

The stillness of statues

A novel by

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DISSERTATION

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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

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The creative writing essay was the bane of my life (and my poor mother's) during my childhood until I met Mrs Bev Walliser, an English teacher in high school. It took only one class for her to show me how writing could be fun and her inspiration, which lives with me to this day, has directed me to the path I've chosen. To the music of words.

Thank you to my supervisor at UCT, Professor André Brink, who believed in my work and offered me the opportunity to live one of my most treasured dreams, that of writing a novel.

My heartfelt thanks to everyone who has stood by me or made sacrifices on my behalf during the creation of this book, especially:

My beloved parents, Neville and Jenny: To my Dad for sharing life in a dream world. To my Mom for always sitting on my shoulder.

My precious sister, Kerry: For helping me live in the real world.

Family, friends and colleagues: You know who you are.

And to my cherished *Ru*, my love, for holding me close in the bubble and letting it soar.

Disclaimer:

Imagination is the reality of the dreamer – Scott Ringenbach. This novel is the result of an over-active imagination and any resemblance to actual people, places, entities or events is entirely coincidental. To weave a history of Benoni, I consulted the following sources: the *Benoni City Times* (2000-2001 'Reflections of Benoni' series); *Benoni – Son of my Sorrow* by Deryck Humphriss (published by the Town Council of Benoni in 1968); *Benoni – The Golden Days* by Ken McLuckie (published by the Benoni Publicity Association in 1993); and visited the Benoni Museum.

K G Cochrane

DEDICATION

‘This sheaf of paper with gaudy cover glued to the spine is not the book. The book is not an object on the table; it is an event in the reader’s mind.... The book, therefore, is only finished when someone reads it.’ – *Lois McMaster Bujold*

‘I must go seek some dew-drops here,
And hang a pearl in every cowslip’s ear.’ – *William Shakespeare*

*This novel, my first, is
For Ru, who humours me
For Mom, Dad, Kerry for being there*

ABSTRACT

'Consequences cannot alter statues, but may help to fix their meaning.' – *Benjamin Cardozo*

The stillness of statues is a fiction novel incorporating various factual episodes to ground it in a fictional realism. It explores the possibilities of different characters trapped or blocked as a result of their actions, ambitions, beliefs, careers, dependencies, expectations, pasts and preconceptions to the extent that they have become statues in their own lives. They are bound not by a linear plot of progression, but rather by the overarching theme of people incapacitated into perpetuating a status quo by their stillness, by their very statuesqueness.

In response to this blockage, they devise various masquerades or masks to protect themselves from discovery and character development (if at all) comes about as a result of the destruction of these façades when the proverbial puppet strings are cut. The novel incorporates an interlaced narration through vignettes to create suspense and gradually reveal connections between characters.

As the story progresses, the circle of narrative widens to incorporate the stranglehold of family networks that illustrate the ideas of alienation, anonymity, distance and powerlessness that tap into South Africa's own greater narrative.

The novel oscillates between a mosaic of past and present tense, but all scenes are delivered in the present to reflect how the past is alive and influentially active in the characters' existing worlds. In addition, narration incorporates the use of dreamscape, imagination, artwork, photography, environment, nature and movement (or the lack thereof) to perpetuate the story. The novel has different sections (chapters) each with a specific topic to convey the central message in another way. It is told as a third person perspective from two points of view, again to maintain the allegory of fragmentation.

Still lives

'A talent is formed in stillness, a character in the world's torrent.' – *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

THE new year washes up onto the shore, debris from the tsunami that swelled up from under the Indian Ocean to devastate Sri Lanka, Thailand and Africa with monstrous walls of water. Under the calmness of the twinkling surface, the earth trembled at the intensity of life and shuddered away its stasis, while the end of 2004 neared. She understands that feeling, but instead of drowning she prefers to suppress her breathing, to catch it in her throat, because only when she pretends she isn't real, do they care to prove she is.

She stands by the contained waters of a fountain because its sparkling movement adds silence to her stark motionlessness. Her *shweshwe* A-line skirt shifts in the wind, but she doesn't. There's going to be a thunderstorm soon. She smells it around her. That's one thing about Johannesburg she doesn't like: its pompous summer storms. She misses Cape Town's soft persistent winter rain and even its gale-force winds. The wind in Jozi is shallow in comparison.

She can't look up to see the metallic clouds, but she knows they're there, with flattened bottoms and heavy paunches in the shape of human bite marks. Popcorn in the sky and people catch its miniature scatterings in cardboard boxes when they visit the movies inside and upstairs at The Zone @ Rosebank. Where there is loudness and action and laughter. And then they find her and stare, trying to catch her eye. Children touch, pulling at her telephone-wire bracelets or South African flag beaded safety-pin brooch, trying to make her laugh. All they want is to wake her up. To shake her. She comes to life when she stands still.

The squirrel is lying in a flowerbed against the split-pole fence, which separates the garden from the unkempt area where the family keeps building scrap such as bricks, corrugated sheeting and sand. There is no grass in there, but the branches of the shrubs and trees that are well tended in the garden reach over the fence to flee pruning shears. The squirrel is curled in a comma of sleep, which is why Abigail can get close to it and stroke it, if she

In the opening pages, readers meet Abigail who performs as a living statue and works at a ceramic studio. An anonymous artist has painted an unusual and disturbing set of plates, which later serve to reflect the correlations between the main characters' worlds. Abigail becomes a victim of crime and is rushed to a local hospital where her story is paused until the novel's closing scenes.

At the same time, Mia is in the intensive care unit also fighting for her life, physically and emotionally, as she tries to transcend the domination of her grandmother's powerful secrets. Her turmoil reflects in her childhood, relationships and in the corporate world of polished caricatures, deadlines and dead ends.

The hospital becomes the stage for a drama that plays out over a few days, but incorporates years of pain. It is also the central meeting point for characters who each serve as a catalyst to bring other players together.

wants. But she doesn't, not yet. Its tail asks a question she can't answer and is almost bigger than its body covered in dense grey and white fur, with touches of caramel on its paws and face, which pulls into a pointed nose. The bushiness of the tail dances in the wind like fields of wheat, but the squirrel's eyes are weighed down by its long eyelashes and it doesn't stir.

It hasn't been here for very long otherwise she'd have noticed it. She knows it's not really sleeping because its nest is probably the one in the oak tree at the back of the garden. There's not a mark on its body, which means the damage is inside, although she's not sure what has caused this quick-moving animal to drop. She's seen them running along the cables above the walls that make people neighbours, jumping from tree to tree and climbing trunks faster than cats. Bulldozer the boxer who spends most of his days spread out sunning on the patio couldn't have done this either because he's too old and slow and tired. He's also only got three stiff legs and a stump so he doesn't move if he doesn't have to. Sometimes Pa carries him into his kennel and out again because otherwise the dog would stay in one place all the time, tears streaking down his muzzle with its black mask, his second stump wagging. He has never hurt anyone and she is sure that includes this squirrel.

As the only person who knows about the squirrel she must help it. She doesn't want to leave it for Bulldozer to find and carry around in his mouth or for the ants to cover in a lace tablecloth of blackness. It is too beautiful, too soft, too gentle. She wonders where it has hidden its nuts for rainy winters and whether other squirrels will find them now. In the early mornings and evenings, she has watched them eating pink berries, turning acorns in their paws like miniature rugby balls and running, running, running.

Abigail is not allowed in the house so she taps on a bedroom window, hoping to find Master Marcel in his room pretending to do his homework. Sometimes they play together. Last Saturday they jumped in equal leaps on the pumped-up castle, but only after everyone else had left the party. Madam Gordon brought her a paper plate bent in half by fizzing sweets that stretched when she bit and pulled, two slices of sponge cake with icing the shade of papayas ripening on the kitchen window sill, dry mini sausage rolls and twisted Nik-Naks to match the Fanta Orange she received in an enamel mug. But even though Master Marcel calls her funny names, tells her she smells funny and that she has

funny hair, she'll pretend to ignore his meanness if he continues to share his games and sweets with her.

The net curtains are scrunched aside in a clenched fist. 'What do you want?' 'What do you do if you find a dead animal?' She knows she speaks and understands English better than other gardeners' daughters because her father pays for lessons with Miss Millie down the road. He says a kind person gives him money for her schooling. When she can, her mother, who lives in Soweto, also sends cash so her child can become one of the *abomashayela phezulu*, people who punch high. 'Where, what is it?' Master Marcel squeezes out further from between the wooden window frames, his eyes popping out like hard-boiled eggs. His expression is the same as when he holds dripping *boerewors* from the braai just out of Bulldozer's reach and then eats it in front of him when there is wetness on the paving under the dog's drooling mouth. 'There is nothing.' She suddenly decides he mustn't know about her squirrel, but she's still not sure what she should do about it either. 'Oh.' He doesn't look fooled. 'Are you being a *poephoh*? I'm coming to look.' 'I'm thinking stupid things again.' She blurts out the first thing she can. He's laughed at her before for making up 'stupid things' in her head like why white people don't work in the homes of people who aren't white. Or why she's not allowed to swim in the sea or make sand castles on the same beach as he does. Or why only white children go to his school and church. Why she can't play on the jumping castle with his friends. 'I'll make my mother give you extra work if you keep pestering me for nothing while I'm doing my homework.' She sees he's been listening to tapes, which are lying on his unmade bed. He sees she has noticed and smiles, his teeth held inside his granadilla mouth by railway tracks. Spit strings between his jaws like the slime that comes with a soggy bar of soap when she lifts it off a dish. 'You can't tell on me because your daddy's just a gardener. But if you bring it to me, I'll get rid of it for you,' he says, picking at something in his sideburns and pressing it hard between his fingers. 'If you don't, I'll tell everyone you killed it.' 'What will you do to it?' She watches him finger his face, feeling for lumps. 'Throw it over the wall for the neighbours. Or burn it with my lighter.' She knows he is watching for a reaction that will tell him she's lying so she stands at the sill trying to look stupid, hoping he'll get bored with her. 'Stupid girl!' He shoots her with his fingers, walks

like an Egyptian, drops the curtain and turns up his music. *It's a sin, doo doo doo*. One day she will be an actress on the television or in the theatre where lots of people will not know that the things on her face are not the things in her head.

Abigail doesn't want to ask her father for help because he'll pick up the squirrel with a spade and throw it away in a black bag for Madam's dustbin boys or whatever she feels like calling them to collect. She pulls hard to open the squeaky door to their room next to the garage where her father has put his bed on bricks to keep away the *ntokoloshe* for Betty, his girlfriend, who is scared of the little thing resembling a hairy dwarf that Abigail thinks lives only in people's imaginations. Lifting the blanket hanging over the sides of the bed, she pulls out a shoebox. In it she received her first pair of new leather shoes polished like buttered sweet corn and the box is now her memory chest. She takes out each treasure tenderly, wrapping it all in the threadbare blanket her mother used to carry the baby girl she once was on her back. Lining the box with toilet paper, she doesn't feel sad giving up her box for the squirrel's coffin. She plans to have other new shoes during her life, but the squirrel will only be dead once.

The squirrel moves easily when she lifts it up with the shovel she found among her father's tools in the wooden shed. She lets it fall stiffly onto its dirty side in the box. It won't mind the sand, she thinks, as she pushes in the tail with the tip of the shovel. She stares at it, secures the lid and slides the box into a plastic packet, which she puts next to her while she starts digging a hole. The squirrel will be safe here. The oak tree's bark has the same material as soldier's camouflaged uniforms.

When she finally goes inside for supper, it is dark and she is hungry. But Lindiwe hasn't brought their food to the room yet. Sometimes Lindiwe eats with them. Sometimes she goes back to wash dishes. Sometimes she goes into her separate room and doesn't appear until the morning to prepare breakfast for the family. But she doesn't go out. They're not allowed to do that.

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When she performs, there are times when coins thud into her upturned umbrella, but she doesn't do it for the money. The umbrella – the first thing she bought when she arrived in

Johannesburg – is not there to carry her. She carries it as portable protection. It's not an open guitar case for people paying for parking tickets to pay for music. It's not next to her to receive, but to shelter. And she opens it up as a parachute so she can fly beyond her 23 years.

Each slice of the circular canopy is a different colour, her rainbow umbrella. At her whim it flares like a temper and collapses, a folded wing. No one is watching at the moment, so she lets her Rooibos-coloured eyes strain to the side. She can see the umbrella in the arms of an air stream, pirouetting awkwardly, its underbelly exposed to the coming storm. But pull away the soft material scratching against the bricks and its steel skeleton of thin rods can do damage. Poke out eyes. She keeps it in a sheath and still it defies flatness because it is not the tiny prop clowns carry.

Master Marcel asks what she'll give him if he leaves the hole in the ground alone and doesn't dig any further. She has caught him excavating under the squirrel's nest and his hands are caked in soil and leaves gone soft. In his tight grey school shorts and untucked shirt with ink blotches, his pale thighs are flabby and his unpolished shoes muddied under crumpled socks. She has just walked back from Miss Millie in the lengthening shadows. 'What will you give me if I stop?' He knows she has nothing of value and he knows she knows this too.

'I have nothing.'

'Think of something I might want.'

She considers her special possessions. A pair of knitted gloves from her mother no way as fancy as the leather ones with fur inside that Master Marcel filled with tinned dog food and invited her to put her hands inside. A violet crocheted doll's dress and bootees. A ribbon Pa says is the colour of fresh poppies. A bank book with separate columns for deposits and withdrawals and stamps. He smiles and the iciness of getting into an enamel bath of cooling water freezes her blood. He moves closer and she takes a step back, wondering where Pa is and whether he'll come running if she screams. 'If you can't give me anything I can take what I want.'

She is still while she tries to control her breathing, to slow it down, to make it stop. Perhaps if he sees she is calm, he will leave her alone, but this doesn't seem to be happening. She tries to let the life flow out of her, but it thumps and heaves to be

acknowledged. Abigail takes another step back and is unable to move past the Wendy House. 'Then dig it out,' she retorts. That surprises him and he thinks for a moment, which seems like a long time.

'Maybe I don't want it anymore.' He is standing in front of her now and puts his hand firmly on her nipple and squeezes it. She doesn't have titties yet. Her stomach leaps into her mouth and she tastes her peanut butter sandwich.

'Marcel! Marccccccccellllllll!' His mother's voice is an arrow from a bow, but he keeps his hand where it is.

'Keep quiet... ' He breathes onto her. 'Or I'll hit you...' Her wild eyes catch sight of Bulldozer peeping around the Wendy House.

'In your box, you stupid ugly dog!' He raises his voice, but not enough for his mother to hear.

'Marceeeellllll?'

Please, Bulldozer, help, she wills. Bulldozer whines. Spit bubbles on his nose and lip. He inches forward, sniffing at their feet and with much effort, jumps up against Master Marcel. 'Push off, you crippled runt!' Master Marcel knocks the animal aside and losing balance it stumbles to the ground where it stays. Master Marcel puts his hands back on her, kicking at the dog, which whines again.

'Marcel! Are you kicking Bulldozer? Come here at once!'

'I can't! Abigail's buried something in our garden!' He looks at her with such poison she knows it will not be long before she and her father will have to leave. He lets his hands drop, but she can still feel them, the threat of them.

Her father and his sack eyes are called from scooping up leaves floating in the swimming pool to witness his daughter's shame. Even Mr Gordon is home early from work to reveal her secret in case it's something illegal that will get the family into trouble during this time of sharpening confrontation. Master Marcel doesn't look at her while her father digs. They stand around the hole. And then the spade hits the bricks she used to cover up her memory box.

With greedy hands, Master Marcel reaches into the dampness to retrieve the container, which he lifts out roughly in its plastic packet, clods falling back into the hole. 'I think we should let Abigail open it since it is her box.' Mr Gordon speaks with authority from under his twitching moustache.

‘Marcel, give Abigail the box.’ His wife supports his decision. Master Marcel drops it onto the ground for Abigail to open but, as she takes it out of the packet and carefully starts to lift the lid, he pulls it out of her hands, tearing at it so the contents fall onto his hunched bare legs. He screams – and then so does his mother – and drops the box. Everyone except Abigail stares with shock as Bulldozer’s spongy turds roll on to the grass.

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The images are disturbing – they disrupt her equilibrium – and she wonders who has painted them on the plates. She wasn’t here yesterday at the studio when the person must have been painting and she hasn’t seen anything like these before. Usually she glances over stencilled tortoises, hot-air balloons, ducks, teapots, daisies. And children’s interpretations of those figures. Twitchy moments without essence or thought. Watery, leaking depictions of nothing. But not these. These make her stare because each picture is too heavy for the paint and the plate.

‘Abigail, could you bring those here so we can put them aside to be fired?’ The voice belongs to Maggie, the studio’s owner.

‘I’ve never seen plates like these before.’

‘They are rather strange. There seem to be eight of them.’ Maggie crosses the studio, a plait rusty with henna draped over her bony shoulder. ‘But we need to hurry with them before the December rush starts.’

‘Who painted them?’ She tries not to think of all the children clamouring to paint plates during their holidays, the studio’s busiest time of year.

‘I’m not sure. I wasn’t here yesterday. I had my examination. Julia was watching the studio. Ask her.’

‘Did they use our paints?’ The colours appear brighter than those at the studio.

‘As I said, ask Julia.’ Abigail watches Maggie walk back to the till, her tanned pregnancy bulging from under a vest that stretches to just below her protruding belly button. She has spoken excessively of a water birth to Abigail, who wonders at times whether Maggie is not more preoccupied with the idea of having a baby than the actual child itself. Similarly, it seems the artist was more preoccupied with the idea of each picture than the final result.

'Can you work on Saturday?'

'I'm performing.'

Julia isn't coming in today with answers. At lunchtime, Maggie has already eaten her food for the whole day. Pre-breakfast buttermilk rusks. Breakfast of yoghurt, fruit salad, cashew nuts, mango juice and chamomile tea. After-breakfast-pre-tea snack of two bran muffins and strawberry jam. Tea break: four Provitas shining with Marmite and apple juice. Lunch – a tuna salad with rocket leaves and cherry tomatoes followed by two slices of rye bread smothered in aubergine paste. She doesn't look happy that she'll have to fill up on water for the rest of the day. She isn't pleased at all, so she grabs her purse and asks whether Abigail would like a doughnut for later. She wouldn't, thanks, and then Maggie is gone, her shoes squeaking on the concrete floor. The studio is quiet, as Abigail washes out paintbrushes and containers, but with the unexpected solitude, she leaves the sink to stare at the plates stacked on a side table. Again she tries to understand, to find the underlying pattern, but she is not sure if even the artist would be able to explain. Earlier this year, Venus passed between earth and sun in a celestial ballet. She loved its rare link with the past and future, with its recorded transits in 1631, 1639, 1761, 1769, 1874, 1882 and now 2004. There was an explained pattern in its movement, which she doesn't understand fully. Only its artist can really explain.

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She wonders what she should do when it starts to rain. Early this morning she white-washed and painted herself into an embodiment of *Litema*, the mural art of the Basotho. The sun has gone behind a cloud and the wind spins her umbrella in its arms. But she won't risk reaching out to steady it while she's acting in public. Of more concern, however, is the rain and its ability to dissolve her mask in the way it washes away *Litema* designs to clear the way for new ornamental opportunities. She wills her umbrella to stay put. Hers are the only rules she doesn't bend.

She peeps through the open lounge window where the family is focused intently on the television, supper plates on their laps. From what she can see and hear, it looks as if an

aeroplane has crashed into the sea and there are lists on the screen. The words mean nothing to her. SA 295. Helderberg. Disaster. Fire. Everyone killed. Mauritius. They don't look happy, but she knows they won't move or hear anything apart from the TV. She runs to the Wendy House to find the bundle wrapped in her mother's faded blanket. In the fabric is the dead squirrel, which she has covered with acorns. She saw Marcel spying on her through the window earlier and knew then that her hands would not be the last to work with the grave. It hasn't been difficult to deceive him. When she heard the toilet flush in his bathroom and felt sure he wasn't watching her anymore, she lifted the box from the hole and ran to her room where she wrapped up the squirrel and emptied the box in readiness for Bulldozer's stinking parcels.

Careful not to let the dry hinges squeal, she pushes open the gate in the split-pole fence and closes it behind her and the building rubble. It is unforgivingly dark, but if she keeps moving, the security lights under the gutters on the house give her enough brightness to continue digging. But when the lights lose interest in her, she has to wave an arm or jump up soundlessly to remind them that she needs help to bury the squirrel. When she's finished, she builds a pyramid of broken bricks over the tomb and scatters it with oak leaves in the same way her Pa disperses seeds over soil.

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The clouds have a full bladder, but still the rain does not come. She is grateful because it extends her performance and tests her willpower. She watches the escalators carrying people up to the bank and down away from it again. It's a system of co-evolution she decides, because when the people in front get off, the next person moves into their position to be replaced from those behind. Different people, at different stages, on different levels, in the same direction. The repetition is mesmerising. Her free mind rides up and down while her body remains a statue on the paving. She thinks it's a fitting way to enter a building that oversees the similar flow of funds. Like the flow of people leaving the country because of the crime and those who return to face the crime in a country that gives them a history.

Four children have created a simple game on the escalators. The two elder boys are holding the arms of a toddler above her shoulders. Her mouth is open while they chatter noisily down to ground level where they swing her to her knees. The fourth, a young boy in denim dungarees, waits at the top of the machine. He bites his hand and stares worriedly at his siblings, pointing his shoe to touch the stairs and pulling back again. A woman in slacks wordlessly takes his hand and steps onto the escalator, pulling him up to her side and they ride together. He doesn't let go of her hand until they reach the bottom where she walks away. When he wants to go up again, there is no hand to grip so he grabs the nearest skirt to lift him up, but this time the woman glares at him distastefully, as if she'd love to swat him off like a fly on one of Bulldozer's cracking mounds that fell out of the box.

Pa has been given his wages for the rest of the month, but they must leave before the end of the day. Lindiwe has just brought flour, sugar, salt, tea bags, gem squashes, half a loaf of bread, pastel zoo biscuits, raw oats, a tin of baked beans, half a sack of potatoes, rice, two oranges as well as a carton of milk for them to take with them.

'Where...?'

'She will not miss these small things.'

'But if she catches us?'

'The Madam is not thinking of these things when she is having her nails painted.'

'*Siyabonga kakhulu Lindiwe.*' We thank you so much.

Miss Millie insists Abigail stay with her. She can help around the cottage and continue her lessons. Pa must save his money for when Abigail is older because he won't need to spend it if her parents need extra help in their garden. And so Pa says goodbye to Abigail who is to stay with Miss Millie in Newlands after she drops him off in Constantia at Miss Millie's childhood home with its sprawling gardens.

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There is a fibreglass skeleton that hangs in Miss Millie's small garden, not hiding in her closet, as her friends tease when they come to rest in her plump couches and drink wine in front of the fire. Bonita dangles from a tree to keep thieves away and gains life at night from street lamps or full moons. Miss Millie hasn't had trouble with break-ins since Bonita took up her grinning vigil. It seems she followed the advice of a *sangoma*, who suggested placing bones in front of the door to keep away unwanted visitors. Miss Millie hates barbed-wire fencing in her domestic space. 'I'm not at war,' she says when a friend asks why she doesn't employ a more conventional approach. 'This isn't a concentration camp, or a battlefield of trenches. It's my home.' She glares at her brass candlesticks on the mantelpiece, as if they've said something to offend her.

'But Millie, this is South Africa. The country is at war. We're in a state of emergency, for God's sake.'

'I don't want it leopard-crawling into my energy. Besides, if I barricade myself in isolation surely it would seem like I have something of value to hide, something that can be stolen. So what is essentially a trap becomes a lure.'

'But, Mildred Baker, your life is valuable, you know.'

'Touch wood,' she says reaching out from her *riempie* bench to polish the *kist* serving as a coffee table, 'there won't be any problems'.

Abigail sometimes wishes she had Bonita with her now, a silent security guard at her side to distract her from her meditation, while she poses in her bricked performance area. She chooses bricks as her milieu because of her belief that they last longer than most other materials. She remembers lessons with Miss Millie about early urban civilisations.

Mesopotamia. The Great Wall of China. Roman baths and amphitheatres. She wants a background that resists her so she won't blend in. A background of repetition supporting her recurring message of silence as communication and motionless as art.

When she first attempted life as a living statue, she stood at a set of traffic lights along Oxford Road with Siphso and Kwezi who amused her with their forward attitudes, copyrighted cardboard signs and ability to dance Madiba style, the *malatsa* and *kmasa kmasa* as warranted by the occasion. Siphso would hold up a sign from his collection: 'My two dog arrested for stealing neighborr chickens. Need money for bayle.' 'Are you going to give me the money or should I fake a limp. No bull\$###t. © Siphso 04.', 'Celebrate 10 years of

democracy with a donation' and later 'Charlize wins Oscar. Siphon wins hearts.' Kwezi sometimes looked after a friend's baby for the day, juggling the lethargic child on her lap or back, looking so sad. Other times she'd mind a blind pensioner called Moses, whom she'd drag behind her holding a tin and rolling his eyes back. When they could borrow a wheelchair from Jabu, a Sandton beggar who liked taking days off, Moses would sit in the chair and twist his hands into crooked talons.

She'd watch how motorists would suddenly wind up their windows when approaching the red lights so Siphon and Kwezi couldn't invade their space inside the vehicles. They didn't want food, just cash. Siphon wanted a television to watch *Bafana Bafana* play and Kwezi was hoping to save up for a microwave oven. She already had a fridge. Moses was in it for a cell phone and extra money for the Lotto. Siphon once brought along a squeegee and a bucket of water to clean windscreens, but he got into trouble: 'Bugger off!', 'No thank you! No *thank* you.', 'Ag no man, not now', 'Hey! What do you think you're doing?' and 'I'm not paying for that *gemors*'. He also tried plastic coat hangers; sparkling red, silver and blue car-cools; soft drinks; dried mango; watches and kitsch toys with tongues that unfolded like party streamers. But he stopped all that. He earned more money with his signs that made people laugh.

Kwezi was selling *Homeless Talk* when Lana the poor white arrived with a tin sporting a wrap-around home-made label appealing for donations for the homeless. Her face was burnt to leather and her over-peroxidized hair – short on the top and sides, stringy at the back – was the colour of mashed bananas. An old-fashioned wooden crutch with sponge rests held her up under one armpit, but it didn't hamper her from turning away from drivers in Beemers and Mercs who held out dark arms to drop coins in her tin. Siphon said *mlungu* didn't know how to do this thing of begging. But Abigail thought that pride was an even bigger job hazard than exhaust fumes, cars not being able to brake in time, metro police, insults and the elements of nature. And knowing that she wasn't in it for the money, Abigail left. They moved her, touched her heart, and she couldn't have that when she needed to surround herself in a bubble of nothing.

In her new performance area, where she can maintain emotional distance, she watches a woman carrying a baby on her hip while talking on a phone. She is stylish in a fawn corduroy blazer with a green chiffon rose corsage, embroidered denim skirt and leather boots, her hair combed back tight from her roots and fluffed out in a bun shape.

She walks purposefully, a child in her arms with ribboned bunches on top of her head kicking out. A diminutive shoe slips from the baby's foot onto the bricks. Her mother doesn't notice. Abigail wants to shout out, to draw her attention to the shoe, but she can't, not while she's standing in character. The soft sandal remains where it is and the woman doesn't return to look for it.

Last night she drank about five litres of water to hydrate for today and ate eight thick slices of bread, oily with apricot jam, to keep up her strength until six-o'clock when in a spasmodic stiff-jointed motion, she will try to make a quick exit without shattering the illusion of a statuesque posture. A couple strolls past hand in hand, carrying take-away coffees from the café upstairs, sipping through lidded containers, murmuring between themselves. They stop and watch her, smiling. 'She's good, hey Ru?'

The man called Ru has black hair streaked with silver and he's assessing her with warm eyes. 'Wink if you can hear us and blink twice to say hello.' Abigail smiles inside and blinks twice rapidly as if she never blinked at all. 'Hey! Did you see, Babe?'

Babe peers intently at Abigail, but doesn't appear so sure, almost as if she saw it, but could be mistaken. 'Perhaps it was an optical illusion, Ru? We don't have our glasses on.'

Suddenly Abigail twists her waist sharply and lunges forward with a bent arm, as if to shake his hand. They jump back and laugh at themselves, spilling coffee. Ru touches her hand and presses a coin into her palm, but she lets it fall to the ground. She can't give in to tricks. Babe picks it up and throws it into the umbrella. Ru watches her over his shoulder when he leaves and Abigail winks, just once.

Miss Millie is reminding Abigail to say 'No, thank you' and 'Yes please' and 'Pardon' if she wants to have good manners. 'Hay is for horses.' Abigail is lying on the floor, using wax crayons with the rich choices of silver, copper and gold to fill inside the lines of the pictures in the colouring-in book. She didn't say 'Yes please' when Miss Millie asked if she wanted fish fingers for lunch. She finds the pictures boring because they're not of her world. A magician with a long pointed hat and beard pulling a rabbit out of a hat by its ears. Little boys fishing for striped and spotted fish in a pond. A motor car with small tyres and a smile between the head lamps. A princess kissing a frog. She tries to give colour to the black and white outlines, but starts drawing her own pictures that she would like to see in the white space. A squirrel holding an acorn. A woman with a baby on her back in a

blanket. A bed on bricks with a funny monster underneath. A woman with a mane of frizzy hair next to a skeleton hanging from a tree.

When Miss Millie sees her pictures, she buys her a book with blank pages and no lines. 'Draw what you see in your mind and in your heart,' she tells Abigail. 'Connect your crayon to your deepest dreams.' She never gives her a colouring-in book again and buys magnets that snap on the fridge to hold up Abigail's drawings.

Abigail is practising with her hula hoop in the garden out of Bonita's sight. Around her waist. Around her arm. Fling into the air to catch with the other arm. Around her ankle. Around her waist. Around her other ankle. The hoop is the luminous yellow of the highlighters Miss Millie uses to remember things on notes. If she looks carefully, she notices fine white stripes. The wooden door in the wall leading onto the gravel pavement outside opens and in walks a woman Abigail hasn't seen before and when that happens, Miss Millie has told her to stop what she's doing immediately and go into the kitchen through the back door. There she must stay quietly until Miss Millie tells her she can come out or that she must wait in the kitchen and find something helpful to do. Empty the rubbish bin. Put away dishes drying on the rack. Peel potatoes for supper. Water the pot plants. Shake crumbs out of the toaster. Give the cat more milk. She is half expecting Miss Millie to call her because the woman seemed friendly with a smile pulled across a wide apple face. But she doesn't, so Abigail starts washing the tea cup and saucer in the sink. She is waiting for Miss Millie to tell her what to do, but the door remains shut and she can't hear a voice coming closer.

She opens the door slightly and peeps into the lounge, which is empty, except for the visitor's scarf thrown over the couch, which Cleopatra the cat is kneading with splayed paws, a bobble wet in her mouth and a look on her whiskered face that says she's thinking happy things. Abigail steps out of the kitchen, through the lounge and down a short passage because it is the only direction she can go if she wants to find Miss Millie. And when she does, her mind unwraps like a Chappies bubble-gum wrapper. *DID YOU KNOW? Miss Millie kisses other women instead of men?*

Her name is Zoë, says Miss Millie with a beetroot face, and she is a special friend. Zoë is dressed in a cream dress, thick cream cardigan and Jesus sandals. Her hair is lighter than her clothes and tangled in wiry corkscrews down her back. She has a round face with

eyes as rippled and flecked as the ocean on a windy day. She smiles at Abigail. 'So this is your good cause, Millie love?' Her teeth are ivory and both incisors lean out across the front row towards each other, like Miss Millie and Miss Zoë. She decides she'll call the new lady 'Miss' too, to link her to Miss Millie. It's better than *aunty* or *tannie* or *ousie*.

'So now you know my secret, Abigail. Why I live alone with no man in the cottage.'

Abigail nods, thinking about what it means to be a good cause because Miss Millie hasn't answered the question.

'Do you mind? Does this upset you?' Miss Millie bends to reach Abigail's height so she can look her in the face.

Abigail thinks of the Gordon family and of Miss Millie. 'No.' It must be the right thing to say because Miss Millie puts an arm around Miss Zoë and one on Abigail's shoulders.

'I'm so glad because we're going to be seeing a lot more of this amazing woman.'

In her cow-jumping-over-the-moon pajamas, Abigail lies on her stomach on the rag-rug and draws hula hoops spinning through the stars. She feels the weight of Cleopatra curled on her back. Miss Zoë is lying with her head in Miss Millie's lap. Dirty supper dishes are piled next to the couch to be carried away later. 'Am I your good cause, Miss Millie?' The question has been drumming through her mind since Miss Zoë asked it.

'See what you've done, Zoë?' Miss Millie sounds cuddly like blankets, not crisp like summer sheets. Zoë mumbles something soft for Miss Millie, not Abigail, to hear. 'You cause goodness in my heart, Abigail. Look at this picture.' Abigail looks at the photograph in the magazine Miss Millie is leaning over to hold up. 'This is Princess Di. When so many people believe AIDS can be contracted through casual contact, here she is, sitting on the sickbed of a man with the disease, holding his hand. That's what I'm doing. No matter what people think, say or frown upon, I've chosen to hold your hand'

'Am I sick?' Abigail looks at the man withering away.

'No, darling. You're my princess!'

'Why do you think people paint, Millie?' Miss Zoë has been watching Abigail putting the finishing touches to her drawing, offering bad suggestions of what else to add. The cow and the moon from Abigail's pajamas. Space ships. Green Martians with too-big heads.

'Perhaps to see a new way of looking at something that has influenced us?'

'Perhaps we see a new way of looking at ourselves?'

'I suppose. What makes a painting beautiful for you?'

'When I still like it after I've moved away.'

'Isn't it rather if you still like it when you turn back to it?'

In the silence, Abigail peeps to see Miss Zoë lifting her face to Miss Millie's. She waits for a moment before standing up to say goodnight. She wants to brush her teeth and go to bed.

'Off to bed?'

She nods, rubbing her eyes.

'I'll be along shortly to tuck you in.'

Abigail, carrying her things, shuffles down the passage, but stops when she hears her name mentioned.

'Aren't you going to deprive Abigail of her culture, Millie, taking her away from her family like this? And why does she call you Miss Millie? Surely that perpetuates a role handed down to us?'

'What culture, Zoë? The father's a gardener. The mother's in Joburg. Both are too busy trying to survive to look after a child properly. Abigail is bright and deserves a chance. The system isn't on her side until the struggle is won. And I've told her she doesn't have to use *Miss* in front of my name. It is her choice, which I respect.'

'But why must you be the person to give her that chance?'

'Her father lost his job. I stepped in to help. He's working with my folks now and is loving it. Like I love Abigail. It's that simple.'

'It's not.'

'She's helping me around the house in exchange for lessons.'

'Please, knowing you, the girl probably doesn't even make her own bed. You've given her a loving home no matter how you try to justify it to yourself or anyone else. How did you meet them?'

'He had a job down the road with that ghastly Gordon family and when I broke my ankle he came over once a week to help me in the garden. One day about a year later I went for a walk and noticed this little girl on the pavement behind a cardboard box outside their house. She was selling home-made perfume in old fish-paste bottles. I don't think anyone knew about it because I'm sure they'd not have permitted it. Anyway, I asked what was in the bottles and she said the garden. I asked her to elaborate. She said squashed rose petals

and water. God, Zoë, I opened a bottle and it smelt revolting. I said I'd take the lot, how much did she want. She was quiet for a while, as if she was thinking. Then she said: Miss could help me use my brain properly. She couldn't have been more than five. I've been teaching her since. Now, tell me. What do you think about all the worker strikes reducing Botha's election to a side show?

'Tambo has called for us all to rise against tyrannical puppet administrations.'

'The regime is trying to find puppets of its own to man apartheid structures.'

Abigail hears them outside her window, as they say goodnight. Their hovering voices woke her up. 'Hey, you must lock your car door, it's still open.' It's Miss Zoë's clotted cream voice.

'I never lock my door. They're welcome to get inside to see for themselves that there's nothing there to steal. It saves me the bother of replacing a broken window or a damaged door, which in the long run costs more than whatever they steal. Not to mention the hassle factor.'

Miss Zoë laughs thickly in peaks and dips. 'You're fantastic, Millie. Has anyone ever been in your car?'

'I have a resident *bergie* who moves in during the winter months for a place to sleep at night out of the wind and rain.'

'Doesn't he leave behind a mess?'

'He has the utmost respect for Bonita, who is intolerant of things like booze and *zolls*.'

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In the studio Abigail holds a plate up to the light, as if somehow there will be a transparency to offer clues. It intrigues her how these images were made by brush-stroking a surface with paint. Generally, coverings masquerade as art, like lingerie. This time, however, she feels somehow that the skill is in a mastery of the plate as a medium. On the back she notices an initial. W? Or M? 04 on its side. The images don't reveal a logical meaning to her, but to the painter they must all be interconnected. A door slams shut and she jumps in fright, knocking the plate she is holding against the corner of a wall. When she dares to look down at it, there is a decisive dry fracture cracking it into lazy zig-zags

and she knows the two pieces will come apart when she separates her hands. Horror claws at her throat like a leopard on the attack, its powerful rear limbs kicking into her stomach. Disembowelling her. But all she sees are its broken circles of spots.

‘Abigail! Yooo-hooo! I’m back in the land of the living!’ It’s Julia, who has come into the studio, letting the door crash behind her. She has skunk highlights and as she gives her a hug, Abigail notices she hasn’t applied her foundation properly because the orangey tone of her face ends at her jaw line and doesn’t extend to her neck. There are also orangey streaks into her hairline. She has different earrings in each ear. One has two holes with studs; the other has a row of pewter loops like an arm with too many bangles. ‘How’ve you been?’

Abigail is frozen with the broken plate in her hands and her eyes meet Julia’s hazel ones under thick black-rimmed glasses. ‘It broke.’

‘The plate?’ Julia looks into Abigail’s cupped hands, which haven’t moved since she destroyed the ceramic treasure by accident. ‘Shit.’

‘Did you see who painted them?’

‘Ja.’

‘What do I do? It was an accident.’

‘You’ll have to fix it.’

‘The crack will still be there. We can’t glue it back together again.’

‘Then you’ll have to repaint it exactly like it was.’

‘You’re not going to tell the artist?’

‘No. Trust me. It’s better this way.’

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Abigail stares at the people moving up and down on the escalator. They stop their own travelling, but the escalator keeps them progressing. It is a smooth seamless rhythm, she thinks. Step on. Stand still. Move up. Move down. Step off. Walk around the solemn security guard with a blazer, walkie-talkie and Alsatian. But it’s idiots like these, she thinks, watching four men pushing people aside on their way down, trying to beat the sliding steps, who break the gliding momentum. The festive season is over and so she wonders

what makes their rush greater than everyone else's, especially on a busy Saturday morning. Then she notices the identical knitted balaclavas pulled over their faces, the pinks of their lips visible through slits. They could be anyone, she decides, as she hears the first scream.

The heavy middle-aged woman almost falls over the side, as one of the men pushes her hard against the railings. She didn't seem to hear the commotion coming towards her from the top and didn't move when they were suddenly upon her. They are waving guns, she doesn't know what kind, but they are big. Abigail ices over and wishes she could blend into the environment, something she has always worked hard to avoid. They will see her, she is certain of it, but will they pass her by for the statue she pretends to be or will they mark her as a witness to their cash-in-transit crime.

Faint thunder and the first drops start to fall, quickly, drumming into her turquoise head-wrap, but she doesn't move. The leopard is clawing again and there is a snapshot moment when she thinks she will be safe. It is when they reach their probably hijacked vehicle, which has pulled up illegally, parking in legitimate cars between solid white lines. Three of the men dive into the back seat of the Corolla with bags. Abigail holds her already censored breath, which is bursting through her lungs. But the fourth man turns and extends his arm deliberately to point his gun at her. And pulls the trigger.

Shoppers clutching packets and holding handbags over their heads run to find cover, some in the shops they have just left. As she feels the first fire penetrate her body, she wonders whether the people are running from the droplets or bullets raining down on the square. Or from personal tsunamis. The man fires a second and third time before being pulled into the car. She tries to keep standing, but her legs are caving in. As she sinks to the ground next to her umbrella, she blinks. It's almost as if rain hurts.

Silent live-wire

'There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening, that is translated through you into action and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost.' – *Martha Graham*

THERE are no windows in the intensive care unit that she can see, but the brightness in the ward is strong enough to sear her eyes. She wishes she could close them, block it all out, but then the smells come into sharp focus. Urine and old shit clinging to the genderless figure with a tortoise neck who hasn't been cleaned properly somewhere in a bed across from her. Vomit carried past in stainless-steel serving dishes, carbon towels keeping only the heat inside. Citrus perfume on the mother whose bruised eyes spill over her shaved son lying in a coma in the bed on the other side of the partially drawn curtain. She would rather smell disinfectant all the time instead of only when they bring the bed pan. These people are dying, she thinks. She shouldn't be here.

Thankfully the beeps on the monitor sound like any other healthy heart. Nothing unusual, yet. She wonders again whether she'll hear its irregularity before she feels it, like they say she might. Or whether she'll experience it in her lungs and if so, will her whole chest constrict? What happens if she falls asleep by mistake and doesn't feel anything ever again? 'Mia, I'm here.' A voice she knows like her own. She turns her head to look into the face of Granny Cecilia.

'You managed to get here. Who brought you?'

'Mrs Goldman.'

Mia twists slowly to see if her grandmother is alone.

'She couldn't stay. Are you in pain?'

'Does that include the ones I'm expecting?'

'Let them move you to the Glynwood Hospital. It would be much more convenient for me to visit you there.'

'I don't want to be moved anywhere in case this thing inside me dislodges. Besides, I'm in here for at least the next 48 hours unless something goes horribly wrong.'

'Like what?'

‘Internal haemorrhaging. They say I must watch my gums when I brush my teeth. Oh and I mustn’t jump around. Not that I can with all these tubes and things tangled around me.’
‘I brought you a chocolate milkshake.’

‘From Woolies?’

‘Yes, the fat-free one. Do you want it now? Come now. Let me arrange for them to move you to Benoni.’ Her grandmother pronounces it *B/nonce*.

‘I just want to close my eyes for a while. Please hold my hand.’

She is walking along cracked, destroyed pathways obscured by pine needles in the old section of the cemetery where people are segmented according to religion and race. It’s unlike the new area near the gates where plastic domes and drooping flowers lie lethargically like sunbathers on a beach across mounds of orange soil and recent death before the tombstones arrive to remember a life, to distinguish a grave. There surnames of different languages are neighbours – McIntyre, Maritz, Mbanyana – but not where she’s looking now. These beds belong to some of the early residents of Benoni. Just beyond the walls and blue gum trees is what’s left of a nicotine-stained mine dump, which they’ve been destroying slowly to reclaim the land and what’s left of its buried riches. Its sparse trees remind her of fur on a decomposing carcass.

She doesn’t feel alone, just a bit nervous. She’s heard the stories of muggings or worse and can see how the graves have been defaced. Vases smashed or stolen and railings taken for recycling. Some people don’t even get out of their cars anymore; they just drive past the winter graves. She doesn’t carry flowers and didn’t stop to buy a bunch at the gate from the man sitting on an inverted pot, flicking water onto rose buds. Eating coated chicken drumsticks and *pap* with his hands from a container. The woman she wants to find said never to bring her flora when she was dead, as she’d prefer to enjoy them while she and the flowers were still alive. And she has always listened to her great grandmother, whom at the age of three she called Mom because that’s what Granny Cecilia did.

Being buried here was important to Mom. She sent off money once a month to reserve her place next to her husband who died in 1938 before she finally passed on in 1989 when Mia was nine. Mia can tell the years apart in the contrasting shading of the two slabs fused into one with a line down the middle to keep their names apart, but together. It’s a simple block, nondescript, without pillars, statues or photographs of the smiling dead

below. But vandals have ruined it with neon spray paint splotches that she can't wash off. It lies close to the cemetery office and behind Mom is a grave that has sunken into itself. Mia avoids looking at it for too long in case she sees fingers with curling brown nails clutching around the cement.

But today she can't find Mom. And it's not as if she's looking for a stone that's wrapped up for its unveiling ceremony in one of those tatty cloths that look like the old cotton underpants Granny Cecilia uses to polish furniture once the elastic perishes and she no longer wears them. Mia has moved closer to the entrance now, which means she must have taken the wrong path and she notices a snowy hearse and within it a snowy coffin. No people. A hole deep in the ground where snowy worms wait in colour coordination. A pile of cloddy soil to spade back into the earth. She can already hear the thuds on the lid.

Mia feels a force from behind propelling her towards the trench, possibly like the one in North Africa where her grandfather, Granny Cecilia's husband, fell during World War II. She tries to resist, pull back, but her arms are pinned flat at her sides and she is losing strength. She screams, but the hole sucks in the sound and it gurgles away like bathwater down a drain. She tries to turn her head, but it won't move. With a pang she sees there are no flowers, as she realises it's her grave. Daffodils would have cheered her up. The force starts to pull her by the ear, twisting, tugging. Mia... Mia....

'Mia!' Her eyes snap open to see Granny Cecilia bending over her, frowning, tugging her ear to wake her, as she has always done in the mornings. 'Bad dream?'

'I hope so, Granny Cecilia, I hope so.' She frees her arms from under the straightjacket sheet covering her, careful not to disturb the drip.

Her grandmother's mouth is a tight penciled-in line and she scratches in her handbag, which has her dead husband's striped tie as a replacement strap. 'Have that milkshake before it leaks in here.'

'Okay.' Her mouth is dry.

Granny Cecilia's hand quivers while she lowers the milkshake into the bed, trying to position the shapely plastic bottle on Mia's chest secured by her chin so she can sip from the straw. Mia strains to lift her head and the straw flicks up a nostril. She snorts with the tickle and her grandmother lets go of the bottle when she sees Mia has two fingers around its waist. But her hand has weakened without its duties and the bottle tips, its

creamy chocolate soaking into the sheets. White is so easy to stain, thinks Mia, as Granny Cecilia lurches forward to remove the weapon of destruction.

‘Nurse! We need some help here!’ Her grandmother has bundled the bottle into a plastic packet and left it scrunched on the floor. The nurse, who introduced herself as Sarah earlier, arrives and her dark eyes blaze. She calls out something Mia can’t decipher, which brings another nurse who immediately reaches up to unhook the drip. ‘What are you doing? The mess is down there on my granddaughter!’

‘*Gogo*, she’s vomited up the blood. We can’t continue with this medication.’ Something unintelligible except for ‘*biḻa udokutela*’. Call the doctor.

‘Blood, where?’

They ignore her and lift up Mia’s arm to pull out the needle attached to the drip. ‘No – wait!’ Mia understands how they think she’s haemorrhaging. ‘It’s the chocolate milkshake! I knocked it over! Granny Cecilia, show her the bottle!’

The nurses sniff the sheets and look down at her grandmother fumbling with the plastic packet, which must be leaking on the floor judging by their expressions, as well as Granny Cecilia’s promise to clean it up if they give her a mop and a bucket of water. Sarah informs them that visiting hours are over.

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Mia awakes to the whirr-swish of curtains being pulled around her and Sarah, who is waiting next to the bed. ‘Time to wash.’ She is shocked, not at the idea of a bed bath in the red-eye hours of the morning, but that she failed herself by dozing. Sarah pulls away her sheets and Mia submits to the vigorous wipe-down with what feels like sandpaper, worrying that the same woman who told her not to move is thumping the enemy awake inside her. She wishes she could wash her hair, which feels like candy floss in Durban over a humid December. Sarah gives Mia the cloth to clean herself under the gown. A second nurse arrives – Mia doesn’t know her name – and together they change the bed linen – again with knocks and bumps – while Mia stays on her back, the only comfortable position that accommodates the elevation of her left leg. ‘You want to make a wee-wee?’

Mia nods. ‘I’d also like to brush my teeth.’

‘First the wee-wee.’

Sarah holds Mia under her armpits, pinching her unintentionally, and lifts her onto the bed pan, her leg an immovable, silent live-wire. ‘You don’t have to wait, I’ll manage.’

‘You sure?’

‘Please.’

‘Yebo. Sisi. I will be back soon, to check.’ Sarah leaves behind a roll of single-ply toilet paper that breaks at every square. Don’t hurry back, Mia wills, as she pushes hard to speed up the elimination process, praying the other patients have lost their sense of smell or are so used to their own, they hardly notice hers. A high-pitched pfffeeeuuu and Mia sees the unfolding spiral growing quickly towards her exposed rear. Distressed she tries to lift herself as far as possible out of harm’s way while keeping her leg still and extended.

‘Finished?’ She must smell finished.

‘Not quite yet.’ The toilet paper has piled up over the contents and is threatening to unravel over the sides onto the bed.

‘Finished?’

‘Yes.’

Sarah twirls through the curtain. Mia gives her the bed pan with respect, but cannot meet her eyes. She forgets to ask for a bowl to brush her teeth.

It is the sensation of having shifted onto another plane where no one can reach her, not even those who love her most. And it’s lonely in this private space. That’s what Mom used to tell her, sitting on the balcony of the old-age home, surrounded by ugly unkempt plants with thorny dreadlocks. ‘When you get to my age, Mia, you’ll know what it means to be lonely.’

‘Are you lonely now?’

‘Yes, sweetheart.’

‘Even with me here?’

‘Mmm-hmm.’

Mia hadn’t understood then, almost ready to be cross with her great-grandmother for dismissing her company like that, but now she thinks she does. Loneliness unmasks its power when it makes love with fear. With the disembowelled exhibition of tubes and drips and stands pressing down on her, Mia wonders whether this thing that’s hijacked her body

will be reuniting her with Mom. She hadn't planned to be travelling to that world so soon even though her suitcase is packed.

Someone cries out, mumbles something like hopscotchbluebelldinner and is quiet. Mia wonders if she will cry out, alone, when it happens. Machines pop and wheeze and shooooosh. Footsteps come closer and move away; come closer, move away. Her eyes are burning and she contemplates closing them for a minute, just to rest, but doesn't. It's at this hour that people die. It's also always at this time that the fresh shit smell is strongest, but at least it scares away sleep with a scarecrow's smile. The other patients have succumbed to it, both drug-induced and natural. She decides to close her eyes and put pressure on the lids with her fingertips to create an interesting light show of blobs, flashes, stars and sparkles. In this way her eyes can rest, but her mind will be entertained. But when she does, all she sees is an auburn darkness. Like being caught in a sandstorm. Like the hour Mom passed away at the Boksburg Benoni Hospital, which they've since renamed Tambo Memorial Hospital.

She opens her eyes when the telephone starts to ring. The sound doesn't even infiltrate through layers of consciousness because it's almost as if she's been waiting for it. She stays in bed; Granny Cecilia will answer it as the grownup, or as Mia teases, the grown-old. She hears size-eight stokies that haven't been put on properly shuffling past her bedroom, down the passage, towards the entrance hall. Murmurings. The slippers. And then her door opens. 'Mia. That was the hospital. We must go now. Hurry girl.' Mia flings off her duvet and Granny Cecilia goes back to her room to dress. Mia has on a cherry towelling tracksuit with a hood and her faded black Chinese slippers when she sees Granny Cecilia in tracksuit pants stained by tea, yoghurt and squashed peas under one of Grandpa's cabled cardigans, which is speckled like a bird's egg. 'You're not to come with me when we're there. You're to wait in the corridor like a good girl, do you hear me?'

'Yes. But can't –'

'Do as I tell you, Mia.'

She is waiting on a coarse plastic chair the colour of grated carrots. 'Excuse me do you know where Mom is?' She addresses a lady in a uniform pushing a trolley of medicines.

'What is your mother's name?'

'Mom isn't my mom.'

'I'm sorry?'

'She's Granny Cecilia's mom, but I call her Mom too.'

'Okay, but what's her real name?'

'Her friends call her Joy, but the butcher says Mrs Kingsley.'

'Fifth door on your left.'

Mia doesn't plan to go into the ward, just past it, to see Mom, whom she is sure will smile and call for her, ignoring Granny Cecilia's barked orders. She peeps around the door, but stays outside the room. The woman must have made a mistake. Door five has an empty bed next to the window and a shrunken woman squashed like a used tea bag, with the Big Hole in Kimberley for a mouth, in the other bed. No Mom. But then Granny Cecilia moves out of the corner where she has been sitting and reaches over to close the mouth of the shrunken lady. Her eyes are already shut. And then it is too late to eject the image.

When Granny Cecilia finally comes out of the room, carrying the shortbread tin in which Mom keeps her reading glasses and slimy facecloth, she leans against the wall next to Mia, who rushed back to the orange chair before she got into trouble. 'We must go now.'

'Are we taking Mom?'

'No, she stays here.' Granny Cecilia's voice trips over its own feet.

'But she doesn't like it, she told me. She said people who came here didn't get better.'

'Mia. Mom is not coming with us anymore because she's going to Heaven. Do you understand what I'm saying, Mia?'

'Is Mom in Heaven now?' Mia is enthralled by the idea of her favourite person meeting angels and getting to wear a halo above her washed-out hair, which she tucks neatly under her ears.

'On her way.'

'Is she following the angels? Does she have wings now?'

'Knowing Mom, she's probably leading the pack and telling them all to hurry up so she can get there and have a cup of tea.'

In the car park while Granny Cecilia is fumbling for the Fiat's keys in her deep handbag in which she can never find anything when she needs it, Mia looks up to see if

she can see Mom floating past. Instead she notices how the early rays have tie-dyed the sky and hospital walls into a seafood cocktail. Salmon, shrimps, oysters. She is happy in her sadness because the Boksburg Benoni Hospital will be the only hospital in South Africa to be painted by Mom's last strawberry milkshake, which dripped from her smiling lips on her way up to Heaven. It is sad that the chimneys of the incinerator will soon release thick smoke into a sky of watercolours.

She wishes she could stay away from this place, away from herself, beside her self. She is an intrusive voyeur on the pavement staring unashamedly through lighted windows of homes into furnished cosiness at night before the curtains are drawn. Sarah is asking a colleague how much medication to give Mia for her foot, which she rubs absentmindedly. The sister asks what's wrong with the foot.

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Mia thinks she likes Mom's GP, Dr R, as his patients refer to him. He has popped into Mom's ward – unannounced, uninvited – and Mia notices the rose that ripples through the crumpled tablecloth that is her great-grandmother's beaming face. 'How's my favourite patient today?'

'Well, my dear. All the better for seeing you!' Mom is shrilling, her perfectly square false teeth clicking, as she pulls up the blanket to cover her unrestrained bosom, as she calls it. Mia wants to hug him for making Mom so girlish because before he came, her mouth was a pinch in her doughy skin.

'Is there a problem, doctor?' Granny Cecilia bites into the moment as she does sour apples in the fridge at home.

'No, my darling, I'm just visiting, seeing if everything is alright.' Granny Cecilia's lips stretch, she doesn't like being called a darling, Mia knows that.

'Are they looking after you in here?'

'The nurses are very kind, such strong women, to lift me like they do.'

'Good, good.'

'The food is rotten though, but Cecilia here and Mia bring me treats from home. Yesterday they brought me some cottage pie and milk tart to have with my tea. And Mia baked scones on Sunday, all on her own, like I taught her. Delicious, so light and fluffy, wonderful with strawberry jam.'

'Good, good.'

'And on Saturday we had ice cream and jelly, I do so love jelly.'

'Good, good.'

'Mom, I think he wants to leave now.' Granny Cecilia does not look up from her mother's face.

'Oh...'

'Yes, my other patients...'

'Thank you doctor,' and with that Granny Cecilia dismisses him from the room, as effectively as a kick in the pants with her stout black shoes with nasty buckles that she keeps for church on Sundays.

Sarah arrives at Mia's bedside, checks her drip, slides a thermometer under her tongue. 'Dr van der Webner is on his way to see you.' Mia doesn't like the emotionally stillborn specialist physician who examined her upon admittance late Friday afternoon or doctors in general and their ideas of themselves. She admires what they are able to achieve or contribute, but not the almighty persona that gets lost behind the accomplishment or the aloof disinterest. Two weeks after Mom passed away, Mia remembers finding Dr R's invoice for the hospital visit in Mom's postbox. He billed them for an hour and didn't accept cheques.

'I've consulted with my colleague Dr Cloete and we've two options. Either you go onto streptokinase, which carries with it the risk of internal haemorrhaging, or you can opt for the milder option, the anticoagulant drug heparin, which is administered intravenously, followed by oral warfarin, but this method may not preserve your leg as well. So which is it?' The honourable doctor looks at his watch and then back at her file.

'Um, I actually, um, I don't feel comfortable making this choice, um, I don't really know anything about ..., um, what do you think?' She is horrified at the idea of her leg not being preserved, whatever that means.

‘With the first you’ll need to be monitored in ICU, the second we start here right away.’

‘What is my best option? Um...’

‘Look young lady, make a choice. I don’t have all day. I’d like to get home to enjoy what’s left of my Friday evening.’

‘.....’

‘Nurse, will you please set up the heparin drip.’

‘No, wait.... I’ll go with streptokinetics.’

‘Streptokinase.’

At her bedside, he looks down at her. ‘Any pain since we started the medication?’

‘Just my leg. And groin area.’ She tries to whisper.

‘What? Speak up.’

‘My groin.’

‘Where’s that woman gone to?’ The curtains whirr-swish, as he encloses them within a private area. Sarah slips in and stays at the base of the bed. He lifts up the gown to examine her groin and again, like yesterday, he makes her feel dirty and uncomfortable as if this is her fault. ‘The redness is a bit better,’ he presses down next to her pubic hair, which has gotten caught in her panties, and she flinches inside and out. He pushes again and again in the burgundy stain on her inner thigh. The shade replicates in her cheeks. Two circles on a stove that someone forgot to switch off. .

She looks into Sarah’s eyes to avoid his. The irises are a dark cooking chocolate, the discs melting into the sclera. But they are kind, clean eyes that seem to understand the hurt she feels.

‘How old are you?’

‘I’m 25 soon.’

‘Young. Were you on the pill?’

‘Yes, I just started.’

‘What brand?’

She tells him.

‘Any travelling?’

‘I was planning to go to Cape Town.’

‘I mean long distance.’

‘No.’

‘A family history of this sort of thing? Strokes? Heart-attacks? Pulmonary emboli?’

‘My grandmother has varicose veins.’

‘Did they check your family history or send you for blood tests before they prescribed the pill?’

‘No.’

He shakes his head and doesn’t look pleased. ‘You’re very lucky you had a warning. Some people just drop down dead.’

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When the breakfast tray finally arrives, Mia nibbles at the fruit, but can’t face the oats, remembering many table wars with Granny Cecilia over the milky pithy substance. She sips the orange juice and wonders whether her grandmother could be persuaded to bring her some rusks. She pushes the table away and lies back and then sits up to pull her hair into a new ponytail and then lies back again, grateful that out of all the patients here, at least she gets breakfast. Whether she eats it or not is another story. And then she sees him.

He doesn’t appear to have noticed her yet and she pushes herself into the bed, hoping he’ll walk past, none the wiser, but really hoping he’ll find her. Wearing an ebony v-neck jersey over a white shirt and combats, he is out of place in the bleached transparency of life support. He pauses for a moment, his head turning to the left, then the right, over his shoulder behind him and forward again. The way his head snaps up indicates his recognition and inside she soars.

‘How could you do this to me?’ He runs both hands through his hair.

‘You came’

‘What did you expect?’

‘You didn’t have to....’

‘You gave me no choice.’

‘You’ve never been without a choice.’

'Mia, cut the crap. Are you in pain? How do you feel? Are they good to you? How long do you have to stay in this godforsaken warren of corridors and silence? Fuck, what is that smell?'

'It's not godforsaken.' She is quiet then, looking down at her fingers and the needle driven into her wrist, making it difficult to bend her hand. It has bruised the skin, ensnared it. He touches it lightly.

'I'm scared, so damn scared.' She looks up at him and his face blurs.

'Hey, don't cry.' He bends over to wipe the corner of each eye with a thumb; he is good at catching tears before they fall. 'What does the doctor say? Have you seen him today? Do you think he'll speak to me? Is he competent?'

She doesn't answer his questions because she doesn't want to know what Dr van der Webner has to say. He looks back at her with loris eyes.

'Did you have a good flight?' She wants to steer the conversation away from this moment, this adjournment.

'No. Every woman I walked past reminded me of you. One had your cute nose. Another tilted her head when she listens, like you. One pulled at her earrings too. Three had a similar hair colour, you know, like shiny liquorice. Then there was one lady who even bit her lip in your way when you're about to rag me. Oh and this teenage girl had your eyes. I just saw these two orbs beckoning me.' Mia smiles and reaches for his hand.

'And then there was this lady with road-kill breath.'

She jolts back her arm, ready to return the insult, and the drip shudders to itself.

'No man, she just irritated me. I was sitting next to her on the plane.'

'This is one beautiful toe.' He tweaks her middle toe, which has a fat freckle.

'I nearly lost it when I was small.'

He chuckles. 'Of course you did! You'd lose your head if it wasn't attached to your body.'

'That's such a cliché! Anyway, I'm serious.'

He inclines his head slightly, watching her face.

Mia is in the garden with Granny Cecilia, who is pruning the roses sprayed across the flowerbeds. Mia is pushing her gollywog around in a plastic hooded pram, the same colour as the English mustard her grandmother smears on roast beef sandwiches. The telephone rings inside and Granny Cecilia drops the clippers onto the lawn, wiping her hands on the

apron around her waist. 'Don't fiddle with my things, Mia.' The screen door swings shut and through the mesh Mia sees the top half of her grandmother moving deeper inside. She forgets about the pram and its lifeless occupant.

The clippers have crimson handles, Mia's favourite colour. The tool is lying spread-eagled on the grass and she sees it performing what she calls a star jump, one where she claps her hands above her head and kicks out her legs at the same time. It is cool to touch, smooth, and too big for her hands. A big person's toy. She picks it up and as she tries to cut a rose for Granny Cecilia to put next to her bed, she drops it on her foot.

Standing on the transparent, rippled carpet protector in the passage that is turning red with her blood, but not the same red as the clippers, she can see inside her toe, which has flipped open like a kettle's lid. She knows her mouth is open, but she can't hear any noises. And then Granny Cecilia is lifting her, carrying her to her room, lying her on the bed, bathing her toe with steaming water, a clean towel and antiseptic stuff. She watches how those fingers squash the toe together again and hold it still before wrapping a plaster around it so tightly it can't move. Mia should be having stitches Granny Cecilia is saying, but she wants to see if this does the trick. Mia spends the day on her bed, leg elevated.

'You can still see the scar.'

He bends his head. 'Proof,' he smiles, looking up into her eyes and caressing her foot.

'That I'm telling the truth?'

'That you never listen to what you're told!'

'I didn't think you were going to come.' He kisses her forehead and his words ski down her nose.

'I didn't know what to think.'

'And now?'

'I can't see past this. I can't think. It feels as if someone's dumped a screaming baby in my arms and I don't know what to do with it.'

'You need to focus on getting better, on getting out of here.'

'You know how people are full of bravado when they're healthy and they tell their families what to do with their bodies when they're dead. Jack, scatter me in the Drakensberg. Jill, dump me in the Kruger National Park for the hyenas to eat. But when you could actually die, you realise hang on, I don't want to be buried *or* cremated. So what do you choose?'

‘You’re not going to die now.’

‘You can’t say that. You don’t know. Promising that just makes it worse.’

‘Do you want me to leave?’

‘No, please stay! When you’re here at least I feel safer. That there’s someone here to hold me back on earth if they try to take me away.’

‘I’ll pull hard on your leg.’

‘It was the lone sentinel, my leg. It provided the only warning it could to save my life and I almost didn’t listen.’

‘I rest my case.’

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Mia wakes to the bee-bee-bee-bee-bee of her alarm, set to give her enough time to make her early morning flight. Her suitcase is packed – it’s probably overweight – and all she has left to do is shower and squeeze the last of her toiletries into her rucksack. She clicks on the lamp and scrunches her eyes, adjusting to the harsh light that saturates the room. She sits up, tosses aside the duvet and looks down at her outstretched legs, reminding herself to shave. The bare skin prickles and pimples with goose bumps, as the draft from under the closed door ushers away warmth from the bedcovers. She slides her feet back towards her, knees coming up to her chest. She winces at the pain and stiffness in her left groin. At first it was her lower back, which she hurt during a kickboxing class, but now the discomfort seems to have transferred. Returning her leg to its position, she notices puffiness around the ankle and loss of definition in her calf. ‘Ag man, what now?’ She presses her skin and the indent stays there, as it would if she pushed her finger into an overripe tomato.

She is alone in the townhouse, he is away, and the room suddenly seems garish, loud, mocking. She remembers painting it; they had fun together, the two of them. They created a lavish, exotic chamber for Croesus that reflected their relationship and the end of parsimony. She had wanted to paint the walls Renaissance ruby because then anything they put on them would become a work of art, in her opinion. He didn’t agree, suggesting they rather turn the walls into works of art themselves.

They opted for cretestone walls with imagery taken from delicate Chinese fabric; stencilling was too tired and impersonal. Copying a picture in a glossy magazine, she painted freehand with loose brushwork to generate a painterly feel, as she depicted trees in the pureness of white orchids against wheat all the way from the ceiling to the silver roots flowing over the skirting boards to disappear into cracks between the wooden floorboards. The mural came to life in the detail, with flowers opening in the hue of pink bubblegum and grassy fields, highlighted by rich sunbursts of gold, his favourite colour. For motionless movement and depth, she attached gauzy butterflies to the branches with double-sided tape so when the light fell on the interaction, the patterns stirred to life.

The rest of the room, however, is a dramatic turbulence manipulating the hot hues of plum, cherry, blueberry and steamed asparagus. For theatrical effect, the four-poster bed is swathed in silk and velour drapes, with texture scattered around the floor in fusion beaded cushions. It facilitates the sauna of their relationship. But right now, she could do with the drabness of wisdom. Her leg has taken on a life outside and beyond her and she doesn't know what to do.

She is sitting on the scratchy carpet in Mom's room, head in the old lady's lap, listening to the growls and churnings and bellows inside her stomach while knotted fingers detangle her hair. They have finished their tea and ginger biscuits, which Mia organised while Mom rested her swollen feet and read the *Benoni City Times*. 'Please bring out Peter and Paul like you promised.' Putting aside the newspaper, Mom chuckles, pulling out the tissue crumpled into the sleeve of her blouse. She rips off two scraps, which she licks with smelly spit and sticks on two fingertips:

'Two little dickey birds sitting on the wall...'

'One named Peter, the other called Paul...'

'Fly away Peter, fly away Paul...'

'Come back Peter, come back Paul.'

The scraps of tissue reappear magically. Sometimes Peter and Paul give Mia advice. Try not to eat too many Jelly Babies before supper. You can find the Christmas cracker toy collection in the old ice-cream tub under the bed. You can play with the doll in the knitted dress if you put the spare toilet paper roll

back under her skirt when you've finished your game. Have you noticed how cold it is; don't you think you should fetch the crocheted rug on the bed for Mom's icy toes?

'How's your leg feeling?' She has opened her eyes – again she drifted off without noticing, how embarrassing. He has taken off his jersey.

'You speak as if there's been an amputation, with my leg existing as this separate entity that just happens to be lying in bed with me.' She sees Sarah approaching. 'Don't you want to know how the person behind the leg is feeling?'

'Is it a mental or physical amputation?'

'Excuse me?' She was expecting an apology.

'The physical can, in some cases, be fixed. I've heard of surgeons reattaching severed limbs, fingers, toes, ears and hands. It's the mental amputation that worries me.' Sarah comes between them and wraps Mia's upper arm in a blue cuff, which inflates and pft-pft-pfts when Sarah squeezes a rubber bulb connected to it by a tube, a stethoscope hooked in her ears. Mia feels the tightness, the same tightness she experiences when she stands on her leg. A frying sausage about to burst out of its skin. Sarah reads the pressure and deflates the cuff. 'What's this instrument called?' He addresses Sarah.

'A baumanometer.'

'That's a big word!'

Sarah giggles, flashing two rows of teeth perfect for a toothpaste advertisement. Mia wishes her leg would deflate as quickly as the cuff.

'Is her pressure good?' He wrinkles his forehead in Mia's direction.

'It is low, but good.'

'Do you want to take mine?'

'*Eis!* What do you want your pressure for?'

'To prove that she affects my heart.'

'I hope you are the brother because it is only the immediate family allowed to visit.' Sarah smiles knowingly, commenting on what her position requires her to say.

'I am her *brother*...?' He winks at them both.

Mia is holding Mom's Eskimo slipper in her hand. Many years ago Mom had a toe amputated and all its siblings slanted all over the place to fill the gap. She once kicked a

vacuum cleaner in exasperation, causing a super-size bunion to grow at a right angle to her toe, pushing the others out of its way. An all-knowing orthopedic surgeon said amputation would help, but Mia couldn't see how it had and neither could Mom. Even the sheepskin shoe has taken on the odd shape of her foot, moulding itself around other bunions and corns and nameless distensions, the fluff flattened into wake-up hair inside. Mia once asked her if she missed it, the lost toe, but Mom said she had no time to waste fretting over yesterday's sour milk.

She has kept the slippers at the back of her cupboard. Sometimes she wears them for softness and once she used them as a nest for a stray mewling kitten before she found it a home. She saw the slippers again, perched atop a pair of black leather boots and dusty mules when she was packing up. At that moment she would never have guessed that she would be bringing her case here; already her mind was somewhere else, following her heart, which had extracted itself from her core and gone exploring. She wonders whether that's why she has a relatively low blood pressure. Inside she feels as empty as the vivacious bedroom she's left behind, as empty as the bland room Mom left behind. She has come to realise that empty rooms are just unlit stages upon which their players perform. It doesn't matter how well decorated or ugly they are, the extent to which their painted props come to life depends on the energy of the acting, on the quality of the life inside. She recites the soothing words of William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* again in her mind, remembering the hours she spent practising the lines from her favourite play to get them perfect for a high-school project:

'All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
Then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,

In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.'

She wishes she could slip through a trapdoor to escape from the ward and exit the present scene of her life. She wonders which part she is playing now and what she could do to avoid mere oblivion.

Mia is in Mom's room, but Mom isn't here. She's embedded within layers of soil in her favourite peach nightgown, the silver locket she always wore around her neck close to her heart. Mia wishes they'd given her a cardigan – Mom feels the chill badly – but Granny Cecilia said it wasn't necessary. Granny Cecilia doesn't know however that Mia hid a pair of knitting needles, a few balls of lamb's wool and a tissue inside the coffin when it was lying open in the church. She'll be happy to have a spare tissue, which means Peter and Paul can keep her company. Since coffins don't have blankets, Mom can knit herself a scarf to match her clothes if she needs the extra warmth or something to keep her busy. Mom dislikes it when her hands are still and have nothing to do.

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Tying a shoelace, his foot on a chair, he asks her if anyone from work has visited or phoned.

'No.'

'What did they say when you told them?'

'I didn't tell them.'

'I mean about the trip.'

'I'm talking about the trip.'

'Were you planning to?'

She doesn't answer and studies the squishy bag of the drip.

'What were you going to tell them?'

'I didn't know what to tell them.'

'Were you going to tell them anything?'

Again she is quiet, watching the regulated drip, drip, drip of the colourless liquid flowing into her vein, dissolving, doing its job.

'You weren't going to say anything.'

She doesn't affirm this.

'How long were you going to stay?'

'Why are you doing this?'

'How long were you going to stay? Answer me please.' His voice flexes its muscles and it sounds very loud.

'Keep it down! They'll ask you to leave.'

'I'll save them the bother.' He picks up his jersey, wallet, keys from the chair.

'Don't go, please....'

He ignores her, his jaw tight, bumping his hip against the bed in his sudden need to be away.

The album reminds Mia of a resplendent peacock. Its cover is iridescent emerald and emblazoned with gold patterning. Inside she absorbs the rich cobalt pages covered by postcards slanted this way and that of mysterious landscapes she's never seen before, except on these pages, as well as sepia photographs of a young woman with a bobbed hairstyle doing different exciting things with different exciting people. There she sways in a shawl astride a camel led by robed Bedouin in the desert. Next to that she is scooping up spices close to her nose from a sack in a souk. There is a close up of both hands – decorated in entwined henna tattoos – crossed in front of her laughing face. Then there is a colour postcard of a medieval castle on the River Po, in Turin, which hints of conquests and fortifications. And the spires of Gaudi's Sagrada Familia dominating Barcelona's skyline. The Gothic façade of the Natural History Museum in Kensington as well as the

stone-built Tower of London; the owner of the album had a passion for richly adorned buildings. A photograph of the wind whipping her hair across her face, Table Mountain and the Twelve Apostles stretching southwards to Cape Point behind her. The album stirs within Mia a need to be textured by travel and altered by adventure.

There is a photograph that always slips off its cardboard background in defiance of the adhesive corners put around each tip to keep it still in its place. This is Mia's favourite because it sings of liberty and release. The woman, in a completely free act, is running up a dune away from the rabid lips of the waves reaching for her. Her head is thrown back, an arched neck, her arms wings in the air next to her. Mia cannot see if she is laughing, but she can hear it, deep throated, untreated, unblocked. Next to her is a scruffy dog, its mouth wide open in a shiny grin, ears flying behind its head. The rest of the animal is blurry, its activity too fast for the camera to trap. Shot on black-and-white film, each detail is percolated in colour. The photograph has an imprint bigger than its jumbo limitation.

Pulling up a blanket over the sheets, Mia wonders how fast this thing blocking inside her would travel through her bloodstream if a piece of it, or the whole mass, broke away. It wouldn't tell anyone before its departure; she imagines it choosing the deep underground railway of veins as its mode of transport, after which it would look for a place to lodge, before going about its business of damaging or killing. She sees its inception, red blood cells clumping, adhering to each other and the blood vessel wall, forming a taut mesh of fibres, trapping the platelets and other blood cells. A road block.

Sarah arrives to update her temperature. 'Where is your *brother*?'

'He had to leave.'

'Will he be back?'

'I think so.'

Sarah nods, looking at her watch and leaning over to pull out Mia's file.

'I couldn't be a nurse. You're very brave.'

'Why?' Sarah looks at her, flicking her wrist and with it the thermometer.

'I'm too squeamish.'

'What do you do?'

'I'm a journalist. I write stories for a newspaper. I take photographs. I visit different exciting places and meet different exciting people.'

‘That is similar to a nurse’s work.’

Mia laughs. ‘How so?’

‘We both monitor people and look for shit in exciting places.’

‘You’re right!’ Mia is amused. ‘Respected watchdogs for the public’s wellbeing.’

‘Not all the time.’

‘Oh, like when journalists nurse advertiser egos.’

‘Like when we both get our low-status pay cheques.’ She inserts the thermometer into Mia’s open mouth.

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Mia’s mouth drops. Mom is telling her that she cut short her travels in 1922 because her father was killed in the bombings of Benoni. She never knew Benoni was bombed.

‘What happened? Wasn’t he supposed to be underground with the other miners?’

‘No, he was striking.’

‘Why?’

‘Mines were faced with declining gold prices and increasing costs. In December 1921, the Chamber of Mines gave written notice to the South African Industrial Federation that highly paid wages would be cut from January, that the Status Quo Agreement would be cancelled and that new underground working regulations would come into effect whereby highly paid white workers would be replaced by lower-paid blacks.’

‘What was the Status Quo Agreement?’

‘It was a voluntary agreement signed during World War I between the Chamber of Mines and the Mine Workers’ Union to keep the existing division of labour in the mines intact. It stated that no jobs held by whites would be given to black workers. If the mines wanted to expand and employ more blacks, they had to employ more whites as well. Anyway, white mineworkers downed their tools in January – my father was one of them – and became increasingly rebellious to pressure owners and the state to back down. The mines came to a standstill and gold production slumped. Strikes became increasingly violent and resulted in what became known as the Rand Rebellion of 1922.’

‘What happened next?’ Mia believes Mom is a much better history teacher than her own at school. She tells a story instead of forcing them to learn lots of facts that don’t make sense. ‘A reign of terror and plundering ensued. The army was called in as well as the new air force. Aeroplanes bombed the Mine Workers’ Hall in Benoni. Snipers sat on rooftops shooting everyone in sight. I remember poor Mrs Truter was killed by a bomb. Many of Benoni’s buildings were destroyed. The Smuts government was criticised for letting the situation get out of hand, especially because hundreds were killed and injured before the strike was called off in March. Smuts later lost the 1924 general election.’

‘How long did the fighting last?’

‘The 1922 battles raged for about three months.’ Mia watches Mom’s sad face, as she looks at the tiny oval photograph of her father that she keeps facing her mother in a silver locket. ‘And then an economic depression followed. We were all hit hard. It took the best part of three years to recover. But I’ll never forget the strikers shouting: *What Benoni says today, the Rand says tomorrow*. The politicians even used it in their slogans afterwards.’

Sarah has gone again, taking Mia’s temperature with her. She hates being alone in here. It’s almost as if she’s rollerblading full-speed down a hill towards a bomb waiting for her at the bottom and no one can hear her screaming for help. But if she’s true to herself instead of trying to be brave, Mia knows she’s floundering in shock waves because her world has already been hit by dozens of bomblets. Some exploded on contact and she continues to disturb the others, which blow up in her face, leaving her charred and bewildered. She’s not sure how long it will take for her own recovery, if she has the choice.

She closes her eyes, visualising the woman and dog on the beach. She enters the frame and sails through the years. It’s all there. The fishy, salty spray. Sand couscous. The sea. Yapping. Breathless laughter. She is drawn towards the woman, contemplating whether to replace her with herself, to take over this moment of living, or to throw back her head, flinging her arms into the wind. She decides to join in, to share, and slides down the dune to meet them. She doesn’t want to be isolated, even in freedom.

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Mia loves beaches because they are always changing. She is captivated by how they are the painstaking accumulation of different sands carried from mountains or eroded from volcanoes or donated from coral reefs. Standing on a shoreline is usually when she takes back for herself what she has lost, but not this time. They are here to give what has been lost to the sea.

‘Are you sure this is where you want to do it?’ Mia looks at the young woman next to an information board on the African penguin, as she leans against the wooden railings on the boardwalk.

‘Yes, it must be here somewhere or close by.’ Compressed eyes, a cracked explosion of blue, assess Mia, while snarled whitish strands of hair whip pink across her cheeks, tracing through tears. Broken ballerina eyebrows. Her dry mismatched lips are parted and a beauty spot nods on the surface of her lithe upper lip like the toy dogs on dashboards whose heads nod in all directions on unstable necks.

‘I wish we could get down there with the penguins.’ Mia finds it so clever that their white bellies protect them from under underwater predators looking up and their black backs from enemies looking down on the water.

They watch a projectile spurt from behind a bird shuffling stiffly past them. ‘There’s too much crap there, I like it up here next to the boulders. I read somewhere that these granite boulders are about 540 million years old and I love the idea of overlapping worlds.’

‘There’s a tour group coming, don’t you want a bit of privacy?’

‘Let’s go to the other side then.’

From their elevated position, they continue to watch the penguins on Foxy Beach and those bobbing in the waves. They sound like donkeys, Mia thinks, forgetting to voice her opinion when her friend starts to speak. ‘It’s actually better here.’ The gold chain around her neck flashes nightclub laser sunbeams, but Mia thinks the dented dolphin pendant mars her bare chest like a scar.

‘Don’t you think they walk like Mr Burns from *The Simpsons*?’ Mia chuckles at her own observation, but the wind blows the sound against the rocks, smashing it.

‘I love the babies.’ Mia barely hears her friend’s whisper.

‘Did you know that penguins always return to their ancestral nesting sites where they were born to lay their eggs and look after their little ones?’

‘No. But I know they can withstand intense cold. And that they’re monogamous.’

‘I wouldn’t want to be a penguin.’ Mia watches as a bird dips and dives. ‘Although that does look like fun.’

‘Because they’re monogamous? Or because they look so clumsy when they’re not swimming? Or because you hate having cold feet?’

‘Because they are flightless.’

‘But Mia they fly in the water.’

Through a windowpane freckled by dried droplets, Mia watches her swim. In the pumping dolphin kicks, there is nothing of the butterfly after which the stroke is named. It’s a silly time to learn to swim when you start to drown – she heard that line somewhere in a Tegan and Sara song and she’s not sure why it comes to mind now. The wavelets spill onto the paving and then the swimmer calms. Mia kicks off her sandals on the carpet and then wishes she hadn’t when the bricks burn her feet outside. She hops, a desert lizard lifting alternate legs from the searing dunes.

The flat embossed shadow rippling in the whipped-up water emerges with dimension and slicked hair, as Mia waits at the steps. Her friend shakes her ear towards her shoulder, trying to release the trapped water, the pendant glistening against beaded skin.

‘Are you ready to go?’

‘Sorry? Can’t hear you. Got this water in my ears.’

‘Are you ready to go? We need to leave for the airport in half an hour.’

‘Okay, I won’t be long.’

‘I have something for you.’

‘Why? What for?’

‘Friendship. Water under the bridge. Moving on.’

The tissue wrapping falls from the matchbox-sized container to the wet bricks where it absorbs the moisture without delay, as she lifts the lid with a practised air. Mia smells her sharp coolness and chlorine, as she pulls back the gauze to reveal a dolphin pendant, an exact replica of the one around her neck, but without the fatal damage.

‘Mia, what the f – ?’ She slaps the limp pendant protectively to her chest.

‘Yours is ruined... I thought I’d replace it for you. Here let me help you –’

‘Leave it alone!’ Her breath is sour from the exercise and she sounds parched.

‘I’m sorry... I was only trying to help! I thought you’d want...’

Mia is quiet then, as Cyclone Dirty Look spirals off the contorted face and consumes her in its devastation. Mia steps back, lets her walk towards the sliding doors, smacking decaying footprints onto the steaming bricks. Somehow these slurred blots don't have the same buoyant confidence as fresh prints pressed deep into a shoreline before the tide rolls in to claim them. Neither are they empty moulds of a life, which are able in their architecture to resist the foam for a few rounds before they fill and are worn down to the point where they become shapeless hollows and then only slight pockmarks.

Mia holds the urn for her to open it so the breeze can escort them over the penguins and into the sea, but it blows the ashen confetti back into their faces, showering the boulders, shoreline, promenade and shrubbery as well.

'A kiss goodbye,' says Mia to her friend's horrified expression, as it hits her face and nestles in her hair.

She turns abruptly from Mia, not touching it, almost as if she's too scared to cause offence by wiping it off. 'Did any land in the penguin pooh?'

Mia watches as a gull picks at a clump of ash caught in the tangle of greasy kelp. 'No. No! Even if it did, it won't stay there for long, the wind is strong today.'

'Please tell me that most of it went towards the sea.'

'Most of it went towards the sea.'

.....

.../ she can taste is ash, but when she tries to open her mouth it is sealed and her lips have disappeared into her face in the way an earthworm has no ears or eyes or even lungs. All she wants is water. She can hear a waterfall, but she can't see it. If she tries to speak, perhaps her lips will part, just a little, so she can drink from a straw. But when she looks at her hands, she has stiff flippers and Mr Burns is showing her how to hold them when she walks. He's telling her that the train has left from Deep Vein 1 and soon it will all be over for Mia. And then he laughs, with his head thrown back, his arms drooping flowers. Mia! Mia! He sounds like Granny Cecilia at a bingo evening in Boksborg. Her grandmother will take a strap to Mr Burns and he'll not know what hit him, even after all these years of

working with Homer Simpson. And then the ragged dragon from *Haas Das se Nuuskas* is flouncing after her, his mouth flapping open and closed in the blackness, followed by *Wielie Walie's Bennie Boekwurm*, *Sarel Seemonster* and *Karel Kraai*. All she wants is a sip of water. Maya! The little bee that looks like her Cabbage Patch Kid with short loopy yellow curls and blue vaulted eyes has stung the dragon. Maya, Maya! Mia! Have something to drink.

She opens her eyes and stares into the coiled cylindrical eyes of her grandmother. She's never thought of them as earthworm coloured before. 'I have something to drink.' Mia doesn't question her and bends her neck so she can sip from the mineral water bottle. 'Do you have a straw?'

She peels it as she does bananas, deliberately, strip by strip, and plops it inside. 'Who's the young man, Mia?'

'You met him?'

'He was pestering the nurses for information about you, asking to speak with the doctor. Quite a nuisance.'

'What did they say?'

'Mia, it's not his place.'

'And who decides whose place it is or not?'

'Who is he, Mia? What are you involved in?'

'Nothing I can't control.'

'You control the unwanted. Pests, weeds, weight, births.'

'Don't distort what I say!'

'Then what are you saying? What is this man to you, Mia, considering your circumstances?'

'It's really none of your business, Granny Cecilia, unless I choose to tell you, which I haven't.'

'So there is something to tell.'

'No there isn't.'

'You just said there was!'

'Please, just leave it alone!'

'Not until you tell me what's going on. I have a right to know!'

'No, you *don't*.'

'Now you listen to me, I –'

'-Aikhona! We have very sick people sleeping in here.' It is Sarah who takes one look at Mia and tells Granny Cecilia, again, that she must go away and return later.

'Are you telling me to leave, young woman?'

Sarah doesn't say anything more, as she reaches to fill Mia's drip.

'Don't be ridiculous! I just arrived.'

With a deliberately calm blank expression, Sarah fiddles with something above Mia's head, while Granny Cecilia gets that look about her. It is the swollen look of a moulting penguin.

She picks up her handbag and shakes it at Sarah. A lipstick falls out, clattering to the floor.

'I'm going to speak to the matron about your attitude. You haven't heard the end of this!'

She turns her back on them. 'You people... mutter mutter mutter ...air of entitlement... mutter mutter mutter ... don't know what this country is coming to....And Mia.... As for you...'

'Don't take my blood pressure now,' she says to Sarah, her hands trembling slightly.

'Eish! Why is Gogo so angry today?'

'Because I wouldn't tell her who my friend is. You know, my *brother*.'

'Why not, Sisi? We no longer grind with old stones.'

'It's complicated.'

'Here is your complicated brother-friend now.' Sarah pulls the curtains closed.

'Was that your grandmother I passed on my way out?'

'I'm sure she'd like to disassociate herself as my grandmother, but yes, she is.'

'The one you call Granny Cecilia.'

'The one I was told to call Granny Cecilia.'

'By whom?'

'Her.'

'Why?'

'She was named after St Cecilia, patron of music, and she likes the mystique it suggests I suppose.'

'A name says more about the person giving it than the person receiving it, in my opinion.'

'Is that why you've never given me a nickname?'

'That's different. Calling someone by a nickname is like pulling petals off a flower.'

He arranges a handful of lavender sprigs in her water glass and rubs his knuckles on her cheek. 'I'm sorry about earlier.'

'Don't – ' She breaks off to listen as a sudden anxious energy whistles through the ward. 'What the hell's going on?' He pushes the curtains against the wall. She sees they have opened up a space for another bed and the nurses are hovering, waiting, getting ready. It looks serious, she thinks. Like a proper patient.

The bed seems to take to the air through the door accompanied by a team pushing, leaning over, leaning into, pulling, inserting, covering, opening, taking off, setting up, pushing, whispering, instructing, putting in, putting on, lifting the oxygen mask, checking, wiping.

'They look like pallbearers in fast-forward mode.'

'Don't be so insensitive!'

'It looks like a clown or something... ' he says, as the bed is wheeled into the gap and connected up.

'Please don't ' If anyone's the clown, it's her for stealing the spotlight in a show that isn't hers.

'No, I'm serious, from what I can see from the person's face. It's painted white.'

'Are you sure it's not from shock or just a very pale person?'

'With brown arms?'

She tries to see, but isn't successful with all the people in the way. They seem to be talking about gunshot wounds to the chest. A female in her mid to late twenties. Critical condition. Getting her to theatre.

'Do you think it's worse if it happens before you know it or after you wait for it?'

He turns to face her. 'Just be sure you're waiting for something you know will arrive otherwise you'll end up wasting all that energy, like waiting for Godot.'

She nods, pretending she gets his point, and wonders whether the new woman will last the night.

Puppet play

'Come children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out.'
– William M Thackeray

DISAPPOINTINGLY, the invitation has none of the razzmatazz and calligraphy she associates with formal requests for attendance. Nor is it a template page ripped from a pad. It isn't addressed to her, but the disjointed scrawl languishing near a corner of a page burnt black by the irritated dialogue of fax machines transfers it. *Miah. Car uou go? About 500 words and a pic. P.* The *P* stands for *Parker Black*, who is to be her immediate supervisor and editor. It is a style that would drip blood, Mia thinks, as she picks up the faxed page from the desk she's been told is hers in the open-plan office.

Despite its unpolished appearance, she likes the invitation's suggestion of things to happen. It promises something, an experience, for a person willing to share it. She believes it will open doors, cut through border lines and offer admission into the unexplored. She buys into its code and allows herself to feel included, summonsed, tempted. And so she invites it in and RSVPs yes in her mind, rejecting the skittish idea that perhaps it's a false start, a disqualifier.

Two voices behind her are arguing their way down the passage towards the cubicle where she is waiting self-consciously for someone to tell her what to do. She doesn't generally enjoy the first days of new jobs, especially now that it's nearing the end of the year and everyone is tired and ratty. How the hell can you put that fucking picture on the front page? You told me to lick advertiser arse! I never said prostitute the fucking publication! But it works if you offset it against the lead – maybe the readers won't even notice it! A picture of an *empty bed* in an *empty hotel room* does not justify a place on Travel Talk's front page! It costs R12 000 a night to sleep in that bed ... and they took out a 12-month contract. Silence. More silence. Then why is the picture so fucking small?

The voices don't even need bodies to give them air time, she thinks, yet she hears only the power play of puppets that haven't realised the power of speech is much more than an ability to amplify through a funnel-shaped mouthpiece. What she dislikes most about puppets is the very thing that gives them their puppet-ness: they can't speak for

themselves. Even those with hinged mouths that open and close only release empty air because words need life to shape and propel them. For Mia, words have the most delectable aftertaste and she loves how they undulate in an alphabet soup inside her mouth. But puppets wouldn't know the taste of language because they only exist when an operator moves fingers, controls rods or pulls strings and a narrator spoon-feeds dialogue, which transcends painted faces to be absorbed by an audience.

Mia can't sit still, as she and the other children wait for the show to begin. It's a Saturday and the Benoni Central Methodist Church is having a fête. Mom is standing behind a table with a plastic tablecloth pouring hot water into plain teacups, trying not to let the tea spill into the saucers, as she told Mia earlier, letting her take a biscuit. Mia has already eaten a chocolate doughnut, a cinnamon-sugar pancake, a lollypop and she plans to get her pocket money from Mom to buy a *boerewors* roll later as well as six *koeksisters* for Mom and Granny Cecilia to share after supper. She has had her face painted; she is a princess and the gold glitter stars prove it. As usual, she is alone, without a little sister or brother to cling to her hand with warm, sticky fingers. But she doesn't mind because she's in the front row, at the end of the column, and she'll be the closest when it starts and people will have to peer around her head. She also has a Flake that she might nibble secretly when the curtains pull back; she doesn't think anyone else has thought of these things, as they save spaces for their friends and whisper behind hands.

She really hopes they are not using boring finger or glove puppets that can only bend up and down or lean to the side. They're not as true to life as the string puppets, which have jiggling arms and legs and shoes that clack. Granny Cecilia said Mia must use the proper big word for what she meant, which she spelled out with her finger in the air. M-A-R-I-O-N-E-T-T-E. Mia was glad she wasn't standing too close because Granny Cecilia had just eaten a pilchard sandwich.

She is hoping to see Miss Piggy with her bubbly blond curls and Kermit the Frog with his skinny green legs; if she had a show she would use them. No, she thinks she'd just choose Miss Piggy because she has nice-to-brush hair and the best outfits. She wonders if she could fit the pig into her Baby Angel's clothing. Mia doesn't like her big-boned doll much, although it is fun to push in its face until it sticks to the back of its head before

slowly filling out again. But the pig and her personality probably wouldn't fit on this stage. She wouldn't even mind Pinocchio and a talking cricket.

Instead of the glamour Mia hopes for, up pop two decorated wooden spoons that look as if they've been chewed on by a puppy. One has lost a smile somewhere and the other's dirty woollen plaits are peeling off the side of its head. Mia hates dolls whose hair flaps up or open to reveal a smooth bald plastic head. The strands must be attached properly, like Barbie's or her Cabbage Patch Kid's tiny granny curls. The spoons speak with the same high-pitched voice that keeps losing its balance to slip into a normal grownup voice and their clothes are like cheap sacks with none of the details of real clothes.

Bored with the nonsense, Mia looks around and notices a little girl even smaller than herself cradling a doll almost half her size. There is such tenderness in the love Mia finds herself unable to look away. The girl is sitting on the steps of the church where Mia waits for Mom after Sunday School and she is barefoot. Her hair is brushed up into a flame and Mia wonders whether she minds that her doll is not the same colour as she is. Mia stands up, ignoring the heys and the whatcha doings, and is not surprised when she sees a woman dressed all in black behind the stage, kneeling on the ground, her hands busy in front of her. She has the same voice as the stupid spoons.

The girl on the steps is trying to brush the doll's hair into the same style as her own, but the second-hand hair won't kindle for a hairstyle unsuited to it. It has a filthy face and Mia wonders why she doesn't wash it. 'What's your name? *Wat is jou naam?*' Mia presumes she speaks English or Afrikaans.

The girl says nothing, her eyes downcast.

'Do you want me to clean her? *Moet ek haar skoonmaak?*'

Again she says nothing, but holds on to her bundle tightly.

'Where is your Mommy? *Waar is jou Ma?*'

The girl looks towards the kitchen where Mia hears the sound of dishes being washed.

'Do you want to come and see the puppets?' Mia points towards the booth and the group of children clustered around it. She doesn't know the Afrikaans word for puppet. The girl nods, puts the doll on a step, and takes Mia's outstretched hand. Her fingers are warm, but not sticky.

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'You'd better not leave her there. Someone will take her.' Mia picks up the doll by its stomach and it bleats 'Ma-ma'. It has nothing to wear and its soft body seems vulnerable against the hard scratched plastic of its limbs and head. The girl's eyes roll back and Mia thinks her smile is like a rainbow because it doesn't know where to end. 'Is your dolly new?' The girl picks her nose and pulls out a crusty crustacean and then an oily octopus. 'Sis! Where are you going to wipe your snarlies?' The girl giggles and drags her finger down her shirt, which has little holes in it. She must think it's a game, Mia imagines, staring at the snot on her clothes.

'Mia! MIA!' Mia looks up and tries to locate her grandmother. She can't and continues leading the child towards the puppets. Suddenly she is being spun around. 'Where are you taking this child? Granny Cecilia is spitting on Mia's cheeks, as her teeth tap-dance across her angry face.

'To the puppets.'

'You cannot do that!'

'Why? She's my new friend and I want to show her the puppets.'

'This girl is not your friend! Where did you find her?'

'On the church steps where I w –'

'Take her back there! Mia stares at her. 'Now!'

'Why?'

'Mia, don't push me. I'm not going to tell you again. Take her back there now! You don't know who's she been with and what diseases she has. She's not even supposed to be here!'

'But she's a little girl.'

'She's not like you. Where did she get that doll?'

The child has lowered her eyes and is pressing into Mia's side. 'It was a present to her because it's her birthday today.' Someone puts the words in her mouth.

'She probably stole it from the Sunday School.'

'We don't have such ugly dolls there.'

'Take her back.'

Mia has no choice but to lead the girl back to the steps.

Later when Granny Cecilia is supervising in the kitchen, Mia goes back to the church to give the child her *boeremors* roll, a dolly dress and booties crocheted by one of the grannies to sell and a handful of tissues. She also leaves her cardigan with her because it

has all the colours of the rainbow in it. Mia knows the sunbeam on the pinched face is worth the smacks she will get later for losing her jersey and spending all her pocket money on one day. Granny Cecilia's wooden spoons lost their smiles a long time ago.

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The voices get closer to the cubicle. The placatory accent mumbles into a person and as Mia looks up, her immediate thought is that the hyena is a carnivore with a large head and neck, well-developed forelegs and powerful jaws to crush bones. 'Parker. Parker Black. You have to be Mi-aah.' The hot air rises in pitch.

She nods, wary of releasing her voice into the wild.

'Punctual. Good! That's me off the hook!' Something resembling hysterical human laughter bubbles up from deep inside him and with it a fetid wind describes last night's menu of garlic and carcasses.

She doesn't want her breath to mingle with his and so she smiles. He scratches his testicles with long, rasping sounds and then holds out his hand to shake hers.

'Did you get the invitation I left on your desk? We must reply by the end of today.'

'Thank you, I will.' She tries not to feel his skin, as she clasps his fingers in greeting.

'It's a privilege, you know. Not everyone can go.'

'Thank you for giving me the opportunity.' He digs in his teeth with a broken toothpick.

Either it's the right answer or the wrong time for him to respond because he grunts. He dislodges something with threads, stares at it, sniffs it and then puts it back in his mouth to chew properly.

'So what should I tell them?' She looks down at her boots. 'That I'm attending on behalf of the publication?' Mia gives him enough time to dispose of the matter in his mouth and then glances at him. He doesn't seem to be listening, as he tries to take over an open packet of crisps from a lady walking past the cubicle. When he hears they're salt and vinegar, he scrunches his already upturned pug nose, protesting his preference for cheese and onion.

'So what should I say?'

'That you're attending on behalf of the publication. Use your common sense.'

‘Will I get a byline for the story?’

He looks at her with his mouth open and she sees the darkness of fillings.

‘Give me a story I can use and then we’ll talk about bylines.’

‘But 500 words isn’t a story.’

‘A sentence is already a story.’

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Parker is cutting his nails at his desk, using scissors with orange handles. Mia watches warily as grey slivers fountain into the air, landing on the carpet, in his keyboard and in the tray of stories waiting for subbing. She wonders why he doesn’t aim for the dustbin; it’s right next to him. ‘The thing you must understand about commission,’ he is saying, ‘is that all the airlines worldwide have been cutting distribution costs and that includes travel agency commissions. It’s not limited to South Africa or to one airline.’

‘How much do they pay them?’

‘In South Africa at the moment it’s 7% a. But it’s going to change. That’s what all the fuss is about.’

‘And that applies to all agencies, irrespective of the volumes they sell?’

‘That brings me to my next point, overrides.’ A nail whizzes past dangerously close. ‘The airlines pay overrides to those agency groupings that meet their target volumes over and above base commission earned. But this time, overrides are also under threat.’

‘What do you mean this time? Has this happened before?’

‘They’ve been fighting over commissions since I joined the industry. Since the last century.’ He giggles.

‘And how do the travel agents feel?’

‘Come and see for yourself. I’m going to an ASATA meeting later. You can take the photographs.’

What Mia loves about photography is that for the time she hides behind the camera, subjects are obliged to surrender control of their self image to her. The camera is her tool to lower the neighbourhood security boom temporarily so she can gain admission into their world, before using her title as a visa and her byline as a right of access. It is a

means of introduction, or a mask, but today she's unsure of the digital camera she's been told to use and sensing her lack of confidence, those subjects clamour to take back control of her photographs. She hasn't won their trust yet and before the camera crunches, they tell her who they want to appear alongside in the pictures, how they want to pose and where the pictures should be placed in the publication. And then they want to approve the photographs or set up group photographs with their colleagues.

Parker is balancing on a wobbly table, three rigid faces trying not to blink looking up at him with forced grins. Before leaving the office earlier, he fetched the normal camera, as he called it, to take back-up photographs in case hers were unusable. She suspects he's not too sure how to work the digital camera either, particularly as he was so insistent that she use it first and then show him what she learned. Watching him at work, manipulating stiffness into mime and forced joviality, she believes there's such a fine line between too much and too little technique. The soul of any photograph lies in its artlessness, she thinks.

'How's it going?' He raises his voice and jumps off the table, the overlay sliding down with him to the floor. He lollops across to where she's standing by the drinks. 'Fine, I think.' She stiffens in the hope she'll be taken for one of those living statues instead of his shadow.

'Get a couple more for practice. They should be starting now. Take notes of Vanya's speech and also the questions the members throw at her. I want a story from you, but we won't use it if we've got mine.'

She nods. He's already beckoned for a waiter offering a tray of curled-up snacks. She's not surprised when Parker, his mouth full with something, pushes a few mini meatballs into the back pocket of his denims with his notebook, to eat inside, she presumes, if he doesn't sit on them first.

'We will not work for zero remuneration,' Vanya, who has cropped white-blond hair, is saying. 'There must be a dual revenue stream. Suppliers must pay us for the work we do on their behalf and clients must pay for the work we do for them. SAA has been responsible in its approach by working jointly with ASATA and demonstrating its commitment to finding a sustainable solution for the industry.' Parker is writing quickly, long spheres, on his notepad. Mia is trying to keep up. Thankfully Vanya speaks deliberately, choosing her words carefully, aware of the travel media and their need for

quotes. There is a respectful silence as she speaks, reassures, motivates. 'Under no circumstances will we accept a proposal that is in any way detrimental to the industry as a whole. Our working committees and negotiating teams are working around the clock to negotiate a win-win scenario. Yes?'

'It's about time they cut the puppet strings.' A lady resembling Camilla Parker-Bowles interrupts in the way a stone skids across a lake, leaving behind ripples of murmurs.

Vanya continues politely. 'Thank you for that. I'm going to open the floor for questions now, but just remember our slogan: With ASATA, you're never on your own!'

But Mia feels very alone, as everyone else in the room is buoyed up in the same bubble, speaking the same language.

'Parker, what does ASATA stand for?' She whispers.

'Association of South African Travel Agents.' He returns with meatball breath.

'Thanks. And what position does Vanya hold?'

'She's CE.'

'Right. And what's a service fee?'

'Professional fees agents should charge clients for their time and expertise.'

'Should?'

'Many of them don't. The excuse is that the South African travelling public doesn't want to pay for services they've had for free in the past.'

'Are agents supposed to charge because commissions are falling away?'

'No because they should add value to the travel transaction. Commissions are about being remunerated for selling supplier products.'

'I've never paid a travel agent for services rendered.'

'Exactly.'

At her desk, tiny blocks of colour appear on her screen, which Mia enlarges to view the images. She has been fiddling with cables, the computer and camera to download her photographs for a while now.

'Let me see your pics.' Parker has come up behind her.

'I don't know if you can use them?'

'Yes.'

She smiles, feeling competent.

'We'll have to; I've lost my spool.' He farts silently and moves back to his desk.

Alone in the cubicle – Parker is away on a vague mission – Mia opens the window not only for the breeze to carry away the stale unpleasantness from earlier, but because, proverbially, she'd like to set sail with the wind. She unfolds her notes, glances at the gibberish and refolds them. She opens up one of the press releases Parker left her earlier, trying to find news in the story of a prominent hotel that introduced new bed linen and a different brand of coffee in its junior suites three months ago. Her eyes droop and she gets up to go to the kitchen.

Pushing open the door, Mia's shoe suddenly loses its grip on the tiles; she slips, hands flailing, as she wills herself not to fall on the wet floor. She doesn't. A rough hand reaches out to steady her as Mia bumps into a bucket. Dirty water sloshes over the rim onto bare toes in worn-down slip-slops. 'Sorry.' The whisper is barely a butterfly floating on the breeze.

'No! Damn! I'm sorry! For messing up your clean floor like this! I didn't know you were busy in here!'

'I clean it away already, the footprint.' It seems the woman is used to starting over; the modest motion is programmed into her limbs. 'They do it all the time.' Mia has the feeling they don't even notice.

'I'm Mia,' she says. 'We haven't met.'

'I am Priti.'

'It's lovely to meet you, Priti. And thank you so much for catching me so I didn't fall on my fat bum!'

Priti smiles slowly, as if she has learnt to contain displays of emotion. The movement unfurls tentatively, a young fern frond, until it suddenly opens up to reveal the complete length of its potential in fresh purity. 'My people say a woman is like a merino sheep because her beauty is judged by her backside.'

'I must remember that!' They smile together. 'Priti, you must smile often. You're beautiful!' 'Eish, if they see me smiling all the time they will tell me I don't have enough work to do. They will say I am lazy, that I stand still. And then they will look for more things that I must finish. I am working hard for the reception job.'

'But when I come into the kitchen to make something to drink, you can smile for me?'

'Yebo. Sisi. I will smile for you, but then you must not be falling all over my clean floor.'

‘There you are!’ Mia has the domed lid off a container and is scooping up white granules as Parker bangs open the door, his shoes squeaking over the wet tiles. Just before she lifts the spoon out, the sugar snows back into the container. ‘You can make me a cup while you’re at it. Five sugars.’

‘Is that function one of my KPAs?’

Something like heeeee-hee-hee-hee-heeeee and she realises he thinks she’s joking. She is unsure whether to drive home her point in case she ends up driving home, jobless. She gets down another mug – a picture of a lilac hippo with pursed strawberry lips holds up a cut-out heart with ‘I love work as much as myself’ scrawled across the ceramic organ – and innocently puts in a heaped spoonful of coffee. He sees the cup and hastily takes down another stark black one, without reading its bold personalised message. ‘This is Fay’s mug, you fat fuck,’ it says bitterly. ‘I’d prefer tea,’ he states.

‘You’re brave, taking on Fay like that whoever she is.’

‘Fay’s okay. She won’t mind.’

‘Where the fuck is my fucking mug? Can’t any of you fucks read in this place?’

Mia turns to look at Parker, who has Fay’s used mug buried somewhere on his desk. ‘Are you going to tell her before a client hears or something?’ Mia can’t remember when last she heard so many expletives in such a short time in a place where people didn’t even flinch. She peers over their cubicle. Fay is standing up behind her desk, glaring. She claws both hands with short nails painted dark maroon through her spiky hair dyed an unrelenting black and her fringe flops back across an icy eye. Her fringe is the only softness around her face and she catches eyes like fire. ‘Parker,’ Mia hisses. ‘Give her back the mug.’

‘No fucking way! She’ll eat me alive!’

‘She won’t.’

‘Don’t make promises you can’t keep.’

‘The woman’s a vegetarian.’

‘How do you know?’

‘In my experience, only vegetarians eat tofu and lentils for lunch.’

‘Here’s the deal. I’ll look for it. You return it.’

‘Are you mad? She probably eats meat on special occasions.’

'Fay, it's here somewhere.' Parker stands up, shuffling papers from one heap to another, without looking directly at the wraith just past the partition. 'But I can't find it yet.'

From behind Parker, Mia can see Fay's compressed eyes. 'You filthy fuck. I should have known.' And to Mia's incredulity, she hears hysterical giggles and a low, rusty reverberation from Fay. 'You owe me a box of smokes, Parker Black, and I'll have them before the three-pm smoke break today.'

Mia is in the kitchen again filling a cheap plastic cup from the water dispenser when the migration to warmer climes begins. As the bubbles bellow deeply inside the dispenser, there is a sudden rush of workers and managers through the cool planes of the kitchen and she is trapped momentarily in the alcove. She sees the start of a red-hanger sale, as elbows jab and jostle to get through the sliding doors onto the patio. There is a brief frenzy and as she sees the cinnamon circles of caution taking hold, lighters are thrown casually on the tables or placed atop cigarette boxes. There is contentment then, as the smoke starts to curl. She looks at her watch; it's five to three. Her cup fills and she twists it carefully from under the dispenser. She almost spills, as the kitchen door suddenly swings open and closed again. It is Fay, holding a cigarette between her fingers.

Outside, a place opens for her. Mia sees the men bend over the table to light Fay's cigarette with burning eyes. But she turns her head to the woman on her right, who flicks a flame for her. She sits back in the chair and inhales deeply, watching the people talk, saying nothing, saying everything. Blowing her latticed smoke into faces that stare. Mia turns away, trying to keep water in the flimsy cup. She could squash it so easily in her hands, she imagines, and wonders why she thought that.

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Mia is in trouble because Granny Cecilia found her reading about Betty and Veronica instead of learning about citrus farming; Mia had the comic inside her workbook, which she was pretending to study. Granny Cecilia has also threatened that if she asks Mia her work and she doesn't know all the answers, there'll be no more comics for a year. And

now Mia can't remember anything and the harder she tries, the worse it gets. So when Mom arrives to drop off an extra bag of oranges, Mia refuses to eat them.

'But you must have Vitamin C, lambkin.' Mom has peeled an orange and offers Mia a *skj/ie*. She doesn't take it.

'What's wrong? A bad day at school? You look as if you're about to burst into tears at any minute.'

'I didn't learn my Geography because I was reading Archie comics and then Granny Cecilia found out and then she said I couldn't have comics again if I didn't know my work when she asked me and now I'm scared that I won't know anything and when I try to remember I can't and the stuff doesn't stay in my head and I really want to read comics again and now –'

'There, there, there.' Mom always says that and Mia never understands why she chooses to repeat that specific word when there are so many better choices. Like orangutan, orangutan, orangutan. Or marmalade, marmalade, marmalade. Or A Team, A Team, A Team. 'Shall we learn together?'

Mia thinks that's an excellent idea. Together, together, together.

Mom sits on the bed and picks up Esmeralda, Mia's Cabbage Patch Kid, who is wearing a frilly bibbed apron over a pleated dress, matching scarlet stockings and plastic shoes that keep falling off her feet. Mia loves the emerald signature on her crinkled bum, which means she's a real Cabbage Patch Kid. 'Ha-woh!' Esmeralda's head turns to the side, as she sits in Mom's lap.

'Hello.' Mia feels shy, but is delighted that her doll knows how to speak even if she squeaks a bit.

'I'm kwevva!' Esmeralda can't pronounce words properly because she is a little thing, says Mom, who is holding Esmeralda around the neck, making her jump up and down, her arms flapping at her side. 'I'm so kwevva! I'm so kwevva!'

'What are we going to do now?' Mia is worried about the wrath of Granny Cecilia.

'Gegorephy,' says Esmeralda, who has the same peppermint breath as Mom.

The man, who has been called a vent-something, is sitting on the stage next to the podium in the school hall. They are finishing their final assembly before breaking for the December holidays. Mia is so excited and because of the improvement in her marks (with

Esmeralda's help), not only are they going to Margate for three weeks, but Granny Cecilia has promised to let Mia sit for an hour in the CNA at the Northmead Mall so she can choose a *pile* of new comics to read before they drive down. Mom is also going to take her shopping in town for three new holiday outfits; they'll start with Woolworths, hold hands and cross the road to Jet and then move across to another block and up the road to Foschini. Perhaps she'll even get a new pair of sandals from Chafkin's when Mom visits to buy more inner soles for her tan leather shoes. Mia always feels so special at Chafkin's where a lady, who looks like Popeye's girlfriend Olive Oyl, brings out different boxes and puts them on the carpet next to Mia's chair. She opens each one, unwrapping the new shoe gently from the tissue paper, and waits for Mia to put her foot on the slanted footrest, also carpeted, so the lady can ease her right foot into the shoe. She always uses her right foot because it's slightly larger than her left. And then when the most practical shoe fits, Mia is Cinderella as she walks up and down the shop, delighted at how her feet step out together and multiply in the mirrors that line the room.

Mrs Coleslaw, ag Coulson, is standing up in a pleated woollen skirt that clings to her skittle body of rounded stomach, hips and backside. Her skinny legs in laddered stockings are climbing the stairs to speak with the vent-something man sitting on a high chair on the stage. The man, who has just said his name is Nelson and the dummy on his lap 'M', must be in trouble. He doesn't seem to respect what she is saying because he keeps a half-smiling expression while his side-kick answers her, which makes everyone laugh and Mrs Coleslaw, ag Coulson, goes splotchy. But then she hisses something like a grumpy cat and the dummy becomes quiet, as she walks down the stairs quickly, almost slipping at the bottom. Only the brave ones snigger. Then the man tells them he's used the wrong names and now he's not going to use any at all.

The man and his dummy are dressed in boring brown suits with hanky triangles peeping out of their jacket pockets. The man puts his hand on the dummy's shoulder and the dummy looks from the man to the audience and back to the man again. The dummy has combed stuck-down hair and a mouth that bulges out like a monkey's. The man says something and when the dummy looks to the audience he answers with a wisecrack before looking back at the man again. Everyone laughs except Mia. They are talking about freedom and how the dummy hates to be locked away in a box when the man doesn't

want to let him have a say. Mia doesn't think it's funny because she believes the message was in the names.

It is her turn to make the lunch today. He is reading off a roster, which Mia knows only has women's names on it. 'No one said anything about this before I signed my letter of appointment.'

'It's not a big deal.' Prem is her first official boss ever and also the owner's grandson.

'Do I have to make for everyone even if I bring my own lunch?'

'Ja.'

'Why?'

'Because all the women do it.'

'That's blatant discrimination!'

'Anke doesn't complain and she's a director.'

'And that makes it right?'

'It makes it acceptable.' He mouths the words of someone or something else.

'And what else don't I know about?'

'What else.... Oh, yes, you have to go to the shops to buy the ingredients. Wait, before you interrupt. The company gives you the money. Just pick it up from Anke; she keeps the petty cash with her...'

'And?'

'Make sure you go before lunchtime because people don't like it if their food is late.'

She doesn't wash her hands so they'll all end up with food poisoning, she hopes, applying a heavy layer of the butter on the bread rolls. She hopes the hard block she found in the fridge clumps in the crumbs and sticks in the blood vessels. Savagely she rips apart the lettuce leaves, one of which falls to the floor. She picks it up and puts it on the roll for Anke. The general rule of thumb is one roll for women, two for the men. She spoons on the tuna mixture (tuna in oil, extra creamy mayonnaise, onion chopped into fat eye-burning chunks) and squashes the top full moon of the roll down. She didn't think she'd be waitressing at a small production company specialising in auto trade publications where the employees refuse to eat pink polony that curls up at the edges. And pies only once a week. Only Jacques, a sales rep who lives in Brakpan, thanks her when she puts a plate on his desk. 'Jg, shame. Thank you, my darling, but I really don't care for tuna.'

'I'm sorry I'm late with the pages, but I was making lunch...' She looks at him behind his computer and sees a half-eaten roll and one that is untouched. He wasn't in his office earlier. '...Which you haven't eaten.'

'Don't take it personally, I went to a press launch and snacked there.'

'I'm not clearing away everyone's dishes.'

'No one expects you to. That's Mona's job.'

'I think this whole lunch thing is pathetic! And why can't everyone take their own dishes to the kitchen?'

'You've aired your opinion, now drop it.'

'But don't you care that the company is sexist?'

'I care that you get back to your desk and work on pages one to five.'

'And then?'

'Then we go out for dinner.' A ventriloquist's wisecrack from a dummy.

'Where does your name come from? What does it mean, Prem?' They are eating Thai food in a Rosebank restaurant where naked plastic dolls of both sexes hang from the ceiling in weird positions, as evocative as their unbendable joints permit.

'My parents were in India when I was conceived; it's got something to do with it. It means love in Hindi.'

'A man made for love. For loving.' She looks at him playfully. 'I wouldn't have thought that about you from work.'

'For making love.' He plays join the dots with the moles on her arm.

'So is that your life's ambition?'

'Hell no! My aim is to follow James Dean's advice: Live fast, die young and leave a good-looking corpse.'

Their laughs pop out as Siamese twin bubbles and split apart in the air, going their separate ways.

'I get it.' She sits up straight, elbows off the table, as Granny Cecilia never fails to remind her. 'The world's a joke and you're the comedian.'

'Never thought of it that way, but I like that.' His chewing smile bounces in his olive complexion, which is complemented by only one shade of black for his eyes, eyebrows, stubble, square patch of beard in the cleft of his chin and glossy shoulder-length hair,

which only sometimes covers the silver ring in the upper cartilage of his ear. ‘How’s your soup?’

‘It’s okay. . . . Then why are you a production editor at your grandfather’s company, perpetuating his life’s work?’

‘Because I’m studying towards my Honours degree in marketing and if I don’t have to expend my own creativity at work, I can plough it into my studies.’

‘Ah, so you’re a man concerned with image.’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you ask out all your new assistants for dinner in their first week of work?’

‘Would it bother you if I did?’

‘No, not really.’

‘That’s a pity.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because here I am trying to impress you.’

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Mia looks down at the cup of black tea on her lap and then up at her grandmother.

Granny Cecilia’s is clouded with full-cream milk and she dips a dry cracker into it.

‘I wish I had some Romany Creams.’

‘Must I bring some when I visit again?’

‘Then I’ll die waiting.’

‘That’s not true, Granny Cecilia, and you know it.’

‘I know I’m the only one in the complex who doesn’t get visitors on Sundays.’

‘And whose fault is that?’ Granny Cecilia’s empty washing line shrieks, turning in the wind.

Prem’s mother – she lives closer – adds the old woman’s hand-washing to her own load and even though her knuckles bleed each Saturday from rubbing out the stains, she never hears a word of thanks.

Granny Cecilia leaves her biscuit in the tea for too long and it breaks and sinks, before she is able to lift it out, into her mouth. She rotates a teaspoon, trying to catch the

pulp before it disintegrates further at the bottom of the cup where it will release crumbs that thicken. She can't scoop it up and she frowns. 'You made it too hot.'

'Sorry, I thought you liked it that way.'

'Not so hot that my biscuit breaks before I can taste it.'

'Well don't leave it in for so long.'

'It would be lovely if you made me some of your scones. And whipped cream,' she sighs, a victim, lifting the cup to her mouth, hand shaking, tea dribbling out the side of her pursed mouth, down her chin and gathering as pearls on her cardigan. 'Or pecan-nut pie, even though yours is never as nice as mine.'

'Don't you want to know how my first day at work went this week?'

'How did your first day at work go, Mia?'

'I'm going away for the weekend to the Cederberg.'

'What is the purpose of this visit?'

'To experience a beautiful establishment and write a personal perspective when I get back.'

'Are you going alone?'

'Yes.'

'And what will Peter be doing with himself?'

'*Prem* is working. He's got an important presentation on Monday.'

'That's what he tells you. I bet you he's got another girlfriend.'

'I should get going, to beat the traffic.' Mia stands up.

'Why you can't live here, in Benoni, is beyond me.'

'Granny Cecilia, we like it where we are and it's close to work.'

'And further from me. You liked it here too, once.'

'I still do, but I want to avoid sitting in traffic if I don't have to.'

Granny Cecilia shakes her head and smooths down the hillock of her middle covered by an apron, as she stands slowly. 'I've been perfectly happy here my whole life. I've never had a need to travel like my mother.'

'You speak as if your life is over.'

'It is.'

'I like your new apron.'

'It's not new.'

'I've never seen it.'

'I've never worn it before.'

'Do you remember when I used to dress up in your aprons to become a Sumo wrestler?'

'Yes, tangling your hair in a silly topknot. Messing salt all over my kitchen floor.'

'I was scattering handfuls during my purification rituals. It was fun.'

'It was messy. A nasty habit. Wasteful too.'

'Then I used to pound the tiles with my fists.'

'And scare the poor cat away. What was the blessed creature's name again?'

'Mittens.'

Cecilia refuses to take Mia's outstretched arm, as they go outside.

'Garden's looking pretty.'

'It's all burnt up. We need more rain.'

'I can't see any snails.'

'I sprinkled salt yesterday; they're there, just busy dissolving. When do you leave?'

'Tomorrow after lunch.'

'Don't do anything stupid.'

Mia is wearing her grandmother's genuine pearls tight around her neck. They are creamy, not like the fake ones Granny Cecilia gave her for her sixteenth birthday. The velvety paint on hers has chipped away like old nail polish to reveal a stringed set of dull globes. She never doubted their authenticity until that moment. Yesterday Granny Cecilia told her the gems came from abnormal growths in molluscs. Mia didn't quite understand so she looked it up in her encyclopedia last night where she read about something called nacre (mother of pearl) and how pearls formed after tiny particles of foreign matter invaded molluscs. The particles then acted as irritants before being coated with layers of nacreous material. She dreamt about almost-invisible grains of sand shining with fairy lights but when she woke up this morning, she realised that Granny Cecilia has never coated her irritants. Mia has never become a pearl. She lifts up the scissors and slides the blades between two pearls to cut the string that connects them all. She lets them clatter onto the dressing table and fall into the shaggy rug, which she used to throw over her back as a sheep disguise.

When Mia twists to wave, as she reverses out of the parking space, her grandmother has already turned away to go inside, blatantly preferring the parallel realities of soap operas.

She doesn't look back. Exposure to sunlight can destroy the iridescence of mother-of-pearl.

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She is writing her early-morning e-mail to Prem when Parker comes up behind her. 'Diary meeting. Now. In the boardroom.' The bloated words contort and writhe in the air-conditioned atmosphere. Mia cuts the message short, boss calling gotta go, and presses Send. Meanwhile Parker is disembowelling a satchel camouflaged by its own sewage and removes a loaf of white bread falling out of its plastic sleeve slice by slice, a sticky Tupperware containing something that looks like brown vomit served with diced carrots and rice, an avocado with old-person's sun-damaged skin, his camera and a few decomposing notebooks. A rewind spool drops onto the floor. Ripping off pages, he ignores the confetti showering to the carpet, as he stalks off to the meeting, kicking the spool unknowingly out of the cubicle.

Mia sees him again in the boardroom, digging for something to drink in the bar fridge. He doesn't offer and she presumes because no one else is taking advantage of a freebie, he's not meant to either. She chooses a seat as far a way as possible from the head of the table. A can is cracked open and Parker comes to sit next to her, slurping up the fizz collecting on the top of the tin. He laughs at something the woman opposite him says and wipes his chin with his sleeve, spilling onto the table. He notices the leftover croissants from the seven-o'clock management meeting on a side table and moves across to help himself.

'Thisch isch Gwynesch, our schales manadger. She's bloodschy goodsch.'

As Gwyneth smiles, eyeliner opens up small eyes and gloss shines on generous lips. Her hair is a dazzling mix of corn rows and spiral hair extensions. She looks ready to duck from the sprinkler system spurting from Parker's mouth while he introduces her. 'Well, I do work hard. It is nice to meet you, Mia.' Gwyneth holds out a manicured hand and Mia has to stand to shake it. Her teeth are widely spaced and she seems to speak slowly to complete her words. She has an empowered grip.

‘Yes, you too.’ Mia feels inarticulate and insubstantial in this woman’s presence. She loves the way Gwyneth connects the country’s past with its future by wearing an orange and blue T-shirt that emblazons a *Drum* magazine cover. Mia guesses Gwyneth’s outfit has a Stoned Cherrie signature and wishes she didn’t feel so average in a generic pinstripe skirt and white linen cap-sleeve shirt.

The publisher is ten minutes late and in that time, skittering up against her legs under the table like a rat is the malevolence of evil-smelling shoes. Mia is sure they belong to Parker; Gwyneth is lightly fragranced. Mia tries to turn her thoughts to the aroma of baking bread or brewing coffee while Gwyneth tells Parker about the goat her uncle wants to slaughter next week in the garden of her home in Mondeor. ‘Good God! How will the neighbours react?’ Parker appears captivated by her.

‘What do you think they will do?’ She leans forward, pulling at her hair and frowning in concentration.

‘They won’t offer to lend you their spit braai, that’s for sure.’

They are laughing when the publisher arrives in a breeze of spicy aftershave that tingles in Mia’s nostrils.

‘Right, let’s get this show on the road. What do you have for me?’ He looks at Parker.

‘Bilateral talks. The South African and UK governments are due to open airline bilateral talks.’

‘Front page?’

‘Yes.’

‘This deadline?’

‘Yes.’

‘What are we starting her with?’ He glances briefly at Mia and then back at Parker.

‘Um, the invitation –’ She breaks off when she sees he is waiting for Parker to respond on her behalf.

‘I gave her the weekend invite for that reserve in the Cape. It’s a waste of my time and I’ve accepted the fancy one that arrived yesterday in all those feathers bound up by string and a mopani worm. Did you know mopani worms are actually not bad if you dunk them in coffee before eating them?’ Mia shudders at the thought of a coffee-flavoured caterpillar.

‘They’re advertisers. Fine.’

‘Here are some press releases from my clients for editorial. Can I tell them when – ’ Mia notices by her quick glance at the ceiling that Gwyneth doesn’t like being cut off when she speaks.

‘No. Give them to *her* to process. Speak to me afterwards about the proposal you put on my desk yesterday.’

It’s as if names don’t matter at this common meeting ground where socio-political roles are enforced because only titles carry weight, especially those with capital letters, Mia thinks. Publisher – Editor – Sales Manager – junior journalist. She wonders why corporate environments are more about the sociology of work as opposed to the physics of work. Surely it’s exhausting constantly worrying about conserving energy and building protectionist barriers to entry?

The discussion has dipped into a presentation of monthly sales figures and targets. Gwyneth is passionate in her ideas and her hands are antennae above her head. On Mia’s notepad, a stick figure in a triangle skirt and no legs comes to life with corkscrew curls. Why is it, she wonders, sketching a background of daisies, that she always seems to pass through a place as a traveller in the night, not even as a voyeur. She’s simply irrelevant. ‘Before we close, I want to talk about an incentive I’m introducing for the person who breaks the commission story when they finally reach a decision on the new remuneration model, etcetera etcetera.’ They all look to Parker.

‘So what do I win?’ He giggles.

‘The person who unearths the story will be sent on an all-expenses-paid trip to a destination still to be announced.’

‘That’s not fair!’ Gwyneth’s outstretched arms seem more suitable for a pulpit than a boardroom.

‘Why?’ The publisher indulges her.

‘It’s biased in Parker’s favour unless sales personnel can enter too?’

‘You have similar contacts.’

‘Not exactly and besides, Mia has no contacts.’

‘Best she makes them and quickly.’

‘Sounds great!’ Parker smiles.

‘Which of my clients has been bribed to sponsor the trip?’ Gwyneth is persistent.

‘When is the closing date for entries?’ Mia flushes when they all laugh.

Parker's cell phone bloop-bloop-bloops, as he slips out with another can of juice through the sliding doors onto the patio where the smokers are starting to gather. Gwyneth hands over a pile of press releases to Mia and follows the publisher. Mia feels sorry for Priti who has to clear away the empty can and crumbs Parker has messed all over the table before the room can be used again.

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Parker returns with an aura of alcohol half an hour before she is scheduled to leave for the day. 'They asked me to lunch. Couldn't very well decline. Got a story.' She's not sure who they are and doesn't ask. 'Wasn't sure I'd still find you here. Let's look at your work.' 'I put them on your desk earlier.' He shuffles through papers and photographs on his keyboard. 'What time?' 'Just after lunch.' 'Right.' He digs deeper, finds the layer of stories for that evolutionary period and starts reading, his masticated pen a claw to scratch deeply into mistakes. She is unable to look away, as he inserts the pen into his ear and whisks it, seemingly to dislodge the wax that thrives in the canal. Finished, he inspects the pen's tattered tip and wipes it on the fabric of his chair before putting it back in his mouth. 'Not bad. Just remember in future to put a slug on the stories so we know who wrote them.' She nods, planning to lock away her pens.

'Black! Where've you been all day? I've had Peter on the phone twice asking when you're coming to see him; he's got great news for us. Amadeus has grown its market share again. Rumour has it that they've also bagged an IT deal with SAA.' The publisher stands outside the cubicle, aloof from its contamination. 'When are you going to clean up this pigpen?' 'I'll call him tomorrow.' The publisher – his name has something to do with pigs, but she can't remember it – looks hard at Parker. 'What stories have you got for me?'

Parker hands over Mia's stories and a face with a ruddy complexion glances over the first paragraphs. 'This will do,' he says, wheezing his way back to his cubicle. 'Nice work, Black.'

'Thanks,' says Parker, putting the pen in his ear again.

Mia is nervous. Later during the day they have to say their speeches in front of the whole class. But first they are writing sentences with words Miss Chicken reads out aloud. Miss Chicken gets teased a lot by the boys in the class about her surname, which she can't change until she gets married. Mia hopes she finds a man with a good name to give her. 'Right, class. A sentence with the word pick. Try to write it in cursive.' Mia sees herself in Mom's vegetable patch where she plants lettuce, tomatoes, carrots and spinach. She doesn't like spinach, so she writes 'I pick tomatoes in our vegetable patch'. Hazel, who is sitting next to Mia, peeps at her work. 'What can I say?'

'I don't know.' Mia doesn't want to be shouted at by Miss Chicken, who has asked them not to speak to each other when she's given them work to do.

Miss Chicken looks in their direction. 'Hazel, what is your sentence?'

'I pick tomatoes in our vegetable patch.'

'Good. Mia?'

Mia panics. 'I pick my nose.'

The boys laugh while Miss Chicken frowns and makes Mia say 'Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper' ten times. And then the girls laugh. Mia gets a demerit.

'I meant to ask you earlier. When are you leaving for your trip?' Parker lounges in his swivel chair, legs splayed open, cleaning under his fingernails with a pencil.

'On Friday morning.'

'When are you back?'

'Monday afternoon.'

'Two days out of the office. It's too long. Phone them and organise to leave later on Friday after lunchtime and be back by Monday morning.'

'But it's all arranged!'

'We can't spare you for two full days. You know we run a tight ship.'

'Why didn't you tell me before I RSVP'ed?'

'It didn't cross my mind.'

'But it's so unprofessional.'

'Tough shit. This happens all the time.'

'But what's the sudden need for me in the office?'

'They can't spare two of us out of the office at once.'

'Two of us? At once?'

'I'm flying to Frankfurt with Lufthansa for an extended weekend. Last-minute decision.'

'It's a press trip and we can't afford to miss out.'

'When do you leave?'

'Tonight.' She sees the torn bag under his desk; it's not as last minute as he claims.

The fury follows the path of heartburn up her chest. It's time to go home. She logs off her computer and the last thing she sees is the peaceful rolling grass under a sapphire sky streaked with clouds that burn into the screen. He looks up at her machine's distinctive proclamation of rest. 'A half day I see?'

'Prem, it's me. I'm off to spinning.' She drums her fingers on the steering wheel. 'If you could just organise something for supper.'

'What do you feel like eating?'

'Anything but curry.'

'Chicken kebabs?'

'Great, then I can take the empty skewers to work as a weapon.'

'I guess I'll be getting chocolate mousse too?'

'Yes. A big tub. Not a mouthful.'

'And a slab of Top Deck?'

'The biggest.'

'Wine?'

'Fat Bastard.'

'...'

'Not you. The wine!'

She is standing on the carpet in front of the blackboard, which she will have to clean after school with the wooden dusters that pat chalky rectangles on the board. She'll have to

smear away Miss Chicken's neat rounded handwriting and then use a ruler to tap out clouds from the dusters, trying not to breathe it in. Mia is telling her classmates about fantastic foxes, a marvellous medicine, witches, a giant peach, a chocolate factory and revolting rhymes. The last speaker of the day, she can feel their restlessness while they long for the bell to release them back to their lives. They're probably hoping to watch the drum majorettes lifting legs in short skirts and twirling maces after school on the quad between the two flagpoles where the head boy raises South Africa's orange-white-blue flag and the head girl the school flag, which both fly at half mast when someone dies, like she's doing now in front of the class.

Miss Chicken isn't even trying to hide her yawn and Mia feels like one of the twits she has just told them about. Books, especially those by Roald Dahl, have always made her feel a champion of the world like Danny, especially because she's different from everyone else living with a mommy and a daddy. She stays with a granny and this means she's odd. And being odd means not having a best friend who holds her hand at break or who buys her tuck. Not having a best friend means spending break trying to look busy by eating brown-bread Marmite sandwiches very slowly as if she's enjoying them. Trying to look busy means taking a book to school to read in a corner where no one goes. And that means she gets to reread her favourites because she doesn't have enough books for all the breaks and she doesn't always get to go to the library next to the building where Granny Cecilia pays the lights and water accounts. So sometimes she has to be naughty or not finish her homework so she can get detention, which means having something to do at break.

Mia books her bike and goes to change into her gym kit. Slinging her bag over her shoulder, she sees a queue has formed quickly; her timing was good. There's always a long line of latent aggression waiting to push into one of Kevin's classes. A group is still in progress, the glass panes have steamed up and someone has traced '*Help us...*' into the condensation. She averts her eyes and looks down in preparation for the parade of naked flesh in the ladies cloak room; she's not in the mood.

Sitting on a bench, she slips off her shoes and unzips her bag. She pulls out a pair of black lycra cycling shorts and a white vest, dropping them on her towel. Fluffy socks. An elderly lady releases her slacks to reveal thighs of ripe blue cheese and Mia looks away

to see a young woman coming in her direction towards the toilet cubicles. She is dressed only in baggy black; shirt, long layered skirt, boots. It is Fay.

If Fay has seen her, she gives no clue to it. She disappears into a cubicle, bangs the door shut and drops her bag onto the floor. Mia can see it from under the gap as well as Fay's Caterpillar boots. Pulling up her shorts, Mia keeps glancing to where Fay is changing in private. The boots have been pushed up against the gap and the shadows shift and lift inside. Mia adjusts her straps, checks her shoelaces and picks up her bags; Fay is still in the cubicle when she leaves.

Arms around pyramid legs, chin on knees, Mia waits as suffused, dripping spinners leave the studio, spraying as they talk. The cleaners move in with mops. A fitness consultant in a luminous yellow shirt and a clipboard positions himself by the door, preparing to channel the energy inside according to numbers. Mia glances towards the cloak room again; she's been waiting to see Fay and hopes she hasn't already missed her. Almost. Fay is climbing the steps, just above her, out of reach. Mia scrambles up, not quite sure why and follows; she still has a few minutes before she loses her bike. But it is peak hour and she is held back by two young girls moaning about a useless lecturer, walking slowly, parading their beach bodies, holding eye contact with men. A mother trying to persuade her wet toddler in a costume to follow. A man with his leg in a plaster cast. When she gets to the top of the stairs, Fay has disappeared.

Parker is on a road bike ahead of her, taking the corners of Chapman's Peak wildly, almost out of control. Steadily she closes in, comes up next to him and shoves hard. She smiles sweetly into his shocked eyes. And there he goes, with his rusty, rattling bike, over the barrier, crashing down the cliff. There are no falling rocks from above. Those are contained now. Only Parker is rolling, rolling, rolling. She stands up on her bike and pedals furiously, away from it all. But she must give more, more, because she sees Fay on a bike, hair in razor blades, riding towards her, face expressionless, eyes drowning. And the disc spins and spins.

Rock art

'In matters of style, swim with the current; in matters of principle, stand like a rock.'
– *Thomas Jefferson*

THEY are sitting around a camp fire sipping butternut soup, the country's national soup if what she's heard is true. At home, Mia doesn't bother with the vegetable; she's never had the inclination to fuss with tough exteriors. She is enjoying the soup though and its thick taste of effort. Each mouthful comes from a swirl in her bowl.

The foreign guests are commenting on Stonehenge, England's celebrated megalithic monument, according to one lady with soft, soft skin in her sixties and a second mouth of pale butternut. Her name is some kind of flower – Rose/Daisy/Lily – Mia can't recall. Rose/Daisy/Lily goes on and on about Stonehenge possibly being a prehistoric gathering place or a centre of religion. Does Africa have a Stonehenge she wants to know? Rose/Daisy/Lily, in South Africa the rocks are imbedded within the central soul of the country, why can't you understand? It's been a long day and Mia finds it only getting longer. She wishes she could tell the woman to hurry up and eat her soup. That the country's mysteries are natural and its horrors manmade.

'Where are you off to then? Bored so soon?' The voice is a shooting star, as she stands up with her bowl.

'Excuse me?' She looks at the faces, trying to match it. He doesn't help and stays silent in the flickering darkness. Glistening sets of eyes stare at her, ready to be offended.

'Sorry...,' she mumbles, embarrassed, stepping over an outstretched pair of legs and hiking boots dusted lightly in terracotta sand.

A hand from behind whips away her bowl. 'I presume you've done with this.'

'Actually... um... I was going to get some more.' She can't see who she's speaking to so she addresses them all.

'William will sort that out for you. There's no need for you to leave the fire.' The voice is close and it towers above her.

The bowl disappears and since she's standing in the disco darkness, she decides she'd better do something to justify the attention.

'I have a story,' she interjects pointlessly, thinking of an old fable with many variations recalled by Granny Cecilia from Mom and her mother before that. 'My grandmother used to tell it to me. The story of the stone soup. I don't know where it comes from but do you want to hear it?' The polite please do, as another bowl of soup is put in her hands.

'Once upon a time, this beggar arrived at a mansion – we can substitute mansion for expensive house behind high walls and electronic gates in a suburb blocked off by security booms – asking for food, but was told by the servants – for the sake of political correctness, we can refer to them as domestic assistants or house managers – they had nothing to offer him.'

'Oh, I think I know this,' from one of the voices, not his.

'It's not a joke,' she emphasises. 'Anyway, with incredible dignity, he asked if he could boil some water to make soup of his stone, which he held out to show them. Of course they were curious to see if he could pull it off. And so they gave him a pot, water, spoon and access to their fire.'

'And then he turned into the Potter chap and waved his wand until the water became soup!' The few ha-ha-ha's splinter in the crackling logs and she directs a Miss Chicken smile of polite disdain towards the phlegm-coagulated voice.

'Not in my version. Our beggar dropped the stone into the pot. Stirring and sipping the bubbling water, he said the flavour would be enhanced by any spare meat and veggies they had available, except Brussels sprouts. These were supplied and he asked for some seasoning.'

'Black pepper and some of your country's fantastic chutney.' The same mucky voice again. 'When it was ready, the domestic assistants tasted it and declared stone soup worthy of inclusion on any menu. Delicious. *Lekker. Kibbe kakbulu?*

Rose/Daisy/Lily titters; it couldn't have been as good as tonight's butternut soup. The disruptive voice is so set in phlegm it can't contribute anything else. William believes more South Africans should try the recipe. Mia doesn't say a word more; she is being watched by a pair of eyes trapped between a rock and a hard place.

She sits, sips her soup and stays quiet, watching the guests focus again on blowing their bubble of privilege in the bush, which captures within it the trapeze acrobatics of flames.

‘Are you done now, Ma’am?’ May I take that away for you?’ William is considerate and she is grateful to give him the bowl of half-eaten soup.

‘Yes, thank you. Please tell your cook that was lovely, but I’m so full now.’

‘I understand, Ma’am. Some dessert? Coffee?’

‘No thanks. I won’t sleep.’ She wants to ask William about the man who has kept her here, but doesn’t. The whiteness of his shirt has the majesty of a full moon, as he walks away towards the manor house, his back straight. Into the night a hyena laughs maniacally.

Wrooooo-ah-ah. Rrr-who-oooo-ah. Wroo-ahh. She knows his loneliness. But it is not the animal she is considering, as she contemplates how he came to life in timbre, whoever he was.

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Mia looks up as the tap opens and water dribbles from the shower head in the same way her grandmother used to force beef through the pierced plate of a mincing machine, a raw pink with white speckles, dropping like fat worms and breaking into the bowl below. *Mia* is fascinated by coils. How vermicelli dries to form nests. The twisting duct that is the cochlea. Tight tails of bulldogs. The Milky Way. Craters inside whirlpools. Antelope horns. Relationships.

Eyes closed, she lets the coolness wash over her upturned face and into her ears. All she hears is rushing, but the pressure is soft without the hardness of Johannesburg. The evening breeze kisses her back and she loves the decadence of it, of this. The silence is a living thing that raises its eyebrows to reprimand the water slapping against the sandstone tiles next to and under her, but its compromise is in the voiceless ink above her head. The sky is a child’s drawing. She imagines a page where the patterns scratched in to the waxy black crayon covering the whole sheet twinkle with the colours eddying beneath the surface. And then she gives herself up to the pleasure, refusing to shrink against the wall when she hears crunching on the gravel path, which swerves past her suite and the shower standing tall in the *fynbos*. She sees the curve of the path as a laid-back coil.

Sprawled across the king-sized bed closed in by mosquito nets, she dozes fitfully. The pillows are too high, too much, too unused, too hard and she tosses them aside. Her

closed eyes are a cue for the curtains to pull back and reveal the full black-and-white glory of a Charlie Chaplin film, while sleep steps politely into the wings. In the silence, she desperately tries to mould the cardboard tramp into a human figure worthy of love, but all she sees is a vandalised grave with ash roses. With faultless timing, Prem in a bowler hat and carrying a bamboo cane suddenly jumps into the frame, his baggy trousers and enormous shoes failing to hide his lithe grace. She reaches for him with arms of fire. He is speaking to her, pushing a bowl filled with pebbles towards her face, but she is not hungry anymore and his facial eloquence has no resonance. He turns his back and without sound, flies back to Johannesburg using her low-cost reservation, a green superhero.

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The five-o'clock wake-up call arrives. Her eyes are open and burning. It is still dark outside from what she can see through the gap in the bulky curtains, purposefully not pulled closed to allow the pink coral offer of daylight to slash her bed. She rolls across to suppress the telephone and the television trills with copied cleverness. Oh for fuck's sake, as she picks up the receiver.

'Good morning to you too, sunshine.' She wasn't expecting a voice rich with timbre at the other end of the line. The television repeats its tinkle and then again in case she hasn't heard. She throws a cushion stiff with rigor mortis at it and misses. 'Thanks ... um ...'

'They're meeting in the dining room for coffee and rusks in fifteen minutes.'

'And what —' But he has hung up.

She decides to give the game drive a miss and to sleep out of her far-too-early-to-be-awake grumpiness.

Even stepping carefully, she cannot make less of a noise in the gravel. She doesn't want to wake guests who have stayed behind, if anyone has. The digital camera swings against her chest and she zips up her Drimac to contain the momentum. She feels feverish and while she thought she'd be able to rest, her mind is a gymnast. She tried to phone Prem on her cell, but there's no coverage in this isolation. Pulling on denims and boots and grabbing the jacket to hide her nightie, which she tucked into her pants, she ignores

the bra slung over the wingback chair. There is no time for fuss, as she decides to photograph the sunrise.

Lights are on at the manor house when she approaches. A rooster cock-a-doodle-doo. Birds make their beds.

‘Ma’am. You’re not on the drive? Is everything alright?’ It is William, who has come up from the staff quarters.

‘I’m fine, thank you.’

‘Are you looking for something?’

‘Just a good place to take a picture of the sunrise.’

‘You must speak to Mr Redman.’

‘No no no no. I’m fine by myself, thanks.’

‘He will find you the best place, Ma’am.’

‘Please call me Mia.’

‘He will find you the best place, Ma’am Mia. And you will be safe with him.’

‘I’m happy alone, William. I’m not scared.’

‘Yes, but I am not happy for you to be alone. There are wild animals in this place.’

‘I know. I’ve already met one. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.’

‘Ma’am Mia, let me call Mr Redman.’ William’s voice is rising.

‘I don’t want you waking him up just so I can take a photograph.’ She is trying to keep the exchange whispered.

‘No, he’s awake already. He works in the study at this time of day.’ Mia sees the open window and the shaft of light highlighting the shrubs outside.

‘Who is Mr Redman, William? Is he the manager?’ William looks over her shoulder and almost looks relieved.

‘No, I’m not the manager. Is there a problem here, William?’ She closes her eyes but it doesn’t block him out. She doesn’t want to turn around.

‘Ma’am Mia wants to take pictures. Of the sun. I am saying she must go with you; you will take her to a good spot.’

‘No, really, I’m fine by myself.’

‘How brave...’ She spins to face him, as he slips a rucksack onto his back and slings a rifle over his shoulder. He must have overheard the conversation through the window. ‘And

how stupid.' His mouth is left open after the 'pid-dch' of stupid, which leaves skid marks in the air.

'Excuse me? I'm a guest here, a journalist reviewing your establishment.'

'Yes, I know your type. True to form.'

'And what type is that?'

'Look, if you want to get that picture you'd better stop talking crap and hurry up. There's quite a walk ahead.'

'Don't avoid my question.'

'I'm not. I just couldn't be arsed to answer it.'

His long legs cover ground quickly, but then he knows the terrain and is sure of his steps. She tries to place her feet into his footprints, but she can't find them; he uses rocks, pebbles and undergrowth to mask his impression. She stumbles and kicks up stones, almost strangling her ankle, as stinging claws hold her back. They are climbing, but she will not ask for his hand to step up, over, down. She can hear the cheerleader cries of flora, as he moves liquidly through the vegetation, but when she arrives, they boo, block and pull. The sweat tickles as it slides between her breasts and she curses herself for leaving the bra in her room because now she can't take off her jacket.

Suddenly he is still, motionless, one leg up on a rock, waiting. He watches, as she approaches and she feels unfit, ungainly and unattractive.

'Taking strain?'

'No.... I'm not....Just fine.... Why don't you carry on...?'

For the first time he smiles; the idle upward movement bringing an eclipse to the cleft of his chin. 'You're lying.'

She looks at him, but doesn't answer; it would take too much energy and she can see he knows this.

He holds out his plastic water bottle to her, but she shakes her head. 'I don't have germs.'

'Everyone ... has... germs....' She reaches him and puts her hands on her knees, bending over to catch her breath.

'Don't dehydrate.' He lifts the bottle to his lips and Mia looks up to watch as the water bulges down his python throat. She licks the salt off her lips and her mouth tastes barren.

'Where are you taking me?' Sweat trickles into her ears. She licks her lips again and she is sure her tongue has swollen to fill her mouth.

‘Please drink.’

‘The man can be civil.’

‘Look, just drink the damn water.’

She takes the bottle and places her lips where his have just been. The rim is warm and wet, but the tepid water is cool and tastes how the container smells. She hands it back to him.

He secures the cap, puts the bottle away, lifts his rifle.

‘You didn’t say.’

‘What?’

‘Where you’re taking me.’

‘To the rock art.’

They reach the shelter, as the sun decides to take off its pajamas. Mia is enchanted with the lighting and pulls her camera through her Drimac and clicks into the sky. ‘You’ll find your angle if you lie on your stomach across these rocks,’ he demonstrates, his khaki shorts pulling tight over his muscled rear.

‘I know how to take a photograph, thank you.’

‘My pleasure, but I wasn’t questioning your ability, just providing a helpful suggestion.’

‘And what qualifies you then?’

He continues to lie across the illuminated rocks sweaty with dew. ‘Why don’t you take off your Drimac? You look so bloody hot.’

‘Again, if I wanted your advice, I’d ask for it.’

He puts a cigarette between his lips and as he draws in, hollows form across his cheeks.

‘Our rock paintings were part of profound religious feelings and spiritual experiences. For the artists, the walls of the rock face became painted gateways to a supernatural reality.’ His back is to her. He is almost reverent in the alcove. She can hear his voice, but responds to its timbre, intrigued by how his nose pulls down when he speaks and how the paintings bleed silently behind him. She appreciates the aesthetics of detailed, dotted depictions of hunter-gathering magic, but for her, metaphorical resonances have faded with the artists and years.

‘Sorry, what did you say they were painted for again?’ His oral art evaporates in the temperature’s fever as quickly as he says it and she is spiralling in the energy of trance dances and hallucinations. It’s as if she has hit him. His eyebrows dive into the bridge of his nose and for the first time she notices his eyes are mismatched. One has the irregular

tawny manifestation of tigereye quartz, the other is the rippled yellow-green of limes. She can't look away.

'You should rather ask what they communicate.'

'Don't be so cryptic.'

'Only in response to your boredom.'

'I'm not bored. Why do you keep saying I am?'

'It's so obvious. You're only here because your pamphlet wants you here.'

'Don't judge me on a crime I'm not guilty of. It's unprofessional. And it's your job to tell me.' She doesn't even bother to reply to his slur on Travel Talk.

'Actually, it isn't.' He steps down into the thorns. 'If you could bring yourself not to kick up the dust, I'd appreciate it. It adheres to and erodes the paintings, spoiling them for everyone else. For those who hold our legacy in awe.'

'Don't be so sentimental. They're just drawings. Glorified stains.'

'You don't get it, do you? You just don't get it. Rock paintings aren't just the arbitrary result of some projected need for decoration or a way to pass the time.'

'So what are they then?'

'Be careful of that rock there when you step down.'

'So let me in on a secret.' He is holding back branches for her to squeeze through, as she slips in loose dust. 'How long have you been bored with the poor guy who's put his life on the line to marry you?'

'Excuse me?'

'You heard.'

'I don't think I did, not correctly.'

'I'm not repeating the question. Either you answer or you don't.' His eyes flicker basalt, sliced avocado.

'You are such a bastard.' She knows now it was him last night.

'You won't win arguments by name-calling.'

'Don't flatter yourself. This isn't an argument. An argument by definition is an exchange of views or a reasoning process. In this case, you're beyond reason. And there is no exchange.'

'You're grasping at straws.' His laugh is filled with gravel, like his voice.

'And you,' she pauses for dramatic effect. 'Are out of line.'

'Am I? The truth, she is hurting!' He plays with a different accent.

'Not as much as you will when I pull the trigger.'

'You wouldn't want to do that.'

'Just watch me.'

'I will, especially if we come across any predators. Unless you're planning to call them names too.' The sound of construction workers mixing cement, as he laughs again.

'What's your first name?'

'Why, so you can tell me to go and do what with myself?'

She sighs deeply and pulls in her mouth.

'So how much is it worth?'

'Is what worth?'

'Your ring.'

'I don't know.'

'Someone like you always knows the value of her engagement ring.'

'I'm amazed at how you have such intimate knowledge of what I'm like. Go on. I'm intrigued.'

'How much did he pay?'

'How do you know I didn't buy it?'

'It's not your style.'

'Oh, right. I'm forgetting. And you know what that is. My style. And just what is *someone like me* like?'

'Now that would be telling.'

'He cops out. Did I expect anything less? I can't believe I'm perpetuating this ridiculous discussion.'

'Then just answer the question. How much did it cost?'

'More than you can afford, so piss off.'

Lying on her back, Mia stares at the mosquito graveyard on the bedroom ceiling, as she does almost every night before switching off the light. Grey smears smacked into the surface. Some are messier than others whose positions neatly became one dimensional. And neither of them has bothered to wipe away the marks.

The toilet swallows and she knows Prem will join her in a minute or two; he's probably finishing a page of his book, which he keeps stacked on the pile of magazines in the bathroom for that purpose. He's not really a booklover, but he has to have something to read there. Mia sees it as an extension of his need always to be in a narrative surrounded by people and plots. He avoids scenes with soliloquies. Almost as if he's scared he won't be able to charm himself in the way that he charms the rest of the world, including her.

'Hey, beautiful,' he comes to join her on the bed now, kissing her forehead. 'I missed you.'

'I'm not surprised! You were in there for more than an hour, Premmie. Longer than me!' 'It was a good one though.' Smiling, they know he is not talking about his shower. 'You haven't told me about your day yet.' He settles next to her, tracing the outline of her breast through her spaghetti-strapped vest.

'Not much to tell. You?' Her thumb sweeps the floor of his hand.

He doesn't reply, but takes her face in his hands and kisses her, his stubble scratching her face. She puts her arms around his neck and pulls him to her. Deftly he lifts her vest over her shoulders, arms and drops it on the floor. Hungry with questions, she opens to him and in the honeyed solstice he lifts himself beyond a detailed answer. Black-eyed familiar, she remembers his language. It is written in gold calligraphy.

They lie next to each other, kidnapped by Egyptian cotton sheets. He is cracking the joints of his long fingers, which jabs like a file under a nail. 'Prem... Please...' He does a few more and reaching over, lifts out one of the saffron daisies floating alongside candles in a ceramic bowl on the cushion-high table closest to the bed. The water in the bowl sucks in its stomach. 'A gift for you; I picked it myself.'

She takes it from him. 'Thank you, but it's far too generous. Can I get you some water? I'm going to the kitchen.'

'You know I can't resist a sexy woman offering a glass of liquid from a tap.'

Plopping the flower back into the water, she leaves the room, noticing how he pushes the candles like little boats, creating waves.

Carrying two glasses into the bedroom, she puts one down and stretches across to hand him the other.

'Aaah! My beauty!'

'Prem, you never change ... but I like you all the same.' She smiles.

'For that you get a smooch, come here.'

'You're affectionate tonight!'

'I'm just happy, beetle. I'm happy I have you. And that you're going to say yes.'

'To what?'

'To me!' Delighted with himself, he pulls off the shirt he's been wearing since the bathroom to reveal a dramatic exhibit of henna tattoos on his smooth chest. There are sunflowers, roses and tulips as well as the words *Will You* He turns around slowly to reveal, on his back, arum lilies, orchids, daisies and ... *Marry Me?*

She says yes. Yes to the body art. Yes to a mirage of herself in silver fairytale. Yes to the brilliance he is slipping onto her finger. Yes to the certainty of acceptance.

Mia is saying no to his suggestion that they visit a second rock art site; she just wants to get back to the lodge. She has chosen silence as a weapon and plans to keep to her vow not to speak to this man until he can be civil to her, which is probably never. That is fine with her too. She doesn't even know his first name and refuses to call him Mr Redman. She'll leave him nameless so he has no identity. Perhaps she should make him feel self conscious about his eyes too, being so dissimilar. Get personal like he has. But that's only if she needs to break her undertaking.

Considering the reserve's vastness and the turbulent tectonic collisions behind this craggy landscape, she is somehow soothed by an ancient acknowledgement of her presence here and a sharing of delicate life able to withstand this barrenness. Her mind millions of years away, Mia almost walks into him, as he bends to look at rock. 'Trace fossils.'

'What?'

'Trace fossils of marine invertebrates. Evidence of evolutionary activities. Deeply implanted within this sedimentary rock.'

'Do you mean little skeletons?' She forgets to ignore him at the prospect of finding tiny creatures.

'No, not body fossils. Trace fossils. These preserve evidence of movement. Like footprints.'

'So have you found little footprints?'

'I said invertebrates.'

'Help it!'

'No, not this one, I can't.'

'What's wrong with it? Please try!'

'I don't know, but it might have been poisoned.'

'Then you can't leave it here for other animals to eat!'

'I know.'

'Please save it!' The cinnamon bird has its head thrown back almost to its black tail, its wings dragging through the sand at its sides, its beak opening and closing. It wobbles unsteadily under an aloe.

'Go back to the manor house. I'll meet you in the lounge.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Help it.'

'What is it?'

'A Cinnamon-breasted Warbler.'

'What are they like?'

'Will you please leave so I can deal with this?'

'I don't want to walk away from its pain. Let me assist too.'

'Disappear, now.'

She persists and reaches out towards the bird, which shuffles further under the leaves and collapses.

'You're prolonging its agony. Now go.'

'If you're going to help it, why can't I stay?'

'Because then I'll wring your neck too.' In the way his mouth pulls down she can see this will be harder for him than for her, so she leaves him.

The bird is gone when she checks under the plant and he is sitting on a tree stump, smoking. 'Thank you for leaving.' His back is to her but he must have heard her approach. She wonders whether the bird's neck cracked loudly and if its body went limp before the ultimate stiffening.

'Thank you for helping. I'm sorry. I hate facing death.'

'It's worse to hold it in your hands.' She stands behind him and looks down on his head, noticing scalp, which isn't as white as hers, probably from being outdoors most of the time. 'Thank you for the apology.'

She turns to go to her room for a bath, or shower, she's not sure of which luxury to choose. Maybe both.

'Your question, earlier. The Cinnamon-breasted Warbler is one of the noisiest species with its melody and mimicry. Usually we only see them at dawn. Warblers in general are pretty secretive behind their cryptic plumage.' He has swivelled to face her.

She smiles and hands him a *nygie*. 'For the bird.'

.....

Mia is struck suddenly, while trying to clear her thoughts, by how hands of the earth understand the tight canal of birth. She is without clothing, but does not feel naked because rusted towels wrap her in a border. She loves the idea of a massage, but always tries not to give up all her boundaries and in this way, she hasn't. There's something about osmosis and the migration of molecules that makes her hold on tight to impermeability. If too much water moves into cells, they distend and rupture. If too much leaves, they wither and stop working. If she could choose, she'd rather shrink, as there's more dignity in that, she believes, and less pressure.

A presence appears in the room, which allows in the landscape and with it an ancient stillness through floor-to-ceiling glass panels. *Mia* hopes no one plans to walk past because they will see her, although the wellness centre is secluded against a ragged *koppie*. There are no whispers and the presence peels away the towels to allow her back to breathe with her mind, in a way that doesn't leave her feeling stripped bare by drought. She consoles herself that land art is beyond frame, beyond restriction, yet she feels more like abandoned graffiti on a clinical towelling cover. The only sound is the attempt at no sound, which reminds *Mia* of the teachers who used to click up and down between the spinal chords of desks during exams, whispering, but making more of a disruption than if they had spoken normally. 'Is this going to hurt?' She tries to whisk up the air into peaks. The presence says nothing, but does not ignore her. Fingers touch, impress, circle oil in her arm and then *Mia* feels an immediate heat, as a hot stone – basalt – rolls over the tense terrain, sending warmth spiralling deep into the bone. So penetrative that the natural elements will not corrode its calm, she hopes, at least for this day. Please can the energy

dilute the pollutants he brought into her environment, she pleads, but the idea of him has penetrated deeper than the heat can reach and she can't trace its source.

He helps everyone up into his vehicle – she refuses his outstretched hand – and takes them to a rock pool for a swim and picnic. On the rocks, Mia holds back while the foreign guests pull off shirts and shorts and socks and shoes. They don't feel the cold water, she thinks. 'Can I...?' She reaches out towards him, palm upturned and flat, as he starts unpacking the basket. He looks at her face, ignoring her hand, as she did to his earlier.

'You can do anything you want.'

'Would you like some help is what I mean.'

'I don't think so.' His laugh is an incomplete first draft. 'Some ostrich biltong?' She shakes her head, turns away, embarrassed at her offer, which was the only diversion she could come up with quickly to avoid stripping down for the swim. 'Salted peanuts? Pretzels?'

'No thanks.'

'Aren't you going to swim, cool down?' He doesn't look at her, preoccupied with the fuss of food.

'I'm considering it.'

'What's there to think about? It's so hot.'

'Are you going to?'

'Would that make a difference to you?' This time he watches for her response at his directness.

She hasn't expected that, especially his swift sidelong glance at her ring.

With the towel a loose glove to keep the warm stone cupped in her hand, the presence floats to her other arm. Mia appreciates the delicate link land art maintains with the environment in which it was created. It does not last for thousands and thousands of years only for people who don't understand, but think they do, to imprison it within their determined interpretation of it. It irritates her, the reading of age as a dated reflection of the present. So she allows herself to float on driftwood into a vague stone age. But thoughts of him swell and burst without warning, as a stone handled carelessly clatters against the tiles beneath her. The slow rhythm shatters. The background becomes the

foreground. The clock. Clearing up. Enya's music, soothing at first, starts to chafe. When land art cannot be purchased and taken away to exhibit, it burns away in the sun.

The person tries to bring back the softness, but Mía is too focused on bubbles boiling in what reminds her of an automatic kettle the moment before it switches off. Hands open and close a lid to remove another stone. There is a pause and the stone is returned. The person moves closer and fingers slip off her ring, so easily. This irritates Mía. She doesn't want to be aware of the ring coiled next to her, off her, losing its warmth in air that offers no forecast of the discovery of metals and the end of a stone age. She turns her head away from the questions and the towelling licks her cheek with a cat's tongue, as she looks into the waterfall.

She stands staring at the froth falling for some time. She removed her shoes and shorts, but has kept her shirt on over her costume, just to stop his eyes. She can hear him behind her, piling plastic plates on a checkered cloth, the type usually associated with eating outside, as she watches the others making waves and diving deep, deep. There is no wind and she feels the sun burning her skin red. Not even a bird calls in the heat and she can hear the trees breathing. She doesn't even have a chance to open her mouth to scream, as she is pulled into the pool, her nostrils haemorrhaging with streaming water in the underworld.

After what seems forever, she breaks through the surface into the air. He is waiting, seal-slicked, the start of a receding hairline. His eyes are caves. 'You were taking too long to decide.' Droplets spray from his mouth. He is smiling and the deep crease in each cheek seems to operate as a pulley for his nose. Caramelised sugar, ripe kiwi crinkle. 'That was no decision! And how did you know I could swim?' She doesn't like the way she sounds and doesn't want him to either.

'But you can.'

She kicks her legs to keep upright in the pool. 'Shit, you're impossible.'

He inclines his head, arms pushing and pulling in arcs. 'But you like it that I am.'

She opens her mouth to retort and swallows water instead, which she coughs up in unattractive retches until she tastes bile.

'Are you enjoying your swim?' He looks so much younger in a weightless setting.

'No, it's cold. I'm cold.' She manages to splutter.

‘Why didn’t you say something earlier?’ He doggie-paddles away to the sound of group laughter echoing in the rocks, leaving his smile floating in circles next to her so she can get out.

Mia’s leg is lifted by the presence, her heel a right angle to the ceiling, oil soothing the scratches on her calves. Fingers massage between her manicured toes, over her supple, smooth heel. She works hard to wear down the old skin with a pumice stone to keep away toughened, cracking flakes. Old skin is not attractive; it catches on sheets in bed. It diminishes the aesthetics of fragile sandals. It traps within it the dirt of living. So when her foot is bandaged to trap the stone in a towel bootie, it is clean and sleek. Like the inside layers of rock. Only once both hands and feet are warming with stones, the presence places a line of hot pebbles over a towel along her spine; reinforcement and strength seeps through the threads. And then the door opens and closes; the hot-stone therapist has left her alone in the room to absorb.

She treads water in the coolness before swimming towards the land to climb out. Scrambling onto the grainy warmth to dry, she watches his head in the shadowed waters some distance away. ‘Lovely man isn’t he?’ Mia stretches around to see Rose/Daisy/Lily. ‘Is he? I don’t really know.’ She drops her head to avoid staring directly into the sun and she speaks to elephant knees.

‘You don’t need to, my dear, it’s in his eyes. So sad.’

‘What do you mean by sad?’

‘Look into his eyes and you’ll see it there where he is trying to bury it. Such unusual eyes too.’

‘What? What’s he trying to hide?’

‘I don’t know, but it’s eating him alive.’

‘So how can you tell he’s a lovely man?’

‘My dear, when you get to my age, you just know.’ At that she turns, the movement releasing a fanny fart.

The door opens and with it a warm breath from the dry outdoors sticks in the room, a persistent fly. The presence is back, she supposes, drifting back to him. He feels so close.

She wonders what the therapist looks like because the presence only came into the room after she was on the table, eyes closed. But she doesn't mind the appearance of the hands because it's in the technique; in the feeling, not the emotion. The hands are confident, supple, strong and she feels his on her arms in the pool. How strange that the meaning of art and the act of creating it are inseparable, she thinks, but the artist, exhibitor and audience are not.

She knows she is losing sense of time, as the present blends with a past that is only passing while it calls to a future to which she must return. Her body twitches while the characters in her mind get into costume for a bodily affair. The hands on her shoulders become his, masterful, and her impermeability is challenged; molecules are moving and the pressure builds. Fingertips meet fingertips as a stone is taken away and this is her fault for not keeping well away from the lava.

The sensation is one of burning, although the rocks have cooled. His hands tentatively trace her spine, lifting stones one, one, one. She feels herself waking into the moment and her eyes open under the lavender pad, as a stone slips down next to her breast. The hands hesitate and then one reaches down to retrieve it, lightly brushing the swell. Her nipples harden and in shock, she tells herself these are professional hands, hands meant to create sensation although these have taken it to sensuality. She acknowledges then that the rain has washed away the topsoil and only rocks could have prevented it. Just how much erosion did it take? To create Western Australia's Wave Rock, which was sculptured into the shape of a breaking wave before it hit the shore.

His hands continue to exert a penetrative pressure up her legs; she shifts with sensation. When did the massage become manipulation, she has time to think, as yet another wave arches to crash. And as she weathers away and upon, she sees him strolling across to her, as the others walk back to the open game-viewing vehicle.

'Where is your fiancé?'

'What's it to you?'

'Are you in love with him?'

'Yes. Yes, I am.'

'Just remember the real is as imagined as the imaginary.'

'What the hell is that supposed to mean?'

'Ah, there you are, Petunia! You wanted to know what type of protea that was...' He slows his pace to walk with Rose/Daisy/Lily. Mia picks up hers.

He takes the long way back and she tries to ignore the droplets catching the sun in his hair as it dries. She admires the clasp of a black leather thong behind his neck and the pale scar that ploughs up the surface of his nut-brown arm like a mole's tunnel, as he points out something in the bush that she doesn't look to find. He has a hard profile, stubborn, one that refuses to give away clues. When he suddenly switches off the vehicle to show them another rock art site, she stays behind in the vehicle, refusing to get out, blaming her apathy on a blister. He says nothing, leading the others away through the bush until it is quiet. She has control over not having control, she tells herself. But it is not long before they return; he made a mistake, they tease. Wrong site. They seemed relieved that a South African is also not always able to tame the wildness. But she has a feeling the site is right; only the lie is wrong.

Back at the lodge, she phones Prem from the landline in her room, just to hear his voice.

'Enjoying yourself, Beetle?'

'Um, *ja*. I've got a divine suite and an amazing outdoor shower.'

'Cool.'

'What are you up to?'

'Working on my presentation.' His voice is silk. 'No gallivanting for me.'

'It's more like a forced march.'

'Huh?'

'Nothing.'

'Are you relaxing?'

'Not quite. Not yet.'

'Go for a massage. It will be good for you.'

She listens for silence, as his hands knuckle her back and then move to unravel the towels around her feet to release the embedded stones. She is still on high alert and confused by the response of her body to these hands, which by the shivers they evoke, should belong to Prem. But would she recognise his touch at rock bottom?

When his hands uncover her other hand, there are no more stones to remove. She wants it to stop, but she's scared because it won't stop. Nothing ever stops. Like nothing ever starts. It's always been happening and continues to happen. The same patterns reappear in the latest configuration of the same genes, a merry-go-round that everyone simply climbs onto and off when the time is right. She's had this argument before with Prem. So she is not really surprised when the hands don't pause. Instead they rub her neck and shoulders, as if trying to find the drawbridge over the moat to understand her secret language. Trying to slip through the cracks in the rock face to a heightened state of consciousness.

It upsets her, this insubstantial struggle of the manmade against forces of nature, which are too powerful not to win. She wants the velvet of nature, not the elemental rawness of tweed. But she finds herself in a cave where her timid voice gathers force to reach out beyond itself against a strong timbre and two incompatible eyes that glint in the gloom. A place where water turns to stone soup and the merry-go-round doesn't stop turning. A place where skin takes its colour from the environment.

She assumes that by staying in the room, the person is waiting for her to take off the pad covering her eyes. The physical massage is over, but it carries on and on. Mia resists because she doesn't want to know; the hands must simply belong to a person without a name, to a therapist, a healer. A presence. She is too close to bursting – or melting – point. She puts her hand out for the ring on the side table to give her a backbone, to pull her back through the spiraling canal and offer a hand to help her through the bush. But nothing happens because the presence has dissipated.

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Barefoot, she limps back to her suite, past the smoky rim-flow pool, stubbing her toes on the pebbles lining the gravel path and wincing as stones stab into the soft secrets of her feet. She gets more annoyed with each step that hurts. Her hair is pulled into a bun, off her oily neck, and she can already imagine herself soaking in the freestanding claw bath in the centre of the bathroom.

'City feet.' She doesn't need to look up to know whose voice it is.

'There's nothing wrong with city feet.'

'Never said there was.'

'Your tone implied it.'

'Then you are tone deaf.'

'Sure, I misheard.' She is not in the mood for this pointlessness.

'Does it really hurt?'

'Do you think I'm walking like this because I have a bad back? Of course it hurts my feet. Don't you have a job to do or something instead of skulking around waiting to find fault with everything I do or say. Or am?'

'I was actually looking for you to set up your site inspection and interview with the general manager.'

'I've already inspected the site but fine, when do you want to do it?'

'How soon can you be ready?'

'Hour and a half.' She refuses to relinquish the image of relaxing in the bath.

'So long?'

'It will take me that long to get to my room.'

'Where are your shoes?'

'I forgot them at the spa and don't feel like walking barefoot all the way back to fetch them.' She flinches as yet another pointed stone cuts into her and looks down at the ground to curse it. She doesn't see him moving to scoop her up into his arms, his eyes lifting off his face when he looks into hers. He is so close she can see the pores of his skin and a beaded scratch across his temple. His eyes deepen and narrow in their different ways. His front teeth bite down on his bottom lip. He smells of the outdoors and mint. She could place her lips on his, right now, she muses, if she found him attractive, which she doesn't. 'What are you doing? Please put me down!' She wriggles to show she means it and to shake off her foolishness.

'Helping you back to your room.'

'You should put me down.'

'Should I?'

'Yes.'

'I'll put you down outside your room.'

'I don't want anyone to see.'

'So what if they see? You're hurt.'

'I'm not.'

'Pretend.'

She meets him outside the manor house where he is waiting with a press pack.

'Shouldn't you be with the others on their game drive?'

'No.'

'What is your actual portfolio? How can you just do what you like?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'It does if I have to quote you.'

'You'll quote the GM; I've set up your interview for tomorrow morning after breakfast.'

She nods.

'Right, let's get this show on the road.' He runs his hand through his short hair and she watches the copper bangle judder down his arm.

He is elaborating on the capacity of the conferencing facilities, which extend to an outdoor amphitheatre of boulders, when William rushes into the room. 'Mr Redman, sir, Mr Redman!'

'What's –'

'It's your father, sir, you'd better hurry!' William stumbles to get back through the entrance and leaves a contour map of five splayed fingers on the sliding door. Mia sees him sprinting across the gravel barefoot and she thinks in some empty part of her mind that even if he had city feet, he wouldn't feel the pain.

She waits in the library and pages through the glossy books on the coffee table, which is an elaborately carved door covered by a sheet of glass. She fills in the gaps in her notes. The house is muted with the overflow of an ashtray that needs to be emptied and she is glad the other guests are out. She smells lamb cooking and a pot crashes in the kitchen. For the third time, she picks up a book and pages through it slowly, but it is lifeless without his narration. She feels like an illegal immigrant even though she hasn't crossed a border.

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Mia finds him in the sandstone amphitheatre because it's where she would have gone to disappear. He wasn't at dinner, but the guests didn't seem to notice, the rosemary lamb on their plates a tender distraction until their knives finished tearing it up. He is a rod in a camp chair pulled out of a semicircle, his legs crossed at the ankles, a cigarette burning in his fingers. 'You shouldn't have come here alone; it's not safe.' The beam from her torch foxtrots in the whiskey bottle on the sand next to him.

'I thought you could use the company.'

'It's the solitude I want.'

'You've had the time. Besides, you need to eat something.' He looks at the reflective arch covering a plate in her hands.

'Did William prepare that for you?'

'At my request.'

'So that's how you found me?'

'I knew you'd be here; William just gave me the directions. And the food.'

'How did you know?'

'You told me this afternoon this is where you come to think with the stars.'

He takes in her words, looking for flaws. 'How did you ditch William?'

'Someone needs to take care of the other guests. He wasn't happy though. He made me take this torch and whistle....' She puts her mouth around its gaping sea horse jaw, ready to expel air.

'Don't blow! You'll call him!' He jumps up to pull it out of her mouth and his fingers brush her lips, as he takes it from her. His touch is serrated and liquor fumes distort the comforting aroma of baked potatoes.

'You must be hungry.' She swallows, breathes in and looks down at the vaulted lid, feeling stupid. 'You should eat before it gets cold.'

'Actually, I'm not. Hungry.'

'Just try a bit.' She holds out the food, which he takes after putting the whistle in the pocket of his denims, and sits, the plate on his lap. She hands him cutlery mummified in a serviette and squats next to him. 'Should we make a fire?'

'What for?'

'Warmth, safety, ambiance.'

'For those reasons yes, since we don't need to cook and the moon is bright enough.' He drives his fork into a potato and turns it cruelly.

'Where's your lighter?' He puts down his knife, digs in a pocket and hands it to her.

She flicks and lets the flame take the wood into its arms.

'I should make you try the friction method.'

'Pass the matches then.'

He smiles. 'No, with a stick.'

'Why?'

'To make you a survivor.'

'I'm not into reality shows, thanks.'

'Does that extend to your life too?'

'Definitely.'

She notices there's no serving of lamb on his plate. 'So when did you become a vegetarian?'

'When my uncle took me on my first hunt.'

'How old were you?'

'Sixteen.'

'What do you remember?'

'Her long black eyelashes and soft eyes that stayed open almost as if she couldn't rest even in death.'

'Was she your first?'

'And only, in the name of sport.'

'How inhumane that the word sport is associated.'

'Don't be a hypocrite. What people eat from the abattoir goes through hell compared with hunting where at least the animals have no idea of what's coming. Some antelope that take a heart shot can keep running or jumping for a couple of metres before they just fall. At the abattoir, they stand in queues, waiting. They know the betrayal. They smell it. And then it's the stun gun with its retractable pin that is used over and over again. The hunt got me thinking, but it was the idea of those queues that made me realise I needed to be a vegetarian. It wasn't enough to become. I had to be.'

'What does it smell like, when you've killed an animal?'

'Cordite. Copper.'

‘And what happens then?’

‘It’s onto the back of a *bakkie* with the clacking of horns and hooves on metal.’

‘Where did you shoot her?’

‘In the neck.’

‘And then?’

‘Why all these questions?’

‘I’m curious.’

‘This for your story?’

‘I’m not taking notes.’

‘Then the throat is slit to let the blood flow out. You don’t want it coagulating in the veins. You hang it up by the back legs by inserting hooks behind the knees between the tendon and bone. You gut it. Skin it. You crack open the rib cage and take off the head. You take out the internal organs. You wash out the inside of the carcass with a hosepipe. Put it into a fridge. It’s weird. When it comes out, it’s dry and it’s almost as if a second skin has formed because a sheen covers everything. And then you cut it up.’

‘I guess once they’re cleaned, all animals look the same underneath.’

‘Like anatomy pictures of muscle groups in textbooks.’

‘Do you ever get rid of all the blood?’

‘It’s the eyes and smells that stay. And the clacks on the back of the *bakkie*.’

He hands her the bottle and the liquid cuts her stomach. He drinks when she is finished. ‘The best a man can get – for the pain.’

‘Would you like me to leave?’

‘Talking keeps the mind from pulling against the leash. Tell me. What were you like at sixteen?’

‘Lonely.’

‘Family and friends?’

‘I was living with my grandmother at the time. I’m an only child.’

‘Your parents?’

‘They were overseas mostly and felt for the benefit of my schooling it was best to leave me with the stabilising influence of Granny Cecilia.’

‘What were they doing overseas?’

‘They’re both successful doctors. Top specialists.’

‘That was the only reason?’

‘No. They were escaping. From the noose of parenthood. From the trap of the country. From themselves. They’ve divorced since, but I’m sure they were separated even before they married.’

‘From you too?’

‘Separation implies we were once bonded. The only link we share is our DNA.’

You know something –’

‘What?’

‘Even though I was preparing for it, it doesn’t come as less of a shock now that it’s actually happened. God, I can’t believe it. I mean. Fuck. My father’s dead. My father’s fucking dead.’

They are silent, as he draws on his cigarette and inhales deeply. The smoke rushes out through his nostrils and mouth. She can almost hear the whistle of a steam engine. ‘How often do you see your parents, Mia?’

She shakes her head.

‘I would give my left testicle to see him again It’s so sad....’

‘Death always is for those who remain behind.’

‘I was referring to you and your parents.’

She snorts. ‘It’s better this way.’

‘Are you close to your grandmother?’

‘Define close.’

‘As in close-knit.’

‘She’s more like a closed book. Close as in shut. The word goes deeper, not higher.’

‘How often do you see her?’

‘Once, sometimes twice, a week. And before you say something, I’m happy with things the way they are.’ She stares at him steadily, but he looks distorted. ‘Besides, I have Prem.’

‘Prem?’

‘My fiancé.’

‘I know. You just haven’t mentioned his name until now. Unusual name.’

‘For whom?’

‘For me, I guess.’ Prem snaps the tightening atmosphere into three.

‘Tell me your name.’

He closes his eyes, wiping two fingers from the same hand over each eyelid, and puts his plate under the chair with most of the food in a mixed pumpkin cohesive. 'It's Lyndal. But my friends sometimes call me Lyn. It was a joke at first, kind of, but then it stuck.'

'Do you mind?'

'There are worse things one could be called.'

'Were you close to your father?'

'I like to think so.'

'Did he hunt?'

'Not for pleasure; we are – were – alike in that regard.'

'How long was he ill?'

'When you hear someone is dying even a second is too long. And then his dying had nothing to do with his death. It was a bloody accident.'

'What happened today?'

'He slipped and fell in the bathroom, hitting his head on the corner of the shower. It feels like a mistake. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. Without control. His or mine.'

'And your mother?'

'Another mistake, their relationship. She left me with my father when I was a year old.

They never married. I never knew her very well when I was growing up.'

'Have you been in contact?'

'Look, can we talk about something else?'

The pheal of a jackal pierces the night. 'I love that sound.' His face is a Picasso artwork in the flames. Mia smiles into his bright liquid eyes, as he keeps the conversation buoyant. 'Do you believe the most influential people in society are those who make a living being creative?'

'Mmmm... I do. Without creation there is just existence.'

'Is that why you chose journalism? To be creative?'

'No, it chose me. I'm just the outlet.'

'That's a narcissistic view.'

'Do you think it's possible to be nostalgic for a place you've never been to?'

'Sure.'

'It's like that. Nostalgia for places and spaces I've never been to. Stories are the offspring of that energy.'

'And what drives the nostalgia?'

'That's what I'm trying to unblock, or block, I'm not sure.'

She sees the animal before he does and her scream unfolds its tortuous neck and sharp mouth. In a swiftness that defies the empty whiskey bottle, he is on his feet, pulling her behind him. Mia tastes the acid thumps of her heart and feels its iambic pentameter. But her mind lets loose free verse that has no regard for the niceties of format, as it rushes out from her mouth. What is it, what is it, what do you see, can it see us, will we die, where's it now, what is it, will it hurt, will you shoot it, where's your gun, can you see it, can it see us, where's it now, is it close?

He is still and she cowers against his back, her arms a lasso around his waist. And because she cannot detach her tongue from the roof of her desiccated mouth, she keeps quiet, except for the sticky clicks as she tries to loosen it.

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She doesn't really want to know how close the animal is, or what it is, or how big it is and how much it's going to hurt. She feels so overwhelmingly sad she didn't tell Prem she loved him one last time. And then she wonders how it feels to die with someone she doesn't know and how when she's about to die, she's actually on her own, even though she's with someone else who might not even die with her. And now the hunted is getting its own back and someone will wash out her cavities with a hosepipe. 'It's not real.' And why that someone starts blathering on about how it feels so surreal when all she wants to do is get the fuck out of there. Why aren't they running like two bats out of hell, but she remembers her legs don't want to move and when they're dead she's going to moan at him because it's his fault that she's not going to get a chance to be a bride. 'Mia. It's not real.' And why is time the last double Maths period of the day and oh boy is Granny Cecilia going to be jealous that her granddaughter gets to die first. 'It's not real, listen to me.' His hands are prying her fingers off his chest and she resists, which makes him pull harder and turn to face her. 'Get a grip, woman! It's not real.'

She is terrified to look for herself, but she knows she must. She remembers the immediate presence of a solitary animal, tossing its head and springing into the air. The warped horns. The matted mane. The hollow eyes. A snapping mouth. Kicking legs. 'The kudu is sometimes called a grey ghost of the savannah.' He is whispering into her ear and she has no idea of what he's blathering on about in undertones. 'Because of its ability to blend in, to disappear.' Hang on... he's speaking about a buck so it must be okay. But surely that thing wasn't a buck.

'Why do you say it's a kudu?' She stands up straight and peeps over his shoulder.

'The white markings on the cheeks. Long spiral horns. Regal.'

She giggles. 'That's not majestic.'

'Shut up!' He hisses at her.

'But it's funny.'

'It's for my Dad. A rite of passage.'

But all she sees is William in a mask.

'Why's he dancing for us in a costume?'

'He is directing the masquerade towards the spirit, not the spectator.'

'Must we clap?'

'Just shut up and keep still.'

'Is that raffia stuck to the mask supposed to be a mane?'

He ignores her.

She has to admit the show is intense, as she stares at the mask, which seems to gain its power through the movement. If it was propped up behind a glass box under a spotlight in a museum she would probably walk past it, but here, in the flutter of flames and moon milk, pulsing in the energy of dance, the mask invokes physical perfection, vitality, strength and wildness. She finds it difficult to look away. 'Why did he choose to be a kudu?' She speaks as she would in a church.

'Possibly for magical strength. Or love. Because it was my father's favourite animal.' She can barely hear him.

'It's amazing how it's all so natural, yet abstract.' He says nothing and her perspective of William clouds, as he disappears and reappears, dives and jives. When he veers close past her, her eyes shift to the exponential rings of ever-increasing radius above his head. The sign of growing organisms that she sees in horns and shells and trees.

Just as swiftly as he arrived, he is gone and with him the spirit of the stars. She is frozen in the previous age so when Lyndal places his hand on her lower back, it seems her body is already arched to fit, waiting, wanting. She is an unfinished sculpture caught in the fleeting moment before action.

The artist begins to chisel away at the superfluous material to reach the desired form. The wet clay of her body is being moulded into a shape that will dry and capture the expression of an historical event. The sculptor prickles her body with gooseflesh and takes away a spine. Hands are rough and push the clay up against a rock, which tears into the puttied softness, but sculptures don't leave behind blood when scratched raw. The masterful craftsman has a double vision of functional art without a separate air. Of the oeuvre of Carrol Boyes, its contortions and connections. Of deep details and shallow imprecision. Limbs bend and then fuse, as the sculptor creates another and pushes two works into one.

Mosaic mayhem

'What is called good society is usually nothing but a mosaic of polished caricatures.'
– Friedrich von Schlegel

INSIDE, his cabin is the bleached palette of the environment and her first thought is that the design offers a bland background for the three black-and-white photographs that contain most of his emotion. He has mounted the images on the wall above his bed and it is there her eye lingers. 'You took these.' She knows he did without him confirming it, which he does now with an upward kick of his head. He inserts a distance between them and moves across the room to pour a glass of water. She contemplates why he did that when her back is raw from the force, his force, her force. He forgets to offer her a drink, gulps down the water quickly and pours another for himself. Her eyes return to the pictures and she walks over to the kitchenette, tipping the bottle over a glass and standing close to him.

He runs his hand over his jaw, fingering the outline and puts down his glass. 'Where are my manners?' She doesn't reply, but looks up into his face and when he forcefully pins her hands above her head against the masonry she wants to moan with pleasure. The water from the glass in her hand splashes over her head and runs down her face. And then he is licking it off, biting her lips, pushing against her, lifting her camisole and she is pulling him closer to absorb him.

There are no boundaries. With Prem, she is aware of the total vague experience; with Lyndal, she takes in the explicit details. Each time his arms bunch, as he leans over her. Each time his tongue travels around her ear. Each time he runs his fingers down her inner thighs into waiting wetness. Each time he kisses her nipples. Each time she shudders and elevates to receive him. Each time he entwines her hair around his wrist to draw her nearer. Each time he looks away when her eyes search for his. Each slap of his skin against hers the deeper he penetrates. Their breathing. Their sweat. Their writhing. Pressure. Pressure. Release.

'You don't speak much, do you, during...?'

'Neither do you.'

'I let my body say what it has to. Anything else is noise.'

'Agreed.'

'So what does your body say to mine?'

He thinks for a while. 'That you have a beautiful *derrière*, my sweet. And yours?'

'That you must be in love with something before you can live with it.'

His smile slips off his face and she isn't surprised. 'What makes you think that? It's an unusual thing to say.'

'Your photographs.'

He chuckles then, seemingly relieved that although she's guessed a truth, her reason is ludicrous. Possibly. In the calabash-filtered light, his eyes are identical in depth and shape despite their superficial difference. He sits up and turns to face the models. 'I photograph or at least try to photograph moments of unadorned beauty.'

'Why is it unadorned?'

'I'm not supposed to be intruding.'

'So they're a part of your life then, if you got them to pose for you.'

'They weren't posing, except for the one. They no longer play a very active role in my life.'

'Was that a choice?'

'That they're the women I loved most?' His dubious expression tells her he wasn't supposed to admit that.

'That they're still active in your life.' She pretends his statement has no major consequence.

'I just said they weren't.'

'For you to use the word means they are.'

'Crap.'

'Then why are you getting upset?'

'Why are you asking all these questions?'

'Because you don't want to answer them!'

'Then let's just leave it at that.'

'They left you, didn't they?'

The first is a young coloured woman, almost androgynous, probably not yet in her twenties, on haunches, tipped forward on her toes, poised to lunge forward and up. Her clasped hands are on the ground. Her face, mouth slightly open, looks ahead at the light, which has cast a shadow inside her A-shaped nakedness and behind her, as it stretches

beyond the frame's border. Her strong nose and neck. The image is about her body not her face – she could be anyone – and her skin, which is taut over her limbs and ribs as a result of slimness, not emaciation. Her breasts are hidden by her arms and pressed against her thighs. Peppercorns cover the beautiful curve of her head and her thrice-pierced ears have no earrings. Her fingernails are painted in a dark colour, but there is no shading on the ends of her feet. It is a striking portrait of potential.

The second is a white woman caught up in her own self and it appears her ebony hair is damp, as if she's just come out of the shower and is getting dressed. It is not an act of unclothing, as she bends in a seven to fiddle with the hem of a lacy gypsy skirt, the only garment of clothing she is wearing, and her hair has fallen to cover half her face. Her mouth is as delicate as the peaked nipple and beauty spot on the side of one of her breasts. The sensuality hints at the elegant softness of ballerinas. As with the first, the woman is thin and the light falls on her silky back and in the billowing folds of her skirt, emphasising the strength of her protruding spinal column. The image suggests the perceptual game where both an attractive woman and a hag reside in the same contours and that the photographer believes he has found the beautiful woman.

The third is posed. A middle-aged woman – parted wet hair and dewlap upper arms – is bent with her head underwater, holding her breath, a pebble atop a pottery disc on the centre of her back, just below her nape. Any minute she will come up heaving in a rush of water and she must have been still for a while because the ripples are moving away. There is no clue to the rest of her naked body, or face, and like the other images, it conveys a sense of gravity. They all have the internal battle of black and white competing to be in charge. All speak of loss.

He has climbed out of bed and is sitting on a tree-stump chair in a pair of boxer shorts, watching her. He has lit a cigarette and smoke fills the room. His bare feet rub against a bridle leather carpet.

'You smoke too much.'

'Moderation is for the faint-hearted.'

'Who are they?'

'Honest disclosure is not for the faint-hearted.'

'So are you faint-hearted or not?'

'Yes.'

'Stop being so damned cryptic.'

'Why? I've no obligation to tell you anything about my past, present or future.'

'They're all one thing anyway.'

'That the past is the present and the present is the future.'

'That there's no present because the past and future overwhelm and override it.'

'Okay. So then I have no obligation to reveal my past. I don't know what my future is and you just said I don't have a present.'

'But you do have a presence.'

'Is that so?'

'And you're quite presentable.'

'Really?'

'And presently I'll have one of those kisses of yours again.'

'Is that right?'

'Yes, it is. Right.'

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She sleeps curled into his back, their feet entwined, but during the early hours she gets too hot and turns away. It's not long before he curls into her back, his arm holding her against his chest, his breathing lifting the hair on her face. She strokes his arm, fingering the shiny pinkness of his scar. Not once during her fitful sleeping has she been disorientated, despite the alcohol she consumed. She knows where she lies and with whom. And it's not with Prem. His face comes to her now, Prem's, and the sadness is a swamp inside her. Two years and it will disintegrate like smoke rings in the air when she tells him. Shit, how can she utter the words, 'I've been unfaithful'? They come across as premeditated, which this wasn't. How can she describe what has happened when all he will see in his mind is the stage acting of his presumption? And what exactly has happened to her in this ancient place of spirituality and wonder? Can she describe it to herself?

Architecture is the language of urban life, Prem tells her, as they stroll down the crowded La Rambla pedestrian boulevard in Barcelona holding hands. After admiring the flower

shops, she stares at a busker, dressed all in yellow – top hat, spectacles, bow tie, ruffled shirt, suit, pointed shoes – speaking on a yellow telephone, his painted lemon face animated. He stands next to a dwarf prostitute and a muscled flame-thrower. She smiles, thinking as he speaks, of Gaudi's work, which for her expresses the problems of poverty more than an extended metaphor of novelty. Prem doesn't agree with her, as she voices her thoughts while buying postcards at a stall selling maps, magazines and newspapers. She watches the artists drawing caricatures and opens her rucksack so she can put away her cards.

'Beetle, the dude was obsessed with magnificence.'

'But his work is fragmented, which to me highlights a fragile, transitional society.'

'Don't try to be all intellectual. Bloody hell, that paella smells good.'

'Do you think his collages are contradictions?'

Prem is staring intently into a bustling food market from where she can detect the saltiness of fresh fish and doesn't appear to have heard her. 'I'm getting hungry. Do you want to share a *bocadillo* with me?'

She thinks of the sandwiches in the café window where she saw the owner lifting out curling meats dried up from the previous day in the sun to replace them with fresh slices inside the same loaves. 'No thanks.'

'Beer?'

'No, just water.'

'Oo-na bo-tel-ya de ag-wa mee-ne-ral,' he reads slowly in phonetics from the Spanish phrase book in the café they have just entered. 'Oo-na ther-be-tha.' He smiles. 'Por fa-bor.' Behind the counter, a buxom lady with hair piled atop her head lifts her eyebrows and grins back at him. He smiles even more charmingly and Mía turns away, embarrassed.

'It's like a water underworld,' she sighs later, taking in the surging waves of what is known as La Pedrera, the name, she tells him, alluding to the building's resemblance to an open stone quarry.

'Ja, whatever?'

'You must admit it's got a suggestiveness to it.'

'I can be suggestive too-oo.' He tries to act coy, but it comes across as peevishness. The tension about their sexual abstinence is the tight sinuous helix of La Pedrera's tangled

balconies. Her virginity is a thing she knows he's eager to dispose of, but the guilt from Granny Cecilia's rules dictates her choice.

'I read somewhere that Gaudi believed buildings should have a double roof in the way people have hats and umbrellas.'

'Like people have condoms you mean.'

'Prem, get over it. We've had this discussion and you know where I stand.'

'No, I know where your grandmother stands. I'm not sure it's the same stance as yours.'

'It is, so let's just move past it, please.'

'Beetle, we've been going out for a year already. Surely....'

'I think I know my own mind.'

'Why don't you know you know your own mind?'

'Prem, shut up.'

In the enchantment of Park Güell, Mia can't resist photographing how natural the artificial has become: 'I love this mosaic lizard! Oh! Prem! Look at this forest of stone columns – hey, some of them are leaning over! What a divine little pathway! Prem, just stand there, no wait, there, hang on, just step up there, wait a sec, lean a bit more to the right, *ja*, that's right, no wait, just sit a bit, no sorry, it's better if you're standing, and oh wait, let's get that pigeon in too. Smile!'

He waits for her on the steps near the lizard. She can't stop chattering. 'Don't you think it's wonderful how he found artistic uses for all types of materials? Broken tiles, old ceramics, glass bottles. I want to have a Gaudi house one day! What do you think?'

'I think it's *siesta* time.' He guillotines her enthusiasm.

He sleeps for two hours in their sunny hotel room decorated in pewter stripes while she lies on the bed watching him and plotting a self-drive route on the map. On his back, he gasps and splutters, as bubbles foam and pop around his mouth. Sometimes his eyelids twitch or an arm or leg jolts stiffly. He has taken off his shirt and his chest lifts and falls into ditches. She is lying in a vest and bikini underpants to ward off the heat that pushes down on them. A ceiling fan whirs, but she can't feel the outcome of its efforts. She contemplates turning up its speed, but the cord is out of reach and she doesn't have the energy. When she looks at Prem again, his eyes have opened and he's assessing her.

His arm reaches out and rolls her nipple through her vest and it responds. 'Not now, I'm plotting,' she says, her glance moving back to the map.

‘So am I...’ She keeps her eyes downcast on her markings and tries to ignore the injection of sensation he has just given her.

‘Look at me,’ he orders and she turns her face towards his, which has more shadows in it than the room. In one movement, he has pushed her onto her back and shifted over her, his mouth already demanding things from hers. She is overwhelmed by his strength and tries to reposition her limbs for more comfort. This seems to ignite him and while he holds down her arms with one hand, she feels his hand move the warm moistness of his penis sideways from the elastic of her panties to her dry entrance.

‘Wait...no...,’ she mumbles, but he silences her with his mouth and in one thrust he penetrates her so deeply she cries out loud with the tearing pain of it. He is rough with her and he comes quickly inside her. Almost as quickly as her blood when it starts to flow.

He stands outside the closed bathroom door and jokes that she’s his woman now, for sure, as she cleans herself and puts on a sanitary towel. When she urinates, it burns. When she wipes herself, it burns. When she pulls up her clothes, it burns. When she thinks of it, she burns. And all she hears are the burning recriminations from the little Granny Cecilia who resides within her conscience. He has signed the blank sheet of her body with his name in a gold ink that has wasted no time in penetrating. She is not sure whether this will make it easier or more difficult for them, for her, because the intent to deprive another of something permanently is classified as theft.

She asks to visit the Church of the Sacred Family, the Sagrada Família, whose spires she has seen in Mom’s travel album shaping Barcelona’s skyline. She is interested to see how the environment responds to this dominance, especially since the cathedral is unfinished and still under construction. Even in its state of incompleteness – it is just a façade – she imagines it will physically penetrate the sky’s womb and also the perceptions of those who arrive to view it. When she sees it, she feels passive under its unmoving shadow and overwhelmed by its size and presence.

Lying under Lyndal’s arm, she feels the weight of Prem’s absent body impelling her deeper into the mattress. Noticing the moonlight reflecting in the glasses atop the flat rock he uses as a coffee table, Mia feels she must drink something. But she doesn’t want to move or roll away. She licks her dry lips and tries to swallow spit, which has no effect on her thirst. ‘What’s wrong?’ His whisper nuzzles against her neck.

'Nothing...why are you awake?'

'I could hear your brain whirring and clanging. What are you thinking about?'

'About your scar? How you got it.' She doesn't want to think about Prem while she is in another man's bed and closes the curtain of her mind on him.

'So you're not grappling with your guilt?'

'I haven't committed an offence.' She feels prickly and defensive.

'But what about infidelity?'

'I don't believe in strict conformity to any perceived truth, or fact...' She sounds like a university assignment, she thinks distastefully. 'Unlike you, I don't relate to extremities, but prefer the comfort of flying beneath the radar.' *Where does she come up with these things?*

'You're saying commitment is an extremity?'

'Yes. Commitment implies intensity, which is an extreme level.' *Oh boy!*

'So how do you classify a relationship then?'

'It's a boundary, a definition. A limitation to possibilities.'

'So what about your engagement to Prem?'

'It's a promise to marry.'

'And do you honour your promises?'

Mmmmmmm... 'A promise is an expectation. A conveyance of potential. And as you know, potential is a latent energy until it manifests.'

'And when it manifests?'

'Then it's clear.'

'So what you're saying is that you're still waiting for clarity?'

'...'

'And does guilt precede clarity?'

'For me, guilt is a self indulgence and I'm the most indulgent person I know.' *Enough already!*

'Tell me about your arm.'

'What about my arm?'

'How you got that scar?'

'In a car accident.'

'And?'

'That's it. I got it as a result of a car accident.'

‘Was it a bad one?’

‘Aren’t all accidents bad?’

‘But was it serious?’

‘You mean was anyone seriously injured and the vehicles seriously damaged?’

‘Something like that.’

‘Yes.’

‘Were you the only one injured?’

‘No.’

‘Who else was in the car?’

‘Two women and a dog.’

‘What about them?’

‘My wife and her dog were killed. Her sister and I survived, with minimal injuries.’

‘Oh no! I’m so sorry! I didn’t...?’

‘It was just on a year ago before you ask.’

‘Is it something you can talk about?’

‘I can talk about it. It’s more a question of whether I’m able and willing to talk about it.’

‘Are you able and willing?’

‘No.’

‘Which one of the women on the wall was your wife?’

‘None of them.’

He retreats and somehow she senses the rest of her time with him will be a regression of intimacy. He turns on his side and shuts down the conversation until his breathing deepens. There are no shallow pops of breath from his mouth, but instead inhalations and exhalations enter and leave the core of him. She finally gets up to drink a glass of water, stubbing her big toe on the wooden platform on which his bed rests and which extends to include a headboard and bedside table. He doesn’t wake or at least let her know he’s awake and the loneliness scratches against her skin as coarsely as the rough surfaces in his room that have a solid history in nature.

When the sunshine is cheerful through the ceiling-high glass panels of his room, she opens her eyes and immediately wants to close them again when she realises what she has done. Her heartbeat quickens and she is sure the man next to her can feel its uncomfortable thumps. Without turning to face him, she can’t, she slides out from under

the twisted sheets and grabs a towel from the ladder leaning against the stack of logs so she can have a shower. As with her suite, to which she must return soon, the shower is outdoors, but instead of a tiled floor, his has a concrete slab embossed with the shape of leaves. She loves it and the smoothness against her feet, marvelling at how water can charm the sharpest of stones.

She is not really surprised when he joins her. They snap and bite and scratch and tear at each other, knowing it is the last time they can do this. There is not even a question of being able to, or would like to, or may, or will. Something that has been tight and shrunken inside her for so long swells, melts and spreads throughout her body and she doesn't know what it is, for she has never experienced it before. It brings with it permission to relax, a tendency to want to weep and sigh with the exquisiteness of it, an understanding of the tenderness this man's body has awakened, a desperate urge for possession and a bubble of delighted laughter that expands and expands. This mood must be on loan from the environment.

In the force of their passion, she takes on the shape of her fulfilment and her cries are rivers in her ears. The spray dribbles out of their mouths, drips off fingers and slides down breasts, backs and limbs. They slip, catch each other, slide, kiss each other. Their grips tighten and loosen. They only move closer and inside. They get there together and swallow water while they groan. She starts to cough and it is then he opens his eyes. He blinks and turns away from her sharply, no smile or lingering caress, leaving her to shiver in the shower. He says nothing to her, but his manner implies he has taken her for what she is. A common prostitute who doesn't deserve compensation and he wants her to feel that.

.....

When she packs her bags into the rental car, he's not there, something to do with the removal of his father's body or so William tells her. She could have stayed on until lunch time, as her flight leaves in the evening, but she must get away from this place. From him. Six messages from Prem, but she cannot speak to him or listen to his voice, words or messages. Her message has become one of death, not only of *his* father, she must not even

think *his* name, but of the new woman she was trying to release from under the layered entrapment of too many grim tales.

‘Was your stay good?’ It is William and she fears he knows all she doesn’t want him to imagine.

‘Thank you, William, for your hospitality.’

‘What is it that you will take with you from this place, Ma’am Mia?’

The harsh barrenness she sees around her has seeped into her desiccated body, but there is no sustenance here for the dehydrated. Her smile droops in the corners of her mouth. The truth stabs her, but he is squinting at her quizzically so she must answer him. ‘It has forced me to know myself better.’ The words are weeds in her throat and acacia tears puncture her eyelids.

‘That is a good gift then, Ma’am Mia?’

‘No.’ Her cactus tongue blunders in her arid mouth. ‘No, not for me.’

‘Is Ma’am Mia alright?’ He touches the stooped, cracked branch of her shoulders and she flinches away. Kindness is not what she needs in this straw carcass. She’d prefer the crows to peck at her, at least then she’d feel.

‘William, I really must leave... the traffic... need to avoid the queues ... my flight...’

‘Is Ma’am Mia alright to drive?’

‘Let me go... please...’ She gets in and slams the door hard, shutting William out. Shutting them all out. He stands back and the last thing she sees is the red dust clouding up and settling on the clean shirt of the straight-backed man watching her departure.

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The dust goes with her back to Johannesburg and she feels delicate when she finds it in her shoes, on her clothes and in her suitcase when she unpacks. ‘Fuck, it’s everywhere.’ Prem taps a shoe on the bathroom tiles and a fine powder collects in a pile. ‘So was it fun? Too much fun to return my calls?’ He wipes away the dust with a dirty sock.

‘Prem, I’m really tired. Can we talk about it tomorrow?’ She drops a pile of clothing into the woven washing basket and lets the lid fall. She looks at herself in the mirror and is astonished at how her face looks back at her from a drawn death mask. Prem is assessing

her reaction and his look leaves ragged marks on her. They are the marks of the sea after it has mated with the beach. 'I'm going to bed.'

She sees the man before he is aware of her presence behind him. He is leaning on the splintered handle of a rake watching the donkey, which is assessing him from behind the closed, but broken, gate of its enclosure. It has thick matted mud in its coat and pooh stuck in the fur around its bum and tail, she sees, wondering if it's the job of this man to clean it away. He is talking softly to it and calling it *Donki*. The animal lowers its head so Mía moves closer to see it and the man better. A windmill turns half-heartedly and trampled cabbage leaves and a chewed carrot lie in the mud. When she looks up again, the man is staring at her from eyes that look as if someone has pushed them deep into his head with their thumbs.

He is dusty and wearing a navy overall, which he's unbuttoned to hang around his waist in a way that gives him four arms, she thinks. The Octopus Man, but at least he's not the bloated orange Oros Man whom everybody loves. O, O, O, O, O-ros! He is too thin to be that. He's also too brown. It's the first time she's seen an adult man's naked chest and this one is covered with tightly whirled, glistening black hairs. She remembers him from the park's entrance when she came in holding Granny Cecilia's hand. She soon released her fingers to walk up to a rabbit, which hopped out of reach to sit in the shape of the VW Beetles she's seen students driving. She tried another, and another, but used to outstretched arms, they disappeared into burrows. When she held out one of the carrots from the bunch Granny Cecilia bought from Tony's Green Grocer, they sat up with interest, but from a distance. Until this man caught one, picked it up and brought it over for her to stroke. Granny Cecilia had gone to spend a penny in the cloakroom she said and so she never got to touch the rabbit.

'Yes,' he says to her now.

'Can you pick up a rabbit again?' She looks at his top lip, which lifts off his bottom lip.

He shakes his head and reacquaints himself with the rake.

'Excuse me. I'd like you to pick up a rabbit for me.'

His arms get big and then lengthen, as he pulls and pushes the instrument in the sand bowl, scattering the *bok drolletjes*, as her teacher refers to animal droppings or sometimes

the raisins covered in chocolate for which she gives pupils money to buy her from the tuck shop.

'Excuse me, Mr Man. There is a rabbit next to the fence that you can pick up. That one over there.' She points, irritated at his adult dismissal of her. She hates it when grown-ups pretend not to hear when they can, so she tries to be disdainful too because this man works here at the Rynfield Bunny Park and she's a visitor. Also, she's white and he's not. 'Now you listen here, boy.' That's how Granny Cecilia speaks to Siphso the gardener when he pulls up flowers instead of weeds. Mia pushes her long hair out of her face. The wind has whipped out strands from the pigtails of which she's so proud because they make her feel like a real little girl and not a tomboy. She lifts her head and stares into this man's eyes, stamping her foot. 'Pick up that rabbit I say!' The donkey looks up, but the man turns away, raking, his broad back to her.

'*Jislaaik!* Mr Man! I'm talking to you! Look at me when I'm talking!' Granny Cecilia says these things, except the *jislaaik*, so they must be okay. The man starts walking away from her and so she runs after him and pulls on an arm, but he disregards her, letting her dangle like a useless swinging earring that ladies wear with ball gowns. 'Mr Man! Listen to me! Mr Man!' She is shrieking now and all she cares about is making this man pick up a rabbit for her to love. He says not one word and mothers pushing prams or holding children's hands are staring, but she doesn't see this while she grips his wrist in a vice and slitted tears of rage blur her surroundings. And then she visualises her front teeth as those of a rabbit's and bites him.

Someone is screaming a bit too loudly she has time to think, as her arms are pulled high above her head and behind her shoulders. She tastes blood and in shock relaxes her jaw and lifts her teeth out of his flesh. A furious force is wrenching her backwards and she spins to look into the ignited eyes of her grandmother. The man is standing in silence, holding his arm. She wonders why he didn't bite her back like Granny Cecilia did after Mia bit the old lady's finger in frustration when it was reprimanding her about failing her sums test. Her arms are still held above her head by Granny Cecilia, who suddenly slaps her across the face, twice, a strike for each cheek.

'You spiteful child,' she hisses. 'Stop that racket! Do you know what you've just done?'

'I didn't mean to. He wouldn't – let ...' She stops speaking because her grandmother isn't listening. Dropping Mia's arms, she limps across to the man, who is lowering himself to squat on his haunches under a willow tree. Mia wonders why she's limping. Maybe she put her foot in a rabbit hole and twisted her ankle like she warned Mia not to do. Her cheeks sting as she wipes her streaming eyes, nose and mouth against her arm.

'Let me see.' Granny Cecilia orders the man who is staring at her with a strange expression. It seems he knows something Granny Cecilia doesn't, as she takes hold of his hand and puts her face close to the area on his forearm where Mia has left an indented outline of teeth. He has the appalled wariness of a witness, someone who has seen something he shouldn't. Mia takes a step forward.

'Stay where you are. You've done enough damage, girl.' The voice lashes through the tree's leaves, which remind her of rats' tails, which is how Granny Cecilia sometimes describes Mia's hair after a long day. But she doesn't agree; she likes her hair. The man is standing up again, so Granny Cecilia doesn't have to bend while she dabs his arm with a tissue, which she keeps licking to keep it wet. Mia hates it when her grandmother does that. Lick tissues and then wipe off something on Mia's face. But the man doesn't seem to mind, as Granny Cecilia finishes swabbing his arm. She unzips her handbag and takes out a clasp purse, which she opens. 'Go and see your doctor in case,' she is telling him. 'This will pay for it.'

The man nods in thanks, but as he takes the money, he doesn't take his eyes off Granny Cecilia. Those eyes speak better than he does, Mia thinks. 'What is your name?' Mia can't see her grandmother's face as she speaks to him, but her voice grates like a gear. 'Ben.' They stare at each other for a moment and without a word, Granny Cecilia whirls abruptly and hobbling even faster, takes Mia by the upper arm. Pinching her skin, she pulls Mia over the wooden bridge that is arched like a moving worm, trying to outrun Ben's eyes and whatever she saw reflected in their still pools. There is no time for Mia to admire the fluffy ducklings leaving Vs behind them on the sluggish water or the billy goat standing upright on its back legs to reach the bottom leaves of a low-hanging tree. But she does have time to notice her grandmother is trembling.

They rest on a bench painted the colour of strawberries and Granny Cecilia fingers her ankle, which is swelling inside her stocking. She says nothing, but gives Mia her handbag to hold on her lap. She is still jittery and stares ahead at the rusted drum surrounded by barbed wire atop a pole. It used to be a house for pigeons, she tells Mia.

Two little boys play on a jungle gym in the shape of an ox wagon, their smiling mothers holding packets of candy floss while they watch. The ugly feeling of something – what? – twirls inside and Mia wishes she could play on the wagon with *her* mother watching. *Her* mother wouldn't smack her in the face like Granny Cecilia. 'Please can we stay, Granny Cecilia. I don't want to go home. I also want to play on the wagon. Will you watch me?' 'After what you've done? You have the cheek of a thousand monkeys to ask. Wait till your father hears about this!'

'He won't do anything. He doesn't care.'

'Don't speak about your father like that, do you hear me?' Mia wonders why Granny Cecilia always asks her that when she speaks loudly enough for everyone to hear.

'Why are you shaking?'

Her grandmother turns to look at her with such a horrible expression on her face, Mia wonders whether Granny Cecilia hates her. Mia hates a boy in her class, Jeremy, and she often tries to give him looks like she is getting now, especially when he burns ants with a magnifying glass and the sun's rays on the quad. Her Sunday School teacher says hate is a strong word. Too strong for children. But she didn't say anything about grownups and Mia is sure her grandmother is old enough to keep the feeling of hate inside her body.

'I'm just getting my breath and then we're going home. And put that hair behind your ears.'

'Please can I play in the castle?'

'No, it's filthy.' But Mia doesn't mind the smell of wee or having to stoop when she runs, pretending to be a beautiful queen with a woollen cloak, heavy crown and Rapunzel hair, as she sends the guinea pigs, hamsters and rabbits to carry out her biddings within her turreted stone castle and surrounding animal kingdom.

'Can I walk on the poles of the wooden fence while you hold my hand so I can balance?'

'No.'

'Do you hate me, Granny Cecilia?'

With a wheeze, her grandmother stands up and starts limping in the direction of the entrance, forgetting her bag on Mia's lap. She doesn't answer Mia, but she knows Granny Cecilia answered the question.

Her grandmother has paused next to a mining headgear, she calls it, when Mia approaches and asks what it is. 'This headgear was originally erected on New Modder Gold

Mine in 1896,' she reads to Mia from the sign. 'This headgear was presented to the Town Council of Benoni by Morris Nestadt ... and Mrs Nestadt. I believe my grandfather may have worked at that mine once.'

'Who was Morris Nestadt?'

'He was known as Mr Benoni and served as a mayor many times.'

'Why do mines have headgears?' Mia thinks of Jeremy's headgear to keep his bent and coated teeth in his mouth.

'They used them to help transport miners and materials up and down the shafts.' Mia remembers her school trip to the mine at Gold Reef City and understands. 'Come now,' Granny Cecilia remembers to be cross, 'hurry up. Now come now'.

They walk past the thatched *rondavel* where they sell juices, but Mia knows not to ask her grandmother for an ice-cream. A woman bouncing a baby on her hip approaches Granny Cecilia. 'Shame man, are you in pain, limping like that? Do you need a hand?' 'No, I have one,' she snaps, her teeth clicking. 'Two in fact, four if you count my granddaughter's.' The pretty lady – Mia admires her honey hair and eyes – steps back. Her child starts to cry and the lady turns, almost jerkily, looking over her shoulder at Mia in pity and flashing sparks at Granny Cecilia. On the pavement outside, Mia sees a rabbit has burrowed under the meshed triangles of fencing around the park. She wonders where it will go to escape.

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The bathwater is far too hot for her to climb in and so Granny Cecilia tells her to sit on the dining room chair that she has brought into the bathroom. She covers the floor with the Saturday newspaper and fetches her sewing scissors. Mia is still in her sundress, the one full of dust from the Bunny Park, and sighs as she waits for her grandmother to trim her fringe. On Sundays her grandmother helps her clip her nails or wash her hair and she is used to the routine.

Granny Cecilia uses an old Windolene container to spray water onto her hair and then unsnarls her hair with a comb that has missing teeth like them both. She lifts the wet hair off Mia's back, holding the dark weight of it, letting it slap against her skin. She says

nothing, as she pushes Mia's head towards her chest. 'Are you trimming all my hair, Granny Cecilia?' She peeps through her fringe while Granny Cecilia clasps a section of hair in a claw-clip on top of her head and scrapes the rest of it closely against her neck. She doesn't answer and a lock almost as long as Mia's arm slides down her shoulder and onto her lap.

'Granny Cecilia!' She looks up and twists and as she does, another clump of her hair falls off her head.

'Be still if you don't want me to cut it all skew. We should have done this a long time ago.'

'What?'

'Given you a proper haircut. No granddaughter of mine goes around looking like a ragamuffin.'

'But I don't.'

'You do.'

'But I like my hair.'

'You'll still have your hair, just shorter.'

'But I like it long.'

'I don't and I'll judge what's best for you.'

When she looks into the mirror above the basin, her head is still top heavy with coiled hair, but the gap between her ears and shoulders is empty. 'My pigtails....' She puts out a hand to her head as Granny Cecilia pulls out the clasp and with a swift movement, chops off the hair above her ears, dropping it atop the fluff on the floor. Tufts on Mia's scalp curl out like old toothbrush bristles and she wonders if it will still feel as if she has long hair in the way Jenny in her class says her oldest brother can still feel his leg even after it was amputated after his motorbike accident. She's scared to touch what's left of it because Granny Cecilia is cutting it shorter and shorter because she can't see properly without glasses. Each time she cuts, she has to fix it, which means even more hair lands on the abandoned pile on the newspaper. Yesterday's news. She looks at the tresses on her lap, curling as they dry, and believes her strength to be fading away like Samson's when Delilah cut his hair.

The haircut gives her prickly shoulders, neck, chest and back and she doesn't care if the bathwater is still too hot. She wants to get away from Granny Cecilia and the

scissors. 'Are you finished now?' She whispers because her voice doesn't seem to want to work properly and tears want to fall.

'Almost done,' says Granny Cecilia brightly, snipping quickly in her hair, which doesn't move or swing anymore.

'You said that just now.'

'Yes, yes, yes.'

When Mia glances into the mirror after her grandmother has left the room, a mini Granny Cecilia in a sundress looks back at her. She pushes the hair on the floor into a pile. She climbs into the bath and lets the water burn her skin. She stays there where she can't see herself, submerged under the water listening to the lapping in her ears, until Granny Cecilia brings her a cup of tea and a meringue in the shape of a swan.

.....

They call her a boy at school and a pixie with a fat head. At break she almost gets detention for being in the girls' playground until the prefect sees she's wearing a dress because she has to and not because she's playing a practical joke. She sits on the grass, stabbing holes into the shoebox with the compass she uses in Maths. Inside the box are her family of silkworms lying on white mulberry leaf deckchairs. 'You mustn't kill them.' The voice is soft, but bossy. Mia looks up into a pair of forget-me-not eyes under thick, black eyebrows. Full pouting lips. Curly blond hair standing up in a dandelion spray.

'I'm trying to let them breathe better.'

'Then open the lid.'

'I don't want them to get out.'

'How do you know they will?'

'Because they're moths waiting to fly.'

'Silkmoths can't fly.'

'Then why do they have wings?'

'Why does an ostrich have wings?'

'What do you want?'

'I'm trying to be friendly. Do you really have moths in there?'

'No, they're still silkworms, but one day they'll be moths.'

'Why don't you have a friend?' The girl sits down next to her.

'I'm different.'

'What makes you so different?'

'I live with my grandmother who cuts my hair and makes me look stupid and ugly.'

'But it will grow back and what's wrong with living with your granny?'

'She's strict. And stuff.'

'But that's not your fault. And you're not stupid and ugly.'

'She hates me.'

'What do you do to her?'

'Sometimes I don't know what I do.'

'Where are your Mommy and Daddy?'

'....'

'Do you have brothers or sisters?'

'No.'

'Then I'll be your friend and you can share my sister.'

'And you can share my silkworms.'

The girl smiles and tells Mia her name is Kerry.

Mia wishes she could trade places with Kerry like Hayley Mills in *The Parent Trap*. That she could pretend to have young parents who love her, a kind older sister who goes to Benoni High School and wears a Chappie-wrapper blazer at all times to please Mr Lotter, the pipe-smoking principal, as well as their Staffordshire bull terrier called Buddy who grunts when he trots. They are lying on their stomachs drawing pictures of spindly beauty queens in costumes and ball gowns while listening to records on loan from the library. If Kerry draws a girl with eyelashes, then Mia's characters also start wearing fake eyelashes. Granny Cecilia has gone to have her feet done, which means a lady in a white dress cuts her ingrown toenails and paints them when she's finished. 'Do you want some Milo?' She stands up and looks down at Kerry, who is absorbed in the detail of her drawing.

'Yes, please.'

'Hot or cold milk?'

'Cold, with an extra spoon of Milo.'

'I'll put in two extra spoons,' Mia says, 'and we can eat it off the top before it mixes'. She glances through the dusty net curtains to see that Granny Cecilia hasn't come home. 'And we can maybe make some prank phone calls just now?'

'Yes!'

But Mia isn't listening anymore, as she sees the man from the Bunny Park standing outside the fence, pointing at the house. The man she bit is waiting with a woman who is darker than he and a little girl wearing tracksuit pants under her dress. The shock hits into her stomach with netball force and she starts to shiver. 'Oh no! He's come to fetch me! How did he find me? He'll take me away! Oh please ... where must I hide? Don't tell them where I am, promise!'

Kerry looks up at her with goggle eyes.

'Do you think they'll find me in the secret gap between my cupboard and the wall?'

'What are you talking about?' Kerry sits up to peer through the window. 'Who are they?'

'Oh, what must I say? Granny Cecilia will be so mad!'

'Why? Who are these people?'

'I bit the man at the Bunny Park and now he's coming to get me with a knife.' Mia hasn't seen a knife, but it makes the situation seem scarier.

'Why did you bite him?'

'I'm going to hide, tell me what they're doing! Tell me if they come inside.' Mia runs down the passage.

'They're standing still...'. Kerry raises her whisper dramatically. 'Hang on, he's taking the little girl's hand and they're leaving. Can't you hear all the dogs barking?'

'They're going?' Mia peeps from behind the door.

'Ja.' Kerry stands back from the window and looks at Mia. 'Mia, why did you bite the man?'

'Because he looked at me with Granny Cecilia's eyes.'

The worms crawl at night. In her bed in the darkness, Mia lies as still as she can while listening to the scratching in the shoebox. If there is no energy around her body, they won't be attracted to the warmth, she thinks wildly. She feels the silkworms oozing through the holes in the lid, their faces turning in the air as they lean back, pulsating quietly, inching across the cardboard, down the cardboard. Inching across the wooden

surface of her book shelf, down the wooden surface of her shelf, her books! Inching into the clinging threads of the carpet. Where they stick. She is terrified and she knows the palms of her hands are damp, as they press into the mattress under the sheets. Her bladder is full, but she has no choice but to hold the wee in, until when she doesn't know. She's hot, so hot, but she will not move, because she doesn't want to open her eyes. The worms are big and white now, their bodies bloated to fleshiness, not the thin, greyish babies she bought, and it gives her *grrr/s* up and down her body. She likes that word, *grrr/s*, because it is guttural and the sound of the word shudders as much as its meaning.

The tabby gives her comfort. Its purrs vibrate and reverberate in the room. It is also a *meggoikind*, a throwaway child, because Granny Cecilia rescued it as a kitten from a cage at the SPCA. She eases her hand out from under the sheet to stroke the animal and its contentment goes up a notch. Mittens is her friend. When she loses her milk teeth and hides them in her jewellery box to test the detective ability of the tooth mouse, she feels safe knowing Mittens will keep any mice baddies away and make sure only the mouse with tiny bank notes in his suitcase gains access to her teeth. It will be the same with the plump worms. But not with the man who came to the house. Not even Granny Cecilia knows about his visit because Mia didn't tell her. Her grandmother won't help.

When she opens her eyes, the birds are tweeting. Mittens is off her bed, probably yowling for chicken livers in the kitchen. She hears the newsreader on the radio and her grandmother making porridge. She hopes it's not mielie meal and if it is, she'll pretend she has diphtheria, which Granny Cecilia suffered from when she was a little girl. She doesn't know what it feels like to have the illness, but from what she remembers her grandmother telling her, a membrane grows at the back of the throat and gets bigger, bigger, bigger until it blocks the air passages. She knows people did die from it in the olden days. Granny Cecilia used a funny word, *asfox*...she can't think of it, but she imagines a huge hand tight around her sore throat choking her until her mind becomes black.

Granny Cecilia's throat is beautiful though in its strength, even though funny things lived in there long ago. Mia is amazed at how her grandmother was so lucky. Cecilia, she wasn't a granny yet, didn't die, because after a violent bout of coughing, she managed to disturb the obstruction, which Mom wouldn't let her swallow. She had to spit it into a bowl and Mom threw it into a fire. And now she has a frog living there on the rocks of her tonsils. She's always telling Mia that, through her baobab throat.

In the luminous room, she builds up the courage to look in the direction of the silkworm box and when she does, it is not in its place on the shelf. Immediately her glance drops to the carpet, her stomach trying to get out through her mouth when she sees the open container, tipped upside down, leaves scattered around it. And then she notices some worms under her dressing table. Blobs of chewed leaves covered in patches of white skin, the rest torn from their bodies, as the cat shredded and swallowed. Granny Cecilia, who smells of burnt toast, confirms Mittens as the culprit when she comes running to Mia's scream. The leftover worms remind Mia of the sack of grass, a stomach that was left of a warthog after it had been eaten by a leopard under a tree in the game reserve. Cats don't like to be vegetarians. She starts to vomit.

The vomit in the toilet bowl is colourless. She's eaten nothing since she left Cape Town, except half an apple, which she had to discard halfway because she felt nauseous. She looks at it for a while before she realises she's staring at it and wipes the tears from her eyes with her sleeve. She always cries when she vomits. 'Are you okay in there?' It's Fay's voice. 'You're making one hell of a noise.'

'Mmm... Okay... thanks.' She must get away from the smell, she thinks, retching again, it makes it worse.

'You don't sound it.' Fay is knocking on the door quite insistently. 'Do you need some help or anything?'

'You could leave me alone.' Mia leans against the wall, away from the toilet, resting her forehead against the cool tiles.

'Are you bulimic?'

'No!'

'Then if you've finished, come out of there. You won't feel better sitting in a crap house.'

Mia hears the rush of water, as Fay washes her hands in the basin, and then the wrenching while she tries to break off a sheet of paper towel from the dispenser to dry her hands.

'You're done aren't you?'

Mia stands, flushes the toilet and unlocks the door. She smiles at Fay, who tosses the crumpled paper into the bin and turns on the tap for Mia to rinse out her mouth. 'Fuck it stinks. Are you sick?'

'I've just been sick. I don't know if I am sick.'

Fay grins. 'Sick of this place already?'

'More like of myself.'

'What are you doing on Saturday?'

'I've actually got quite a –'

'Come with me to walk the dogs at Wet Nose. Those animal orphans will set you straight.'

'Where...I'm not sure...'

'Meet me here at nine and I'll drive.'

'Let's play it by ear.' She doesn't think she can face more eyes like her own.

At her computer, she stares at the blank Word document. The glow turns her stomach and the block of emptiness cuts into soft silences with dental floss dexterity. In her story, she can't convey that things are not as simple as readers think. But she has a deadline. A dead line. And she must meet it in a head-on collision.

.....

Granny Cecilia is looking at her with red, raw ruts down her cheeks. She hasn't spent the usual hour 'putting on her face', as she calls the time she applies heavy make-up that cracks when she frowns or smiles and melts in humidity. Instead of fuchsia cheeks, a creamy complexion, defined chestnut eyes and drawn-on eyebrows, her face is grey and mottled with liver spots. She is brandishing the water pistol she keeps next to her bed at night. She forgot to put it down after she squirted the neighbour's cat from venturing into her garden to select a bird. She has pulled out from the shelves Mia's clothes from the cupboard and the tangled arms and legs network on the floor while the cat sniffs them with jolts, as if they have electric currents. *Granny Cecilia* has done this before, many times, telling Mia to get out of the house, offering sarcastically to help pack the suitcase. When she was younger, it terrified her, the threat of *Granny Cecilia* forcing her to leave with nowhere to go and desperate pleases and sorries often made her hiccups turn into gags. But not now. Today she has somewhere to go.

'That's the last time you do that to me.' Mia bends to push the clothes on the carpet into a bag, the cat hooking its unsheathed claw on a cardigan.

'Don't threaten me.'

'I'm not. I'm leaving.'

'The door will be locked when you've finished your walk to the bottom of the cul-de-sac and back.'

'I won't be here to find out.'

'Where do you think you'll go?' The question is a snort.

'Where do you think I'll go?' The answer is a smile.

If Prem is surprised to see her at his door, only his arched eyebrow reveals it. His eyes drop to her suitcase. 'Moving in or are you moving out?'

'The same, aren't they?'

'No.'

'Does it matter?'

'I'd like to think you're moving in, because of me, not moving out because you're running from your grandmother.'

'Why does it have to be one or the other?'

'Because it is. One or the other.'

'For heaven's sake! I'm running to you and that's got to be enough.'

'For tonight, it's enough.' He moves out of the door frame so she can lug the suitcase inside.

Mia is trying to do her homework, but the splashes in the neighbour's pool distract her, as the swimmers play Marco Polo. 'How did Benoni get its name?' is the essay topic she's been staring at for the past hour, in addition to counting the freckles and cutting the hairs on her arms. She's poured herself juice twice, had four tablespoons of peanut butter and kissed lipstick pouts onto a tissue, which is crumpled in the dustbin next to her desk. She's also squeezed at a blackhead, but nothing came out. Photostatted sheets of information from the library are spread over her bed. She hasn't read them yet, although she probably should if she wants to finish this thing before Sunday evening. Granny Cecilia, wearing her oldest apron, is in the garden somewhere. The heat weighs her down like adipose tissue.

Mia scrounges under Granny Cecilia's bed to pull out Mom's old travel album. She has decided the pictures will give her inspiration for the task that waits for her like a drooling dog at supper time. As she heaves the book out and turns it on its side to tuck under her arm, an envelope slips out and lands silently on the carpet. Putting the album on

her grandmother's bed, she crosses her legs to sit on the floor, as she studies the envelope. She has never seen it before. It reminds her of the yellowy and uneven stained teeth of adults. It smells like an antique shop. It is blank, yet filled with words and questions. It feels ordinary and she knows it's lying.

Closing her bedroom door behind her, Mia turns the key in the lock and sliding to the floor again, her back against the door, she lifts the unscaled flap of secrets. Inside is a Polaroid image of a man with a shaved head and tight muscles. He is glaring at her in a familiar way, but she has no idea who he is. There is a second image of another man, a pencil sketching, which has been torn up and stuck together again with darkening Sellotape. There is no indication of who the men are, as there are no names on the pictures. But someone knows.

The door handle drops and lifts. 'Are you in there, Mia?' Granny Cecilia pushes against the door. 'Why is your door locked?' Quickly Mia puts the pictures back into the envelope and slides it into her exercise book.

'I'm trying to do my homework and I keep getting distracted.'

'May I come in?'

Mia unlocks the door, sits down at her desk and leans on her book with her elbows, concentrating on the emptiness between the lines.

'What is your homework?' Granny Cecilia's presence is heavier than the heat, as she leans over Mia. Her grandmother needs to spray on some deodorant.

'How Benoni got its name.'

'What is your answer?'

'I don't know yet.'

Granny Cecilia continues to lean and then picks up Mia's brush, which she uses to smooth her own hair. 'One of the stories goes that the city was given its name by a land surveyor called Johan Rissik who became frustrated on the reef when trying to mark out the government's land in the 1880s.'

'Why was he frustrated?'

'Iq, he was probably bored and battling to do the job. Anyway, it is believed he named it Benoni, which means *son of my sorrow* in Biblical Hebrew, after the story of Jacob and Rachel's son in Genesis. Rachel had a difficult labour and as she died, she named her son

Benoni. Jacob later called him Benjamin, which means *son who will be fortunate*. Maybe that helps. I'm just going to change out of these gardening clothes.'

Granny Cecilia is gone before Mia realises she's forgotten the album on her grandmother's bed. Girl child who is not so fortunate.

Not even Kerry's sister's teacher, Frith van der Merwe, who set a new record in the Comrades Marathon, would be able to outrun the questions that come flying Mia's way. Why is the album on my bed? What have you been doing with it? What are you looking for? Why did you leave it there? How many more times do you need to page through it? Were you looking for something specific? Did you find anything specific? Did you find anything? Did you find the envelope?

Prem makes her a cup of hot chocolate to sip while she calms down. 'Do you think it's wise to live together only two months into our relationship?'

'What better way is there to find out?'

'A baptism of fire?' He smiles.

'A confirmation of fire?' She plays along with the progression.

'A marriage of fire?'

She looks away from the ultimate commitment and at her suitcase. 'I think I'll unpack. Do you have some spare hangers?'

'Knock yourself out. There're no skeletons in this closet.'

'I don't mind skeletons. It's the envelopes I'm worried about.'

Granny Cecilia takes hold of Mia's ear and squashes it up against her head. 'Where is the envelope, Mia? I know you have it.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Don't fib to me, girl! I know you have it!'

'I don't!'

'You won't hear out of this ear again if you don't give it back to me or tell me where it is!' The pain burns, but Mia is too terrified to admit possession of the envelope, which is as horrible as Granny Cecilia.

When Mia doesn't answer, Granny Cecilia starts pulling clothes out of her cupboard. Her school uniform. Her shorts and shirts. Nighties. Sundresses. Her tracksuits

and her jerseys. 'I won't have a fibber living under the same roof! Out! Out of this house! Find somewhere else to stay!'

'Where?' Mia's whisper is a croak.

'Ah! So you do have a voice!'

'Where must I go?'

'That's not my problem!'

'But I don't have anywhere to go....' She starts to cry, cringing at the thought of phoning Kerry to ask if she can come and live with them because her grandmother doesn't want her anymore.

'You should have thought of that before you lied to me!'

'Please, Granny Cecilia!' This as her grandmother starts stuffing the clothes into a suitcase.

'PLEEEFE-ASE!'

Granny Cecilia ignores her, zips closed the suitcase and lifts it out of the room, dragging it down the passage towards the entrance hall. Mia pulls out the envelope, but doesn't know what to do with it. She won't be able to put it back in the album before her grandmother returns. She doesn't want it in her room anymore, even if she's allowed to stay, because it will bring nightmares. And then she sees the man from the Bunny Park in her mind and knows it is the same face as the photograph in the envelope. She starts to scream and when Granny Cecilia stands at the door with an outstretched hand, she almost smiles when Mia gives her the envelope.

Prem is frowning. 'And she did this to you how many times?'

'No less than five times after that first time with the envelope and I always gave in.'

'Not tonight, though.'

'No.'

'Did she ever tell you who the men were?'

'No. Not even tonight.' Mia looks down at her hands and imagines there is blood caked under her fingernails. She didn't scratch her grandmother's face – Granny Cecilia did that herself in her sleep during some particularly bad nightmare – but she wishes she had.

The dented dolphin

'It is of interest to note that while some dolphins are reported to have learned English – up to 50 words used in correct context – no human being has been reported to have learned dolphinese.' – *Carl Sagan*

FAY's eyes are swollen from crying, but her glare is dry. She is in the kitchen making something to drink and ignoring everyone. She has changed her hair colour to burnt ochre with midnight blue flames, which heat up her splintered eyes. A cigarette is a wimp in her mouth.

'What's up?' Mia stands beside her and lifts down the tin of teabags.

'What the fuck has it got to do with you?' Fay mumbles out the side of her mouth.

'Nothing, but why should it before I can ask?'

Fay stares at her. 'Don't ask.' The cigarette shifts and wobbles.

'Come for dinner tonight with us.'

'Why?'

'I'm a decent cook and you can meet Prem.'

'Why?'

'You could do with a good meal inside you. Besides, you look like you're cast in stone.'

Prem lets himself in with familiarity and without the need for impressions. Mia feels him before he puts his arms around her from behind and bites her neck, as if he has the key to her body too. 'Yuuuumm! My favourite! Did you remember the coriander and limes? Chillies? And the onions?'

'Can't you see my bloodshot eyes?' She has not enjoyed spoon-feeding the mixture into the sagging mouth of soft flour tortillas. He doesn't look at her and steals a sliver of avocado, getting away with it, as he drops onto a fake zebra-skin ottoman and watches her from under a heavy fringe. He starts cracking the joints of his fingers.

'Prem... Please... Can I get you something to drink ... before Fay gets here?'

'The usual.' She pours him a whiskey on the rocks, the way he likes it. 'Why did you invite her for dinner?'

'The silence is corroding her soul.'

‘Jesus, you’re melodramatic! You hardly know the woman.’

‘I don’t need to.’

‘Neither do I, quite frankly.’

Fay arrives in a black gypsy skirt, black vest and boots. She carries a bottle of wine – Merlot, she says – by the throat, like a dead duck. She smells of a basement after a poker game, but risk is a darker cloud than smoked smoke. ‘This is a fucked-up idea,’ she hesitates at the door, fiddling with her pendant.

‘I’m so glad you made it! Did you find the place okay ... great! ... This is Prem.’

‘Nice to meet you, Crayola.’ Fay inclines her head at his comment addressed at her hair and Mia holds her breath because she can see Fay is processing whether to let Prem get away with it or not.

She permits it, almost as if she’s decided he’s not worth a retort. ‘Can I smoke in here?’

‘If you hang out the window,’ says Prem. Mia squirms and nods her head at Fay, who has already lit a cigarette.

‘What have you been crying about?’ Fay looks directly into Mia’s onion-distressed eyes while she turns her mouth to blow clouds over her shoulder towards Prem.

‘Food. You?’ Mia doesn’t miss a beat.

Fay snorts and gives Prem the once-over. It is the look an editor gives a shabby first proof.

‘I went out during lunch.’

‘And that moved you to tears?’ Prem.

‘No, you dick. They plucked my eyebrows to fuck.’

‘What’s for supper?’ Fay lifts a lid and peers into a pot.

‘Prawn, butternut and mango curry – the first time I’ve tried it.’

‘Awesome.’

‘So you’re a DTP operator, Fay?’ Prem sucks on a left-over slice of mango, as he leans over the kitchen counter.

‘No, I’m nothing of the sort.’

Prem glances at Mia with irritation. ‘But didn’t you say – ...?’

‘I’m a multimedia artist, darling.’ Fay sashays down the ramp of his confusion. ‘I create the points of access for a page.’

‘And you hope to climb the corporate ladder in this way?’

‘I don’t believe in hierarchical structures.’

‘So you plan to tread water in gothic boots?’

‘Prem...’

‘I believe in synergies. If things work well together, I try to uncover the opportunities.’

‘An opportunity is just an opening. It doesn’t mean you’ll get through.’ Prem wipes his sticky fingers on a dishcloth.

‘Have you seen my tattoo?’

‘You have a tattoo!’ Mia is delighted. ‘Where? Show me!’

‘Hey, what happened to supper? I’m starved.’ Prem whines. ‘And don’t you get any ideas, Beetle.’

Fay lifts her vest to reveal the black script across her lower back. ‘I was inspired by a performance of Kathryn Smith, a local artist, who had this funky tattoo, which I copied.’

Never look for unicorns until you’re run out of ponies.

Fay lies on her back on a rug, staring at the ceiling, her empty plate atop her flat stomach. She refuses to conform to the contours of a chair or that’s what she keeps telling Mia. She reminds Mia of a bunch of black roses she once saw on her scenic route to work. Dead valentines atop a stretched plastic rubbish bag on the pavement. Brittle stillborn buds. The same desperate black as paper too near a flame before it flakes apart.

‘Tell me your idea of an ideal date.’ Her voice distracts Mia from her musings.

‘Oh Fay, come on! What bullshit question is that? It’s done to death.’

‘Come up with something better, Prem.’ Fay can’t even smile at him.

Mia answers first. ‘I love men who make intimacy a deep pleasure. I would love to date a character in one of my poems. Sit with him, listening, dreaming, thinking. Prem?’

‘I didn’t know you wrote poems.’

‘Prem just answer the question.’

He looks pained. ‘A woman who knows – without being asked – when to bring me a beer.’

He sighs with boredom.

‘What about you, Fay, since you asked the question?’ Mia is curious.

‘My ideal would be to date someone who is nervous to ask me out and who takes me somewhere unusual to make complacency impossible.’

‘And you’ve experienced that before?’

‘Yes.’ The beauty spot on her lip seems to pulse.

‘He took her to buy a pair of decent shoes.’ Prem sniggers at his own attempt at humour.

'You were crying today, no matter what you say.'

'Talk about tact, Mia.' Prem stands up. 'I'm off to bed.'

'It's their anniversary, today.'

'Whose?' Mia leans forward.

Fay doesn't answer.

'Their wedding anniversary?'

'No, of their death.'

'Whose?'

'My sister and her little dog.'

Prem snorts. 'Sorry, I really am. Sorry. It's just all so dramatic. Sorry.' He puts his glass on the counter. 'Weird to meet you, Fay....See you tomorrow, Beetle...' He walks quickly out of the room, without a backward glance.

'They don't speak for a while. I'm sorry about Prem. He was an arse tonight.'

'Just tonight?'

Mia turns her head to flash a painted-on smile in Fay's direction, who shuffles her hand in her hair. 'That was rude, I apologise. He pissed me off.'

'We're not here to talk about Prem.'

'We're not here to talk about me either.'

'How about your sister? What it was like to have a sister. I've always wanted one.'

'I miss her. I miss the dog, can you believe it? And I miss him.'

'Him?'

'Her husband.'

'Aren't you still in contact?'

'No...More wine?' Fay empties the bottle into her glass when Mia shakes her head in decline.

'This is going to sound crazy, but I met someone... recently... and he... lost a wife ... a dog ... in a car accident.'

'It's the dog that makes it stick, doesn't it?'

'I think only if you care about dogs.'

'Which we do, yes, that we do.'

'Mmmm... What dog did your sister have?'

‘A pavement special ... and that other dog...?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘Mmmm...’

‘How old was the dog?’

‘Mia! For fuck’s sake!’

‘It’s him, isn’t it? It’s Lyndal.’

‘Yes.’ Fay pulls at the pendant and Mia notices it’s a dolphin, but dented.

•••••

She’s wanted to see him with such intensity that when she does, she feels almost nothing. Almost. It’s the shock that masks her real reaction, a sense of freezing over and a simultaneous melting. Nothing and everything is tender.

Tender: Easily cut, or chewed, not tough.

Tender: Easily touched or wounded, susceptible to pain or grief.

Tender: Delicate, fragile.

Tender: Loving, affectionate, fond.

Tender: Requiring tact or careful handling.

Tender: Early, immature.

Tender: An offer.

He is with another woman and hasn’t seen her. The woman’s back is to her and his right profile is leaning towards the woman’s face, his hands clasping hers. Mia can’t remember the colour of his right eye. Tigereye quartz or limes, she’s not sure, but why should she be thinking this now? He’s here, but he’s not, and she has to do something about his presence. Their presence. She’s self-conscious, wet from her spinning class, but her legs take her through the gym’s exit towards their table in the adjoining coffee shop. And then her mouth is opening – ‘Hello Lyndal’ – and she is standing next to him, watching his expression flicker to something like happiness and then back to a concealed camouflage of indifference.

‘You’re the last person I expected to see here, Mia.’

'I can see why.' She looks pointedly at the woman, who is much older than him, she notices, with faded corkscrew hair and a round face. 'But this is my gym.'

'Mia, this is Zoë. Zoë, this is Mia.'

'What are you doing here?'

'Zoë is waiting for a Pilates class.'

'No, in Johannesburg.'

'I'm up for my father's memorial service. Many of his family and friends live here.'

'When is it going to be?'

'It was yesterday.'

'Oh... How long are you in Johannesburg?'

'Until the weekend.'

'What are your plans?'

'As little as possible?'

'I need to discuss.... Um.... Some things... with you, about the article, you know, the one I'm writing. I just wanted... to.. um... clarify... some ... stuff. Um. Perhaps....'

Zoë stands up. 'My class is in ten and I still have to run to the ladies. Nice to meet you, Mia. See you later.' She kisses Lyndal on his head, picks up her bag and takes a few steps – 'I'll settle with you after class...' – and glides away. 'Bye'.

'Take a seat.'

She sits – not in the chair Zoë has just vacated – and doesn't know where to look.

'Have you been well?' He seems to have the same problem, as he glances over her shoulder, above her head, down at his hands, into her eyes. It's the colour of limes, his right eye.

'No.'

He doesn't ask why, but looks down at the steeple of his fingers. 'You said you had something to discuss about the article?'

'What article?' She is momentarily nonplussed. 'Oh, yes, the one I'm writing. God, I'm in a state. Sorry... I didn't expect this, you see, and now... it's not supposed to be like this...but it is, and well, um, I actually don't quite know how to handle it. And now, her involvement....'

'Who? Zoë?'

'Well yes, hers too.'

'It's not what you think.'

'Actually I'm not thinking anything. Nothing you do surprises me anymore.'

'Anymore. You mean it did before?'

'That's not the point.'

'Then what is?'

'May I get a ... latté please ... do I order at the counter?'

'Wait a sec,' he signals a waiter, who arrives at the table. 'A latté and another filter coffee please.'

'Who is Zoë?'

'You mean is she my girlfriend?' He smiles winningly. 'The investigative journalist at work. But surely your job is to write up the establishment, not me.'

'Sure, but I got involved, as you did.'

'The sex was a once-off, not an involvement.'

'So that's the way it's going to be then?'

'And what way is that?'

'I don't feel I need to justify myself.'

'Neither do I.'

'Yes, I can see that is your way with women.' The latté arrives and she pushes it aside in anger.

'With you, you mean.'

'I think Fay would beg to differ.' She hasn't meant to be so blunt, especially when her comment is a swing of the axe to his face and he spasms.

He pauses, breathes and puts effort into ensuring the normalcy of his next statement, but fails. 'Christ! What are you doing?' He runs both hands through his hair. Caged eyes.

'Perhaps you should ask yourself that question.' She stands up. 'I don't know why I'm doing this to myself, really I don't, but I thought... maybe... never mind, I'm leaving. Fuck this. Fuck you.'

'You sound like Fay.' He sounds exhausted. 'Sit down.'

'I can't... don't you see?' She gags on her words. 'I can't do this... I must go.'

'Mia, let's go somewhere else, please... don't leave.'

'I must just...'

'I'm sure the waiter – Matthew, is that it, thank you – will manage here.' He pulls out his wallet and leaves a note on the table that makes Matthew's eyes widen. He takes Mia's hand and guides her through the tables and chairs, out of the door and into the parking lot where she wrenches free and starts to run.

He catches her when she fumbles to find her car keys in the damned rucksack.

'Leave me alone... I can't do this. I can't be here with you.'

'Why?'

'It hurts, damn you. It shouldn't, I know. I understand all that.' The tears have put in an unwanted appearance and he puts his arms around her. While she longs to relax in them, she pulls away. 'Don't touch me. Don't. DON'T!'

'Where can we go? To talk?'

'Nowhere. I've got to be home... Prem... supper...'

'Mia. Please.'

'What about Zoë?'

'I'll leave a message on her cell.'

'How will you explain? No, wait. I'm not going to be part of your sordid triangles. I'm leaving. I'm going. Now. Yes, I'm going. Without you. You stay with Zoë. Goodbye.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Zoë. Fay.'

'What?' He looks confused.

'How did you get here?'

'With Zoë.'

'Then that's how you're leaving.' She finally finds her keys, unlocks the door, opens it and gets into the driver's seat, shutting him out. He taps on the window and mouths 'please' at her. She puts the key in the ignition and her foot on the accelerator.

Prem is in a good mood when she gets home, for which she is grateful. It distracts him from her puffy uncommunicativeness. He has made toasted cheese sandwiches for supper and has already eaten. 'Go and have a shower,' he says, crumbs on his shirt, 'and then we'll have a nice cuddle hello.' He is channel hopping, his arm extended with the remote, and he doesn't give her a second glance. 'Oh, I've been thinking,' he says, as she waits by the door. 'It's time we set a date for our wedding. I'm not that keen on a long engagement.'

She locks the bathroom door and sits on the toilet lid, her knees clasped to her chest. She doesn't know how long she stays there before getting into the shower and submitting to the fierce heat. All she cares is that the rushing water burns him from her. She hears nothing, wants to hear nothing and when she switches off the taps, Prem is banging on the door. 'Mia! Open up!'

'What's wrong?' She reaches for a towel.

'Why did you lock it?'

'What's wrong?'

'It's Fay on the line. She says it's urgent.'

It takes Mia half an hour to find the garden cottage or rather the main house where Fay stays in Parktown North. She's nervous about driving around at night, but her need to help supercedes any fear of potential hijacking. The house – and Fay's cottage – is set down a panhandle driveway and guarded by five beards on legs. When she presses the buzzer for the cottage, no one answers, but the gate opens and she drives inside. The yapping dogs respond to a whistle at the main house. Some distance away, the white and turquoise-painted front door of the cottage is ajar and Fay is lit from behind, a solitary figure on an all-white canvas.

She stands aside to let Mia into the lounge and an antique crystal chandelier catches the light to introduce instant theatre. 'Wow, it's beautiful!' Mia is awestruck. 'It's like something out of a love story. Or a palace. Or a Jane Austen period drama.' She almost forgets why she is here. 'Oh, I'm so sorry... here I go again... how are you doing?' Fay is wearing a white kimono, her bare feet smooth against the pile of the carpet. 'This is the first time I've seen you in anything besides black.'

Fay smiles. 'Come in.' For Mia, the room is an interplay of colourlessness, light and echoing from the chandelier and collections of mirrors – old and new – on the walls.

'Oh wow! I've never seen so many mirrors like this before!' Each wall has an arrangement of different mirrors, each with a story, says Fay, describing her passion. Mia sees hundreds of little Mias and Fays in the mirrors, some fractured, hung around the room. 'It's magical.' 'I started playing with mirrors when I was still small. I believed if I stared long or hard enough, I could change my face, my hairstyle, my clothes or even my personality. Later even my life.'

'Why did you want to do that?'

‘Doesn’t everyone at some stage?’

‘It reminds me of the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles. I can just imagine masked *mesdames* enticing *messieurs* with their fluttering fans and feathers.’

‘For me, it’s more about how surfaces form images from reflection and lighting.

Fascinating. Anyway, enough about that. Can I get you something to drink?’

Mia glances at the white table and chairs. ‘What colour did you paint them? It’s gorgeous.’

‘Plascon Silver Statuc. A drink?’

‘Some water, thanks. I just can’t get over your place. It’s so completely not what I expected.’

And neither is Lyndal when he comes into the room.

‘Why am I not surprised?’ Mia looks first at Fay and then her glance lingers on Lyndal. ‘Do you guys think this is funny? That I’m the butt of some bad joke?’

‘Mia... don’t be angry.’ Fay speaks. ‘He was desperate.’

‘I thought you two weren’t in contact any longer.’

‘We weren’t until yesterday. I went to the memorial service. It was the first time... since, well, you know. My mother told me about it. I had to go.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me? Why did you lie to me?’

‘I was still processing it. My reaction. My feelings. Him.’

‘What about your sister’s anniversary? And the poor dog!’

‘That part was true.’

Lyndal moves deeper into the room towards them, but Mia stops him with her outburst.

‘And you! Does Zoë know where you are? You cheating pig!’

‘Zoë?’

‘Yes. Zoë. Or have you forgotten about her too? Jeez! You just can’t help yourself, can you?’

‘Mia, Zoë is my mother.’

And then she sees the third photograph on his wall of middle age. Of gravity. Of loss.

‘And you’re the second woman in the photograph.’ She looks at Fay, who looks at Lyndal.

A photograph of love.

‘Why are you doing this to me?’ Mia is distraught at this betrayal.

‘Mia. We’re not doing anything to you.’ Lyndal’s voice is gentle. ‘But you wouldn’t give me the chance to speak with you earlier.’

‘What do you expect after you treated me like a whore?’ Fay sucks in her breath and makes to leave the room. ‘You don’t have to go,’ Mia feels her voice getting shrill. ‘I have nothing to hide.’ The anger and hurt clot in her veins.

‘Mia, I really don’t have to be here.’

‘But Fay, don’t you see? It seems for Lyndal you’ve always been present. An immovable ghost.’

‘That’s not true.’ Fay touches Mia’s arm.

‘It’s true to life.’ Mia points at Fay’s dented dolphin pendant.

‘Did she know, about your feelings?’ Mia fires the question. Lyndal’s face has become taut and his eyes are empty shafts that penetrate his head. And hers. Fay starts to cry, silently, delicately, without any of the facial trauma Mia displays when her tears go on the rampage.

‘Her name was Delfine.’ Lyndal starts.

‘Why did you marry her?’ Mia is relentless.

‘She was the only woman I knew whose face was naked to the world.’

It was the doctor travelling behind Delfine, Fay and Lyndal who saw the accident and recovered the dented dolphin, Fay says. Somehow he knew the pendant had been a gift celebrating a special love that often only comes once and so to save it, he untwisted it from Delfine’s neck before they arrived to fetch her. He could do nothing for her and later her parents were kept from identifying what had once been her body. Fay still dreams of the terror.

It happened on a narrow bridge with single competing lanes, when a taxi with failing brakes and an unlicensed driver, illegally overtook a truck burdened by an abnormal load, smashing head-on into their small car. After the blow, a few mildly shocked passengers from the taxi moved quickly to steal from the dead where there would be no resistance. The doctor tried to stand guard, but his threats and pleas held no sound or meaning. Suitcases carried away. Loose apples from the *padkos* box hitting the tar in bruising thuds. The gassy burps of opened cans emptied into thirsty throats. Road death toll statistics up by one and a half. Bitterness shapes Fay’s mouth. Bereavement was a gain.

‘Where are they buried?’ Mia includes the animal.

‘We haven’t scattered their ashes yet.’ Lyndal tries to take Fay’s hand, but she moves away, closer to Mia. ‘Will you help me?’ Her eyes are soaked tissues. In her mind, Mia sees a

grave of smashed glass shards, blood on the road covered by scattered sand and white corners painted on the tar. Disfigured balustrades. Car squashed like a used tin on a landfill site.

‘So that’s how her pendant was dented.... It was a gift from Lyndal.’

‘No. Lyndal gave it to me.’

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There is a brief moment where Mia doesn’t understand. They are looking at her from identical eyes that are dead against the lively sparkles from the chandelier. Lyndal sits down on a spindly chair covered in faded velvet as incongruous as he is. Fay continues to stand.

‘When did you give it to Fay?’

‘It was....’ Fay’s voice shudders into nothingness.

‘After I photographed her. Just before I married Delfine.’

‘Right. I see.’ But she doesn’t. They don’t elaborate.

‘Why did you photograph Fay?’

‘It wasn’t my intention. The photograph was as spontaneous as the moment and as beautiful.’

‘Right. I see.’

‘Fay has never loved me in the same way....’ Lyndal looks at Fay and then at Mia.

‘And so you married her sister to be close to her.’

‘I married her twin.’

‘Did Delfine know this about you?’

‘I need a cigarette.’ Fay bends to scrounge in her bag on the floor in the kitchen.

‘Unfortunately one of Lyndal’s legacies that has stayed with me.’

‘We don’t know.’

‘Why do you still wear the pendant, Fay?’

‘She gave it to Delfine on her wedding day.’

‘I’m not sure what you want me to do with all this information.’ Mia is weary and overwhelmed. Fay inhales from her cigarette and lights one for Lyndal, which he takes as he would a life-jacket.

'I think I'm going to hit the road before we have a *Phantom of the Opera* moment with the chandelier....' Mia switches on her cell phone and picks up her keys.

'Please stay!' Lyndal jumps up. 'Don't go. Not now. Like this.' His eyes pounce from his face at her.

'He's right, Mia. I'll get us some coffee. Have you had something to eat?'

'No... But Prem....'

'Fuck Prem.' Fay picks up the phone from the receiver. 'You're staying the night. Tell him your plans have changed.'

The bird flies into her dream. She knows she is dreaming, in her dream, because she is in their house and although the rooms appear different, she accepts it because it is a dream. She is upstairs – she's always wanted a home that has an upstairs bedroom – and she can hear the fluttering of wings on the lower level. It must be trapped in the blinds against the windows. She is tentative coming down the steps – she doesn't want to scare the bird – and the movement at the window confirms her thoughts. The Crested Barbet flaps and flaps and gets caught up in the beaded threads that connect the strips of fabric. She moves away so it will not become even more afraid and it jumps free to hobble into the next room where it shoots straight into the blinds there.

She can't get close to it to open a side window. She's already pushed open the sliding door onto the patio. She starts to whistle – gosh, she sounds like a bird; she never knew she could whistle so brilliantly and keep a tune; she must remember how to do it when she wakes up – and the bird cocks its head at whatever message she is conveying. She goes into the garden to tap against the window, hopefully to nudge it towards the door, but the bird flies upstairs and onto the top shelf of her open cupboard, where she stores her knitwear. There it stays and quickly she shuts the door to trap the bird in the bedroom. Her fingers shake as she unlocks the sliding door onto the balcony, while beady eyes watch from the darkness. She hopes it hasn't messed in there, as it has next to the windows where it panicked. Urine or liquid poo, she's not sure, but there was an ingested insect in the fluid on the tiles. She moves to stand by the bedroom door – why does she feel so trapped herself – and whistles. Suddenly the terrified bird swoops out of the cupboard and straight through the open sliding door outside, spraying the same yellow

stuff onto her linen. When she locks the door, she feels as free as the bird now watching her from a branch.

Her eyes open again and fitfully she stares into the strange dimness of an unfamiliar place. She is hot and then she is cold. She is exhausted, but not tired enough. She knows immediately that he is not asleep. He is too quiet. 'Why did you treat me like you did?' Her whisper barely rises above the day bed where she is lying amidst embroidered cushions and crocheted rugs, but the utterance cymbal-clashes into the atmosphere. There is a pause despite the silence.

'It was a test.' There is unzipping and a shuffle in the sleeping bag. His words are almost muffled.

'For whom?'

'For us both in retrospect. But I intended it for you.'

'Why?'

'To push the boundaries. To push you to the extreme.' He has crawled over to the bed and she can feel him next to her, but she doesn't move. 'Only at the extreme do you feel truly alive. Remember I said moderation was not for the faint-hearted?'

'But what were you trying to test?' All senses are on call.

'Your statement that you believed commitment implied an extreme level. That a relationship was a limitation to possibilities.'

'And you had to treat me like a prostitute to test this?'

'Isn't prostration a form of prostitution?'

'Speak for yourself.'

'I am.' He reaches out to cup her face and she wants to let him.

'Please don't.' She turns her head away. 'As I once said, I like to fly beneath the radar.'

'But the problem is you never have.'

'And that's your research finding? The conclusion of your test?' She sits up and pulls herself back against the wall, away from him. He holds onto her leg, but she pries his fingers loose.

'What are you blocking out, Mia?'

'Now? Right now? You.' Thank God he can't see her tears.

'I fucked up. I'm so sorry.'

‘Why didn’t you make contact with me? Tell me you were coming to Joburg? Anything?’

‘Because remember you told me that in your mind there was no present because the past and future overwhelmed and overrode it. The past was all I had of you.’

‘Are you still in love with Fay?’

‘I will always love Fay. She was my first love, but I’ve learnt that disappointed love is a kind of personalised terrorism.’

‘Were you lovers?’

‘I was a lover.’

‘Did you love Delfine?’

‘I loved the idea of what she could offer.’

‘How sad.’

‘It’s okay. It wasn’t all bad. Beauty is in the things that go unnoticed at the time, or so I’ve heard.’ He reaches for her hand and she relaxes, but only for a short while, until she speaks.

‘I’ve always believed a good lover is someone who whispers our own stories back to us.’

The words stop then. He lets go of her hand and climbs up next to her on the bed, kicking away an eiderdown. Facing each other, they let the soundlessness speak. She looks on the wall next to her shoulder and she sees multiplications of two profiles and then of his luminous eyes, as he assesses her through the mirrors. The moonlight glows on their bodies – Fay only has fragile voile curtains – and still they don’t touch. ‘My father used to enjoy an old legend claiming that everything lost or wasted on earth was treasured on the moon.’

‘Such as?’

‘Fruitless tears, unfulfilled dreams, misspent time, squandered wealth, broken promises.’

‘That’s beautiful. What made you think of that now?’

‘It feels like those things have brought us here together, in the moonlight. To be treasured.’

‘So long as we don’t moon over each other.’

‘Nah! I’m just over the moon to be here!’

‘Then show me those buttocks!’

‘Patience, my dear lady... let’s take it slowly this time.’

She hears a toilet flushing in Fay’s bathroom. ‘Is she awake?’

‘She often dozes off and then wakes up to have a leak before getting to her real beauty sleep.’

‘How long have you known Fay?’

‘Since my matric year. I moved with my Dad to the Cape and I started at her school. She hasn’t always been a Gautenger.’

‘How did you meet?’

‘She was spray painting a prefab.’

‘And you told on her?’

‘I asked if I could help. Shame, she was so cute. A little standard-six girl with white-blond hair. Her blazer was far too big for her even though she had rolled up the sleeves.’

‘What was she painting?’

‘Black Beauty, you know, the horse.’

‘And what did you paint?’

‘Not much. I supervised.’

‘What happened after that?’

‘I gave her my heart, but she re-gifted it.’ His teeth shine in his face. ‘Mia, let Fay go to sleep.’ He pulls her jaw towards his face and kisses her so deeply she doesn’t respond. Her arm goes around his neck and she pulls him to her forcefully. The bed creaks and they start to love.

‘How long have you been watching me?’ Her eyes have opened into his.

‘Forever.’ He speaks into his hand. ‘Sorry, dragon breath.’

She is self-conscious then and turns her face into a pillow where she giggles. She feels so buoyant in the morning beams and wishes she could spend the day in bed with him. She wonders whether Fay has something she can wear to work. Fay’s clothes – at least the ones Mia has seen her in – appear baggy, so they should fit. ‘I must get up.’ But she stays where she is.

‘Coffee for the lovers...’ It is Fay carrying two mugs into the room.

‘I didn’t even hear you go into the kitchen.’ Lyndal looks bemused.

‘Of course you didn’t. Was it good?’ Fay looks incredibly cheeky and in her short satin nightie, Mia thinks she looks like a forest sprite with Steffi Graf legs.

Their smiles are soppy at each other and Mia looks to Fay reluctantly. ‘Do you have something I could wear to work?’

'Sure. Take your pick.'

'Why do you wear black all the time?'

'You never used to.' Lyndal also seems intrigued.

'It's my office uniform.'

'Is it assigned?' Lyndal looks to Mia.

'No, but if I don't appear to change in form or character, wouldn't the assumption be that I conform to the same set of rules, or patterns, mine and theirs?' Fay tilts her head.

'But why are you so blatantly anti-establishment, with your fuck-you attitude?' Lyndal forgets to speak into the cushion, but Mia still thinks he smells wonderful.

'I said the assumption would be one of conformity. And aren't assumptions simply pretences of knowledge?'

'Fay, what are you on about?' Lyndal's tone is one of exasperation.

'She's creating a work persona that has nothing to do with who she really is.'

Fay smiles at Mia's statement.

'Why would you do that, Fay?' Lyndal looks at her with concern.

'In that way she leaves her inner core sheathed.' Mia glances at Fay with understanding.

Mia eventually wears what she wore the night before. Fay leaves before she does – 'Please tell them I was at a last-minute interview' – so she can breakfast with Lyndal, who seems prepared to skip the meal. 'My grandmother always told me breakfast was the most important meal of the day.'

'Sure, but that doesn't mean I have to eat it.'

'Didn't your mother insist?'

'Zoë wasn't around a lot when I was growing up.'

'Where was she?'

'She was a political activist with love and passion elsewhere.'

'You knew this?'

'Not at the time.'

'Where was elsewhere?'

'She had a lover in Cape Town.'

'Is she still with him?'

'Yes, with her. But they give each other a lot of space and freedom. Millie is the love of her life. As is Abby.'

'Do you spend a lot of time with them?'

'I used to.'

'And now?'

'It got messy. Abby is in one of the photographs.'

.....

Who is Abby? The question flickers on Mia's lips in the kitchen at work when she sees Fay outside smoking on the patio. She is chatting with Gwyneth and every so often she laughs. She is like her mirrors. Even her hair is broken with its fragmented colour that changes abruptly along splintered textures. All Mia sees when she looks at Fay is a reflection of Mia. At the moment, Fay is reflecting Gwyneth. She is sure Lyndal could see himself when he decided to help her spray paint a horse on the building. She's easy to like, Mia thinks, but only if a person likes him- or herself first.

'*Yebo*, Priti.' Mia smiles at her. 'Yes, Priti.' Priti is taking leftover carrot cake from a home-industry container and wrapping it in foil to take home with her.

'*Kunjani Sisi?*' How is it with you, sister?

'*Kuhle kakhulu!*' Very good!

'*Hamu! Uyasazi isiZulu!*' Gosh! You understand Zulu!

'*Kancane?*' A little.

Priti's smile is a blessing.

'You made it!' Fay's smoky presence in the kitchen is not unexpected.

'It was a good interview.' Mia feels foolish with her incessant grinning.

'I'm glad.' Fay rinses out her mug and starts to dry it. 'Fuck, these *lappies* are always wet.'

'Here, Sisi.' Priti reaches up into a cupboard and brings down a fresh cloth.

'Fay, who is Abby?'

'Abby?' She smiles at Priti, as she manages to dry her mug. 'Thanks Priti's.'

'Yes, Lyndal spoke of her.'

'Abby... Abby.... Abb-bbee ... ah...that must be Abigail!'

'And she was?'

'A lover, I think.'

‘Another one! He moves around, doesn’t he?’

‘I can’t answer that.’

‘What happened to her?’

‘He’s never told me.’

‘What face does she have?’ Priti interrupts and Mia is taken aback, as it seems I’ay is too.

‘Prit’s! That’s the first time I’ve heard you butt into a conversation like that! Um, I only met her once. She’s coloured, I think, and really pretty.... Did I say something wrong?’

Priti rushes out of the kitchen, leaving the tap open. Water gushes into the sink and down the drain so Mia twists the dial tight until only droplets form around the rim.

Back at her desk, Mia stares at her inbox and notices she has five unread messages.

‘Mia! Have you seen Parker? He needs to sign off these proofs otherwise we’re going to be late with production!’ I’ay is at the entrance to their cubicle, scanning the office.

‘He wasn’t here when I got back to my desk and I still haven’t seen him.’

‘Where the fuck is he?’

Gwyneth saunters down the passage and leans over the cubicle, the buttons of her lavender blouse pulling apart to reveal the cleft between her breasts. She has a glittering lilac crucifix around her neck, which Mia thinks detracts from her outfit; she’s not partial to costume jewellery and it cheapens the symbol. ‘I saw him go into the Alpha meeting room about an hour ago.’

‘With a client?’

‘No.’

‘Is it an internal meeting?’

Gwyneth smiles. ‘You could say that.’

‘With whom?’

‘Himself.’

‘What are you speaking about?’

‘I went in there a couple of minutes ago with one of my clients and found him sleeping on the floor.’

Mia laughs alone while Gwyneth examines her manicure. ‘It was so embarrassing. My client thought he was dead.’

‘Mia, for fuck’s sake, go and wake him up. We need these proofs approved ASAP!’

The blinds over the door are closed and she knocks softly before moving into the room. For a moment she thinks Gwyneth has been having her on because she can't see him, but then she smells the stale running shoes and she kneels to look under the table. Parker is lying on his back, his shoes off, a toe protruding through a worn sock, his arms supporting his head. His mouth is open in a quiet gasp. 'Parker... Parker... Wake up...'. He doesn't move and she hopes he is still alive. 'Parker!' Suddenly he sits up and bangs his head under the table. 'Bloody hell!' She stands up nonchalantly, trying not to smile. 'Parker, if you don't mind. The proofs have to be signed off. Fay's been looking all over for you.' 'Yes, yes, ah, yes, the proofs.... Pass me my shoes.'

Back at his desk, Parker fumbles through the catastrophe around his computer for a pen. He then takes his arm and sweeps all the clutter onto the floor to clear a working space. He bends his head in silence while he studies the proofs. Mia turns her back on him and gets back to her personal perspective article, wondering when she should start working on the commission story and who she should contact first.

He eats lunch over the proofs, shovelling the contents of a chicken shwarma into his mouth with a plastic fork. She can hear the occasional thud on the pages as he spills and she's glad she doesn't have to decipher his comments or scratch off his gloopy mess. He almost puts her off her own food, but she's got a spinning class after work so she'd better eat something now. Mia peels off the foil lid of her yoghurt and rolls across in her chair towards the bin to throw it away. She glances down at the mess Parker has brushed off his desk and sees a pink self-adhesive note attached to one of his papers. **Commission announcement - call asata or fri to discuss.** She picks it up and rolls back to her desk. The splats continue to drop onto the proofs. Today is Friday.

Vanya agrees to meet Mia in the afternoon to discuss progress regarding the new remuneration model and the undercover exhilaration both thrills and terrifies her. She didn't say anything about having already spoken with Parker and Mia is hopeful she can file a story before he even makes contact with the association. The idea of a percentage paid from goods or services sold makes her question the true price of such a transaction. It's about chasing a moving target, from every angle.

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Lyndal asks if he can photograph her and she laughs. ‘So you can stick me on your wall as one of your conquests?’ They are sipping wine in Fay’s garden.

‘I’m not out to conquer.’

‘But you conquer a moment by capturing it in a photograph.’

‘Surely that moment is only masked by the picture?’

‘It is only masked if the image has a choice.’

‘You have a choice.’

‘And what is that choice?’

‘You can say yes or you can say no. It’s that simple.’

‘Is it really? Won’t you present an image of me that you’re determined to present?’

‘I try to get my photographs to tell an honest story.’

‘And what story do you want to tell about me?’

‘It depends on what inner dialogue you establish when I take the shot.’ She looks at him while he continues. ‘Just don’t look blank or like you’re trying to entice the camera.’

‘But it’s okay for me to seduce the man behind the lens?’

He grins. ‘By all means.’

‘And I want you in the picture.’

He refuses. ‘I don’t want it staged.’

‘Won’t it be posed anyway, since you’re asking me?’

‘No. I’m not asking you to model for me. I’m asking if I can photograph you.’

‘Did you ask everyone else?’

‘No.’

‘Then why are you asking me?’

‘Because I don’t want to stuff up again.’

‘When do you want to take it?’ She runs her fingers through his hair.

‘That I’m not going to tell you!’

‘Okay, but then can I ask you one thing?’ He nods. ‘That you draw inspiration from Frida Kahlo’s paintings when you photograph me.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I love her sense of fantasy.’

‘From what I’ve seen they’re traumatic. Isn’t she surrounded by baboons or something in one of her portraits?’

'Monkeys. But she used beauty to convey the painful aspects of her life.'

'So why do you want her trace in any photograph of you?'

'Her strength inspires me.'

He takes her hand and kisses the tip of each finger. 'Your will is my command.'

'Tell me about Abby please.'

'Mia! What is this?'

'Curiosity at its best.'

'It's a long story.'

'I've got time.'

'Yes, but I don't. I'm flying back tomorrow and I don't want to spend our last night together speaking about the past.'

'Is Abby the past?'

'Very much so. Now come here....'

.....

They kiss goodbye at the airport, before he goes through security. 'I hope you don't have any sharp objects in your hand luggage.' She smiles at him. He opens his mouth to speak, to joke it appears, but shuts it and grins instead.

'What were you going to say?'

'Nothing.' He tucks a stray strand of hair behind her ear and puts his lips on her forehead.

'That means something.'

'Nothing important, really.'

'Okay.... Will you SMS me when you get there?'

'I'll call you.... Come here....' he clutches her towards him. She leans against him and he puts his arms around her, holding her tightly. They kiss again and when she looks over his shoulder, she sees Prem watching them.

She stiffens, oh shit, oh God no, what now? 'What is it?' Lyndal doesn't move.

'It's Prem and he's seen us. Why's he here?' She continues to look into the depthless eyes of her fiancé. He stares back, almost without blinking. Her lips twitch and stick together.

'Do you want to slap my face or hit me or something?'

'He knows now. I can't pretend.'

'Do you want to go to him and I'll leave or do you want to introduce me?'

'Just go.'

He releases her and she steps back to enable him to pick up his bag. Her eyes don't leave Prem's even when Lyndal whispers something and turns away. Lyndal walks into her line of vision and Prem doesn't acknowledge him as he moves past. His eyes cling to Mia's. She steps toward him, but abruptly he spins and walks briskly towards the undercover parking. 'PREM!' She starts to run after him, but a strong hand pulls her sleeve.

'Leave him.' It's Lyndal from behind the railings, but she shrugs him off.

'I must explain... talk to him...'. She doesn't see Lyndal's face, only the back of Prem's shiny head, as he moves further into the crowds milling around domestic check-ins.

She waits for him in their bedroom, their loud empty chamber, but he doesn't arrive. He is still not there at 02h03 when she finally closes her eyes to sleep. She has left six messages on his cell phone and sent two SMSs. A butterfly has fallen off the mural onto the ground, the double-sided tape obviously losing its stickiness. And her favourite shades of plum, cherry and blueberry in the room have become bruises.

When she wakes at 05h35, she is suffocating in the room. She stumbles out of bed, her legs tangling in the linen, to open a window. She feels dreadful. She gulps down the stinging air and lets the breeze finger her face. Moving back inside the room, she checks her phone. There is one message received, from Lyndal. He didn't phone when he arrived and she didn't notice. He is safe, but she can't say the same for Prem, whose presence criticises and sticks with her like a regret. She climbs back into bed and pulls the duvet over her head. The blinds are rattlesnakes against the window.

Mia is in a frame with Mom, who is wearing a peach nightgown covered in clods of soil. The silver locket around her ropey neck is tarnished and hidden by a tatty scarf. 'Thanks for the wool and knitting needles,' she says, dust puffing from her smiling mouth, her hair full of sand. An empty coffin lies on its side next to her. Mia looks up to see the corners of the photograph in which they stand, which she presumes is to be found in the peacock photo album. If she stretches high enough on her toes, she can see past the borders to watch the lady with a bob running up a dune with a dog, but an envelope of hidden stories covers half the image. Mom shakes her head, more dust, and opens her mouth, but no

sound comes out. Mia reaches out to stroke Mom's chin, which she knows feels like a bristly raspberry, but Mom is too far away. They turn to watch as Granny Cecilia struggles up the dune behind the woman, her face scratched, reaching out with empty hands. Suddenly Mia becomes Granny Cecilia, her feet deep in soft sand, pausing when two men appear at the top of the dune. She wants to run to them. The one has a face drawn by pencils and the other has a photographed face. When she reaches them, she moves to embrace them, but they step back and turn away. Distressed, she slips down the incline, twisting her ankle. Mia turns to look at Mom, but her mentor and the coffin have gone. The scene is a map of devastation.

Mia's face and pillow are wet when she feels herself waking up to a vibrating cell phone. Lyndal Prem! 'Mia, what have you done?' Granny Cecilia.

'Granny Cecilia ... Are you well? ...I wasn't expecting your call...'

'I want to know why that fiancé of yours has moved back into his mother's house...'

'We had a ... difference of opinion...'

'What are you going to do about it?'

'Speak to him...'

'I presume you'll drop by with some groceries.'

'Granny Cecilia.'

'Mmmm...'

'What's a limerick?' Her grandmother looks up from her contemplation of lumpy gravy.

Mia knows it's lumpy because it's always lumpy. She sometimes hides the blobs under her vegetables. Or she cuts them up with her knife and fork to release the dry powder trapped inside. Either way, they taste terrible and now Mia asks Granny Cecilia not to put gravy on her food when she dishes up.

'It's a short funny poem.'

'My teacher says it must rhyme.'

'Yes, in a few lines.'

'Five. She says.'

'Something like that.'

'It must be aabba.'

'ABBA? What's it got to do with them?'

'It must rhyme like aabba.'

'Oh.' She stirs while peeping over the rim of her glasses.

'Will you help me?'

'After supper.'

There was a young girl from Benoni
Who really was quite lonely,
So she asked for a tale,
From her Gran who went pale,
And the silence after that was stony.

After supper, Granny Cecilia sleeps on her wingback chair, gravy on her blouse. Bubbles foam on the edges of her open mouth and one sleeping eye is pulled open by the way her face squashes against the faded floral fabric. It watches Mia with blankness. There is no way her grandmother will help her with the limerick now, because every time Mia tries to wake her, she says Mmmmharumfff and goes back to sleep. Sometimes she says funny things like the gerbils are gambling in the kitchen. Or Mittens is making mud. Mia often giggles to herself when she hears these things. She pulls Granny Cecilia's sleeve.

'Granny Cecilia.... Granny Cecilia.... Granny Cecilia....'

'Mmmm....'

'Granny Cecilia....'

'Put the potatoes on the potty.' Mia smiles.

'Wake up....' She shakes her arm.

Her grandmother jolts up. 'No! NO! Nooooo! Don't take my baby!'

'Come have a smoke with me.' Fay leans over the partition of Mia's cubicle.

'Mia doshn't smoke.' Parker looks up too with a pen in his mouth. 'I'll come.'

'Mia doesn't have to smoke.'

'Can I speak for myself, please?' They both look at her, Fay smiling, Parker chewing the tip of the pen. 'I need a break anyway.'

'Down boy! Stay where you are. You have another deadline in half an hour.' Fay grins at him.

Outside, the smokers are gathering, but Fay and Mia sit at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the patio. Fay lights up while Mia watches. 'I need...' she takes the cigarette out of her mouth, exhales and asks Mia to come to Cape Town with her.

'Why do you need me?'

'I have finally decided where I want to scatter their ashes.'

'Which place have you chosen?'

'Foxy Beach... It was, still is I'm sure, her favourite haunt. No pun intended.'

'Why do you want me with you?'

'It's something I don't want to do alone. Besides, you'll get to see Lyndal.'

Mia's stomach food-processes its contents, but she says yes to Fay and makes a mental note to buy oral contraception. It's about time she went on the pill. If rocks can fold, so can a person.

Petrified

'Loyalty to petrified opinions never yet broke a chain or freed a human soul in this world – and never will.' – *Mark Twain*

THE wood is petrified, says Miss Millie when Abigail asks why the tree stump is so shiny. 'What does it mean to be petrified?' She assesses the wood that Miss Millie sometimes uses as a side table or a place to keep chips and dip when guests arrive.

'For humans, it means to be immobile with fear. For this stump, it means the wood has literally turned to stone by becoming a frozen statue of its former self.'

'Why?'

'Remember how I told you how wood disintegrates over time, or is burned up, or digested by animals?'

'I think so.' She nods.

'This doesn't happen to wood that eventually becomes petrified. Usually what occurs is that it's buried very quickly in something like volcanic lava or mud, which preserves it in an oxygen-free environment. When water carrying dissolved minerals finally seeps through all the mess and porous parts of the wood, the statue-making process begins. The water evaporates over the years, but the minerals stay behind, crystallise and gradually fill the tree's structure. When the minerals harden over centuries, the original log is replaced, cell by cell, by a stone replica.'

'So it takes a long time?' Abigail doesn't quite understand, but she pretends she does.

'A very long time.'

'Older than old people?'

'Older than our worlds. Petrified wood is a fossil like dinosaur bones.'

'Where does this stump come from?'

'We imported it from Zimbabwe.'

'But if it's buried, how did people see it?'

'Erosion probably exposed it.'

'But why is it so shiny on the one side?'

'I polished it up to show off the colours.'

‘What colours does it come in?’

‘Depending on the minerals, petrified wood can appear in a smorgasbord of colours.’

‘Like people?’ She remembers Miss Millie explaining the big word a few days ago.

Miss Millie smiles and kisses Abigail on her forehead in agreement.

The inner indent of the baked bean-shaped head looks like a mouth open in a scream or gasp for oxygen. There are dots of stumpy teeth along the concave side and black splodges for the things Abigail assumes are eyes because they’re in the right place for eyes. There’s no neck and the head – like a Barbie’s head that has come off and been pushed back on in a way that takes away the neck – touches the slouching shoulders of a genderless, hairless wraith. There are no fingers on the hands – maybe they’re clenched fists – and no toes on feet that lose form in paint. Abigail has the greatest aversion for this image out of all the plates. The wraith’s shape floats within two outlines of matryoshka nesting dolls, trapping the embryonic figure inside one and then another body. ‘It’s dark in here....’ says a bubble that bumps up against the womb of the closest figure surrounding it. The plate is cracked; she broke it earlier in a way that has decapitated the bean from body. Somehow she will have to repaint this image on another plate to avoid telling the painter the truth. She gives the image a name. *Petrified*.

It’s foggy in her head and Abigail is aware of dry-ice pain, which takes over like the wind in a tree that has no choice but to move with the breeze when it arrives. To surrender its tall stillness for life. Embedded layers are blotting out everything except the broken image, *Petrified*, to which she clings inside the roaring prism because it is a pain she can see, from a distance, so it’s not hers. When the jaws let go for a moment, she lifts away without substance to hide, but she knows it will return to find her. And when it does, it will pull her away from safety to rip into her body with bloodied fangs.

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Miss Millie tells Abigail that Zoë will be joining them for Sunday lunch at her parent's house in Constantia. Abigail is pleased – she'll be able to see her father – until Miss Millie tells her Zoë is bringing her son.

'I didn't know Miss Zoë had a son?'

'Yes, she doesn't see him often or speak of him much.'

'Then why is he coming?'

'She hasn't spent time with him for a while now and wants him to meet us. He's on holiday and he's staying with her this time.'

'But why? Why must he meet us?'

'Because we're special to Zoë and she wants him to know and share this.' Miss Millie is watering her garden with a hosepipe.

'But I don't want to meet him.'

'Why?' She turns to glance at Abigail.

'Because he'll be horrible to me.' Master Marcel's eyes drop into her memories like paratroopers.

'Not every white child is going to be horrible to you, Abigail.'

Abigail is so excited she's been allowed to come with Mama to a church fête. Even though she must stay with Mama, who has to wash dishes in the kitchen, it doesn't matter. Mama is happy because she believes work is a medicine for poverty. Mama is so pretty too and Abigail likes holding her hand. But Mama doesn't want to hold hands while she's washing cups and tells Abigail to go and play outside with the doll.

She sits on the steps of the big building where white people go in to pray on Sundays. She cradles *Doli* in a way she likes to get love and tries to brush its hair. 'What's your name? *Wat is jou naam?*' A white girl with a painted face is standing in front of her and Abigail is so shy, she says nothing. The girl has dark hair in plaits.

'Do you want me to clean her? *Moet ek haar skoon maak?*' Again she says nothing.

'Where is your Mommy? *Waar is jou Ma?*' Abigail looks towards the kitchen where Mama is washing cups.

'Do you want to come and see the puppets?' The girl points towards a box and a group of children around it. Abigail nods, puts *Doli* on a step, and takes the girl's outstretched hand. The girl smells nice and leaves glitter on Abigail's fingers. 'You'd better not leave her there.'

Someone will take her.’ The girl lifts the doll by its stomach. ‘Is your dolly new?’ Abigail picks her nose and pulls out what is in there. ‘Sis! Where are you going to wipe your snarlies?’ Abigail thinks this girl is funny and drags her finger down her shirt.

‘Mia! MIA!’ The girl looks around at the sound and continues leading Abigail by the hand towards the puppets. Suddenly there is a *Gogo* spitting with fire into their faces.

‘Where are you taking this child?’

‘To the puppets.’ The girl answers and Abigail gets scared.

‘You cannot do that!’

‘Why? She’s my new friend and I want to show her the puppets.’

‘This girl is not your friend! Where did you find her?’

‘On the church steps where I w —’

‘Take her back there! Now!’

‘Why?’

‘Mia, don’t push me. I’m not going to tell you again. Take her back there now! You don’t know who’s she been with and what diseases she has. She’s not even supposed to be here!’

‘But she’s a little girl.’

‘She’s not like you. Where did she get that doll?’

Abigail lowers her eyes and stands closely to the girl called Mia. ‘It was a present to her because it’s her birthday today.’ Abigail doesn’t know that today is her birthday, but again she keeps quiet.

‘She probably stole it from the Sunday School.’

‘We don’t have such ugly dolls there.’

‘Take her back.’

Sitting on the steps wondering why the *Gogo* was so mad, Abigail sees the girl returning. She wants to run to Mama, but the girl gives Abigail some food as well as clothes for her doll. And tissues. And a jersey. She puts a finger on her lips for Abigail to be quiet. But when she runs back to Mama in the kitchen she shouts: ‘Mama! Mama!’ ‘Priti! Control your daughter please. She’ll break something. She shouldn’t be in here in the first place.’ The old grandmother from earlier puts her face close to Abigail’s and snatches the jersey from her hands. ‘Especially when she steals.’ Abigail hopes she never has stinky air coming out of her mouth, like this woman.

The puppet painted on the plate is smiling. It is the unoccupied smile of a lifeless object only able to move when the hands above it tweak and twitch the strings. It is a slouching invertebrate. Words on the piece of wood to which the strings are attached say *Wildlife ahead. Beware!* One side of the puppet's face is that of a hyena. It has an axe in its head. Anger and creativity fall along the same continuum.

Abigail sits on the paving around the swimming pool, her bare feet resting in the water on the square, blue mosaic steps, which remind her of the shower floor. Under the water towards the deep-end, two matching mosaic dolphins arch brightly against the whiteness. She wonders how it would feel to spring into the sky from the diving board. She hears Miss Zoë arriving and looks up to see her walking through the back door towards the pool. She is wearing a cream sarong and no shoes. She has had her hair cut into a short style that sticks to her head and cheeks in curly tufts. She is followed by a teenage boy whose hair is almost touching his shoulders. He slouches and wears a tight T-shirt and shorts. He is chewing gum and Abigail believes he thinks he looks cool in his sunglasses. Miss Millie is leading them towards the pool.

‘Abigail, this is Lyndal. Lyndal, this is Abigail.’

‘Hi.’ He stretches over to shake her hand.

‘Hi.’ She is suddenly shy. A white boy has never shaken her hand before and shown such good manners. Perhaps it is because the grown-ups are still watching.

‘Hello, darling.’ Miss Zoë's round face crinkles as her flecked eyes smile at Abigail. Abigail sees Miss Zoë's son has one of his mother's crooked incisors. ‘What's the water like?’

‘Quite warm.’ Abigail can't keep her eyes away from Lyndal, who is taking off his shirt and glasses to dive into the water. His body is tight and tanned. The adults shriek as the spray splashes them and run inside. Abigail stays where she is, fascinated, waiting for him to stop propelling himself through the waves. He stands up. ‘I'm walking on the moon!’ he laughs, as he takes big bouncy steps in his flip-flops towards her in the water.

On the diving board, he informs her that he's the new president of the country. He holds an arm in the air, a salute of power, and somersaults into the depths of the pool. Abigail lunges underwater to see him surrounded by an explosion of bubbles, almost as if he's caught in a giant soda water-making machine. After the bubbles disappear, he appears blurry, as if she's looking through Miss Millie's misted-up goggles. She likes the silence

under the surface, especially because nothing is still. Water fills her ears, nostrils, mouth and then she stiffens her spine and lifts her bum to let herself float above the waves. She is proud that she isn't swimming with water wings anymore. She's a big girl now. Seven years old. She does an underwater handstand, showing off, and then he asks her if she wants to jump from the board. He watches her from two people's eyes. She says yes.

What Abigail loves about swimming is the isolation, especially when she drifts on her back, watching the life in the sky above her, her head filled with liquid. But when she climbs up onto the board, she feels like everyone is watching, even the grown-ups through the dusty lace curtains inside. 'Jump!' Lyndal climbs out of the pool and runs around to where she is hesitating. 'Jump!' Her mistake is that she turns to look at him. So when she smacks her face on the bottom of the pool, she wonders why she didn't realise how shallow the pool actually was.

On the way to the hospital, Lyndal tells her not to worry, be happy. When she doesn't smile, he tells her about other music he likes. Have you heard Kylie Minogue's *Locomotion*? Or Inner City's *Good Life*? *She Drives Me Crazy* by the Fine Young Cannibals? You must have heard A-HA's *The Blood That Moves The Body*? She turns her squashed bleeding face into Miss Millie's chest, away from his eyes. Those eyes.

'Have you seen *Top Gun* with Tom Cruise?' She hasn't. 'I've got sunglasses like him.'

'Have you seen *Batman*?' No.

'Have you seen *Lethal Weapon II*?' No.

'What about *Crocodile Dundee II*?' Uh-huh.

'*Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*?' No.

'Do you watch *The Cosby Show*?' Yes.

'*America's Funniest Home Videos*?' Sometimes.

'*The Wonder Years*?' Yes.

'*Cheers*?' No.

'Lyndal, be quiet.' Miss Zoë's creamy voice is sour, as she tries to wipe more blood from Abigail's face with a towel.

The doctor says she has a broken nose and only then she cries, because how will she breathe without a nose? And smell? And then she imagines her face without a nose and she cries even harder. When she looks in the mirror in Miss Millie's eye-make-up case,

a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle looks back at her with a big bandage plaster on its face. Lyndal has to say he's sorry. Abigail asks where her Pa is. Miss Millic says she doesn't know.

The image is painted over a faded pictograph. The artist has tried to turn the plate into a rock face, she thinks. She recalls Julia telling her that the medium always contributes to the meaning of an image. It is true in this instance because somehow the paint seeps through the cracks and irregularities in imaginary rock. The figure's head is bent under the rim of the plate and the weight of a nose bleed. It is a male (he has a huge erect penis) and he seems to shimmer and lift off the plate in a hallucination of magnified detail. The plate has become an animated screen of visualisation and Abigail wonders at the image of a kudu behind the foreground and also what this artist saw behind the veil of the plate. From what she knows of San rock art, their paint had its own power, mixed with the blood of freshly killed eland and ochre, among other ingredients and pigments. History brings to the image a depth and a manipulation of resources.

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Lyndal is in love. With a girl called Fay. He tells her that Fay means fairy and Abigail imagines a miniature girl with sparkly hair, dewdrop eyes, silk-spun wings, arched ballet shoes and clothes made of flower petals. A girl that can sit in the palm of his hand, twinkling. A girl that is tiny enough to live in his heart, curled up in the ventricles, using the valves as trampolines and climbing through the aorta. She has been learning about the heart this year at her new school and closes her fist. It is about that size, the size of a clenched fist. And why would she want his heart? It's only a pump.

'What are you going to do next year now that you've finished school?' Abigail is not even in high school yet and Lyndal must feel like Nelson Mandela when he was released from prison three years ago. Although Lyndal wasn't in school for 27 years. 'Be famous.' He laughs. 'Seriously, I'd like to be a press photographer.' 'And what will you take pictures of?'

'The news. You know, like when Mandela and De Klerk accepted their joint Nobel Peace Prize a few days ago.'

'So you'll meet famous people?'

'Maybe, but I'll get to photograph them. That's if my matric results are okay. I'm still waiting to hear that I'm officially finished.'

'Just like apartheid's now officially finished?'

'That's what they say.'

'What do you mean?'

'Not everyone believes that in their hearts.'

That pump again, pumping life into the country. Or maybe not.

'I'll *do anything for love*. . . you know, like the Meat Loaf song.' He smiles at her and inside the beats get faster. They are sitting in Miss Millie's lounge, watching *Jurassic Park* on video. Miss Millie and Zoë have gone Christmas shopping.

'Does she know?'

'Yes.'

'So are you girlfriend and boyfriend?'

'Not yet.'

'Why?'

'She's only allowed to go out with a boy when she's sixteen.'

'How old is she?'

'Thirteen.'

'Are you going to wait?'

'No.'

Abigail looks up at him.

'I'm going to speak to her parents. Negotiations worked for the country. Surely they'll work for me too.'

The dolphin, which has been mauled apart into heart-shaped halves, is gunmetal blue. It has been painted badly, Abigail thinks, but it has a terrible beauty. She doesn't think the plates at the studio are an attempt for the artist to see his or herself, but rather to see how a specific image, another way of looking at familiarity, can reconfigure something torn within the artist. Julia once said to her, in her view, she would worry less about trauma

victims painting dead children, men with dripping knives, burning houses, explosions or people being shot than she would those painting pretty flowers, cloudless skies and happy suns. Worlds that are beautiful masquerades of grim realities. This artist paints the insides of a dying dolphin ripped apart by love. Abigail wonders whether it is beautiful or grim.

The wooden floorboards creak as he steps into the room and Abigail halts her salutation to the sun. She is wearing tight underpants and a bikini top, as she always does when she practises yoga in her room. She tips forward onto her toes, knees to her chest, and assesses him.

'Don't move. I want to take your photograph. Like that. Just like that. Will you wait for me to fetch my camera? It's in the lounge.' He doesn't pause for her answer and she stays motionless on her mat until he returns.

'Why do you want to photograph me?'

'You're so beautiful like that. So earthy and natural.'

'Will it take long?' She swallows.

'No... um ... no. It shouldn't.' He swallows.

She slips off her clothes and throws the items atop the bed. Naked, she feels proud, confident and sensual. She wants him to see her. To really see her. But with his own eyes, not the eye of the camera. 'Okay. Take me.' She looks at him directly, but his fingers turn her chin to face towards the light, away from him. And he takes her photograph.

Her room is restrained in neutral colours – pearl, spring water, incense smoke, oats, oyster shells – but free in its lighting, which is what she thinks appeals to Lyndal. He loves the texture of her ribbed velvet straw-coloured duvet and she lies against it for him, the sleekness of her skin complementing its unevenness. She peers from behind her wooden slatted headboard, her eyes bright. She curls on her side within the arch of her bay window, the curtains slapping her thighs with the outside breeze. She plays the role he wants her to play, changing it when he asks, listening to him. He has stopped smiling and so has she. He hasn't asked it of her. The flash blinds her again and again, but she doesn't need to see beyond this moment where she has enthralled him to stay. She doesn't blink anymore. She tries not to breathe.

He puts down the camera on her desk. 'You were great, thank you.' She smiles. She has no words to enhance this experience.

'You need a name more unobserved. Like Abby.'

She moves towards him and kisses him gently on his lips. 'I love you, Lyndal.'

He steps back, knocking a paper mâché figurine on her desk to the ground. 'This is my fault,' he says, picking it up. 'I'm so sorry.'

She knows he isn't speaking about his accident, but about hers. 'I know you love elsewhere. I'm not asking for anything from you. You've always been very kind to me and a great friend.'

'You've been the sister I never had.' He speaks with words used by so many before and therefore safe, she thinks.

Abigail sits on the bed and reaches for some clothes. She is feeling unexpectedly exposed and vulnerable. She pulls a shirt over her head. '... Something married in ... weeks.... Something. First to know.' She hasn't heard him properly and asks him to repeat his statement.

'I'm getting married in a few weeks. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision. I just wanted you to be the first to know.'

'You've always loved Fay.'

'Yes, but I'm marrying her sister.'

She hears his laugh, briefly, and is comforted because he must be near. It is a low, deep sound. Like falling boulders, which have trapped her beneath them. It's difficult to breathe, and agonising, because it feels as if air is leaking out of her body. Slowly, but consistently, it goes, until she's a collapsed camping mattress. And then she has to take, or rather make, another breath. She wishes she could take a photographic breath with the slight twitch of a finger. How easy that would be. But until then, she is a prisoner of pain in the images she keeps in her mind.

.....

Pa is not happy when he comes home from work with a sore arm. When Mama asks him what happened, he says a child bit him. Mama asks if he went to the doctor and he says he did that's why he's wearing a bandage. Mama asks why the child bit him. She stops stirring

in the pot. He looks at Abigail and tells her to go and sit on the steps outside while he speaks with Mama. They both look at her, waiting. They close the door behind her. They speak softly so she will not hear. Wise men only talk about secrets to their hearts. Mama told her that once. Mama must be his heart.

The house they are standing outside is painted the colour of elephant tusks, but it has smears of mud from the rain on the walls. Where she lives, many families would fill this house. The lawn has patches on it and her father says it is because the lawnmower cut too close. In Daveyton, they don't have lawnmowers and she can't imagine what a machine with teeth looks like. Mama and Pa don't tell her why they're standing outside the house and so she stares at the tree near the door. Pa says it's a lemon tree. The curtain moves inside, but that is all, and the bared teeth and snapping barks of the neighbours' dogs make her cling. She doesn't know why they are here in the road, watching someone else's house. There is no car in the driveway so Pa says she's not there. Who? The woman he's come to see. He holds an envelope in his hand.

No-one arrives. If there are people inside, they don't want to invite them in. Abigail feels ignored and locked out. The fence is rusty and a plant with wilted leaves covers the side gate. The postbox is dirty and rolled up papers, soggy after the rain, have been pushed into its mouth. Mama says they cannot stay here for long because people will think they are *tsotsis* or *skollies*, lurking on street corners with idleness in their hands and bad thoughts in their heads. Pa looks at her for a long time, takes Abigail's hand and starts walking away. On the way home he tells them that they are moving to Cape Town. Mama cries and shouts and says no, she wants to make things happen in *eGoli*, the place of gold. He tells Mama she can stay behind.

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The night before his wedding, Lyndal arrives. They are getting married on Boulders Beach, the bride's choice, because that is where he proposed. Miss Millie – Abigail still can't get out of the habit of prefixing the name – pours him a beer, which he puts back on the

kitchen counter. 'Can I chat with you for a sec, Abby?' He takes her by the hand. 'There's something I want to show you.'

'What is it, Lyn?' Miss Millie's curiosity thrives on details.

'I need Abby's opinion.' He grins, drags his hands through his hair, lifts up his rucksack and pulls Abby away from the kitchen towards her bedroom for privacy. She hopes he can't hear her heartbeat thumping in her ears.

'Are you nervous?' She sits on her bed on her hands so she won't fiddle with her cuticles in anxiousness. Her legs swing.

'Yes.' He sits next to her.

'Do you still wish it were Fay? Tell me honestly.'

He doesn't answer, but opens his bag and takes out a photograph. It is of Fay, getting dressed and wearing only a gypsy skirt, her hair falling over her face. It is striking, more so than the woman, because its beauty lies in his adoration. 'I took it a couple of days ago.'

She says nothing. She can't ask him why he did it. She knows, but she doesn't want to hear his reply. The photograph answers, but if he says it, his words will steal the magic away from her photo session with him. 'Delfine doesn't know.'

'Why are you showing me this?'

'Because you understand.'

'Understand what?'

'What it is to love...'

'And not have it returned, you mean? At least in that way.' She looks into his eyes and he doesn't flinch.

'It was a goodbye.'

'The photograph or that you slept with her?'

'What makes you say that?' He doesn't deny it.

'It foregrounds the photograph.'

'I've got yours here too...'

He takes a manila envelope out of his bag.
'I'm not sure I want to see them.'

'Why? They're gorgeous.' He bends down and starts placing them on the floor in a pattern that supports the central photograph, the one on her haunches, his favourite. He covers her rug with little Abigails, but they look nothing like her. She doesn't like them because while the lighting around and inside her is ethereal, there is no shimmer, as with Fay's

photograph. His love cloaks Fay. But in these photographs, she is only a subject. A theme. A field of study. Someone owing obedience. Fay is an object. An object of desire. To touch. To direct an emotion or feeling. His purpose.

‘What’s going on in here?’ Miss Millie stands in the open doorway. They probably didn’t close the door until it clicked. They certainly never noticed when the breeze blew it ajar. ‘What are those?’

‘Just some photographs I wanted to show Abby.’ Lyndal appears awkward to Abigail because she knows him, but he looks at Miss Millie with what comes across as confidence. Miss Millie moves into the room, bends and lifts up a photograph. Abigail quickly starts picking up the others. ‘This is you, Abigail.’ They say nothing, as she peers at the image more closely. ‘My God! This IS you, Abigail!’ She looks up at them.

‘It’s not what you’re thinking.’ Lyndal speaks with a voice like kicked pebbles and pulls at the leather thong around his neck.

‘And what AM I thinking?’ Miss Millie is shouting now and Miss Zoë follows her down the passage.

‘What’s going on here?’

‘Your son has taken nude photographs of my daughter.’ Abigail is shocked. Miss Millie has never referred to her as a daughter before.

‘Lyn?’ His mother looks at him, ignoring Abigail.

‘Yes.’ He agrees with Miss Millie and answers Miss Zoë with one word.

‘You bastard!’ Miss Millie lunges for him, but Miss Zoë holds her back, close to her.

‘Instead of calling my son names, surely you should ask Abigail what’s going on here.’ Miss Zoë’s voice is lumpy and curdled and dreadful.

‘This isn’t Abigail’s fault!’ Miss Millie hisses at Miss Zoë, trying to get free from her clasp.

‘How could you even think that?’

‘How do you know Abigail didn’t invite him to do this? It’s as clear as day she has feelings for him.’

Miss Millie quietens as soon as the words coagulate in the air. ‘Get out of my home you cold, callous bitch and take your bastard son with you. And before you judge my daughter by your standards, perhaps you’d better tell your son that the man he calls father had nothing to do with his conception.’

Hands up! The swollen finger wears an engagement ring with a disproportionately sized diamond, which dominates the image with its size. The ring, which has strangled the blue digit, has separated the finger from the rest of the hand. The plate has a mosaic rim and takes Abigail prisoner, entrapping her with its mystery of chipped gems. The finger is the blue of lips without oxygen. They never did attend the wedding. Lyndal's.

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Her father is walking with an old upturned hockey stick to support his bad back and he sits slowly on the chair in his room. 'Are you happy?' His sack eyes watch her.

'Yes, Miss Millie is nice to me. Are you happy here?'

'Ja man. They is very good to me.'

'Are. Are very good to you.'

'Don't be all posh with your Pa.'

'I'm not Pa.' But she feels posh, with her new lime green tiered skirt and its matching T-shirt.

'What was your Pa like?' She never met her grandparents and Pa doesn't talk about them.

'He was a good man.'

'Where did he stay?'

'The mines.'

'Which mines?'

'Out there in Benoni.'

'What did he look like?'

Pa thinks for a while and tells her to go and find his special shoebox. She understands what he means because she used to have one too, but she buried the squirrel in it a few years ago. She knows it's under his bed and she's careful not to dirty her skirt when she kneels to reach for it. When she gives it to Pa, he opens the lid and lifts out an old envelope from where he takes out a picture of her grandfather. It is a pencil sketch of a man who looks like a king. 'His name was Royal. Royal Nkabinde. That was your grandfather and my father.' The man stares out of the image proudly, as if he's doing them a favour.

'Who drew this?'

'Your grandmother.'

'Do you have a picture of her?'

'No.'

'Why don't you have a picture?'

He tells her he has to get back to work and that it's time for her to go home.

She picks up a plate that hasn't been fired in the kiln yet. Somehow it must have been left behind when the others were put in. It is a simple line drawing, almost like a sketch, of a side profile of a hairless head. The lips are pursed – not in a kiss, but due to the artist's limitations in terms of drawing lips – and one eye looks forward inside the plate. A red slash is drawn down the side of the profile like a scratch, making space for another eye and pair of lips on the same head to look forward, instead of sideways and out of the plate. The expressions are trapped in a profile that is unwilling to yield anything from the glaze.

It's as if she's going on a virtual reality tour through her wound and its dimensions. She can see the bullet itself hasn't necessarily done all the damage. On its ragged trajectory, it has torn into and burnt her flesh, also managing to shatter bone. Splinters have cut into her muscles and organs and nerve fibres. The flow dynamics of her blood in and around the wound are different, but she doesn't know how. The most potent wounding characteristic of a projectile is its kinetic energy, they say. The energy possessed by an object as a result of its motion.

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They meet in secret, away from their mothers, at Melissa's in Kloof Street. He sips coffee, while she slides her spoon against the melting chocolate on the sides of her glass. 'I don't know how you can drink that stuff. It's so sweet.' He pulls apart a spinach and feta muffin, offering her some of the crust. She shakes her head no. It's too intimate and his wedding band is dull against his finger.

'I enjoy hot chocolate.'

A man with low-slung jeans showing underpants walks outside on the pavement and she sees him through the writing on the window. The door is held open with a brick to let in a breeze and as the man sees a young woman crossing the street, he waves at her. She ignores him and hails a taxi. *Ju man!* He shouts at her. *Eke sal jou 'n poesklap gee!*

'Why don't you have an accent like that?' He is amused at the shouted lewdness.

'What type of question is that?'

'An honest one.'

'Miss Millie.'

'Why don't you call her Millie or Mom. Why the miss?'

'I'm so used to it and I still respect her, even after that.'

'Does she ever speak about it?'

'No, but as you know, they must have, cause they're back together again.'

'I know, but since they're both distant with me, I think they've decided I was the one out of line. Was I?'

'No.' She looks down at his fingers ripping apart the muffin and squashing crumbs together to put into his mouth. He licks his fingers each time he does so. She finds herself staring at his mouth and looks down at her empty hands. One of her fingers is smeared with chocolate and she wipes it off with a serviette. She doesn't want to lick it off in front of him.

He says nothing, only smiles, and they watch as a woman with two young girls tinkle into the shop to buy a cake and a posy of fresh-cut flowers.

'I'm moving to Joburg.' She blurts out.

'Why?' He seems taken aback.

'I want to spend more time with my mother and there are opportunities there.'

'Sure, but there're opportunities here too.'

'But Joburg is more integrated.'

'What will you do?'

'Miss Millie has a friend who owns a paint studio near the old gasworks in Milpark. She's happy for me to help out. And I want to get some experience as a living statue.'

'Why?'

'It's good training.'

'For what?'

'Immersion in a role. Willpower. Mime skills. Suppression of my own life. Acting. To help with my yoga; the moving into stillness. The concept that it's only when you stop moving that people notice you.'

'I notice you.'

'Maybe it's not about me.' She sips her drink. 'Maybe it's about people who ride roller coasters and never scream.'

'Are you happy, without Fay? With Delfine?'

'It's like Ching Chong Cha. One day I'm the rock. Then I'm being covered by paper. And then I'm paper. I get cut up by the scissors. The next week, I'm the scissors. Anyway, such is life. How are you going to develop a sustainable cash flow by being a human statue?'

'A living statue.'

'What's the difference?'

'Too many humans are like the living dead. This isn't like that. It's about suppressing life outwardly. Inwardly you're very much alive.'

'But how can you stand so still for hours?'

'I meditate.'

'Why do you think stillness fascinates people?'

'I actually think it's about the movement. You know when you suddenly surprise them with a mechanical motion when they're not expecting it. The stillness draws them there, but the potential of movement keeps them there. It's like Miss Millie's garden statue. Visitors disregard it when she switches off the pump, but when water dribbles out of the eagle's beak, they usually admire it.'

'So I should dribble coffee out of my mouth...?' He makes to do so. She laughs. 'It's good to hear your laugh again,' he smiles through his eyes. 'But I never knew you were fascinated with the stillness of statues.'

She looks outside into the street at the man who shouted earlier sitting on a kerb, drinking from a bottle. 'It's also the stillness of expectations.'

'Does it bother you what Miss Millie said about your father?'

'Fatherhood is not only a genetic signature.'

'I can understand that.' She thinks of Miss Millie. 'Does he know?'

'No, but it doesn't matter. I'll always be his son.'

'Aren't you in the least bit curious about your biological father?'

'No. The man I call father is the only man I want to know as my real father.'

'When are you seeing him again?'

'Next month. He wants me to spend more time with him on the reserve. To take over from him one day.'

'How does that make you feel?'

'Torn. I mean I love photography and I love – your word – the stillness of the bush. But there's Delfine...'

'She's not interested?'

'No. The stillness is too loud for her.'

The plate is covered in war paint, she thinks, because it has been made to seem terrifying, as if it's preparing to enter a dispute. Or overcome a rival. Either alternative would be appropriate. The outline over blotches of combat colour is simple. It is a singing swan. A swan song: The song said to be sung by a dying swan. Or the last work or appearance of a poet, composer or actor. At least that's what Miss Millie taught her.

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Abigail sits at a low desk (for the children) in the studio as the crowd gathers at the bar next door. Maggie leans over her to put down a tray of colours and a collection of paintbrushes.

'I feel like I'm about to write an exam. What are you still doing here anyway? You should be at home getting ready for your baby.'

'Shawn's picking me up in about half an hour. I'm not driving anymore until after the birth.'

'Where do I start?'

'Start in the womb with the head, then the bubble, then the outlines.'

'Yes, but this means something to the artist. I don't share the meaning.'

'Why would you want to be mad?'

'You don't know that the artist's crazy.'

'Who paints a thing like this?'

'Someone who's carrying a lot of pain inside.'

'Abigail. Look. Don't romanticise the frigging thing. Just repaint it so the artist will never know the difference. Don't try to understand it. Just get it done.'

She starts with the two embedded outlines that trap the petrified figure inside their bodies. It's the context, she feels, and the place to start developing the replica. Her hand is shaking with the strain, but she persists from there to the head and its open mouth with dots of teeth. She tries to keep the paint watery, traceless, as she works on the wraith, clenched fists and disintegration of limbs. The bubble – 'It's dark in here....' – is the final thing she includes. To her eyes, it seems vastly different from the original and she wonders whether to paint something more positive on the plate for the artist, whom they'll have to tell the truth. There's no way the artist will believe this is the original plate. 'Maggie. What do you think?'

But Maggie doesn't answer. She is doubled over, clutching her stomach, watching colourless fluid run down her legs onto the floor.

The City of Johannesburg has acknowledged Mahatma Gandhi's birthday by unveiling a bronze statue of him in Gandhi Square in the city centre. Abigail loves it. She sees him as a young lawyer in a suit and cloak blown open by the wind, with a book under his arm, looking forward away from racial indignities towards civil rights for all. She wonders if the statue has captured him in a pose of non-violent passive resistance, which he called *satyagraha*, or one where he is testing the outermost limits. An alarm is apparently fitted inside the statue to prevent theft. Any movement, any vibration, will be detected and a signal sent to alert a security company. She wonders if sound waves would activate the alarm.

The eighth plate is blank and white. The only thing the artist has done to it is to glaze it. A blank cartridge. A blank cheque. Blank verse. To draw a blank. To test the outermost limits through passive resistance. She waits for the alarm to go off.

Alone in the studio – Shawn arrived and took Maggie away to have their child – Abigail takes an unpainted plate from the stock in the cupboard and sits down again. She stares at its chalky roughness for a while, before lifting up her pencil. She'll draw her image first as a dress rehearsal, adjust it and then fill it in with colour. Outside voices and laughter and

clinking glasses shape the evening. She sketches well and when she's finished painting, she smiles. She puts her plate next to the repainted offering to wait for the kiln.

When she was small, she once saw a documentary on how animation worked. It still amazes her how sequences of still images can be arranged in a way that rapid viewing creates the illusion of movement. She sees herself now on many separate pages in different positions and as the wind blows through the pages, she becomes a real person living her life. Life is full of animated sequences, but not for her now. At the moment she is caught in a single frame that has been cut out of a cycle and dropped onto the floor under the editor's desk, just missing the dustbin. She's been caught in a single position and has no way out. Pain doesn't turn pages.

Lady of the Lake

'Those who have high thoughts are ever striving; they are not happy to remain in the same place. Like swans that leave their lake and rise into the air, they leave their home and fly for a higher home.' – *Dhammapada*

PREM is waiting for her at a café in the Lakeside Mall, which is where, according to Granny Cecilia, a police camp was set up during the 1922 strikes in Benoni. Upon her approach along Tom Jones Street, she admires the façade of the mall, the Lakeside Queen, which sails on Benoni's central lake, reminding her of a New Orleans steamer. It has always been known as a city of lakes, Benoni. It probably explains why she sees Granny Cecilia as the Arthurian Lady of the Lake. But never as her Lady Luck.

He is spooning his way through a cappuccino when she puts her bag down next to a chair and sits. 'Sorry I'm a bit late. I got held up with my grandmother.' He doesn't look up. 'How are you doing?'

He lifts his head and stares at her with eyes of coal. 'I'm feeling fantastic,' he snaps. She is expecting this, but is determined to remain civil and calm. 'I'm sorry you feel that way.'

'Like hell you are.'

'Prem, I didn't mean for any of this to happen.' She glances at the menu card, chooses something to drink and signals to a waiter. 'One latté, please.'

'I don't care what your intentions were. The point is you betrayed me. You betrayed us. You fucked someone else.' He presents his question as a fact.

'Yes, I did.'

He looks surprised, as if he wasn't expecting her to admit to it or to be truthful about her actions. 'So what are you going to do about it?' His voice drags low like a plastic packet caught and pulled under a car.

'What do you mean?' She is just as astonished at her admission.

'How are you going to make it up to me?' He sits in the power seat now and he switches over automatically into an affable mood. She can see how it changes the light in his eyes. She takes off her ring and holds it out to him. He stares at it between her fingers. 'And what must I do with it?' He smiles. 'Get my nipple pierced?'

‘That’s your choice.’

‘Mia, you don’t have to be so extreme. I just want to know how you’re going to make it up to me so we can carry on as we were. Nice gesture though.’ His voice has now been driven over by the car and left behind on the tar, ripped into shreds.

‘What are you saying?’ She almost can’t believe what she’s hearing.

‘I know you’re freaking out at the thought of spending the rest of your life with one person and I understand how you obviously needed to have one last wild fling. It’s perfectly natural.’ He closes her fingers around the ring, pushing it deep inside her palm and she waits for it to cut into her. ‘But I can move past your mistake if you just make it up to me.’

‘How can you move past it? It must be over!’ She leans forward so she can let her words hit into his face like little slaps.

‘We’ll spend a few weeks apart – you remain in the townhouse and I’ll stay with my mother to give myself some time and space to forgive you. And then just make it up to me. We don’t have to end our engagement, Beetle.’

‘I broke my promise.’

‘What promise was that?’

‘That I would continue to be true to you in preparation for a life together.’ Her latté arrives. ‘Thank you.’

‘I know. You stuffed up. Big time. But, as I’ve been saying, I’m prepared to overlook all that and move forward. These things happen.’ He smiles at her like she’s been a very naughty little girl who must stand in the corner until he tells her she can play again. She feels the goose bumps prickling before she notices them. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Beetle, shit happens.’

‘No. I don’t understand’ Her stomach clenches in preparation to revolt. ‘Are you saying that you are okay with me being unfaithful ... so long as I make it up to you ...?’

‘Du-uh!’ He smiles and she notices he has chipped a front tooth. ‘That’s what I said! Can we move on now and talk about nicer things?’ He runs his tongue over his tooth, as if he’s still acclimatising to the new feel of it in his mouth.

‘You’ve been unfaithful too.’ The realisation starts to crystallise and take shape.

‘... Yes ...’ he sips his coffee. ‘But it was a while ago. It can hardly count anymore.’

‘How did you make it up to me?’ She pretends to play by his rules.

'I took you to Spain.'

In her mind, Mia sees her grandmother moving aimlessly, pulling her along behind her. She wants to believe there's a lagoon in the lowest part of the depression, but it's only Lake Disappointment. And when the lakes freeze over and Granny Cecilia skates on ice, Mia always falls through when it cracks. Only ice-breakers can navigate through the ice ages in her heart and sometimes not even them. But today it is Prem who has a frozen heart. Somehow she finds the time to contemplate taking up water-skiing at The Lakes Hotel, which is situated along the banks of what they refer to as Benoni's Swan Lake, so she can improve her skill in terms of negotiating ramps that rise out of water to block her way.

She almost wants to ask who it was, but at the same time she doesn't want to know. She sips her drink slowly, letting the warmth circulate in her mouth for as long as possible. 'So you see,' he is saying. 'We can move past this.'

'No,' she insists. 'There's no way we can.'

'We have already.'

'No, we haven't. You never gave me the choice.'

'You mean I was more discreet than you.'

'I was going to tell you. You've never told me.'

'I've told you now.'

'Only because of what you saw at the airport. You had no intention of saying anything. And what were you doing at the airport anyway?'

'My mother needed to pick up a friend arriving from Durban. I went along to help and boy did I pick up more than I bargained for.'

'I'm sorry you saw what you did.'

'I'm not. I've always wanted to play a role in a soapie.' He sighs vividly for effect. Instead of being amused by him, as she would have been in the past, she is disgusted.

'I've got to go.' She coils a banknote through her engagement ring. It has become too ostentatious for her liking and she puts it on the table with the money.

'Will I see you back at home?' He pulls the note out of the ring, which he pushes back to her.

'I think it's best you wait – '

‘Of course, the separation thing. I’ll see you in a few weeks?’ He grins indulgently.
‘I’ll start packing tonight. You can have your place back next week.’
‘Mia, don’t do anything drastic. Look, I need about a month to cool off. And besides, where else are you going to go? To your grandmother’s?’ He has her then and he knows it.
‘Beetle,’ he says, enjoying his game and sliding the ring back on her finger, ‘who else is there, but me?’
She fiddles with her hair, insecure, not wanting to believe him, but listening all the same.
‘You shouldn’t wear your hair like that,’ he nods at her hair, which is loose and framing her face. ‘Long hair makes your cheeks look chubby.’
‘I must go.’ She scrapes back her chair and stands up. She can’t take any more of this craziness. She must be out of her mind.
‘Try to get a haircut for when I see you again.’
‘Try to get to the dentist. Your tooth looks dreadful.’ She takes the ring off again and lets it clatter back onto the table.
He frowns, his tongue fondling his teeth. ‘My mother always said you’d be bad news, coming from a family with so many secrets.’
‘What are you talking about?’
He shakes his head. ‘Forget I said that.’
‘You don’t even know what you’re saying!’ She leans over the table to stare him down.
‘You’re mad.’
‘I’m not the one with a grandmother like yours. The lunacy is obviously genetic.’
‘At least I’m not a corpse like you!’
‘Correction. A good-looking corpse like me. You’re just a corpse.’
‘And you’re –’
‘Ma’am, are you done here?’ The waiter is looking embarrassed at her shrillness. She is starting to make a scene judging by the sideways stares coming from other tables.
‘Oh yes, I’m done.’ She stalks away.
‘I’ll see you in a month!’ His laugh is a fire that consumes dry bush.

Next to a woman resembling a foil medusa, Mia sits at the hair salon, her poker face unseeing in the mirror. Her stomach is hollow-tight. Her hands flip through pictures of

funky hairstyles and feisty faces. The symphony of washing, snipping and blow-drying seems louder than usual. She can't wait to get past this ordeal. The air is thick with hot air.

In the black plastic gown, she is just a girl in a chair at a salon and not even her hair serves as a point of differentiation. It has been washed, her scalp massaged and the blue-black tresses combed off her face behind her shoulders. She has been prepped like everyone else. The hairdresser – Lisa – stands behind the chair and lifts the wet hair off Mia's back, holding the weight of it in eager hands. 'What are we doing today?' Lisa waits for an answer.

'I don't know. Perhaps something short.' A maggot of unhappiness bores through her body.

'– isn't that a bit drastic, sweetie? Shouldn't I just trim it to your shoulders first and then you can decide?' Lisa chews gum and Mia sees the masticated lump moving around in her mouth.

'But everyone seems to think long hair doesn't suit me.'

Lisa turns to her, eyebrows raised. She forgets to chew. 'Luvvie, you're gorgeous. Look at yourself in the mirror. You're stunning, doll. Don't listen to everyone else. They're obviously clueless.'

Mia assesses her pale face and large bottle green eyes. Moles. Tight lips. Cheeks of flats and slopes. 'Does it make me look fat?'

'Luvvie, just look at this stomach....' Lisa pulls at the concertina of flesh rolls above her zipped trousers. 'This is fat.'

Mia smiles. She likes Lisa. 'Please just trim it slightly then.'

When she gets up from her chair, she shakes off the bits of hair on the gown to the floor. Glancing at herself in the mirror, her hair swings forward, long and free. She is Mia. A butterfly and a moth.

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She meets Lyndal at the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden set against the eastern slopes of Table Mountain. He has chosen the setting. It is central and striking, as the *pygies* take their spring colours of flamingo pink into the summer. The Agapanthus bloom and as

they wander along the path, he smiles down at her. Fay has gone shopping at Cavendish Square to give them privacy; she's promised to pick Mia up after lunch so they can drive out to Foxy Beach to scatter the ashes.

'It is good to see you again, Mia.'

'It's good to see you too.'

'How did it go with Prem?'

'Not as I expected.'

'How so?'

'I'd rather not speak about it if you don't mind.'

'Why?'

'Because I've been blind for so long. And so senseless.'

'Our world is made up of the seen and the unseen. The spirit of others, people we know or knew and the spirit of faith, influences our own spirits.' He reads aloud at a sculpture called *Mudzima* (Spirit).

'That's beautiful.' She smiles at the sculpture of a curving face with prominent lips and holes for eyes. 'I wish I could take it back with me.'

'Take this back with you.' He bends to kiss her, gently at first, but then he yanks her into his arms and deepens the kiss. She returns it with years of expectations.

'What do you know about springstone?' He touches the fine texture of the artwork.

'Absolutely nothing.'

'Apparently it offers a good resistance to sculptors, I've heard. It also supposedly emerges from the quarry like sculptures already created by nature. They say it's often the source of inspiration as opposed to the artist trying to determine its shape.'

'I love this one!' She pauses next to a bust with a tilted head. *'Be still and listen carefully as the elders tell you of the past. Their wisdom and understanding are an important part of your learning.'*

'Opal stone.'

'How do you know so much about stones and rocks and fossils and stuff?'

'They're my passion. And the notion that nothing natural is inanimate.'

Sitting on a bench, sipping cranberry juice, she feels euphoric in this mystical space. She smiles at Lyndal, taking in his face and his ruggedness. *I love you*, she thinks. 'I love Cape Town,' she says.

‘Come and live with me on the reserve.’

She laughs, stunned. He must be joking. ‘That’s a bolt out of the blue! And what will I do with myself all day?’

He smiles. ‘I’m sure we’ll find something to do.’

She acknowledges his evocative tone with a brief grin. ‘You know what I mean.’ She feels decidedly prim, but she has to know if there’s something solid beneath this glittery veneer. ‘Help me with the marketing. With the media. You said yourself my dealings with the press were shoddy.’

‘Damn right they were!’

‘I’m serious.’

‘About what?’ *Me, please.*

‘My offer.’ He tucks a tendril of hair behind her ear. ‘You’ve got such gorgeous hair.’

‘You’re gorgeous!’ She rests against his shoulder, wanting her decision to be so simple.

‘So you’ll come?’

‘What about my job? I’ve only just started. I haven’t even made an impression yet, good or bad.’

‘Be their Cape correspondent.’

‘It’s not so easy.’

‘Mia, you have no idea how easy it is.’

She stands up. ‘Fay’s probably here. She said to meet her in the car park around about now.’

‘Mia, I’ll pay for your air ticket. Please come. In two weeks! Long-distance relationships are shit. Say yes.’

‘I could never come in two weeks! That’s far too soon!’

‘In the new year then. After the holidays?’

‘I’ll think about it.’ Her cell phone starts to jitter. ‘Fay’s really here.’

She finds the image under her favourite black-and-white photograph, the one that always slips off its cardboard background despite the sticky corners around each tip to keep it still. It is the picture of a woman running up a dune away from the water, her head arched back in what Mia has always believed is a laugh. Her arms fly in the air next to her, as she runs alongside a dog, its ears behind its head in a blur. Looking through Mom’s travel

album again, she sees the photograph has slipped out to reveal another image behind it, one she has never noticed before. It is a colour photograph of a baby girl, with a mouth bubbling in an O of surprise. The baby has tight curls around her coffee face and her deep-set eyes are icing on her face. Her nose believes it's the most important facial feature. Someone has written '1982' neatly in pencil behind the photograph, but nothing else. No name, no place, nothing. The baby is reaching for the person looking at the photograph and Mia wants to stretch into the image to pick her up. Instead, she puts her behind the black-and-white photograph, which she clips back into place. For some reason today, the running woman appears terrified, her arms wild in fright, her mouth, Mia imagines, ripped open by a voiceless scream. The dog's grin has become a rictus of fear. But she only sees ridges of water preparing to break onto the shore behind them. She closes the book on the princess child under the water.

Lyndal has organised for them to spend their one night in the city with him at Zoë and Millie's cottage in Newlands. 'Will the car be okay outside here?' Fay looks sceptical, as Lyndal opens the gate in the wall.

'Just make sure everything's locked and all your valuables are out.' He smiles at them. 'May I help you with those bags?'

'We're quite capable,' Mia remarks, offering Fay her bag from the boot.

'Speak for yourself! Here's mine!' Fay thrusts her things into Lyndal's arms.

'You sure, Mia?' He waits for her answer.

'Go ahead, I'm fine. It's not heavy.' She slings her bag over her shoulder and crunches in the gravel on the pavement towards the house.

Zoë stands at the front door. 'Hello, my boy. Hello, Mia. Hello, Fay.' Mia feels self-conscious as she faces Lyndal's mother for the second time and smiles to hide her anxiousness. He drapes an arm over her shoulders, holding her to him, and she tilts into his strength. Fay steps up to Zoë to kiss her on the cheek and imperceptibly Zoë leans out of the embrace in the way Fay has always pushed her son away. Mia studies Zoë's face, which is uncommunicative. The woman who must be Millie comes up behind her, her hair a tousled bush around her head and ears. Reading glasses are tipped forward onto her nose and she has dimples in her cheeks. She is wearing a floral wrap-around skirt and is

barefoot, her toenails painted badly in ruby. ‘Come in, come in. Don’t just hang around outside.’

They sit at an old farm table. On a runner, Millie has placed long, slim glass vases filled with berries submerged in water, air bubbles collecting on the stalks. Zoë fills wineglasses with Mirin and fetches the stir-fry. ‘This looks delicious.’ Mia smells the Asian aroma appreciatively.

‘Stir-fry with shiitake mushrooms, bok choy and noodles.’ Millie seems to dare anyone to protest.

‘Sounds dee-vine!’ Fay rasps. Zoë glances at her coldly. Lyndal gives his mother a warning look, which Millie picks up, giving it back to him. Mia looks down at her plate. It’s safer.

‘So how are you, Fay?’ Zoë’s smile doesn’t embrace the rest of her face.

‘I’m okay, thanks, although today has been tough.’ Fay breaks a piece of bread from the crusty, crumbling loaf in a basket. Before they came to Cape Town, she changed her hair colour to an almost transparent white and she is wearing a white sundress with thin straps. Her eyes are the only brightness in her face. A startling blue.

‘Why is that?’

‘Fay and Mia scattered Delfine’s ashes.’ Lyndal intercepts to soften Zoë’s tone of voice.

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’ Zoë visibly backs off to retreat into her chair and turns to Millie for comfort. ‘Could you please pass me the water, love?’ Mia tries not to stare too hard at Zoë. She is wearing luxurious satin pants and a loose-fitting linen shirt, all in beige. Her hair is clasped back with clips to stretch out the curls and she has exquisite splashed eyes. Neither of Lyndal’s eyes matches hers. Actually, besides his smile, he has almost nothing of her in his face.

‘How is work, Lyndal?’ Millie adopts Zoë’s tone from earlier. Zoë takes her hand across the table, squeezes it and they share a look.

‘It’s difficult without my Dad, but I’m trying my best, for his sake. I could do with some help.’ His eyes meet Mia’s.

‘What are your plans for the reserve? Do you think you’ll sell it? You’ve mentioned before about wanting to go up into Africa for a while.’

‘No, I won’t sell. It was his legacy. It’s all I have left of him.’

‘Zoë tells me the memorial service was beautiful and that everyone was commenting on, uh, your photographs.’ She seems to be struggling to contain something, Mia thinks.

‘Thank you, Millie.’

There is silence for a while, awkward and companionable, as they eat and sip.

‘How is Abigail, Millie?’ Even the candles seem to flicker at his comment.

‘She is well. Enjoying Joburg and her work at the studio.’

‘Is she an artist?’ Mia interrupts, fascinated.

‘No, she works at a ceramic studio. Kids and corporate groups go there to paint plates.’

‘That sounds like fun,’ says Mia. ‘I’d love to try it.’

‘How are you enjoying your work, Fay?’ Millie tries to draw her into the conversation. Fay has been quiet. Mia has also noticed it.

‘I’m just a cheerleader.’

‘But I thought you were working as a designer at that publishing house in Parktown.’

‘I am.’

‘What’s the name again?’

‘The publication is called Travel Talk. The company is Perfect Publishing.’

‘Don’t you enjoy your work there?’

‘As Stefan Sagmeister said at the 2003 Design Indaba: Bad design and a good cause is good. Good design and a bad cause is bad. That’s how I feel.’

‘So what is the cause?’

‘It’s neither good nor bad. It straddles that misty, undefined place of in-between.’

‘But your front page on the last issue was great!’ Mia defends her.

‘It looked like a pissing contest between me and the editor.’

‘You’re a brilliant designer!’

‘The problem with Travel Talk is that while they want a brilliant designer, they don’t want to let her be a brilliant designer.’

‘What about you, Mia? Are you happy there?’ Millie switches to her, while Fay pushes back her chair and fumbles to get her cigarettes out of her bag.

‘Excuse me for a while, please.’ Fay walks through the open sliding doors into the garden.

‘I’ll grab a quick smoke too.’ Lyndal follows her.

Zoë and Millie watch their retreating backs and then zero in on Mia. ‘I’m not sure yet,’ she answers. ‘It’s too soon to tell.’ She watches the couple standing closely on the patio and tries to ignore the pity in the two pairs of eyes watching her from across the table.

‘Why don’t you take your drink out there and join them?’ It is Zoë.

‘Maybe a bit later.’ She smiles bravely. ‘Please tell me more about Abigail’s work. It sounds really intriguing.’

‘I’ll give you the studio’s contact details after we clear away these dishes. You’d like Abigail. She reminds me a bit of you.’

‘Zoë, would you mind making some coffee, please love.’ Millie smiles at Lyndal’s mother, who takes the hint and walks into the kitchen, closing the door behind her.

‘Mia, you seem like a nice girl.’ Millie lowers her voice and inches towards Mia, who concentrates on the open pores on Millie’s broad nose. ‘Just a word of warning. Don’t fall in love with Lyndal. He’ll only hurt you. You must understand. He just can’t see past Fay.’ Outside, there is a laugh filled with timbre and a husky reverberation of promise. Mia picks up her glass, which is almost empty. Or half full, she thinks wildly. ‘I think I’ll join them now. Thanks for your advice, Millie. I do appreciate your concern.’ The penetrating stare behind her sizzles, as she walks through the sliding door towards the laughter.

Trying to stroll languidly across the tiles, Mia looks around her at the garden lit up by lamps. Hearing her approach, Lyndal turns and she sees a skeleton hanging from the tree behind him. ‘Oh God! What’s that?’ She flinches in alarm, spilling what’s left of her drink onto the patio.

Lyndal and Fay laugh. ‘That’s old Bonita. She’s a fibreglass skeleton to keep thieves away,’ he explains, taking her hand and pulling her close to him. ‘They’ve had no trouble with break-ins since Bonita’s been languishing in the tree.’

‘I guess she’s the skeleton at our feast tonight.’

‘What do you mean?’ Fay inhales her cigarette and watches Lyndal while she exhales.

‘She’s a reminder that there’re troubles as well as pleasures in life.’ Mia lets go of Lyndal’s hand and turns to go back inside, jumping again as a squirrel scatters past in the leaves way past its bedtime. ‘I’m off to bed. Good night.’

Millie has prepared Abigail’s room for her and Fay while Lyndal gets to sleep on the couch. She loves the wooden floorboards and bay window, which are enhanced by the quiet colours of the room. She runs her hand across a ribbed velvet duvet and is mesmerised by Abigail. She walks over to her desk, which is free from clutter, except for a few pictures in intricate pewter frames. A photograph of a young girl with frizzy hair, coltish legs and a smile of gaps playing with a hula hoop. That same girl, a bit older, with Millie – a lot slimmer than she is now – playing with a Frisbee on a beach. A woman,

reminding her of a younger version of Priti, stands outside a small brick house. An imperious sketch of a man she's seen somewhere before watches her through wide, proud eyes, with his mouth shaped for the person outlining him at the time. A faint buzzing starts in her head. Her grandmother has a drawing of this man, in a more serious pose, but hers has been torn up and stuck together again. In this image, she can see a trace of something intimate between the model and artist, as she touches the smooth shading of the sketch. The buzzing gets louder when she notices a familiar Polaroid of the man who has presided over her nightmares and her life. It is the only photograph in the world that leaves her feeling like an embryo floating in murky formula inside a glass jar in a biology lab. The buzzing gets louder and louder and louder until she dives onto the bed and pulls the pillow over her ears.

When she opens her eyes in the muffled darkness, she is parched. Groaning, she rolls over and sits up, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. She can't make out Fay's form, as she slides off the bed and heads for the door. Trying to be as quiet as the creaking floorboards will permit, she takes careful steps towards the kitchen in her socks. Someone has left a soft light on the lounge, for which she is grateful, as it enables her to get into the kitchen without bumping into anything. She drains three glasses of water at the sink and puts her glass onto the dish rack. Closing the door behind her, she peeps into the lounge to see Lyndal's sleeping form on the couch. He is lying on his side, his feet with cracked heels on the arm rest. He is breathing deeply. Curled inside his arms like a vulnerable iceberg lies Fay.

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Sitting at her desk on Monday morning, Mia focuses intently on her work, going over her story looking for flaws, deleting what she believes to be extravagance. She still can't get the images of falseness out of her head, but she hasn't said a word to either of them, not even when they asked her why she was so quiet at the airport before she and Fay boarded the plane. *Don't fall in love with Lyndal. He'll only hurt you. You must understand. He just can't see past Fay.* She's been such an idiot, believing him when he asked her to move to the Cape. He was just probably mouthing words he'd said to others before or what he believed he was

supposed to say. Offering her a working relationship. What was she thinking even to entertain the possibility for a second? God, how humiliating! *I'll see you soon*, he'd said before they went through security. *In just over a month... That gives you enough time to resign...*

'Morning, morning, morning! Good weekend, I hope?' Parker has arrived an hour late at nine.

'Hi.' She feels as dead inside as she probably looks and doesn't glance up from her screen. Her fingers tap, are quiet, tap, are still, tap, are quiet, tap, are still.

'What's that?'

'Just a story.'

'Tell me about it at our diary meeting at eleven.'

'I'll give it to you then.' She smiles up at him and he scratches his testicles energetically. Ctrl P. She waits for the machine outside their cubicle to start printing. She clicks Send.

The phone's trilling distracts her and she picks it up. 'Travel Talk, this is Mia speaking, hello.'

'Hello Mia Speaking, this is Lyndal speaking.'

'How are you?'

'I'm missing you already.' He waits for her to say something similar, which she doesn't. He has quite a nerve, she thinks instead.

'Are you okay?'

'I'm just finishing off a story, which I have to hand in shortly at our diary meeting.' *No*.

'Are you sure that's all?'

'Yes.' *No*.

'When are you going to tell them about your resignation?'

'I'm not sure.' *I'm not*.

'When are you going to tell them that you're moving to Cape Town?'

'I'm not sure. Look, I have to go now. I'll call you back later.'

'Mia I?'

'Bye, Lyndal.'

She stands at the printer and sifts through the pile of papers in its tray. Other people have been sending through their documents – the machine is not only linked to her computer – and their personal e-mails and jokes cling together illicitly. 'Hi, Mia.' It is Fav, who has come up behind her. 'How was the rest of your Sunday?'

'Good, yours?' She smiles coolly at Fay.

'I was sad.'

'Of course you were.'

Fay's eyes narrow. 'What's that supposed to mean?' She fluffs up her bleached hair, her white shirt pulling over her tiny breasts and lifting to reveal a pierced belly button. She's not wearing the pendant and again Mia wonders why she refused her gift of a new replacement.

'Nothing. Sorry, I'm just a bit distracted. I printed out my story and now it's not here and I'm supposed to be in the diary meeting already.'

'Get to the meeting. You know how He hates lateness. You can hand in your story later.'

'Yes, but it's important.'

'Mia, just get to that meeting.'

In the boardroom, they are waiting for her. Gwyneth is still pulling out her chair, so she must have arrived a few seconds before Mia. Gwyneth, sunglasses perched atop her head, is wearing a copper blouse with yellow, red and orange stripes over the bodice, complemented by jeans. She looks like a queen. She looks like a sun goddess. She looks fabulous. She also ignores Mia, as she sits.

'It's so kind of you to join us, young lady.' The publisher doesn't glance up from his notes. Parker giggles.

'I'm so sorry. I got caught up ... in an urgent phone call.'

'What's the story?' His all-knowing eyes pierce through her.

'Um... well, I still need to investigate – '

'Sit down!' He hacks into the air with a butcher's saw. 'Now. Fill me in on what you've each been working on. And where's my commission update?'

'I've got – '

'Parker, you first.'

Parker doesn't look at Mia, whose cheeks are aflame at being cut off so dramatically. She stares down at her lap and decides she hasn't pressed her slacks well enough. Great. She is badly groomed as well.

'I've actually got the commission story here.' Her head snaps up and she almost ricks her neck. Rubbing it with her thumbs, she watches in stupefied horror, as Parker slides a sheet of paper across the table to the publisher, who starts to read it out aloud.

STOP PRESS!

SAA is scheduled to meet with the retail travel trade on December 20 to provide feedback on the counter-proposal put forward by ASATA on behalf of agents, advises ASATA chief executive, Vanya Lessing. Agents were responding to the airline's proposal earlier this month of a nett fare environment to replace commissions paid by SAA to agencies for sales made on behalf of the carrier. The new remuneration model will be implemented by May next year.

It's hers! He must have lifted it off the printer. She drifts into a coma where she's aware of what's going on around her, but she can't contribute anything or even move. She feels dreadful. Parker was the one who told her a sentence was a story and she's wanted to prove him wrong. A sentence is a story, but three sentences are a lead story.

'Well done, Parker.' The publisher's voice is silky. His bushy eyebrows dip at Mia. Parker grins unashamedly. 'So what's my prize?' Gwyneth snorts at his comment. The publisher is quiet for a moment. 'I'm not sure.... you see, if Travel News Weekly hadn't already beaten us to it, I'd be able to tell you.' He says it so mildly, Mia thinks she hasn't heard. He slides a bright trade newspaper across the table to Parker with bold headlines and a colourful caricature announcing an update on the remuneration negotiations. 'You fucked up.'

Parker scans the front page of the competing publication, scowling and scraping a pen along his tongue. 'It's a good story,' he says finally. She wonders how he'll try to edit his way out of this reality. 'They went into a bit more detail about disintermediation though. It's good.'

'Yes,' bites out the furious older man. 'It's a bloody good story!'

'Pity we didn't get it first.' Parker giggles.

'Yes, it is, isn't it?' The publisher looks as if he's about to have a coronary, Mia thinks. This stress can't be good for him. 'And what did you come up with?' He snaps at Mia.

Her protective bubble pops. 'Um, nothing worthwhile.'

'So you mean to tell me that the story you e-mailed me this morning, the one I've just read out here, is nothing worthwhile?'

'As you said, Mr Hogg, the competition beat us to it and with greater insight.'

The stretching of his lips into what she assumes could be the start of a smile sends blood pumping to her limbs.

He tells her while her story was a bit too short for his liking with not enough contextualisation, she was actually the first to come up with something solid for Travel Talk. Mia wonders whether she, functioning as both supplier and intermediary, has done the industry development an injustice. She tries to focus on what Mr Hogg is telling her. Unfortunately, because Travel News Weekly stood by its promise of *First with the News*, she doesn't qualify for a prize, he explains kindly. But she can have half a day off.

.....

Mia is elated and not even Parker has been able to pierce her armour of accomplishment. 'What have you done to make Parker so furious with you?' Fay leans over the cubicle, her hard nipples visible through the fabric of her shirt. She pushes her hair out of her face, but it falls forward again. It is growing longer and is softer around her hard face, Mia thinks, still hurt by Fay encroaching on Lyndal.

'Why, what's he said?' She feigns indifference.

'He's said nothing. But he kicked the telephone down the passage while you were in the bathroom. It wouldn't have been so bad if it hadn't hit Priti and if it hadn't snarled in Gwyneth's legs and tripped her up. He also sent back final proofs for being incomprehensible. Mia, he signed them off earlier. I just changed a graphic that I wanted him to see.'

'Is that all?' Mia teases.

'No. He's accusing you and Mr Hogg of conspiracy and collusion.'

'And?'

'He said he was going for a run.'

'Now? It's not quite lunchtime?' She suppresses the urge to smile. 'Which route is he taking?'

'He said he was going to give you a run for your money.'

'Oh for Heaven's sake! I beat him to a story, which he tried to steal and that we can't use anyway. I've subsequently been asked to do a follow-up.'

'I hope you're not going to run the gauntlet.'

'Fay, I've been running the gauntlet my whole life. I just have one concern though.'

‘What’s that?’

‘That he’ll continue wearing his running shoes in here after his run.’

Parker returns an hour later, dripping with sweat, his clothes stained. He disappears for a shower after which he joins Mia in the cubicle wearing the same clothes. She tries not to notice. ‘Mia, I’d like a word please in the Alpha room.’

She saves her work. ‘We could speak here.’

‘I’d actually like some privacy,’ he insists, leaving the cubicle and assuming she’ll follow. Fay thrusts half a sandwich into Mia’s hands as she walks past her desk. ‘This will soften him.’

He is looking out of the window at the parked cars when she closes the door behind her. She says nothing, but pulls out a chair and takes a seat. She prepares her notebook. ‘You won’t need to take notes.’

‘I always take notes.’

‘Not now.’

She lets each end of the pen tap on the table in turns. ‘What is it you’d like to speak to me about?’

‘Your silence.’ He swivels and sits in one fluid motion, his eyes fixed on the sandwich, which she pretends she’s forgotten about.

‘For what?’

‘For when I tell Hogg you took and used my notes. That it was actually my story. Are you going to eat that?’

‘Yes.’ She bites into the sandwich and chews slowly. She loathes mayonnaise, especially when it’s warm. And especially when it complements grated cheddar cheese.

‘What do I get in return?’ She is more furious than serious and almost chokes on the crumbs.

‘I’ll make him believe it was an honest mistake, considering the mess the cubicle’s in, and recommend he promotes you to Assistant Editor.’

‘For doing what? Theft won’t get me a promotion!’ She is derisive and considers snorting like Gwyneth for full effect.

‘So you admit to theft?’

‘No! I’m doing nothing of the sort!’

‘Then for your ingenuity. For speed. For acting on a hunch. For using any means possible to get the story.’

‘He won’t go for it.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘What do you want from it?’

‘My self respect back.’

She doesn’t believe hyenas have much self respect when they feed on the remains of lions’ meals. ‘You lost that when you paraded my stories as your own on my first day here.’

‘Refresh my memory.’

‘We both know the truth.’

‘The truth is a lie that has not been found out.’

‘And whose wise words are those?’

‘Beryl Bainbridge’s, from her 1998 Booker Prize presentation, if my memory isn’t fucking with me.’

‘A lie is a truth that will be found out.’

‘Who said that?’

‘I did.’ She tosses the remainder of the sandwich in the bin – she’s taken two mouthfuls – and watches his eyes devour it. ‘And I’m not going along with your scheme.’

‘That won’t be a prudent decision on your part, Mia.’

‘What do you want from me?’

‘Just your silence when I go to Hogg.’

‘Silence, *sir*,’ she mocks, ‘is the real crime against humanity. And don’t ask me to remember who said that.’

‘I won’t ask you anything ever again,’ he says so softly, his eyes feverish.

‘I’m not helping you bring me down only for you to prance around in a pantomime of glory. What a farce!’

‘And you’ve just gone too far. Soon you’ll be begging for my silence.’ He stalks out of the room, glancing in the dustbin one last time, hesitating, but moving on.

‘How did it go?’ Fay peers over her Apple Mac. ‘What did he want?’

‘He just threatened me!’

‘You’re joking! Parker wouldn’t harm a fly.’

‘He’d eat it though.’

‘Mia, do you need to talk about this? You sound slightly hysterical.’

‘I don’t even know if spinning will help – ...’ She breaks off when she sees Parker approaching from the kitchen.

‘Have you tried kickboxing?’

‘No, but it sounds perfect!’

Inside the studio, people weave and duck, jab and punch, and kick, kick, kick. Fay moves through the simple choreography with ease and while Mia feels awkward and weak, she drills her energy into ruthless sets. She does push-ups, jumping jacks, shadow boxing and pretends to skip, returning Fay’s apparition of a smile and directing her kicks towards Fay. The woman giving the class has left her long straggly hair loose and it sticks against her bulky muscles while she yells out orders. Mia appreciates that the class requires no special skill, no rhythm and dancing ability, as with aerobics, so when a balloon carrying Parker’s face floats into her vision, she twists her waist and kicks with everything she’s got left inside her. She puts imaginary spikes onto her shoes and the pop of the balloon explodes into the deafening music. But the balloon floats back and when she kicks Parker again, it whooshes like a drunk wasp through the outstretched limbs and clenched fists until it deflates to an emaciated prune attached to a piece of string that someone steps on. The tearing in her side and back starts almost immediately, but she carries on. There are only five minutes left of class.

She snaps the contraceptive pill out of its container and swallows it with water, ignoring the pull along her back when she lifts her arm. She feels the pill slipping into her stomach. Already her breasts are incredibly tender and she worries about her body being unhappy about such an invasion. She thinks about Lyndal’s invasion. The smile slips off her face when she considers his – and also Prem’s – betrayal and she leaves the bathroom. The new pain in her body, the result of her kickboxing class, is a sparring partner to the agony jousting in her thoughts. She’s too scared to take anything for it that might neutralise the pill, which she’s probably not going to need after all.

She winces while she pulls her clothes down from the cupboard shelves to start preparing her things for packing. Prem was right about one thing. She doesn’t have anywhere else to go. So why is she doing this? He’s given her an opening and ... and

dammit she's going to bleed it dry. She'll stay in Prem's place for a month, letting him – and others, including her grandmother – think nothing is amiss except that they both need to spend some time alone until January. Hell, she'll even set a date for the circus of a wedding if that's what it takes. She lets her clothes tumble into disarray on the carpet, like Granny Cecilia used to do, and she feels powerful despite the weak protest of her body.

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Her body protests again when the physiotherapist pummels her back. She has taken two days off work because her back is too painful and uncomfortable to sit at a desk for a full day. And she's not really that happy about her 'prize' of half a day's leave, so she's giving herself her own reward, all things considered. She isn't sure whether she's more uneasy about missing work when Parker could carry out his threat or whether she'd be more uneasy having to face him so soon after their meeting. The pair of hands puts pressure on muscle tissue and manipulates her joints. She goes back unwillingly to the massage table in the Cederberg, but today she cannot feel his hands anywhere near her. Other hands are healing her now.

'How did you hurt yourself?' The physio attempts to distract her from the pain.
'Kickboxing.'
'Your first time?'
'Yes.' She winces, as the therapist tries to return her natural movement and flexibility by manipulating tight muscles through measured movements of varying speed. Slow, fast. Gentle, forceful. Pull, push. Hopefully the stiffness and strain will dissipate. She closes her eyes.

There is one woman in the studio. She has skunk highlights and haphazardly applied makeup. Her smile is artistic and her eyes are fairy lights behind thick-rimmed glasses.
'Hello, I'm Julia. Can I help you with something?' Mia watches her swallow a gulp of tea and put the cup down on a stack of magazines.
'You have a wonderful studio.' Mia appreciates the airy spaciousness, its multi-coloured tables and chairs as well as examples of plates painted by children. And adults, she notices,

glancing at sunflowers and boring examples of fruit in a still life that are recognisable as such on some of the plates.

‘Thank you, honey.’

‘Is... is Abigail here?’

‘Are you a friend of hers?’

‘Um... we share a mutual friend ... I’d like to meet with her.’

‘Abigail is performing today.’

‘Performing?’

‘She’s one of those living statues.’

‘Ah, yes. And where is she performing these days?’ Pretending to know about Abigail’s act, Mia glances at her toes peeping out of her sandals and winces as her back reminds her of its tenderness. She must make an appointment with a physiotherapist.

‘In Rosebank mostly. She’s great.’

‘Do you mind if I paint some plates while I’m here?’

‘Not at all. How many would you like?’

‘Eight.’

‘That’s an unusual number.’

‘It’s for a set. And it’s not that unusual. Think of the G-8. There’re eight pawns in a chess game...’ Mia is tired of people second-guessing her and exasperation brings out sarcasm.

‘And Father Christmas is said to have eight reindeer pulling his sleigh.’

‘Is there a specific theme you’d like to paint?’ Julia frowns and walks towards the selection of paints, paintbrushes and plates.

‘Status symbols.’ She adds an ‘c’ to status. Statues. She wants to paint symbols of those who have rendered her a statue in her own life because of status. She watches Julia dab at her nose with a tissue and nod. It is the apprehensive nod given to someone on the precipice of cracking up.

The physiotherapist is dabbing a heat pack on the affected area of her back. The hands are not using a stone as a medium for this massage, which is soft and soothing for her tense muscles. Mia wants to stretch and purr while luxuriating in this warm pressure. ‘This is nice... thank you... what is it supposed to do?’

‘I’m trying to relax muscle tension without having to use traction.’

‘This is fantastic...’

‘At what point does the tenderness diminish?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Where does it stop being comfortable for you when I exert pressure on your back?’

‘There, where you are now. And up a bit, to the left.’

‘I’ve got some stretching and strengthening exercises I’d like you to try at home before you go back to gym. And then I would recommend a low-impact aerobic conditioning programme until you feel strong enough to resume your kickboxing.’

‘I’m not going back to kickboxing!’

The therapist laughs and while Mia is smiling, thinking of her ill-fated class, an ice-pack is applied to her back without warning. ‘Gosh that’s cold! What is it?’

‘It’s ice. Some patients find more pain relief with a combination of heat and cold therapy.’

‘I’ve never had an ice massage before.’

‘It’s still one of the more effective, proven methods to treat a sore back.’

‘How does it help?’

‘It slows inflammation and swelling. It numbs sore tissues –’

‘Like a local anesthetic?’

‘Yes. It also slows the nerve impulses in the area to interrupt the pain-spasm reaction between the nerves. And it decreases tissue damage.’

‘What I find fascinating about ice is how it expands when it freezes. You know like when water entering cracks in rocks for example can split or break those rocks when it freezes.’

‘Mmm-hmmm.’ The therapist is obviously concentrating so Mia keeps quiet. But her thoughts conjure images of ice beneath water. And then she thinks of Fay. When the massage finishes, she is chilled.

Her brushstrokes are so confident and smooth that she has to keep picking out discarded bristles that stick in the wet paint. Because of this, she leaves behind fingerprints, which she has to paint over. She wishes she could paint over the blurs and smudges and stains of her own world in this way, with emphasis and hardness. With colours she chooses. Tears blister in her eyes and as she starts working on the plate about Lyndal, she decides her scheduled visit to the Cape will be a goodbye, not a beginning. A means to understand his complex feelings. She must find out if it’s about her inadequacies or about Fay’s or about

Lyndal's. She'll be confident, smooth, emphatic and hard. A decisive brush stroke over a wet surface. A coiling swirl in colour. And then she'll return. For that she leaves her last plate blank.

Snowflakes

'Like snowflakes, the human pattern is never cast twice. We are uncommonly and marvellously intricate in thought and action, our problems are most complex and, too often, silently borne.'
– *Alice Childress*

HER favourite story growing up has always been the tale of herself playing in the snow after one of Benoni's few recorded snowstorms in 1981 when she was a year old. She remembers nothing of the occasion, but her imagination has created a vivid memory, which Granny Cecilia has fed over the years. It has always been her grandmother's story, despite her parents being involved, and there was never a photograph to force the images in her mind to conform to something imprisoned by the past. They wanted her then, on that day. Or that is what she has chosen to believe.

She walks outside, each mittened hand clasped by a parent, her sturdy legs bold in the snow. Each step sinks below the surface and leaves a miniature booted footprint. The prints are deep, but shallow because of her size. She is dressed in layers, as her mother never thought to buy her clothes for snow, so for her first occasion outside in the new weather, she has on almost all of her cabled cardigans under a navy jacket. Three beanies – one purple, one beige with brown stripes, one lavender – are pulled down onto her small head and not a curl escapes. Her cheeks are flushed rose, her lips moistened with awe and her eyes shimmer in the whiteness, two emeralds. Under her corduroy dungarees – also tan for practicality – her legs are protected by a pair of stockings and tracksuit pants. The clothing makes her movements stiff, but she doesn't notice, as she laughs and squeals at the kitten hopping and leaping in the air.

Her mother bends to show her how to compress and pat the snow. Slowly the body of a snowman appears. Her father rolls a ball in the snow to make a head, which he squashes on top of the body. Granny Cecilia goes inside to fetch a baby carrot and Smarties for decoration while Mia claps her hands and babbles. When they are finished with the little snowman, her father shows her how to throw a snowball, which she tries although it falls at her feet or melts in her hands, wetting her mittens. They decide to call

the cat Mittens because she doesn't like to get her feet wet. And because she has four white paws. Mia's nostrils flare and then her mother has to take her inside for a nappy change. When she reappears later, the snowman has melted into a lump stained by Smarties. Everyone laughs when she starts to cry and Granny Cecilia lifts Mia up, jouncing her on a firm hip. Mia quietens. From then on, Mia goes to stay with Granny Cecilia during the days and her mother returns to work.

She is alone when Fay arrives with Priti to visit her in hospital. Hopefully this time tomorrow she'll be sent back to the general ward where she supposes she'll immediately feel safer and less vulnerable, a bit further away from the hands of death. 'Lyndal told me you were here. Why didn't you call me?' Fay is the only person Mia knows who can wear a white feather boa around her neck and still appear artfully stylish. It is however difficult to tell where the feathers end and her hair begins.

'I didn't want to bother anyone.'

'I'm not just anyone, Mia. I'd like to think we're friends.'

'Fay, you didn't have to drag Priti here. How did you guys get past the nurses?'

'I bumped into Priti at the garage shop after I filled up my car with petrol. I told her I was on my way here and she asked to join me. I didn't drag her; she wanted to see you. None of the nurses stopped us.'

'*Eish, Sisi.* I do not like to see you in this place.' She holds out a bunch of wilting daisies and frilly carnations with a packet of plant food stuck to the stems, surrounded by a medieval collar of cellophane with a fake lace trim.

'Thank you, they're beautiful.' She is touched.

'Just ask the nurse to put them in some water.' Fay glances around and Priti automatically follows her lead, her inquisitive eyes taking in everything.

'Where's Lyndal?'

'I'm not sure. He was here earlier. So what's new, Priti?' To draw attention away from Lyndal and herself, Mia glances at Priti, who hasn't heard her. She is staring at the new patient across the room, her hand trying to keep the moans in her mouth.

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Fay and Mia glance at each other, uncomfortable with Priti's unusual reaction. 'That must be Abigail,' Mia whispers, unexpectedly remembering the photographs on Abigail's desk and that Priti – she confirms that now – appeared in one of them. 'What are the chances of her being here, with me, in this hospital?'

Fay fluffs up her hair. 'Should I go over?'

They watch Priti walk dazedly to the bed, both hands over her mouth, as if one isn't enough to hold in her moans. She seems wounded from her core because she is doubling up, folding in half, trying to be small. 'Abigail is her daughter,' Mia whispers.

'What makes you say that?'

'She has taken her child's pain into her own body. Only mothers do that.'

'I'll go to her....'

'No, wait. Leave her for now. She'll come to us when she needs us.'

Suddenly Priti melts to the floor, holding her head in her hands and rocking. 'Oh God, Mia, we can't just leave her....'

'I've just rung for Sarah, my nurse.' Mia expels a sigh when she sees Sarah walking briskly towards her. 'Not me....'

Sarah's glance follows Mia's finger pointed in Priti's direction. She frowns and picks up her pace to answer the unspoken plea. Fay follows her, but gets asked to leave when another nurse arrives with a doctor. They close the curtains around the scene.

'How was work on Friday?' Mia tries to rip off the choker of tension.

'The usual. Parker was late for a deadline because he disappeared again –'

'Has he followed through with his threat yet?' If anyone knows, it will be Fay.

'Mia, I think he's actually ignoring your involvement with the story, pretending the whole debacle didn't exist. I overheard him on the phone raving about how he won the company's internal competition by breaking the latest update on the remuneration model. He said he and his wife had been sponsored on an all-expenses-paid trip to Mauritius.'

'You're joking!' The worry she's been carrying around with her dissipates. 'He has a wife?' Fay chuckles. 'Hell I laughed, especially because I had just heard Mr Hogg on the rampage about how the publication needed to look *better* than Travel News Weekly, which beat us to another story. And then he went on and on about how disappointed he was that Parker hadn't delivered something more potent and that he was looking forward to your future contributions.'

'Parker has a wife?'

'Yes, of 12 years. She's a dental hygienist.'

Mia is incredulous. 'Never in a million years! What story did they beat us to?'

'SAA's proposal of nett fares could mean a reduction in fare levels across the board.'

'Sounds about right. What else?'

'Gwyneth was queening it over everyone because she won a six-month contract with a new Press Office client.'

'Which Press Office client?'

'She wouldn't say until the ads come in, but she was impressed with Adèle's service levels.'

'Adèle is very professional. Her press releases are always well written and targeted.'

'She also meets her clients' ad deadlines, which is all I care about. Is there any place I can smoke in here?'

'I would think not,' says an authoritative voice. Her grandmother has returned.

Fay appears not to know what to say so she stares, slightly open-mouthed, at Granny Cecilia who doesn't have the same problem. 'What outfit are you wearing, young woman? It doesn't become you. You look like a flustered fowl.'

Mia bites her lip to catch it from grinning. Her grandmother certainly doesn't care about the effect her words have on people. Fay appears as if she doesn't know whether to swear or smile. She does neither, as her scornful eyes clash with Granny Cecilia's fading pair.

'With all due respect, I don't think your outfit qualifies you to make a judgement call on mine.' She pointedly looks up and down at the older woman's pleated yolk-coloured skirt, Green Cross comfort sandals through which her stockinged toes reach for the ground and caramel knitted top.

'I see you haven't been taught respect for your elders.' Granny Cecilia's voice is a lasso.

Fay glances at Mia with what-the-fuck spread across her face.

'Granny Cecilia, this is my friend, Fay. Fay, this is my grandmother who has forgotten her manners at home today.' She smiles sweetly at her grandmother, although privately she is amused by her observation.

They glare at each other across Mia and say nothing. 'Granny Cecilia, did you manage to bring me something nice to drink? I'm so tired of water.' Her ploy works and her grandmother is distracted. 'Yes, just a moment....' She digs in her bag.

'Mia, if you don't mind, I'm going outside for a quick smoke.' After a derisive glance at Granny Cecilia's handbag, Fay sways away, as if Granny Cecilia doesn't exist. She stares at the closed curtains around Abigail when she walks past and Mia, having noticed Fay's lingering look, wonders what Priti is being told.

'Are you feeling any better?' Granny Cecilia knifes into her thoughts.

'I'm no better or worse, thanks, although my leg is incredibly painful.'

She pulls out two cans of fizzy fruit juice and puts them on the side table. 'May I open one for you?'

Mia nods. She is grappling with her need to know and her right to know as well as whether she can take a gamble with her inadequate information and confront her grandmother in this public space for answers. Her frenetic thoughts are a cuckoo in the nest of her mind. 'Granny Cecilia, Abigail is in the bed across from me. I thought you might want to know that.' She lets her bomb drop casually, as if she knows more than she does and it shatters the face of her grandmother. She has touched something deep inside her and she has only seen that expression on her grandmother's face once before.

Crystal Barbie arrives in the post from her parents as her seventh birthday present. The gift is three weeks late, but Mia believes Granny Cecilia when she explains how bad the postal system is between countries. Granny Cecilia bakes a chocolate cake with cherries and offers to invite some children from school for a belated party. Mia doesn't want an afternoon with other children pretending to like her. When her grandmother phones Kerry's mother who has such a pretty voice over the telephone, she hears that it's Kerry's sister's birthday today and that she's also having a party. Unfortunately, Mia's friend won't be able to make it, but Mia is welcome to join them. Kerry's mother asks if Mia would like Kerry's father to fetch her. Mia is tempted; she enjoys Kerry's Dad with his curly, curly hair and willingness to dish up extra ice-cream when everyone else says no.

Mia tells Granny Cecilia it doesn't matter and that she wants to play with her new doll. Alone in her room, the cat licking its paws and wiping behind its ears on the bed next to her, Mia brushes Crystal Barbie's long, shiny hair. She smells nice like new dolls do and the little plastic brush leaves neat lines in her hair. Mia wishes she had someone to brush her hair like this and then she remembers she doesn't have much left after Granny Cecilia

cut it so short. She thinks of how they say she's ugly at school and she wants to cry, but because it's her belated birthday celebration, she pretends she's really happy.

She decides to take the golden hair out of its elastics so she can put it into the styles she chooses. The elastics are difficult to manage and so she gets her scissors from the drawer in her dressing table. When she cuts the first elastic, she snips a bit of hair by mistake and it slithers to her lap. She cuts the other elastic and this time deliberately cuts another piece of hair. With long hair drifting into her lap, Mia decides she'll just trim it a bit, to even out the length. She likes straight lines. And then she has to cut it again because she made it even more skew. She gets frustrated and tears make her lashes wet so she cuts a big piece of hair off. And then she cuts it all off, leaving her doll with a shorn head of uneven chunks. At first she feels good, but then she immediately feels bad. She doesn't like straight lines anymore.

She wraps the hair in toilet paper to flush it away. At first the big bundle floats on top of the water in the bowl, but after she wees on it to sink it and flushes it down again, it disappears after swirling round and round. Circles inside each other become her new favourite shape. Relieved, she goes back to her room and strokes the cat to calm down. Her hands are shaking and she is terrified Granny Cecilia will find her doll. She looks at it lying on her rug. A princess in a shiny ball gown with a pretty face and chopped-off hair. She hears her grandmother calling her name so she throws the doll to the back of her cupboard and closes the door on it.

Granny Cecilia is in the bathroom and when Mia bends to look into the toilet, she sees the parcel of hair has resurfaced. The paper has almost disintegrated and the hair has separated to float like seaweed or the wet hair of mermaids. She doesn't want to look her grandmother in the face, but she does because she also doesn't want to see all that hair anymore. 'Mia, can you explain this?' Granny Cecilia's voice is unusually soft, almost sad. She nods. 'Mittens pulled the hair off my Barbie's head.'

'Why would she do that, Mia?'

'I think she wanted to chew it.'

'Did you see her do this?'

Mia shakes her head no. 'I was weeing and when I came back to my room, she was already eating some of it.'

'How did it get into the toilet?'

'I put it there because I didn't want you to be cross with the cat. She didn't mean to do it.'

'Mia, are you really telling me the truth?' Terrified, Mia can't answer. She doesn't want smacks on her special day.

'Mia, I'll make you a promise. If you tell me the truth, then we'll leave it at that and go and have some cake. Would you like that?'

Mia nods yes and asks if she can blow out candles to make a wish. Today she'll hope for hair to grow.

'Mia, can you explain this?' Granny Cecilia asks again, pointing at the hair in the toilet.

'It was a mistake because I couldn't get the elastics out and I was trying to brush her hair and so I tried to get the elastics out but then I had to cut them out and by mistake I cut the hair and I'm really sad but I didn't mean to and please don't smack me.' Mia flinches, waiting.

'Why did you try to flush it down the toilet?' The smack doesn't arrive. She looks at her grandmother, but she can't tell what's in her head. At least she isn't shouting like she normally does.

'I didn't want you to see it in case you got cross.'

'Mia, why did you cut the hair? Was it really a mistake?'

'I wanted someone else to have short hair and be ugly too!' The words cartwheel into the air before she can catch them.

'Why do you think you're ugly, Mia?'

'Because you made me ugly when you cut my hair like yours! They c-c-c-call me u-g-gly at sc-c-chool....' She starts to sob. After the explosion, the old building of her grandmother's face collapses into its foundations.

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Granny Cecilia makes an effort to compose herself. 'What do you know about a girl called Abigail and what makes you think I know her?' Mia isn't sure, but she senses something hidden in her grandmother that is threatening to break free.

'Come on, Granny Cecilia, I'm not stupid.'

'Mia, surely this isn't the place or the subject for us to be discussing now.'

‘This is exactly the place and the subject to talk about. I may be dead tomorrow or ... or the day after that. Surely you owe me that much. Surely you owe me the truth.’

‘Don’t you dare speak like that!’

‘It’s my reality, Granny Cecilia.’

‘How... how do you know about Abigail?’ Her grandmother suddenly appears incredibly frail, like a swan whose neck has become too heavy for its head.

‘It’s a long story, but the point is she has the same pictures of those men I found in that envelope in Mom’s travel album. And later I also found a photograph of a baby girl behind one of the other photographs. One of those men was the man I bit in the Bunny Park. I never told you, but he came to the house one day while you were out. He had a little girl with him.’

‘He came to the house?’ Granny Cecilia is agitated and takes her glasses off. She puts them back on before she speaks again. ‘Did you speak to him?’

‘I pretended no one was home. What was I supposed to do?’

‘No... no... no... he wasn’t meant to come to the house... I told him not to...’

‘Who was he, Granny Cecilia?’

‘He is... um...’ Her grandmother wrings her hands.

‘Hello, hello, hello!’ A voice of gravel pulverises the vapour of their voices.

‘Lyndal!’

Granny Cecilia stiffens and quietens. ‘I think I’ll just pop into the powder room for a moment. I need to spend a penny.’ She clutches her bag to her and trips over her feet in her haste to be away.

‘God! She’s like a frightened rabbit! I hope she isn’t running away on my account.’

‘She’s running away, but not from you.’

‘How is my favourite patient this afternoon?’

‘I’m not sure. Are you referring to me or Abigail?’

He looks nonplussed. ‘Huh?’

‘The patient who arrived earlier.’ He glances across to where the curtains are still closed and she continues ruthlessly. ‘She’s Abigail.’

‘How do you know?’ He doesn’t seem sure and his eyes narrow, almost as if he thinks she’s testing him.

‘Priti recognised her.’

'Priti's here?'

'She came with Fay.'

'Fay's here?'

'She went out for a smoke. I'm surprised you didn't see her when you came in.'

'Fay and Priti know each other?'

'Priti works with us.'

'God, what a complicated mess.' He sits on the chair and suddenly seems worn out. 'How is she?'

'We're both still alive, thanks for asking.'

'Mia, don't be like this. What an awful situation!

'For you, for us, for Abigail, for me, for you and Abigail, for you and Fay? Please be specific.'

He stands up and leans across her over the bed. 'Stop it!' And then he abruptly kisses her roughly to silence her retort.

'I was wondering when you'd get here.' A smokiness pervades the clinical air and Fay's huskiness drapes itself over Lyndal's shoulders. He pulls away from Mia, who is horrified at her languorous response to the kiss, which switches on the Christmas lights of her body while her mind is still angrily screaming its protest. She puts her hands under the sheet to hide their trembling and she tries to make her face expressionless.

'Is that awful old woman gone?' Fay grimaces and shudders conspicuously. 'Nasty bitch. I must say, these people from the East Rand are whacky.'

'Who are you referring to?' Lyndal smiles in amusement.

'My grandmother.' Mia directs the wintriness of ice crystals to them both. Suddenly she feels fiercely and inexplicably protective over Granny Cecilia. 'If you want to badmouth her, please do so out of my earshot. And in case you've forgotten, the East Rand has some famous people to its credit: Oliver Tambo, Molly Lamont, Charlize Theron, André Watson and as for our sports achievers –'

'What's gotten into you?' Lyndal shoots back.

'Who the fuck is Molly Lamont?' Fay sighs deeply.

'A South African actress who was popular in the thirties after she made it in Hollywood. She attended St Dunstan's College in Benoni.'

'Whatever....' Fay doesn't seem impressed.

‘And...’ Mia continues her defence. ‘Contrary to popular belief, the East Rand does have electricity and running water.’

‘Mia, is it the medication? Do you want us to leave? I can understand if you’re feeling all grumpy.’ Fay flicks a feather off her face. ‘Perhaps she needs to sleep it off.’ She says this to Lyndal, her invitation unmistakable Mia thinks, reflecting how an invitation partly led to this chaos in her life in the first place.

‘Would you rather we leave you for a while?’ The timbre in his voice is weighty with concern.

‘Please,’ she whispers, feeling their unwanted pity shroud her for burial.

Lyndal smoothes her fringe off her forehead, smiles at her and walks towards the end of her bed. With Fay, he watches the closed curtains around Abigail’s bed, which suddenly whirr-swish open to reveal a water-logged Priti being comforted by Sarah. The doctor glances at them aloofly and listens to what the nurse tells him while they walk towards the doors. Fay goes up to Priti and hugs her fiercely, while Lyndal moves to the side of Abigail’s bed, taking her hand. ‘We must call Millie and Zoë,’ he states.

‘We can’t do it here,’ she replies. ‘Let’s go. We can use my phone. I’ve got free airtime.’

Fay holds Priti’s hand to take her with them, but she refuses, wanting to stay at Abigail’s bedside. Sarah asks them to leave if they are not immediate family. Her patient needs the quiet, she says, pulling out the chair for Priti. Mia attracts Sarah’s attention and when she comes over, asks her to give the flowers next to her bed to Abigail.

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When Granny Cecilia returns, she smells a bit like stale pee, Mia thinks, hoping her grandmother hasn’t messed on herself again. Lately she can’t seem to get to toilets in time.

‘Where is that little missy?’ Mia knows ‘missy’ is a derogatory word for Granny Cecilia.

‘And where pray tell is that fiancé of yours. He hasn’t been yet, has he? Where on earth has he got to and why isn’t he here by your side where he should be?’

‘He’s not here because I haven’t told him.’

‘But I’ve spoken to his mother. She would have told him.’

Mia doesn't – but does – know the answer to that one, but finds it difficult to admit failure to Granny Cecilia. 'I think he's away on business again.'

'You think? You give that man far too much free rein! When you're married, you'll have to be stricter than you are now!'

'There isn't going to be a wedding.'

'Mia, I've told you. No more of that talk. I won't have you fretting about dying when –'

'Granny Cecilia, we don't love each other. We're not going to get married.'

'When was this decided? Why haven't I been informed of such developments?'

'It was decided a long time ago.'

'Is it because of this man hanging around your bedside?' Granny Cecilia looks ready to take Lyndal on with her handbag.

'I think he only forced me to admit there were problems. He didn't cause the problems.'

'But why are you still living with Prem?'

'I've stayed on in his house at his request. He hasn't been living there since late November, when he moved back with his mother. If I get out of here, I'm not going back.'

'Why did he do that?'

'I think he's been fostering the idea that we'll get together again after a trial separation.'

'And this other man?'

'His name is Lyndal, please use it.'

'Is Lyndal going to marry you?'

'No.'

'Why?'

'Granny Cecilia, please stop this! Besides, I was asking you questions before we got interrupted. Who is the man in the photograph? The man from the Bunny Park?'

'Mia, really. Must we speak about this now?'

'You've been keeping so many secrets –'

'Ben is your uncle and my son,' Granny Cecilia snaps, sitting down on the chair to blow her nose and inside Mia something begins to dislodge.

She closes her eyes. Snow is actually transparent, but it appears as the white of opaque eyes, due to reflections from the hexagonal ice crystals that comprise it. The ice crystals cluster around pieces of dust in the atmosphere when water vapour condenses

below freezing point and when they melt, they stick together to form snowflakes. Snowflakes are more unique than pearls. She opens her eyes. 'How?' 'Mia, where is all this coming from? I never thought you'd persist like this.' Her grandmother blows her nose again on the same crumpled tissue, shaking her head. She leaves behind something bubbly in her nose, which expands beyond the nostril when she breathes out and withers inside when she inhales.

'Tell me about Abigail.'

Granny Cecilia stands up stiffly and crosses slowly to Abigail's bed. '*Aikhona, Gogo!* It is only the immediate family to visit.' Sarah intercepts her and Priti lifts her head.

'Hello, Priti. It's been a long time. I've come to see my granddaughter.'

Sarah gapes as if to intercede, but Priti's infant smile quivers on her lips, as she hands Granny Cecilia a tissue. '*Kulungile.*' It is right.

She must be caught up in a hallucinatory world of false perceptions, Mia conjectures wildly. This life, their lives, it's all a black comedy filled with spirals of silences that only she seems to hear. As Mia watches the humped figure of her grandmother, she has the uneasy sensation that she has started tearing down a giant concrete and metal statue of a dictator dominating a city square. But the statue won't come down because of a sledgehammer or a noose secured around its neck. Mia needs to drive a tank recovery vehicle that will eventually wrench Granny Cecilia from her pedestal.

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Lyndal returns alone. He smiles at her, but she ignores it. 'Where's Fay?'

'She's gone to the airport to book flights for Millie and Zoë.'

'Shame, that's horrible. This whole thing is horrible.'

'Yes, but you're going to pull through.'

'Do you think Abigail will make it?'

'The prognosis isn't looking positive. I tried to speak with the doctor outside.'

She doesn't want to hear any more about ... about her *cousin* so she stops the questions and instead watches her grandmother speaking softly with Priti.

'What's your grandmother doing there?'

'She knows Priti from years back.' She refuses to reveal anything to him until she's caught it all in a fishnet to assimilate for herself.

'Right.' He doesn't look totally convinced, especially when Granny Cecilia holds more tissues against her eyes and nose, but he doesn't pry. 'I've brought something to show you.'

'What?' She is surprised and curious, as she watches him opening up an envelope. He hands her a photograph. 'Oh no, Lyndal! Why now?'

The photograph is bleached so that she fuses seamlessly with the hospital environment. Streaks and halos around the light areas of the overexposed image give the appearance that she's sleeping under melting snow. Her face and lips are incredibly pale, with a slight tinge of apricot the only colour imbued in her skin. In contrast, her dark hair, eyebrows and eyelashes are stark against the pallor. The fine details of the image have faded in the sunshine glare of brightness. He has captured the moment from an elevated side angle, so a full front view of her face is the focal point of the picture. Her pointy chin gives her face a new cheekiness, even while resting. Her mouth is slightly open, as she breathes. The flash has bounced off the sidebar of the hospital bed that blocks her from falling and off the transparent tubes running up and down her body like a creeper. So while she dissolves in the photograph, she has never seen herself more full of substance. Or life. She has never been so noticed before, not even by herself.

'Thank you ... it's beautiful, although I'm not sure about the Snow White theme.'

He laughs. 'Did it come up to your expectations?'

'I didn't have any and I definitely didn't think you'd do it while I was in here.'

'We can't hide our true selves in hospitals. I wanted to capture you in an innocent, unguarded moment.'

'Why?'

'Because I think you are untainted and incredibly beautiful behind the protective veneer you've created for yourself.'

'Tell me something.'

'Anything.'

'What are your intentions toward me? I mean am I your Next Best after Fay?'

He hesitates, running his hand through his hair. 'Am I your Next Best after Prem?'
'Don't answer my question with a question!'
'Okay Mia, I have strong feelings for you, but you scare the living daylights out of me because of them. It is safer... somehow... to – ' He holds his jaw in a hand, the scar on his arm crinkling over his muscles.
'To remain static in a comfort zone where you know you can't possibly get hurt more than you've already been?' The complexity loses its shell like a snail, leaving only a defenceless understanding for her to pick up or trample.
He nods slowly and leans on the sidebar of the bed, his chin on his hands, his elbows on the bar, watching her attentively.
'Why are you terrified that I'll hurt you?' She picks at the plaster on her wrist.
'Because I don't know whether I'm a plaything, a passing fancy or a good fuck.' His voice drops to a whisper and his eyes seek hers out.
'Lyndal... ' She is horrified. 'Don't say that!' She lowers her eyes.
'Why? Is it the truth?'
'No! How can you think that?'
'I'm not a good fuck?'
'You know what I mean!'
'Because it's what you let me think.'
'I do not.' She glares at him, ready to be insulted, plucking at her plaster more vigorously.
'Yes, Mia, you do. I don't even know the current status of your relationship with Prem. You're not wearing his ring anymore, but you're living in his house.' He puts his hand over hers to calm it and to stop her fiddling with the drip.
'And you and Fay are still sleeping together!'
'We are not!'
'I saw you in Cape Town at Millie's place. She slept with you on the couch.'
'Yes, she slept with me, but we didn't sleep together.'
'And I'm supposed to believe that?'
'And I'm supposed to believe that you're not sleeping with Prem any more?'
'I'm not! He's been staying with his mother. He hasn't even been to visit me.'
'Arschhole.'
She smiles at his loyalty and he grins at her.

'So what's happening then? Are you engaged or not? Are you interested in pursuing a relationship with me?' He lifts her hand towards his chest.

'Are you asking me to pursue a relationship?'

'No.'

'Why?'

'Because I've already asked you. You never answered me. I'm not asking again. My offer remains.'

'I'm not going to marry Prem.'

'Does he know that?'

'If he doesn't, why isn't he here?'

'You still need to clarify that.'

'It's clear in my mind. But I need to be clear that you don't have feelings for Fay anymore, when I think at last she might be developing some for you.'

'What makes you think that?' He seems genuinely surprised, his eyebrows arching in tandem.

'Fay mirrors people and their reactions.'

'And you think she was mirroring mine?'

'Yes.'

'Mia, do you know what's great about self-portraiture?' He seems to relax at the swift change in topic and she wonders at it.

'No.'

'People are less likely to put on a false happy face when they control the picture. They unmask themselves. That's why I took a photograph of you while you were sleeping. It's the closest I could get to that openness.' He bites her thumb gently.

'What's your point?'

'Fay, to use your words, likes to reflect people in the act of being themselves, as they would see themselves in mirrors.'

'We've established that and that's why it concerns me.'

'Why? She's mirroring my feelings.'

'Exactly! Why are you repeating what I've just said?'

'Yes, but she's mirroring my feelings for *you!*'

Hope flares inside her like a signal light. ‘But what’s this all got to do with self-portraits?’

‘Fay reflects people in the same way a self-portrait would. Unmasked.’

‘Lyndal, please speak in normal, simple words.’

‘I’m falling in love with you, Mia.’ His voice is filled with the forceful timbre that has always attracted her and his eyes darken to similar shades.

‘Why couldn’t you just say that in the first place?’

‘Because I’m a silly arse.’

She laughs then through the tears forming in her eyes.

‘And because I had to be sure you were starting to feel the same way.’

‘How did you know?’

‘I just had to look into Fay.’

When Sarah returns, they are both grinning. ‘Mia, your other *brother* is here to see you.’

So when she looks at Prem for the first time in just over a month, she is smiling.

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Prem is wearing jeans and a striped magenta shirt with short-sleeves. He has tied his hair back into a ponytail to reveal the ring in the upper cartilage of his ear. He has shaved off his square patch of beard in the cleft of his chin and Mia thinks it makes his face vulnerable and weak. His smile is like a flash of gold in a digger’s pan. ‘Beetle, you look happy to see me!’

‘Here we go ...’ Lyndal mutters under his breath and she bites her lip to stop herself giggling. She feels absurdly light-headed.

‘Prem, it’s good of you to visit ... finally.’ Lyndal stands even closer to the bed when she speaks and hasn’t let go of her hand.

‘Yes, it is, I know.’

‘And now that you have *boet*, it’s good of you to be on your way.’ Lyndal retorts acidly. Prem looks at him for the first time with eyes of chewed olives and then ignores him.

‘Beetle, I kind of hoped you’d gotten rid of this loony tune.’

She sees a tick in Lyndal's clenched jaw, but he says nothing. She releases her hand from his forceful grip. 'Do you mind leaving us alone for a moment?' Her eyes tell him he has nothing to worry about from Prem's smirk of triumph.

'You certainly have a flair for the melodramatic,' he says winningly.

'What do you mean?'

'Nothing but ICU for you.'

'It must be why I've stayed with you for so long.'

He frowns. 'Don't be bitchy now.'

'Prem, I'm really not in the mood to fight.'

'Neither am I. So what's wrong with you anyhow?' He grimaces at the other patients.

'Christ, you need to let some fashionistas loose in here.'

'I've got a blood clot running from my inner groin to behind my knee.'

'Kinky!' His gaze snaps back at her, impressed, but wonders off to prowl after a young nurse with shapely calves. She squashes a burst of distaste at her own swollen, definitionless limb, which Prem is studiously trying to avoid.

'Prem, I think it best you leave. Your keys are in the drawer.'

'You're choosing *him* over me?' He looks surprised rather than annoyed at what he seems to think is madness.

'I'm choosing *me* over you!'

He laughs then. It is the laugh of a ventriloquist who fails to convince the audience that the sound belongs to his side-kick.

'Peter! I haven't seen you in ages.' Granny Cecilia walks slowly up to Mia's bed, her hands clutching at the railing.

'It's Prem, Granny Cecilia.' Mia feels the familiar coil tightening inside her.

He inclines his head. 'Hello, Cecilia. You're looking your very best!' Granny Cecilia has never looked worse, Mia thinks, revolted by Prem's gushiness. Her grandmother's face is ravaged by torment and regret, Mia assumes, because nothing else would leave her cheeks recessed like graves and her mouth pinched like a cat's bottom, as Marian Keyes likes to write.

'Don't be foolish, boy.' Granny Cecilia, however, has not lost her tart tongue. 'Do you realise you have an insect hanging off your ear?' Prem reaches for his earring and strokes it like a pet.

Mia opens up the drawer in her cabinet. 'Prem, my stuff is all packed; I just need to pick it up. Please take your keys.'

'See that someone picks it up by the end of next week,' he replies, loosing his restraint. 'Or I won't be responsible for what happens to it.'

'See that you're out of this ward by the end of this minute,' Granny Cecilia barks. 'Or I won't be responsible for what happens to you.'

After a few minutes of supportive quiet, her grandmother speaks again. 'I've been meaning to tell you that I tried to contact your friend Kerry, but her mother said she was in New York for six months.'

'Yes, she's working there. Didn't I tell you?'

'I can't remember, but I thought she'd want to know.'

'Thank you. Will you be able to get my stuff for me?' Her mind zooms in on cleansing her life of Prem.

'We'll make a plan,' her grandmother glowers. 'Why did you move in with that nasty rubbish in the first place? I never did like him.'

'I couldn't live with you anymore, Granny Cecilia. I'm sorry.'

Granny Cecilia's scowl deepens, but she accepts Mia's explanation, as if she suspected it already. She sits and takes out her compact powder case. She snaps it open and stares grimly in the tiny oval mirror as if she's never seen her reflection before and doesn't like what she perceives. She dabs the flat sponge repeatedly over her chin, forehead and cheeks, reminding Mia of how she scours dirty pots. While she fixes her make-up, Granny Cecilia curtly tells Mia she's arranged for two specialists to come and give additional assessments of her condition. Before Mia can answer, she continues that she'd rather be safe than sorry and that they should arrive in the evening. Mia is almost ready to be offended by Granny Cecilia's interference, but then she doesn't care anymore even when she realises her grandmother is trying to be concerned. 'Thank you, for caring.' To her surprise, her grandmother's face puckers as if a thread has been pulled by mistake, the iciness of her eyes melting into swollen lakes. 'Please explain, Granny Cecilia. Please tell me your story.'

Her grandmother is taciturn before she breathes in to start speaking. She falters and says nothing, as her powder case clatters to the floor. She picks it up quickly and pushes it deep inside her handbag with tremulous fingers. Again she tries to form words,

but when she looks into Mia's eyes from a newly applied face, she hesitates. Mia closes her eyes to help Granny Cecilia compose herself privately. When she starts to speak, Mia translates what she hears into a film in her mind and tries to watch it from a distance. She gives the silent black-and-white images life and offers the characters their stage entrances through colour.

When Cecilia's son goes missing, Mia imagines how she panics. 'Robert! Robert! Roo-beert!' He could be anywhere on the mine. Since John died four years ago, during the 1941 Battle of Sidi Rezegh where the Third Battalion Transvaal Scottish was nearly wiped out, she has become even more protective of her only child who keeps her husband alive in his eyes and smile. Without him, Cecilia will have nothing left of the man who placed his flag in her heart when she was 18 and has now left her to trudge through the battlefields of the rest of her life at 21. She will never forgive him, never, but she can't focus on that now when she has to find her son. Flinging off her apron, she runs down the path toward the gate and makes her way to the recreational hall. She's already searched the tiny house and garden.

Once a week the mine boys watch a film and when cowboys pull crooks off their horses, the viewers slap backs and jump up in excitement, shouting phrases in *Fanagalo*, the dialect spoken on mines to bridge the different languages, Granny Cecilia explains to Mia. When Cecilia runs up to the gathering, no one pays her any attention except for a tall Zulu who has decorative discs in his distended earlobes. He appears uninterested in the film and the excitement around him. Aloof and elite. He stares at her while Cecilia appeals for information about her missing son. They ignore her or don't understand, except for this man, so she directs her appeal to him. He remains silent and she turns away in exasperation to run off in another direction.

She doesn't find Robert and returns to the house, thinking he may have gone home. But he hasn't and she swallows her sobs. Now is not the time for giddiness. She doesn't know what to do or who to ask for help. Most of her friends were alienated when John was promoted to a mine official and out of pride she won't turn to them now. Her mother has been nagging Cecilia to live with her in Northmead, away from the New Kleinfontein Mine, but it also means away from memories of John and she hasn't been able to do it. Now she wonders whether she should for her son's sake. Out of habit, she

prepares the tin bath in the kitchen for him, keeping her feverish mind busy with day-to-day practicalities.

There is a knock on the door and Mia envisages the startled Cecilia mechanically patting her curls into place while striding to open it. The tall Zulu is standing outside, holding Robert's hand, saying nothing. 'Ma!' Cecilia's son lunges toward her and buries his face in her embrace.

'Where have you been, child? I've been so worried!' Mia can hear in young Cecilia's voice the trilliness building up its strength in preparation for when Mia arrives to buck boundaries.

'I was watching the doctor.' This is not the first time he has spent hours studying the surgeon at work. He is fascinated by medicine and Cecilia berates herself aloud for not thinking of it. Mia doesn't know enough about him to see his face so she lets it remain blurry, except for his eyes.

'Next time tell me where you're going! Now run along and have your bath!' He follows her request dutifully and she turns to the man, who is already walking down the path. 'What is your name?'

He stops and glances at her over his muscular shoulder. '*NginguRoyal Nkabinde.*' His voice is as deep as the shafts in which he works. He speaks his own language.

'Thank you.'

He nods and the gate squeals when he closes it behind him.

'What did the man say to you, Robert?' Cecilia drips water down his back while he sits in the bath, picking at a scab on his knee. 'Don't fiddle with that.' She slaps his hand away with a cloth. Mia remembers that sting of a facecloth when she paid her scabs too much attention.

'Nothing.' Robert starts fiddling with another scab.

'Lord! How many times must I tell you not to fiddle with your scabs?'

He stops and lifts his eyes to her. They are the crushed green of mowed grass. 'Ma, I saw Dr Adler help put Baas Shit's shoulder back in place!' His voice comes alive with his new knowledge. 'That's where the man found me. He said something to Dr Adler and Baas Shit and they let me go with him.'

'What was wrong with his shoulder and who is Baas Shit?' Cecilia almost smiles – Mia sees it floating around the edges of her mouth – but she frowns instead.

'He discolated it.'

'Dislocated it, you mean.'

'Ja!'

'Yes.'

'Yes.'

'Who is Baas Shit?' Cecilia says the words as if they've coated her tongue with an unpleasant taste.

'He is the old man in charge of the sani-, um sani-'

'Sanitary department.'

'Yes and all the bucket boys. They call him Baas Shit.'

'I see. Robert, what is his real name?'

'Mr ... Ernest, I can't remember.'

'When we speak of Mr Ernest, we speak of him with respect. That means no more Baas Shit, do you understand me?'

'Ja-Yes, Ma.'

She soaps the rest of his back in silence and he doesn't notice Cecilia's smile of fondness. But Mia does.

Cecilia sees the man a week later when she is struggling to dig a hole in her garden. Her mother has given her a rose bush and she wants to get it in before the end of the weekend. She won't have time during the week when the children come to her for music lessons. Panting from the exertion and wiping the sweat from her forehead, she stands up to straighten her back and stretch her muscles. She has covered her netted hair with a handkerchief and has tucked her blouse into John's khaki shorts. She likes wearing his clothes, the fabric of which protected his body and she feels his presence strongly when she does. She has kept all his clothing; it reminds her that she isn't alone and that he was once a tangible presence in her life. She still speaks to him aloud, but without Robert hearing, asking him questions, discussing her thoughts, sharing her memories. Her eyes stray to the gate – she used to meet him every evening after work and linking her arm through his, they'd walk up the path to the kitchen where dinner would be waiting. The tall dark man is there in John's old place, watching her without sound or movement. It is then she knows.

Cecilia doesn't say anything when he opens the latch – it squeals dutifully – and walks toward her with the grace of a panther. He looks into her face for a moment before taking the spade from her hands and plunging it into the soil. Again and again, he drives it into the earth and the hole deepens further than she needs it. But she says nothing and doesn't interfere; she is hypnotised by the power in his back and arms. At last she touches one arm to stop him and her fingers are pale against the mahogany of his heated, forbidden skin. He leans on the spade and his deep eyes drill into her, as they sift the reef from the rocks. She lets her fingers slide into a grasp of his arm and her shock keeps them there. Mia can see how it must be exhilarating to be able to touch a man when Cecilia thought she never would again. The texture of his skin makes Cecilia feel alive instead of being buried in her own body, in her own life, in her own memories. Sweat trickles down her forehead onto her lips and she licks it away. He straightens and she obeys his order, letting her hand drop to her side. He lets her go inside before he follows.

Cecilia keeps him in the lounge. The bedroom belongs to John. Robert is with a friend and the noiselessness is loud with their muteness. The back of her legs collapse into a couch and with swift agility he is above her, pulling down the elastic of her shorts and undergarments. At first Mia sees Cecilia starting to push him off her, away from what has been only John's. Cecilia seems terrified of what this will mean for her, but then she doesn't appear to care. Whatever happens, at least it will drag her from this morass of bleakness and unending numbness. It will light within her something that has been blown out. He wants nothing from her and she wants nothing from him except a solitary feline copulation. She closes her eyes – perhaps she doesn't want to see him moving above her – and alone in the darkness he dominates the desiccated abyss inside her, as she calls out for John in a language he doesn't speak.

Afterwards, when he makes a move to get up and leave, she pulls on his arm to make him stay. He fills the room and she wants his company to last a while longer before she goes back into her bedroom and the deadly loneliness. He lies on his side on the couch, watching her, not smiling, and she rummages through her writing bureau for a sketch pad and pencil. She motions in a sign language that she wants to draw him and he doesn't protest. The pencil is sharp and scratches on the thick paper. She focuses on the key components of his long thin face, their essential shapes and the empty shapes. Mia imagines Cecilia viewing his face as translucent glass so she can conceptualise the hidden

angles and depths. Pencilling in his form lightly – pronounced upper lip, aqualine nose, deep-set eyes – Cecilia uses shading to give the picture Mia knows so well perspective and dimension. Mia wonders why she ignores his elongated earlobes; possibly she doesn't understand them. Cecilia draws two sketches and gives him one. The second she keeps in an envelope, which she doesn't open for anyone – only herself when the vultures start to circle.

When Cecilia misses her third period, she visits a new doctor in town, as far as she can get from where they know her. Noticing her wedding band, which she still wears, he confirms what he believes is happy news. If he is surprised at her frightened reaction, he says nothing, just pats her on the shoulder as she leaves. She wanders around town walking down Prince's Avenue and then up again, not knowing where to go or who to tell. She is shopping with her mother tomorrow, which gives her enough time to plan what to say. But there is one certainty. She must leave her home and the mine to hide away with her mother until after the baby is born. She doesn't think beyond that or beyond the shame.

Her second son is born at five in the morning on one of the iciest July days of the year. She names him Ben, as he tears out of her womb, yelling his discontentment. Her mother takes the baby away to wash him and returns him in a snowy blanket that emphasises his coffee skin, aqualine nose and pronounced upper lip. She doesn't look at him when she hands him to Cecilia to feed. Mom has already segregated herself from the child in the way the country expects. But Cecilia is captivated by his yawn, which twists his chin to the left of his face and scrunches up his eyes. She holds her new life in her arms.

Cecilia is admiring her sleeping child when the woman arrives. It is five days after his birth and she is still resting. She misses Robert who was sent to a friend of her mother's just before the birth and is looking forward to introducing him to his new brother.

'Cecilia, this is Mary Nkabinde.'

Cecilia stares up in shock. She has not expected this because she has not told her child's father anything about her pregnancy or the child's paternity, only her mother.

'She has come for her brother's child.' Mom's voice is brittle and frighteningly authoritative in a way that Mia has never heard before.

'My baby is going nowhere.' Cecilia lifts her chin, ice-cold to her core. 'I'm sorry you've come all this way.'

The woman, who is wearing a dusty coat and a scarf wrapped around her head, keeps her eyes downcast.

'Cecilia, there is to be no argument. You cannot rear this child. You are putting yourself and this family in grave danger. I will not permit it. I will not permit it, do you hear me? Think of Robert. Think of John!' Her mother's voice coats her like dirty snow. 'Think of Robert,' she repeats.

'No.' Cecilia shakes her head. 'NO!'

Her mother steps up to the bed and Cecilia holds Ben out of reach. 'No! NO! Don't take my baby!'

'Mary, take the child like I told you!' Her mother snaps, beckoning for the man who has been standing just outside the room.

'Don't take my baby! Please, no, please not my baby! No! NO! Don't take my baby....'

The needle finds the vein and when blackness starts to pervade, her child is leaving the room in another woman's arms. In the scene, Mia takes her grandmother into her arms and cradles her lovingly, but in the hospital bed when she opens her eyes, she wants to push her far away.

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Granny Cecilia is pale, but dry-eyed, as she assesses Mia. Mia feels slightly disorientated and blinded, as if she's just left the cinema. She shakes her head to let the new information sift into the facts she already has. She hopes everything mixes smoothly; she wants to avoid the formation of lumps. She supposes she'd better say something because her grandmother is waiting for a response. Her voice is scratchy to her own ears. 'How often did you see Ben? Did you keep in contact?'

Granny Cecilia fiddles with the noose of pearls around her neck and Mia can sense her grandmother's entrapments of then and now. 'There were laws The National Party came into power soon after than in 1948. I.... I mean I wanted.... I tried.... Ben was born

at the wrong time.' The last statement rushes out, surprising them both with its honesty, and she glares at Mia, daring her to judge.

'And his father?'

'You know....' Granny Cecilia blushes, but not daintily. The stain moves up from her chest and covers her neck and face in disjointed plum splotches. Surely you remember the segregation and pass laws. Mixed relationships were prohibited.... It's not like now,' Granny Cecilia says bitterly, as if the transition in the country was also born at the wrong time.

'Did you want to see them again? Did you love them?'

'I wasn't given a chance' Her grandmother's eyes stalk off into the sunset, but her face remains as a martyr to burn red in the torridness of the day. Her fingers snarl up together like tangled worms under a stepping stone lifted from the compressed soil.

'Why did you always act like a racist then?'

The streetwise eyes return reluctantly to a face where they don't belong. 'Did I? I didn't realise I was like that. I ... I suppose Maybe.... Perhaps I didn't want history to repeat itself. I didn't want to get hurt in the same way again.' She hasn't taken it as a slur against her character, which Mia presumes is because her grandmother has used racism as part of her disguise. Granny Cecilia has worked hard to achieve this perception.

'So didn't you see them at all?'

'They sent me the photograph when he was 21 years. I was so proud, so very proud.' The words sizzle in the raw wound that festers in Mia because she has never made her grandmother proud. Each question is becoming increasingly difficult to enunciate when she wants to scream and scream and scream. Her grandmother hasn't noticed; her glance is with Abigail.

'Did you meet?'

'No. The first time I saw Ben again was when you bit him in the Bunny Park. He was 41 by then and had a child, my granddaughter.' The simple statement momentarily winds Mia who would like to start hitting her grandmother, attacking her in the same way she repeatedly continues to hurt Mia.

'How ... did ... you ... feel?'

Her grandmother drags air through her lungs and it whistles out of her body. 'I spoke to him the next day. You see, I went back to check that he was still receiving my money I

sent money each month He said he had been saving it for his children one day because he felt they would need it more than he had. He was content working as a gardener, he said. He didn't want anything more for himself, although his wife did. They were living in Daveyton ... did you it was known as the Chevrolet Township of South Africa because of its wide collection of Chevrolets?

'Don't get distracted. Did you see him after that?'

Granny Cecilia burps softly and her hand reaches her mouth too late to contain it. 'I beg your pardon.'

'Did you see him after that?' Mia refuses to grant her grandmother any pardon.

'Only once. He told me he was moving to Cape Town with his child, Abigail. He wanted to give me a photograph of her. I think that is why he came to the house. I saw him with his wife, Priti, the day before their departure. Do you remember the church fête?'

Mia nods. 'How could I forget?'

'When Priti was introduced as Ben's wife before they left, I realised I had shouted at you for trying to befriend your own cousin at the church. I had never met Abigail, until then... and until now.' Her grandmother bows her head.

'Did you ever see or hear from any of them again?' Mia has no time for her grandmother's belated emotions now when her own are *toyì-toying* in protest.

'Royal was fighting against the government's scheme to make black people temporary visitors in a White South Africa, useful only to satisfy labour requirements. He was a silent worker behind the scenes with Oliver Tambo before Tambo went into exile.'

'Is Royal still alive?'

'No. He was killed during protestations in 1960.' She says it as if she's been practising the statement in her own head for many years to perfect the idea of it.

'You obviously didn't make much of an effort to make contact.'

'Now you listen here, young lady. Don't you dare presume to criticise me! I was terrified! Lord above, I was too scared to even try to see my child! My own flesh and blood! Mary, the woman who had my Ben, was involved in illegal beer brewing. I had to protect Robert! I believed I was powerless, you see. And how can you even think you understand, having led such a sheltered life. You know nothing,' she hisses, flicking her hands in the same way she dries them after pulling them out of washing-up liquid. Or when she flicks at insects on the kitchen table she hopes to disturb into leaving.

'Did Mom know this?' Mia refuses to enter a debate about the shelter of her life.

Granny Cecilia shakes her head resolutely. 'I never told her a thing again after the day she sent my baby away. I hope she's still turns in her grave to this day!'

'So why did you continue staying with her?'

'I moved out just after King George visited Benoni in 1947 with Queen Elizabeth and his two daughters, Elizabeth and Margaret. Such lovely frocks they wore. Did you know Benoni had three royal visits in 50 years?'

'You're getting distracted again.'

'What was your question?'

'Why did you invite Mom to live with us at times?'

'I knew you adored her. Besides, I didn't feel so confident in my own judgement anymore.'

'Granny Cecilia, I have always believed that you hate me.'

'I hated myself and what had been done to me. And the more I knew I was making you unhappy, the more I hated myself. You see, my baby was given back to me, but I was so filled with bitterness at Ben being taken away, subconsciously I was pushing you away too.' She lowers her eyes and studies her nail polish, her hands splayed in front of her face.

Then she reaches into her handbag to pull out a lipstick, which she starts to press on her rigid lips. Mia watches her grandmother closely, but she can identify none of the signs for which she's searching so desperately. There is nothing Granny Cecilia is prepared to share beyond her inwardly focused words.

'Why?'

'Because when your parents decided they wanted you back, I would lose my baby again.'

She looks up and her expression orders Mia to believe that.

'... That's pathetic! You're pathetic! You selfish, selfish old bat!' Mia is livid. 'My parents never came for me, so why didn't you stop pushing me away? How could you do that to me? You could have tried, damn you! You could have tried!'

Granny Cecilia, her hand moving to her throat, maintains her composure, despite the ssshhhh's heading their way. 'I knew I had to become a cold and distant human being with no feelings so no one would ever reach or hurt me again.'

'Well you certainly achieved that! You were probably BORN a cold and distant human being!'

Her grandmother says nothing, but lovingly caresses John's old tie on her handbag, as if she's trying to absorb his unruffled strength to cope with the situation. Mia wants to shout that's why her grandfather went away and got killed, but she can't quite bring herself to become a vicious virago. 'Why were you so angry when I found the envelope in the album? Why didn't you tell me then? Why did you always make me feel like I was an evil unwanted person doing evil unwanted things? What for? Did you get some kind of perverse thrill out of killing my spirit like yours had been?'

'Secrets were my only cover.' Her grandmother, Mia realises suddenly, cannot be anything other than a statue of a swan adrift on a lake, tolerating the water's frozen temperature. Outwardly serene and calm, Granny Cecilia refuses to share her inner mayhem beyond the surface she presents. Because of this, she certainly cannot offer herself for comfort or reassurance. She doesn't have it to give. Statues are too cold and hard and dead for that. 'That's it? That's all you're prepared to say?'

'It is.'

'Does my father know about any of this?'

'No.'

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When Mia wakes from her sleep, she is alone except for Abigail's strong presence. She steers past the idea of them as future friends the way Granny Cecilia used to drive past the airport so Mia could admire the largeness of aircraft parked so close to the highway. She is in awe of the idea and lets the powerful impression take off along the runway of her imagination. Like many motorists, she's always been curiously stirred by the sleek, shining aircraft preparing to land just beyond the highway that ushers vehicles to Witbank. If she's in the area, she always tries to glance up in time to catch the flash of an aircraft underbelly when it soars over Wild Waters before descending and disappearing. Sometimes she shares the emotions of passengers preparing to hit the ground at speed.

Sarah is approaching with two doctors so Mia shuts her eyes again. She really isn't in the mood for their assessments. Their footsteps pause at her bed. 'You've been monitoring her HR and rhythm throughout the thrombolytic administration?' The man's

question is more of a command. Sarah murmurs something about an ECG machine and blood pressure monitoring. ‘No contraindications or allergic reactions?’ Another question command. ‘Why aren’t the emergency trolley and defibrillator closer at hand throughout the infusion?’ Sarah mumbles something about other more critical patients. ‘Are these her latest vitals?’ He must be looking at a chart and mutters something about assessing the need for heparin therapy graduating to oral warfarin in preparation for discharge.

The woman speaks for the first time. ‘Has she been told to remain in this supine position? Does she know the risk of haemorrhage is maximal in the first 24 hours? Is she complaining of any pain?’

‘Are you taking over from Dr van der Webner?’ Sarah speaks out, almost protectively over Mia, at this onslaught of unprecedented interest.

‘We are her parents.’

Mia’s eyes snap open to see the stern grey-haired man watching her through her own eyes, but different in their reflection of arrogance. The woman is heavily perfumed with Amarige and her hair – similar to Mia’s, but more processed – is styled in flicked-out layers around her face and shoulders. She wears rimless glasses. They stand still and say nothing, as they wait for her to speak. They don’t smile. She turns her face away and squeezes her eyes tight to make them vanish in a snow storm. ‘These are not my parents, Sarah. They’re not even my doctors. Please take them to my cousin Abigail in the bed over there. I’m sure my grandmother would be so grateful.’

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Abigail knows something is badly wrong and that she should be able to move or speak by now. Why when she wants to participate in life instead of acting like she doesn’t is she forced to be immobile? She can hear them around her, blanketing her in love, but she can’t reach out to them like they need her to. She can feel her Pa’s calloused hand in hers, rubbing her thumb repeatedly. Her mother is here too and her mothers, Miss Millie and Miss Zoë. Lyndal comes and goes, as he always has. Their flowing voices mingle and separate, mingle and separate. There is someone else here she doesn’t know, but who seems acquainted with her. This person with milky breath keeps croaking that she must be

brave and strong, that's she's so sorry, so very sorry. The person – she thinks it's a woman because she feels a velvety hand on her cheek – has a voice that has become hoarse from too much recent speaking. Their presence is an ephemeral umbrella over her bed, which she upturns to float and carry her over the walls of waves.

The squirrel leaps out at her from the plate, its tail a question mark, its eyes slanted and beautiful. She lets the paint drip from the brush to give its fur the texture and colour of liquid fudge. The animal makes her happy and she wants the person who painted the other plates to share the sensation of flying. She remembers leaving her plate with the others for collection so the artist would receive her message. She moves into the image now, to lift herself away from the pain that is defeating her body, and together with the squirrel, she runs through a rainbow.

Inside the rainbow, a woman with a bobbed hairstyle is waiting on a dune. She is wearing a nightgown tie-dyed in the swirls of a seafood cocktail, a silver locket around her neck and sheepskin slippers on her feet. Abigail wonders who she is and picks up the squirrel to hold its squirming body close to her heart. A dog bounds up to her, paws and muzzle wet from the sea, and with delighted surprise Abigail reaches to scratch Bulldozer's silky ears while the squirrel jumps on to her shoulder. The woman isn't moving and Abigail tries to identify her, but has no clues to help her. She can hear voices getting further and further away until there is silence, but this woman says nothing. And then she smiles with such love and welcome, Abigail steps forward to take her outstretched hand. It is as light as a snowflake.

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