in the back had placed a pistol on the windowsill.

“You’re going to go to the ATM and get ten thousand, and you’re going to bring it back here to us. Then we will leave in the Jetta, and you can all go home. Or, you can not come back, and I’ll take these two friends of yours to jail for trying to buy a large amount of illegal narcotics.”
The choice of words and well as the choice of options made Dirk ask involuntarily: “You are a cop?”

The man flipped the gun from side to side a few times to say, ‘Yes of course, let’s get a move on’.

“Jason?” Dirk asked for confirmation, but Jason only stared through the windshield.

“They’re not allowed to speak,” the man in the back said. “Now, you have five minutes. There is an ATM on Louis Botha Avenue. I checked before we came, it’s working. Its limit is R10 000. If you can’t get that much, then that’s tough shit for your friends here, they’re going to jail. In Hillbrow,” he added.

After a long time Dirk said: “Yes. I’ll get it.”

Through the window Dirk stared into the face of the cop. The cop wore a faint, dangerous looking smile. Given the situation, it was menacing. This act, Dirk saw, was literally like taking sweets from a child for the cop. He had before, and was prepared to, commit far worse acts than this one.

Dirk had a sudden rush of cold fear climb up his back. It was not fear at a specific thing, but came from the shock that he was not in control. A sensation that Johannesburg citizen’s had come to know through the years – that your sense of security is a wafer, a finger in a dyke beyond which lay elements far exceeding your ability to control them should it be breached.

He checked his reflection in the window to see if it betrayed his fear. The face that he saw was pulled into a defensive grimace, but did not show signs of someone afraid.

“Well, are you going?” the smiling face turned aggressive, and with a nod Dirk held up five fingers and got into his car.

He returned from the cash machine on Louis Botha, his pockets full of orange notes. He slipped it through the window to the cop who flicked expertly through the notes in groups of five, and then put the money in a shirt pocket underneath his jacket.

He grunted in Dirk’s direction and motioned with the gun for Dirk to move backwards so that he could get out. The man in the Jetta leaned over and opened the passenger door and the cop dropped into the seat, and then they were off.
Dirk regarded Jason and his friend through the passenger.

“That was bullshit,” his friend said.

“Come,” Dirk told Jason, “I’m taking you home.”

Jason shared a look and a shrug with his friend, and then got out.

It was somewhere on Catherine Drive, where the dark suburbs gave way to the yellow lights of Sandton, that Dirk finally spoke.

“Why did you call me? Why didn’t you call one of your hotshot buddies big brother or something. You lot pride yourselves on being tight, on looking out for each other, so why me?” Dirk’s anger was heightened by his confusion at his involvement.

“I panicked. He had his gun out, sitting on his lap, and he told us if we didn’t get the money in five minutes there would be trouble. And my friend were dead quiet, no one wanted to call anyone they knew. And besides, we don’t know anyone who lived in the neighbourhood. And I saw the mall just across the park there, and I remembered where you lived, and I knew I had your number, and I just panicked, because the cop was counting down the minutes. Okay? I’m sorry.”

Jason took a breath against the window and Dirk looked at him. He wasn’t the composed and solipsistic boy from Friday, but he was not panicked anymore. Even though his speech was accelerated it sounded like he was embarrassed and wanted to put the event behind him, it was not driven by adrenaline.

This night, and others like him, Dirk saw, would be the making of him. He saw that these were the events that gave the entitled a sense of invincibility, because that’s what his group were bred to believe.

“We just got caught out, this one time. This is normal, all right. It’s not a problem. The cops busted our dealer, only the cops weren’t good cops, because our dealer was just doing things smalltime. They lured us here, we thought it was our dealer, then bam-bam-bam!” Jason rapped his knuckles on the window, “They were cracking on the window with a pistol.”

Jason grinned wildly.

“We’re here,” Dirk said, idling the car in the cul-de-sac. Jason opened the door, started to get out and stopped. He looked back at Dirk over his shoulder, seemed like he wanted to say something, but kept quiet and got out.
The city was quiet now, and pared down this way revealed the fundamental characteristic of the inhabitants of these suburbs: to move from one part to the other, without noticing anything in between.

Dirk glided along the streets, often the only car in sight, and took in little of the surroundings. The flat sprawl, the distances between destinations, meant that the interior of the car became the bubble that contained all focus.

His focus was a frustrated anger, that rove around and around in his body looking for a target to attack. He felt naked, empty, and alone as the Sunday night streets. His life within this city, he felt, was an embarrassing conceit.

Why? Why? Because for every step he progressed forward, the city pulled him back the same or more. Twenty-six, alone, and bribing the police to release seventeen year old brats who would spit on him if it would impress anyone. The way the city spat on him with its police.

He searched for a system of morality wherein he could place himself, his knowledge, and his actions up to this point in his life. But the system moved beyond his grasp, the morality blocked on the other side of a pole that he could not see past.

He veered down a new street. What is the point of his life? In what direction should he set out for? It was a terrible feeling, to know that you should be peaceful and content but not being, and this made him feel spoilt and ignorant. In this city, in this country, it was not enough to live - it was not possible to be free. Freedom was a lie believed ten thousand kilometers away.

He rounded a corner at speed and found a motionless car blocking the entire lane. There was no time to brake, so he shimmied left and then right, whipping past the obstacle, as if blasting through a chicane. In his mind he smashed into an imaginary on-coming car, and slowing down, the reverie broken, he opened the window.

Outside the Highveld air was bitter. It smelt of frozen dust and coalsmoke, and far from any ocean.

*   *   *
The luminous clock on his dashboard approached midnight. In a few minutes it would be Monday the twenty seventh, an annual holiday, the fifteenth April it would be celebrated.

He pulled up to Valerie’s apartment building.

From the top of the stairs she stood in her pajamas, and as he reached the landing he could only see her silhouette facing him. He was just meters away, but she raised her hand and gave a small, ironic wave of hello, which in her tiredness seemed brave and understanding, a fine gesture.

And even though he worried about her expression, which he could not see, he felt that each small step was taking him somewhere better.

"Step on any scorpions?“ she asked.