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Harrow: A Collection of Fiction

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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.

Signature: Charles Cilliers Date: 18/5/05

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Abstract

The subject matter of the two short stories and one short novel in this dissertation, if one could call it that, vary widely. There are, however, overriding themes of fantasy and surrealism throughout, for each of the narratives ask of the reader to disengage from certain axioms of how the world works.

The first story, *The Other Ellis*, deals with a character's struggle to come to terms with the possibility that he may be the only person hearing hidden messages in the music of a particular composer. He becomes convinced that the composer has a terrible secret.

The major portion of work for this dissertation, *Slumber*, is a short novel that explores a science fiction theme, but is written in a style closer to suspense/horror. Once the first chapter closes, each successive chapter presents the reader with a different viewpoint character who wakes from frightful nightmares, which seem to have a primary antagonist: a murderer with eerie, unearthly power. Using something like a Russian doll structure, the novel deals with the effects of an inflicted madness, murder and punishment, the difference between reality and mere sensory perception and a, perhaps inevitable, technology that will change our lives and thoughts. Furthermore, a strong theme is present in the idea that cruelty often springs from the inability to have imaginative empathy for the lives of others. Stories can be ways to experience lives vicariously, but perhaps some day there will also be other ways. The brutality of certain sections of the work was written almost unavoidably, since the reader must, of necessity, experience every waking moment of each character's day and ultimately this involves very unpleasant encounters with the murderer. The novel closes with an argument that sketches, roughly, a debate that might spring from a

confrontation with some of the novel's themes. Spliced between this argument is another tale, also a final irony.

The final short story deals with something like an urban legend/tall tale, which could indeed be true. The reader is left with the disquieting suggestion that an old man has perhaps accidentally sold his soul for a herbal infusion.

University of Cape Town

The Other Ellis

The pin is pressed in at the point that I entered a music-shop and heard, for the first time, a composition by Richard Ellis.

Anyone who's heard it knows that the great composer writes in sad, broken staccato rhythm – it has made one critic think of a rabbit with one leg shot off, still attempting to hop. Like a Thomas Hardy poem, the jovial tone simply masks a greater sorrow, made more poignant by an attempt at cheerfulness.

A plastic case was produced at my enquiry, with entirely black packaging, the name RICHARD ELLIS printed in Braille-like red dots on the cover. On the back of it was the image of a black rose, blue dewdrops on the leaves forming the composer's name.

I had enough money to buy it; and that is when my strange intoxication by music began.

If you were to browse my collection, you would see various titles of the standard and not-so-standard variety; but you would not see an Ellis. I have six discs with his name on them, but they are hidden away in a box at the very back of a cupboard like a dirty secret. I have often considered throwing the recordings away but cannot.

It was some time after I had bought that first Richard Ellis disc that the bad dreams began, and then the voice itself started to echo in my mind until I felt that it came from the music. It reached the point that I could sit and listen to and understand the various melodies as if they were nothing less than a perfectly comprehensible language. It took me some time to hear the girl speak. In the beginning meaning was broken into fragments: shadow images of a stygian basement, echoes of music,

pleasures and pains; of a girl in a wheelchair, concentrating on writing, crouched over a desk. But the meaning grew ever more refined, and became a story. I listened to the memoirs of a girl and, later, a young woman.

Often enough I have tried to translate the messages of the music into language, but the result is always a diminished product. I attempt though, and it works best if one reads the words while listening to the sad staccato to give an indication of the constant play of emotion and meaning. In thousands of years, perhaps, all of us will communicate by rhythm and melody but, for now, I am constrained by a pattern of words.

I have tried to outline the meaning. These are my words but not my thoughts, my narrative but not my tale. I am the prophet, perhaps, of a goddess of music whose name is not Euterpe (the muse of music and, appropriately enough, lyrical poetry). Her name is Louisa.

I lie in my citadel of stone and my father comes to me, like a god to his first Adam, but I am a lonesome Eve. When I touch him I wonder if others will be anything the same. I often dream of these faces from magazines, films and books, transplanted on my father's head as they speak my name and reach for me.

But they terrify. These oblique faces always have him behind them. He turns, and I see his ears and hair, while in front someone famous grins a plastic smile.

I have seen him standing over me in the faint light from another room and watched as he speaks, while his head appears to expand in my field of vision. Like a frame-shot in a film, the outline of his wild hair is all I see.

He dreads that the castle's visitors will somehow know that I am here. But how can they? I am the ghost.

...

A moth distracts. It has landed on the page, to be very still, as if the touch of the paper is enough to paralyse or kill it. It is silver like money and I marvel at this small gift, thin as paper, with the heavy weight of life.

I have read that weight is relative. Mass, of course, is not easily changed. The scientist will let you know that your mass is so many Newton grams and that is all. Of course, it can be adjusted, with effort, but it is your mass, a constant that you can trust, love and hate.

Your weight is another matter. It changes, from world to world and in subtler ways. For there have been days of sombre heaviness and others of rapt lightness. All within the walls of this grey citadel of stone. There are many ways to escape weight.

I read once of a man who spent half a lifetime in a coma. His mind could move, in time, beyond his useless body and so go from place to place, seeing family and friends, more of the world, and then later even space, peering at the surface of strange planets, meeting brilliant life forms, and finally even the Creator, to whom he spoke, and who provided a tour of The Great Handiwork.

But afterwards, he said, he was happy to open real eyes again and see the world through their imperfect focus. "I missed walking the dog," he told those who bothered to listen. The experts dismiss him as a crackpot, claiming he borrowed most of his tale from a novel by Olaf Stapledon.

Ever since, I have been nagging father for a dog, and I think he will relent, though he says he would prefer a cat. "Can you walk a cat?" I ask him.

A small dog is all I require, to sit it upon my lap and have it lick my hand. Then I will close my eyes and pretend to walk it.

The moth in my hand lets me remember. Life has weight, and this moth, whose presence in my palm can never force it down, has a weight in a place where things

like paper and pens do not. In this place of Life the desk I sit at will float, acted upon by nothing, but this moth will drop, like all things living.

So as the moth settles again I hit it with a book. On the paper is a stain, of what was so very recently life itself. There is not much difference, in the end, between a living organism and a few choice chemicals.

...

I think sometimes of screaming, on the chance that a visitor will hear me. But, more likely, I will merely give credence to the superstition that this old building has a ghost. I read that once about this place. So I maintain silence, and give expression to feelings in another way. I wonder if father will ever come to know about this, how secrets have a way of taking on strange voices of their own. When the wind blows through the reeds the voices of the truth whisper forth. Perhaps even the buried bodies of victims grow into trees some day, with their faces in the woodwork. I look at the wood panelling in my prison, and in the top of this old, oak desk, and I see myriad screaming faces trapped in the longitudinal lines of tree-growth, distorted by time. Perhaps these are the souls of young men slain on battlefields, remembered by the wood their erased bodies once gave life to.

A silly notion that, at best. Ubiquitous faces are the trademark of human life: a natural thing, after all, when you're born to recognise faces. When faces to the child are the most important thing. No wonder the face-fixation follows us into old age. We see even a face on Mars, staring back, across the void.

I see many faces, but there is truly only one.

Today, father told me something more of himself. Normally, he is a shut book, though he speaks of many things: science, mathematics, history, philosophy ... all there is to learn for a human being. I am his student of life, who never truly lives. But when it comes to personal details there is a space below his name, where the form

has been left unfilled. He is ashamed of himself, I believe, and attempts to cloak his identity in a veil of the unsaid.

It was after he had lain me out on the bed that he lay beside me in the faint light of the lava lamp, and told me of his visitors. They are two: a woman and her son. She is from his past, the boy from hers. He claims that he loved this woman for years, though she left him for no reason properly provided, and he was never the same for it. He says, though, that seeing this lost love now, again, after all this time, is nothing as he pictured it. Time has made of a lost arm (that itches, or itched, nevertheless) nothing but fleshless bone, and the woman repulses him now. She has come to him, seeking help, and kindness, but in vain. For they have been here three days and father has resolved to kick her out. "She cannot stay here," he says. "There is no room."

Father and I are the only souls in this great edifice of twenty bedrooms. There is, indeed, no room.

I think of screaming, sometimes, but I am the ghost.

...

When I press father on why he will not let me leave, he produces the particular dismissive look that he has cultivated for precisely this question.

"It is too dangerous ... outside," he claims.

"It does not seem that bad," I counter.

"It is. You are better off in here. With me."

Trying to argue this point with him is useless. I raise it now and then, just to test. Perhaps one day I will ask him and he will look up and reply: "Yes Louisa. You are right, of course. I cannot hide my daughter from the world," and he will lift me from my wheelchair and carry me up the steps, and out the front door into sunlight. In this dream my grandmother waits in the garden, pruning a rosebush, and when she

sees me she smiles and gives me a red flower. I remember granny, in a way that I struggle somehow to remember mother. Perhaps, for the mind of a little child, it is easier to remember the lined and wrinkled face of a grandmother, than the unbroken contours of a smooth, mother-face. The mind needs more creases to hang onto, perhaps.

The day it all began (or ended) mother snatched me up and bundled me into the car, much as if I was another hastily packed luggage case.

She was crying when father rushed up from behind in his car. Hitting it into us ... over and again, until finally there was the crash. And I remember little else.

When I woke again it was to his face. And since then his has been the only, bar one other, which I saw but once. When it came I was thirteen (had been this way for eight years) and still I cannot place this strange man (and father will not tell); he was astonished to see me:

“I say. What’s this?”

I was stunned, and stared, to be seeing another human being.

Given more of a chance I would have spoken, but father came then, grabbed the little man by the collar and pulled him out with his screams of loud protest. I cannot say what followed.

...

After the crash father nursed me back to health, taking care to clean my wounds. There was little pain, because, below the waist, all sensation had gone. During the long period of nursing father began the ritual of cleaning that he still performs on me each day. I could sense all and feel nothing.

When the feeling began its return, it became my first secret. Perhaps I will escape with it.

I read once of a woman in New Zealand who tried to break the world record for most time spent leaning against a wall. In the hour before she finally achieved this her husband handed her a towel to wipe the sweat of exertion from her face. She took the towel with the wrong hand. So I am wary of instinctive response. Father must never be given the merest hint that I can simply stand up and stumble off.

And one day, I might.

The more I listened, the clearer it became. It was impossible, almost, to think of anything else. I told no one.

I listened to as many of the Ellis discs as I could find, and then there were only four. The very first I could not understand at all. The second was different – every so often, I would perceive the voice whispering; a dozen words or less. It shook me. I played the melodies to all I knew, studying their faces for a twitch of recognition at the right time, but succeeded only in alarming them.

By the time the fourth recording was in my hands it was quite clear. The fifth was even clearer, but the last, the sixth, was of a frustrated mind, once more reduced to monosyllabic pleas.

Over and over, the CDs spun.

Richard Ellis himself was in his forties and had found recognition only in his late thirties, the sources told, with his small pieces for guitar. He was recognised as one of the finest of new talents and each new composition was awaited eagerly. A misanthrope, he did not offer or accept invitations for interviews. After the death of his wife and daughter Ellis had locked himself away in a big family house on the slopes of Table Mountain, refusing contact with anyone but servants and the occasional visitor. In what I took to be too much of a coincidence, there was a report

of Ellis's therapist, an old friend, suffering a fatal heart attack one afternoon in a therapy session with Ellis himself.

Friends and family had largely given up on contact with the big, depressive man. Then, after ten years, the music started to emerge, and Richard Ellis grew into light with it. He would attend his concerts but refused to conduct, regardless of the pleas, and conductors with hopes of merely gaining advice from the great composer learned to keep their questions to themselves. Ellis refused to speak a word about his music or much else, for that matter.

Further delving produced the following, I believed to be rather damning, fact: that when Richard Ellis' wife and daughter had slipped off the edge of a ravine their car had exploded, charring the two bodies to the point that Ellis himself had been asked to identify them. Nowhere, in all the stories, was I able to determine the daughter's name, much as I was desperate to confirm it. But I had read enough. What mystery remains is overshadowed by what seems obvious confirmation.

It is not nearly enough, though. I play the CDs like an amnesiac searching for important fragments of memory, every time recognising what I might have missed before. The messages continue to develop and I hear facets of the voice, like flashes of a spinning diamond.

There is hardly a clear plan of what to do. I have sought a number to Richard Ellis's phone, but he is, not surprisingly, unlisted. Not that I think phoning the man is an option: I have established an address. I see myself searching his big house, eventually finding a secret entrance in a library or hallway, opening it, and discovering Louisa's world, where she writes the incredible music that haunts me. Failing that, I see myself forcing the presumptive composer to prove his ability only to have him confess to me that he is indeed incapable of putting five notes to paper in

any way approaching genius. I have hardly considered the alternative: that I am insane.

Yet it is the alternative, and tomorrow I will take a bus to the sea, and try to find the other Ellis. My things are packed, and the ticket is ready. Soon, perhaps, I will know. I cannot sleep, not tonight, not with all of this crowding into me.

Music then: softly whispering, calling and tempting. Till the sun rises, I will listen.

University of Cape Town

Slumber

There's a science fiction in the space between ...

you and me

- From Telling Stories, by Tracy Chapman

What you fear in the night

In the day comes to call anyway

- From Einstein on the Beach, by The Counting Crows

Prologue

They had come to fetch him this morning from the cell: the place where he was hidden from the anger of the world, or so he thought of it. They'd given him a good meal. His favourite: russians, egg, toast and peppadews. He didn't know how they knew this strange combination was his favourite meal, but they knew. They injected him with something bright blue. He watched it draining into him from the syringe.

University of Cape Town

Primum Somnium

It was a Saturday. As she lay in bed Jennifer thought of her homework for Monday. There was trigonometry, which she still had to get the better of, a dialogue of some kind for English, and a biology test. It seemed unfair to her to set a test for Monday, but they'd upset their teacher on Friday afternoon. He was a nervous, black-haired little man whose diagrams of the insides of earthworms, bugs and plants were like abstract works only loosely inspired by the pictures in the textbook. Answering test questions when he'd done the drawings required some deal of imagination. And by Monday his anger would be forgotten, she was sure. Since they hadn't done anything really reprehensible, such as torturing frogs, breaking a microscope, playing with formaldehyde or something equally dangerous, it seemed like a petty punishment. They simply hadn't shut up, during the last period of a school week. What had the man expected?

She stood up and stretched, then went to raise her blinds. It was still very early, and there wasn't much light to admit. One of her window blinds was broken and she hadn't been able to shut it. Her father had said he'd take a look at it, but he'd been too busy, as only fathers seem, and then often only to themselves, she thought. She was sure to undress away from the open blinds each night, because she knew you could look straight into her room from the school field. Now that she was growing breasts she had a different sense of self. Though she was only filling out a little, she felt a little less awkward and boyish. All the running she'd been doing would probably not be helping in the looks department, but that didn't bother her too much. She picked up yesterday's clothing that still lay on the floor and threw it into her laundry basket near the door. Her room wasn't very large, but there was space for a double bed, a small homework desk, with its study lamp clamped to the edge, and a

large bookshelf filled mostly with tales of fantasy and adventure novels. On the wall in front of the desk was a student map of the world, and on the wall behind it a poster with a fairy sketched in profile, decorated in a faded art-nouveau style. Beside it, perhaps incongruously, was the long, ghoulish face of Marilyn Manson, a gift from Claire. There was also an old poster of *The Lord of the Rings* on a cupboard door, rune-style handwriting intoning sombrely about how many rings there were and where they came from, and how just one would bind and rule them all in the land of darkness. Her collection of cuddly toys was bunched up in one corner around an old reed chair with cushions and a mirror behind it. One of the cuddly toys had been a present from her ex boyfriend. She had buried it, a grey elephant, underneath all the others and it could not be seen. In the other corner, on the carpet, was a small black and white TV with an old 8-bit games console that she still played *Mario Bros.* on once in a while. The TV had horrible reception, and she liked hitting it with the flat of her hand, which often helped. There was a round, white light fitting in the centre of her ceiling, a graveyard for flies. They lay in a black ring at the bottom of the globe. Over the speckled, grey and white carpet her mother had thrown a soft, white woollen mat which still needed a clean since Hondo, Jennifer's Alsatian, had slept on it two nights before after getting caught in rain. Jennifer's mother had taken one look at the mat and said, "Missy, I hope you know who's going to clean this." Jennifer had looked at the carpet and thought that she could live with it. It was a bit like the flies.

She stood before her mirror now, doing stretches. She had trim brown hair and pale skin with freckles. She knew she wasn't beautiful, but in the right light she could admire herself without too much dismay. She sometimes wished herself more beautiful, instead of somewhat lank and scrawny, but she had settled on a dream for herself that didn't require good looks, and that dream was to be an athlete, perhaps even a great one. At times, the thought seemed ridiculous, but it was something she

felt she could possibly do, and perhaps any success at all would mean something. She was young, and the potential for many things was still a sour sap in her veins, relatively untouched by sun and time. She knew the value of private thoughts, and she considered this something she wouldn't share with others, not until they noticed for themselves, if at all, because to actually say it would lessen it, or have it snatched from her.

The earliest memory of school that she cared for was of coming last in a race. The memory was quite simple. She was six years old, bunched up with several other children, looking across an uneven stretch of playground lawn to a thread of wool between two sticks some distance away. They'd had to take off their shoes and socks, which lay in clumps on the grass, some of the socks draped over the sides like moulted skin. The other little girls seemed less anxious, and some were laughing at boys running on the playground's other side. Jennifer noticed one who wasn't laughing though, an Indian girl who had crossed her arms to pout and look down at her bare feet. It was Claire, and she took the other's looking at her to be an invitation to speak. In a sulky tone, she said she wouldn't race if she didn't want to. Jennifer recalled that the girl could draw a little more nicely than the other girls. She remembered that. She wanted to ask her, "So what's the matter with running?" when a teacher in a floral-print dress lined them up and told them to listen for the whistle, whereupon they should run as fast as possible for the wool. Jennifer focused on the indistinct line, wondering if running into it would feel like anything at all. In hardly any time she was behind the pack of children and she threw back her head in an instinctive attempt to squeeze anything more from herself. A grey blanket of cloud spun, as if descending for a moment, and then the brief experience was over.

Yet, it was something that stayed with her from then on, like an imprint. She remembered the wool, and the feeling of not having enough, no matter how much you

willed it. It would come to symbolise many things for her, though the experience was, in the greater context of things, perfectly humble and mundane. To Jennifer, though, it would become the sound of laughter behind a locked door. She remembered hearing the girl who had won asking if she could have the piece of wool, so that her mother could knit it into a jersey for her, a winning jersey. She couldn't remember if the teacher had given it to her.

True to her word, Claire hadn't run at all. She'd walked slowly, taking a path on the outside of the one the girls had just been on, as if distancing herself from the whole thing. Joining the group of girls again, the teacher told her she'd have to join the next group and run with them.

"I don't want to run," Claire told her, calmly, as if declining a cup of tea.

"Why not?"

"I just don't. Thank you."

"Okay," the teacher said, without any fuss. Jennifer wondered if perhaps it was because the girl was an Indian, and the teacher wasn't really sure of what to say to her.

"You came last," Claire told her, without any cruelty.

"But you didn't even bother."

"Better than coming last."

"I don't think so."

It was perhaps not the friendliest of opening remarks, but they had stayed together for the rest of the day, had talked and swapped sandwiches and then arranged to sit beside each other in class. Not too long after they'd had visits and sleepovers. Jennifer had never worked up the courage to be in another race, at least not a race of the remotest seriousness. And, of course, no one had ever tried to force her to run again.

All that had been nine years before, and she was fifteen now. The thought of losing stayed with her like something badly digested and in her system for far too long. She had been last, though she had really tried. She'd often tried to tell herself that winning a run was hardly a big deal, but she found herself unable to clear the conviction that this was something she had to do, or die trying. She wanted to win.

Her thoughts were on the athletics meeting at the end of the month. There would be qualifiers. She was training for them, and had been for some time. She refused to think about what would happen, or how she would feel, if she tried again, nine years later, only to see a clump of backs and shoe-soles, accelerating from her. It was the reason she hadn't told anyone. If anyone knew how important this had become to her, the thought of an idle word of sarcasm from someone would be like glass in her eye.

She had a stack of magazines and manuals and she had circled all the exercises that appealed to her, particularly the difficult ones. She did them on the school field and the grandstand steps behind her house, climbing over the concrete wall and walking the few paces to the track. When her parents had wanted to move to a better house two years ago, Jennifer had set her heart on this one. On carols night last year the three of them had sat out on the back porch and watched the grandstand of the school shimmering in lambent light, full of young voices singing. Last year was the first time that Jennifer hadn't been one of those candlelights swaying on the concrete steps. Her high school was a fifteen-minute walk away now. Yet, even now, if she could, she would go and sit on the grandstand and watch the younger ones when she could. She'd been a cheerleader in her final year, dressed up in a skirt and brandishing pompoms, but had hated it from the start, having done it only to please a teacher, so that in the end she'd been relieved to leave primary school to others. The cheerleaders, in their bright little skirts, and shapelier figures, had been something

apart from her. In their world, she wasn't beautiful enough, didn't get invited to the good parties and was hardly someone to parade in front of the school in an outfit that seemed to mock her not quite, but almost, gangly arms and legs. Even Claire had made a joke about it, so that Jennifer had quit after the second attempt, with hardly a word from the teacher who'd talked her into it in the first place. A different school seemed like an invitation to change yourself, to improve, even though many of the same children had moved on to the same place with her.

As for Claire, her parents had finally given in to her pestering and sent her to an art school in Greyton, a small town in the southern mountains, where she could sing, play violin, dance and sculpt and paint – and whatever more. What she'd been waiting and longing for. It was perfect for her, and she seemed happy there. They still wrote regularly and phoned every so often, Claire informing Jennifer that she'd been an idiot not to join her in the secluded beauty and nurturing silence of the school. She told her of the talented teachers and their arty students. "Some of the guys walk around for days in girls' clothing and makeup," Claire wrote once, half seriously, as if this was a good thing. In the morning, she wrote, the mist would hang on the lip of their school's little hill. "And it feels like you're floating." They'd made plans to meet for the holidays, but it didn't seem definite. Claire's parents, who were a great deal older than Jennifer's, had retired and moved to Greyton, though Claire refused to go and live with them. "I can't leave the hostel," she wrote. "These people are my friends. They're more like me. I think I'd end up stabbing the old dears in their sleep if they dragged me out of here." So it was doubtful that Claire would ever be coming back to Angerby, and Jennifer didn't much like the thought of riding out to Claire's world for a whole holiday, to live with the stab worthy parents. Even if she did, she and Claire would probably not be off hiking through the Greyton wilderness, hiring kayaks to paddle them up to near some river's source, pitching tents in forest

clearings to listen to owls and barking jackals. Instead, they would be doing Claire's sort of thing, spending time in dusty little rooms listening to violins, comparing poems and paintings and laughing at effeminate boys in skirts. Or something of that sort, though Jennifer was aware she wasn't giving her friend enough credit. And there probably wouldn't be too many boys in skirts during a school holiday anyway. Yet, somehow, she still felt more remote from Claire than before. They hadn't really seen that much of each other in over a year. Her best friend: a complement, or perhaps just a viable opposite.

A few days before, Jennifer had read a letter from her, which had left her with a hollow feeling, because it was clear that Claire had found a boyfriend and then slept with him. Of course, she knew many at school who were already doing it, but this was a little different. Jennifer had had a boyfriend herself at the start of the year, had in fact hooked up with him after the failed cheerleading gig, but he'd stopped coming around after three weeks. He'd been quite plain, a bit spotty and thin, and had walked around with a slouch, but he'd brought her chocolates and come around to listen to CDs and talk about his life and how once he and some friends had played with a ouija board and spoken to a demon or a ghost. Jennifer had figured he was lying, but she had played along because he'd been interesting in his own way. He'd kissed her one afternoon after school, in her bedroom, and then tried to get his hand up her skirt. She'd felt him trying to make sense of things in there, but then panicked and pushed him off. When she'd seen him again at school he'd been sheepish and somehow unable to talk, so without formality or excuse the visits had stopped. She'd felt half inclined to tell him that she missed them, but she hadn't, thinking that perhaps there would be a better time for it. All so unlike Claire, who'd gone as far as she liked with a guy, and he was three years older as well. It produced a wry smile from Jennifer as

she thought of Claire's all too proper parents in their arranged marriage. If they ever knew.

Outside, the birds were chirruping. Through the broken blind she could see that the rain of the night before had stopped and there was faint sunlight filtering through the branches of the oak out in the yard. Good, she thought. Better go for a run now, while it's cool. On went her black ski pants, training bra, small white T-shirt and Nikes. In went two bananas and a glass of orange juice. She gave Hondo an ugly kiss on the snout. The dog whined ungratefully. She tapped its snout, filled the dog bowl with pellets, and waited for the garage doors to wind up. She stretched in the driveway and set off gently, just to get into rhythm.

She crossed the street and was heading for the big hill some time later, on the other side of which were the large, sprawling gardens and houses of the super rich. Running up the hill was always a great slog, but she managed it well today, ran down past a weapon museum and then the school that was their biggest local competitor in the athletics. She was still breathing well. The traffic light, at the three-way intersection, was at the end of the long, downhill bend. This was her favourite part, because it injected a sense of unpredictability into her run, whenever she took this route. The road she was on carried the least traffic, as it went to the houses of the rich, so the traffic light that faced it stayed green for the shortest space of time and remained red the longest. If it was red she would veer to the left, carry on along a few suburban roads, take another left eventually at the circle, pass the Presbyterian church, run along the length of her old school grounds, and be home. But if the light was green then she could cross over and run through the park, which was verdant and green at this time of year, with squirrels and doves, along past tiers of flowers, the old concrete water fountain and then the zoo with its pungent wild smells, where she could pass monkeys in the backs of their cages, until finally she came to the public

swimming pool. Just being in the park gave her energy enough for a longer run and then she would run through a shopping centre, reaching her house from the other side. She rarely ran this route because the traffic light was seldom in favour of it. But as she approached it, though, something happened.

Everything about her disappeared. She was suddenly running on nothing that her eyes could see. Her feet continued to move for the moment, but there was the distinct feeling of an endless expanse of void. She panicked, suddenly and utterly displaced, all reference points gone, but she remained, just the same, her hands where they always were, at the ends of her arms, her legs pumping at nothing, without the sensation of falling, and without the impact of ground. Then, just as suddenly, she was back on the road.

She'd been running on, and was now standing, utterly immobile, in the middle of the traffic intersection. A car drove past her closely. It had had to swerve to miss her. Then another came past, but still she was too dazed to react. She heard a car horn and an angry shout, and then she was moving again, trying to register where all the cars were. She moved out of the intersection, her heart pounding and her body beginning to feel the headiness of adrenaline. She found a grassy verge on the kerb and sat down on it as if afraid she'd be falling into nothing, sucked out of the colours and smells and sounds of everything. She stared at the tar and the little stones that had collected on the side of the road. It was all there, hard and real. How long had the episode lasted? Seconds. And she'd just kept running. In nothing, and then into everything.

A truck came past her then, belching black and oily exhaust smoke. The acrid gas enveloped her and she held her breath till the greasy fumes cleared somewhat. She stood up and had to admit that she still felt fine, and that the episode seemed quite unreal to her now, fading like a dream whose reality bled from the mind as soon as the

sun, the world and all its people and things came along to scrub it off. After a moment, she started to run again, uncertainly at first, but then normally. She figured that if the front gates to the old school were open she could go in, run along the corridors, take the short cut across the sports field, and then scale the wall into her yard. She imagined trying to tell someone about what she'd felt, but she didn't quite have the words for it. But if anything like that happened again, she would say something.

She reached school, and still didn't feel too tired. She'd only started running properly under a year ago. Her mother told her not to overdo it, but by now she was getting used to her daughter's habit of running without much routine. The woman wanted her to find someone to run with, because it would be safer, but Jennifer hadn't been able to come up with anyone, and didn't really like the thought. She'd been given some pepper spray, but mostly forgot to take it. It was a bother to run with, even though there was a small pouch for it in her running pants.

The school gates were open and there were two people on the track's nearer side, under the rugby poles, and she slowed her running a bit, recognising one of them, a boy called Brett Trapp. He'd got national colours for the 100 metres and was going to the IAAF World Youth Championships. He'd also probably slept with all the cheerleaders in the school if you could believe the rumours. If you believed some of the more outrageous ones you could even include one or two teachers. He was seventeen and the most attractive boy Jennifer had ever met. Tall and athletic, like a model in a coaching manual, he was warming up with his coach, leaning on one of the steel poles. He said hello as she ran past and she returned it, breathless after the run.

"Come for a train?" he asked. His coach was leafing through a training manual.

“No. My train’s already left,” she said loudly, still running, and wondered at herself immediately, feeling the pitch in her stomach. Stupid thing to say, perhaps.

He laughed. “I’m sure you have *some* steam left.” Now she stopped, and put her hands on her knees.

“Fresh out of coal. Really.”

“You’re in my school. I’ve seen you.” It was between statement and question and she just nodded. “Are you planning on running at the meet? For the school, maybe?”

No one had ever asked her this before.

“Yes.”

“Great. What?”

She frowned, still trying to catch her breath. “Excuse me?” This was the last person with whom she’d ever expected to have a real conversation.

“What you going to run?”

“Oh. 800 metres, I guess.”

“Hmmm, tough one.”

“I’ve been training really hard.” That sounded stupid too, she thought, and, with a bit more fire, said, “So what isn’t tough?”

He nodded. “Everything’s tough, just like everything doesn’t have to be, if you know what you’re doing.”

He stopped stretching on the pole and took off his jacket. He dropped down and started to stretch on the ground, grabbing at his toes and counting silently. He looked up at her with an impish smile. She noticed his eyes were green, almost blue. If he let his hair grow a bit it would be straight and black.

“So what’re you doing here?” he asked.

“I live over there,” she said, pointing. He looked.

“Oh. My coach lives over on that side,” and he pointed over Jennifer’s head. “That’s why I’m here. Normally we train on the rubber track, but coach just had a baby and so we don’t stray too far from the den. But he’ll get back to normal soon. We hope.” He punched the coach lightly as he finished.

“Wow.” She looked at the slightly portly, balding man, whose eyes disappeared in an enormous grin.

“Little girl,” he said, closing his book. “She’ll bring home the gold some day.”

“Coach is evil,” Brett said. “Probably have his daughter on a treadmill when she’s nine months, running with weights on the ankles when she’s two.”

The coach laughed. “You could be a runner,” he said, examining Jennifer.

“See what I mean?” Brett laughed.

“No. Really,” the coach said. “I’ll see you next week, eh?” He smiled broadly. “Maybe you need a coach.”

“Enough marketing already,” Brett joked and prodded him. He looked at Jennifer. “Good luck for next week then.”

“You too.” Not like you need it, she thought, and then the two men in front of her disappeared. She turned around, and looked about the sports field, but she was alone. She went over to where they’d been standing and looked at the grass, to see if there was any sign of depression there. Had she just imagined the whole thing? She waved her arms about, half expecting to make contact with something, but there was nothing. For a moment she imagined that perhaps all the people in the world had vanished in a sudden wave, and she was all that remained. She shook off the feeling, shrugged inwardly, then made for the concrete wall, jumped, pulled and dragged herself over it to get into her yard. It was always the hardest thing to work up the

energy for after a hard run and she was half glad that Brett Trapp wasn't really there to see it. She would tell her mom about this, perhaps. These ... illusions.

Her parents were still sleeping. She looked into their bedroom for some time, at the faint light from the small gap in the curtains, the mess of clothing still lying on the floor, the calm peace of steady breathing from the bed. Her parents were still in love. She'd never seen a fight between them, apart from bickering now and then. And they both made a fuss of their only daughter. Her mother was more of a sister to her and her father more of a friend. She'd often wondered why they'd never had another child.

She went for a shower, then watched the Saturday cartoons as she moisturised her legs. She'd started shaving them a year ago, thinking of it more as an athletic than aesthetic thing to do. For once, the little black and white TV was behaving and a big angular dog pulled a flea off itself and ate it. She made a disgusted face at the TV, then stood at the cupboard, deciding if today would be a dress or pants day. It was going to be hot, so she picked out a light, green cotton dress that went with her turquoise sandals. The dog on TV was being shrunk to the size of a flea and one of its fleas was being enlarged. Now the dog had to try and hide somewhere on the flea, which was scratching at itself, and had twice as many arms as the dog.

She sat down at her desk. She'd just imagined two people that hadn't really been there. For some reason she wasn't too worried. It was perhaps just a daydream. Something normal. She'd just never had them before. Would this be the start, she wondered, of her populating her life, almost unintentionally, with a cast of imaginary players? And would she start losing the distinction between who was real and who not?

Shit. Better not, she told herself.

She thought of Claire and began a letter.

Dear Claire,

I think I'm going a bit mad.

No, she thought, and started again.

Dear Claire, sorry I haven't written for a while. Still loving the art school? It sounds amazing, but you know it would be lost on me because, well, I have all the creative talent of a falling atomic bomb, as you know.

She scratched over it and started again.

Dear Claire, I don't really have much to tell you, just thought I'd write. Been giving serious thought to trying to get on to the school's athletics team. Hold thumbs for next week for me. I have been timing myself for a while now and I think I have a chance to actually compete with just about anyone. But I'd love to win a race. Never have before, but why not?

I am even beginning to meet fellow athletes who don't really exist. Perhaps it's the angels or something.

She read the last line and wondered at herself. She'd have to start again, or just scrap the whole thing till later. She put her hand into her school case and retrieved a lunch tin. Some of yesterday's bread was still in it. She threw the old crusts onto her windowsill for the birds, tapping the lunch tin on the burglar bars. She sat back at the desk, then got up and turned down the volume on the TV. Then she rose again to switch it off. So distracted, she thought. She remembered the

homework. She had an English dialogue. She found the assignment in her bag, remembering it was an interesting topic:

Imagine that you are meeting your hero. Write a dialogue of one page imagining what you will ask your hero and what you think he or she will say to you.

So who was her hero? She thought about it. She guessed half the kids would be meeting Nelson Mandela and he'd be telling them to brush and floss regularly and respect other people. Did she have one at all? She wondered if she'd just pick Mandela anyway because he was easy.

She started writing, and thought, with half a smile, that if Marion Jones actually materialised in the room with her, she would scream.

Me: Hello Marion Jones.

Marion Jones: Hi.

Me: I really admire the fact that you've never tested positive for a banned drug.

Marion Jones: Well thanks.

Me: You must have trained really hard.

Marion Jones: I really did. Still do, in fact.

Me: What advice do you have for people who are thinking of taking steroids and stuff?

Marion Jones: Don't do it.

Jennifer looked at the dialogue, shook her head and found a clean page. She didn't know anything about Marion Jones, after all. It was just a name. And she probably took performance enhancing drugs, too. All the athletes seemed to, one way or another.

Me: Hello Mr Mandela.

Mandela: Hello little girl. Don't get Aids.

She stopped and put her head on the desk. When she looked up again there was a swallow on her windowsill, pecking at the breadcrumbs and the leftover crusts. She looked at it with a small smile. Weren't swallows supposed to be good luck, or something? She stared at the swallow for a while, and she noticed that it had an unusual red ring around one eye, with another, smaller, purple ring around that. Perhaps this was some species she didn't know of, though it seemed strange that the colour was only on the one eye. Her thoughts were disturbed by a ring at the front door, followed by her mother calling her. She and the caller were talking as she reached the bottom of the stairs. She stopped beside the door, out of sight.

It was Brett Trapp.

"Here she is," her mother said, smiling. "Can't say it's every day that big, hot, sweaty boys come knocking at our door." Jennifer paused, suddenly unsure, because she heard his voice. She saw him there in the doorway, honest as an atheist. Brett Trapp. It was clear he'd just finished training. The sweat was drying quickly, leaving a line on his grey vest. "Hi," he said.

She stared at him, as if beholding a ghost.

"Are you all right?" He looked concerned.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe I'm going mad."

"It's just, you know, we were still just talking back there, and then suddenly you went all quiet and wandered off. We thought we should come to check on you."

"Yeah," she said. "Sorry about that."

"Just wanted to see if you're all right. You didn't look all that good." There was a pause, and then he said, "Sorry."

“No. It’s all right. To tell you the truth, well. I think I felt a bit sick back there. Felt like I was blacking out. Just wanted to get home.”

“Oh. Okay.”

He looked uncomfortable in the doorway. “You want some orange juice or something?” she said.

“If you don’t mind me stinking up your kitchen.”

“It couldn’t do a worse job than my mother’s cooking.” She said it dryly, without a smile, still too thrown by all this. She was detached now. But she would play along, pretend to be here now, with this guy, talking to him, doing all of this.

He laughed. “Touché.”

“Come in.”

He took a seat on one of the tall stools at the kitchen table. She was quiet, waiting for him to speak as she placed the tall glass before him. He smiled at her and closed his eyes as he drank, draining half the glass, then setting it down again.

“Thanks. Just great.”

She took a seat on the table’s other side, rested her chin in both hands, elbows buttressing.

“You have nice neighbours,” he said.

She smiled. “What? You got the house wrong?”

“Well. If I’d jumped over the wall from the other side it would’ve been fine, but I got a bit confused from the street side.

“Well, thanks for coming to check on me. Didn’t mean to weird you out back there.”

“It’s okay. I was thinking about it all the way through training. You seemed to be in a world of your own.”

“Yeah. Well. Always been a bit of a dreamer.”

He looked at her quietly.

“Actually,” she said, drawn half to tell him the truth. “No. Never mind,” she said. “You wouldn’t believe me anyway.”

After a pause, in which she could see that he felt somewhat out of place, he said, “Look, there’s this party tonight. I wasn’t really going to go, but maybe you’d like to.”

“What?” she said, a trifle sarcastically. “All on my ownsome?”

He smiled, waved her off. “No no. With me.”

She thought, barely moved. “Okay,” she said. “Whose party is it?”

“You wouldn’t know anyone. It’s some friends of mine at the university. I run with them. You’d like them.”

“Let me ask my mother.”

Her mother was pretending to read a magazine in the living room, the television mute. She raised her eyebrows and there was a twinkle in her eye. She let Jennifer run through her question.

“It’s all right, I guess. Just be responsible,” she said. “No drinking or anything like that.” Then she winked. She obviously approved of this good-looking young man, perhaps hoping, now, to engage her daughter in a bit of sisterly conspiracy. But Jennifer had the feeling that this was all rather ridiculous.

“Okay,” she told her mother.

“Will you need a lift?”

“I don’t know. I’ll ask him.”

“Just be sure to get the address and telephone number.”

Back in the kitchen, the glass of orange juice was empty. “She wants all those parent-assurances,” she said, her face still expressionless. “Address, telephone

number, time home, available beverages, moral standards of the party goers, etcetera etcetera.”

For a second he looked taken aback, but then he smiled again, touching his nose. “No prob. I’m not sure of any of that, actually. But I’ll get the address, numbers and everything and phone it through to you.”

She scribbled her home number down on a piece of paper.

“You got a cell phone?”

She shook her head. “I am yet to taste the joys of SMS.”

“Oh. Kind of unusual for nowadays.”

“I know, I know. I am an ape. I keep trying to tell my mom, but she has this thing about brain tumours and repetitive stress strain on my thumb. Cell phones are forbidden.”

“Ah. Right. She’s probably right, too.”

“I don’t argue.”

“All right. I’ll be around to pick you up about six. Have you home by eleven.”

“Think ten would be better.”

“Oh. All right. Ten.”

“What should I wear?”

He waved his hands around, noncommittally. “Oh. What you have on now is great. Really.”

“Right. Casual.”

At the door, he looked at her and she could see that she had confused him.

“Look,” he said. “Are you all right?”

“Guess so.”

He simply looked at her for a while, his face a blank. Then finally, he said, "Smile, will you?"

She smiled without argument, but it lacked the automatic brightness of a true expression. She almost felt like asking him if he felt happier now, if perhaps he always took unhappy people around him as a personal insult or something and would he please just bugger off, but he seemed to accept things now and she let him out, watching as he disturbed a swallow on the garden path, and returning a wave as he closed the gate. "Will phone soon," he yelled. She watched until he disappeared up the road, in the direction of his coach's house. For a while she just stood there, thinking that throughout she'd been half expecting him to disappear again. And that later, when she'd ask her mother about it, the woman would frown and say, "What boy? What party?"

She went back to her room to help Mandela finish giving her advice on Aids. Somehow she was able to concentrate fiercely on the homework. By the time she'd finished all of it, had had lunch, studied half the biology work and read a few pages of an Eoin Colfer it was time to start getting ready for the party. As she was closing her bedroom window, her eye caught a pattern on the white paint of the windowsill, where she'd left the bread. Nothing had been disturbed there; had been left there, and she could not help thinking that it had been left there for her. She stared at it, frozen. She tried to think it away, but it bothered her even more as she did. The bird should have eaten all the crumbs, leaving nothing, and if anything remained it should in no way have fallen into any kind of pattern, and by no means should it have become a word. It was a word that echoed loudly in her head now without her being able to put a stop to it, as if somebody had climbed in there and was shouting loudly. She felt faint.

DIE... it said.

She wiped it away with the back of her hand. What the fuck, she thought.

As soon as she'd done it she wondered if she'd just made herself see some meaning in nothing, though why she would she could hardly say. It couldn't mean anything. It was just weird. Like, once she'd read about a Canadian woman who'd been washing dishes and been intrigued by an icicle hanging in front of the kitchen window, shaped just like a hand, and then later having to be rushed to hospital after her hand had been injured by a falling icicle. Such things were strange and disquieting, true, but just coincidence, like the old story of an infinite number of monkeys typing on an infinite number of typewriters, eventually accidentally writing the Bible or something else, by pure chance. She didn't take ideas like that terribly seriously, but it did mean that by pure chance, anything potentially odd was possible.

She tried not to think of it. It was just another strange thing to add to the day's anomalies. She'd heard people complaining that their lives were too predictable, but Jennifer was starting to think that as long as you could say that, you probably weren't too badly off.

Brett Trapp still wasn't calling. She half expected it would never happen. But she was in the shower for the second time that day when she thought she heard the ring. Her mother left the note on her door. She read it and gave it back to her.

"He asked me what your name is, Jen."

"What?"

"He didn't know."

Jennifer nodded. "Of course he wouldn't."

"He asked me not to tell you he asked." She grinned as she said it.

"Oh. So then why did you?" Jennifer asked, irritated.

Her mother frowned. "You all right, Jen? You don't seem yourself."

"I'm fine," she replied. "Fine."

She went back to her room, picked out a denim skirt, suede slip-on shoes and a white T-shirt with a blue star on the front. She started to put on her make up, and was ready a bit too soon. To pass the time she carried on reading, checking the watch every so often. He was late. At half past six the doorbell rang again and there was Brett Trapp, with a dark blue VW Golf in the street. He was in jeans and T-shirt as well, both black and a bit baggy. He'd worked some gel into what hair he had, and it glistened in the late summer light.

"You look great," he said, extending an arm chivalrously. She took it and he walked her down to the car. In the front seats was a sunburnt blonde student with his girlfriend, a small redhead who smiled sadly at Jennifer as she climbed in. Brett introduced them and they left. In the idle chitchat about who Jennifer was, what movies she'd seen lately and what she thought about DJ Electric (whom she knew little of, apart from two okay songs on the radio) she found herself considering, for the first time, if Brett Trapp actually thought he'd have a chance of sex with her. She hadn't really even considered what he was doing, but it seemed that perhaps he considered her a potential conquest. Brett Trapp had at least one girlfriend for sure. They were making the many lefts and rights of suburban driving and would be at the party soon. In the brief silence, she said: "Brett, not to sound funny or anything, but, well, don't you have a girlfriend? That girl I've seen you with at school?"

He seemed prepared for this and there was a laugh up front from the blonde driver. "So?" he said.

So? The ultimate negation. Was she missing something here? Not playing along? She had no intention of playing along with anything.

"So yourself," she said.

"Yeah," he said, almost to himself, staring out of the car window. The Golf stopped amid a cluster of other cars. Around them were the tall oak trees of affluent

suburbia. “Look, don’t think about my girlfriend or anything. She’s not jealous of me, really. And I invited you to this thing on the spur of the moment. Seemed like something to do. You’re ... interesting.” Before she could reply, he climbed out of the car and came around to help her out. He walked beside her up the cobbled driveway. At the end of it was a big, large-windowed, double-storied house. It stood among tall shrubs and broad-leafed trees above a lustrous and even lawn with tables, chairs, umbrellas and deck chairs around the clean white of the pool. She looked at the garden fountain with its four cherubs, just below the house’s veranda, bubbling softly. Over the lawn, and walking in and out of the house, were some of the other guests, all older than Jennifer and even Brett, drinking beers and wine, laughing and listening to Pearl Jam. It was a song she knew and liked. Faces passed and smiled hellos and she felt a cold bottle slipping into her hand. It was a fruit drink, Kiwi-Lemon, with a bit of alcohol. She lifted the bottle and tried to give it back to Brett, who cocked his head slightly. “Sorry,” she said. “Can’t drink. Mother would freak.”

“It’s almost all fruit juice,” he said. “Look at the alcohol as a preservative. You’d hardly notice.”

She took a sniff from the bottle’s end and then tried it. It was all right. Her parents had been letting her drink champagne since she was five, and having schnapps with her father was almost a holiday tradition. “Okay,” she said. “Thanks.” He laughed for no reason and walked off, saying he’d be back in a minute. He carried on saying hello to everybody. He wasn’t introducing her to anyone, and she was quite happy just being there, watching, adjusting to the place, drinking from the bottle slowly. As the last of the light drained out of an orange underbelly of cloud, they took a seat on some chairs beside the lighted pool, clinked their bottles together a second time and he asked her: “So tell me about yourself.”

“Nah. I’m pretty boring. Rather tell me about you.”

“Don’t think I’m that easily bored,” he said, arms leaning on both knees. “But all right. Everyone thinks I’m just this athlete, you know, and that’s like all I want to do. But it’s not, really. I like the running and everything, it’s great. Going to the youth champs next year will be awesome. But I want to be a vet, you know.”

“A vet?”

“Yeah. Since I was like four or something. I help out at the animal hospital in the holidays. Doc Lesting has even let me do a few ops, though that’s a bit of a secret. I’ve learnt a lot.”

“That is, well, kind of surprising. Thought you’re a few kilometres of hard sprinting away, well, from living on as a legend of track and field or something.”

“Nah. Come on. Life is long, you know. I’ve seen some of the guys; and they don’t plan. Winning is all they want. They take the steroids, get obsessed, get into trouble. Maybe have nothing to fall back on.”

“Sounds, uhm, wise.”

“And you?”

“I dunno, really. I’ll probably end up studying accounting or something. I’m just fifteen. Can’t really say.”

“And your running? You’re built for it. Coach wasn’t joking.”

“It would be nice.”

“Yeah. I know.”

They were silent for a while. “You probably think I’m this sex-crazed nut who jumps into bed with every second cheerleader.”

She shrugged. “Whatever.”

“No. Really.”

“Okay. So that’s your reputation. And I was wondering if you’re trying to live up to it with me as well.”

He leaned back and his tone became sarcastic. "God. Look who's got an opinion of herself. Sorry I asked."

He looked about ready to stand up and leave, and she felt daft. She said his name and he looked at her. She could see he was upset. "Sorry, all right?" she said. "I'm not normally such a bitch." He grimaced slightly and she went on. "I've just been having a strange day. You wouldn't believe me."

"Would you believe me if I told you I was a virgin?" he said.

"No."

He made a sound. "Well, okay. I'm not. But I'm not as bad as you think."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"You should see lots of people when you're young, you know. And I just kinda liked you. Just wanted to get to know you first."

"First?"

He produced an exaggerated breath, and looked about ready to leave again, but this time she thought she wouldn't put up a fuss. If he wanted to go, let him. Another partygoer approached him then and told him a joke. They laughed and the guy walked off. "I don't know many of these people, actually," Brett said then, trying to engage her once more. "You'll see later. My friends have this little band. Write their own stuff. Look. They're starting to set up." Sure enough, high chairs, guitars and speakers were being laid on the veranda to exclamations of approval from a few of the party-people. "Maybe you'll like them," Brett said, but she could hear he was straining to be pleasant now.

They watched in silence as the band prepared, and then Jennifer said: "Thanks for coming to find me. This is all ...well, a nice surprise."

He shook his head. "Any time."

The band played, a mixture of slow, haunting acoustic music and well-known cover songs, to the vocals of a plump but pretty girl with short dark hair who played with a cigarette wasting beside her, and a tall, thin, brown-haired bass player whose voice was deeper than he looked capable of. Jennifer watched Brett Trapp, who nodded to the beat. She was relieved to have a centre of attention, to just let go at last. In the middle of the performance, a guy from the party came to speak to her. He could have been anyone there. He had straight blonde hair, a pointy chin, cigarette smoke curling from his lips as he spoke.

“I’ve really crashed this party,” he told her.

She looked at him, and Brett glanced at him too, but went back to looking at the band. “Excuse me?” she said. He propped the cigarette back into his mouth, inhaled and, grinning, blew the smoke in her face. She frowned, leaning back, and waved her hand to clear the smoke. He seemed not to notice her irritation. He had on a white T-shirt with the words, *listen: there’s a hell of a good universe next door; let’s go*, a quote by someone called e.e. cummings. He wore a black, leather jacket over the T-shirt, but she could still make out the words. There was a cartoon man pointing with a thumb. She looked back at the guy’s face, and its look of mischief.

“Just wanted to sneak in,” he said. “And I have.”

“What?”

“I wanted to meet you. You have no idea, do you?”

“Of what?”

He smiled broadly. “I’d better go now.”

He walked towards the pool, looked over his shoulder at her, then dived into the water headfirst, leather jacket, jeans and shoes notwithstanding.

Amazed, she looked at Brett. "Did you see that?" The sound of the splash had been lost to the music, all power chords and drums. The band had decided to heavy things up somewhat.

"See what?" Brett said.

"That guy," and she pointed towards the pool. The young man still hadn't re-emerged. "He just jumped into the pool."

"What? Is he holding his breath down there or something?"

"I dunno." They went over to the pool, but there was no one in it, the illuminated bottom perfectly white and empty.

"Must have got out again," Brett said.

"I was looking."

"You sure?"

The music seemed very loud to her now, and she could feel herself breathing. It wasn't possible. He hadn't just jumped into the pool and vanished. She sat down, and put her head between her knees.

"You all right?"

She waved an arm. "Take me home," she said. "Please."

He disappeared, and returned with the sunburnt blonde guy. The band had just stopped playing and other members of the crowd were now trying to strike up a few chords on the abandoned guitars. Jovially, one started singing *Jesus don't want me for a sunbeam*. "What's up?" Brett wanted to know, as Jennifer walked down the driveway to the Golf. Brett kept talking all the way home, but it was just noise to her. She just kept telling him she was fine, there was nothing to worry about. It felt like a long time, but finally she was home and Brett was walking her to the door. It was good of him. He could have just dropped her and driven off, though she half wished he had.

“Thanks,” she said. “Sorry I messed up your night. I’m just tired. Just want to sleep now. Anyway. Sorry. Really I am.” She didn’t look at him as she spoke. She just wanted him to be gone. And she knew she wouldn’t be able to sleep. She wanted just to be alone. Except for Claire, maybe. She wouldn’t have minded seeing Claire. Even now, or especially.

He said good night, and she could detect his relief to be going and rid of her. If he called her a head case, she would not feel inclined to disagree. The VW took off. She breathed and sat on the front steps, the moths dancing around the orange porch light. Above the street’s tree edge a three-quarter moon was rising, with Venus close by. She sighed and stared upwards. She thought, and then considered maybe she shouldn’t think too much. She wanted to think that she could blame the alcohol, but that would be too easy. Soon, she told herself grimly, she’d want to start painting, and cut off her own ear or something.

Her parents were watching TV when she entered. She spoke to them briefly, told them innocuous things about the party and then went to her room. She read for a while, but couldn’t concentrate. She took off the make-up, put on her pyjamas, brushed her teeth, switched off the light and lay on the bed. It seemed to pull at her, as if there were g-forces in the mattress. So she just lay there, staring at the ceiling, aware that she’d drunk two of those fruit drinks. Perhaps, she thought, some of the alcohol still lingered in her system.

Then, at last, it seemed that she was drifting off. In a dream, she was changing out of her pyjamas, putting on a vest and shorts, slipping on her running shoes, opening her bedroom window, balancing her way off the roof below it, onto the wall and over it. The school field was almost dark, but by the light of the moon and the big floodlight on the main building of the school, the racetrack was faintly illuminated, big and open, cool and ethereal. She started running. The wind

whispered past her ears. She breathed, and she felt the strong pulse of life. Five minutes, ten minutes. Still she kept running, feeling the lactic acid ebb and flow, mixing with the fluids of her body, imagining that she could feel endorphins bursting from glands.

Lights came on around her as she ran, and then she saw that there were people on the grandstand, all of them watching her. She did not acknowledge them as she ran, but was driven to run faster. Yet the crowd remained silent, as if expecting something, and it wasn't her, or her run. She wanted them to cheer, felt half inclined when she passed the assembled faces to raise an arm at them or perform one of the moves she'd learnt as a cheerleader, because Jesus Jones Almighty, this crowd was *dead*.

She kept running, until finally she was out of energy. She stopped and walked, and felt the sweat under her armpits and coursing off her eyebrows, down her face. That was a *run*, she told herself. And I'm not asleep, she heard herself saying. This is real. As the thought occurred to her she suddenly had no doubt of it. What was she doing? Running around the field like this, half asleep. Sleepwalking. She heard her mother's voice in her head.

For Pete's sake, Jennifer. What the fuck are you doing?

She looked at the grandstand and she was suddenly very scared of all the people there, sitting there, watching her for no reason, gathered on a dark grandstand at a god-forsaken hour. She saw someone running from the field's other side, wearing a long jacket. She watched him until he was close, and then she saw it. He had a knife. It was long and strangely shaped, and he was raising it. She wanted to scream, but only a small croak emerged, and she turned, to run for the grandstand and all the people there, perhaps to hide among them. She knew, though, that the man with the knife had come for her alone. He approached very quickly.

Run, she told herself. Run away. Be faster, quicker, stronger. She was almost at the railing when she felt him. The last thing that she could make out, before the sudden pain, and then a slow, painful descent into blackness, was rank upon rank of downturned faces, staring at her without approval or despair. She screamed at last, but nothing moved, except the determined arm of the killer. There was a flash of his face, she saw it only briefly, and then she beheld nothing more.

University of Cape Town

Secundum Somnium

Waking was like surfacing from deep pressure, the joints in the skull creaking as force on her head lessened.

Wake up, Katie.

Breath entered in short bursts. She awoke and felt something slip from her mind, receding, receding, like a bright treasure sinking slowly, back into stygian depths, where mountains of water could embrace and caress it jealously in the dark.

It was a dream. Just a dream, but as she awoke it seemed that she had lost some sense of herself to it, her name and her life. Her breathing settled soon, though, and she knew that she was twenty-six, that indeed her name was Kaitlyn and that she was lying on a tattered mattress on the floor in a room with peeling wallpaper and newspapers over the windows. She remembered that she hadn't been paid yet. She was alone, the old man who inhabited the room gone. His black bags, which contained his clothing and other personal things, were still resting against one wall. There was his chair and small table, his little bar fridge on the floor, a dirty mat, solitary couch and a large, wood finish colour TV with the colours distorted and reddened due to the age of the tube. The television was silent, flashing images of a couple arguing. Every few seconds she heard the wet sound of a leaking tap from the porcelain basin. Beyond the room were the muted noises of Angerby. This room had once held proper furniture and curtains, all stolen now. It was after dawn, the light already clear. She should, perhaps, not have slept here, but she had been tired and the place was safer than going straight home, particularly in the state she'd been in. Last night there had been four different men, the first in a hotel room, the second right there on the street, against an alley wall, the third in his car and then this one, the

regular who'd let her sleep on half of his mattress and had disappeared off somewhere now. It wasn't normal for her, but last night fatigue had hit her like a hammer blow.

As she thought of the old man, his door opened and he entered with a bag of fruit. He was in his late sixties, but looked considerably older. He wore a stained, yellow shirt, unbuttoned over a vest. Flesh drooped around his eyes, with between them a nose that had the swollen, bulbous look of too much alcohol. Muscles sagged on his bones and skin. He lived on his pension, drank and whored out most of his money in the first two weeks and rationed himself in the second two, when he would be, she imagined, possibly almost sober. It seemed to her that he lived off only sausages, bread, whisky and beer, so the fruit he'd brought her now was unusually thoughtful. He handed her an apple and she looked for something to shine it on, but there was nothing. She lay between dirty blankets with little on and sat up, holding the rough blanket to her chin with one hand. The apple was sweet, the juice bleeding from dense, white flesh. At the little table, the old man used his pocket knife on an orange, quartering it unevenly on a breadboard. She finished the apple, then helped herself to the citrus, piece by piece, tearing the soft cells from the skin with her teeth, shutting her eyes as she did, returning the porous skins to the wood. The old man watched and then went to find a beer in the small bar fridge. The electric cube hummed and shivered as he found what he wanted, raised the bottle, and asked her how she'd slept.

Images plummeted through her mind at his words.

"All right," she replied. She dragged the blanket with her to where her clothes were folded on the room's only chair. She glanced at the old man, whose expression altered to one of mock wounded disappointment as she made circles with her index finger. He raised a hand, shaking his head and, almost theatrically, spun himself and his gaze from her. She dropped the blanket and started to dress. A false sense of

modesty wasn't something she would have insisted on, but this was really not time the old man was paying for. And a bit of mystery couldn't hurt, even after all the times she had been here. When she was finished, her black stockings, miniskirt and boots were on and she was teasing at her hair in front of a sliver of mirror. She took a comb from her handbag and straightened the loose strands as well as she could. Also from the bag, she removed a small towel and soap to wash her face and neck, drying herself and then putting on perfume, lipstick and a light powdering of make-up, mascara and black on her eyelashes. It did something for her, for though she was not beautiful, it did help to mask her obvious disfigurement.

"You look lovely, Katie," the old man told her.

"Whatever," she said, discounting his lie. She knew she was anything but. "Thanks for letting me crash here last night."

"My pleasure." He bowed. "It was late."

"And it's always nice to wake up with a girl beside you in the morning," she added. "Isn't it?"

"Only you." He grinned inanely.

"You'd think we were married," she told him, almost smiling. "But thanks. It would've been bad news going home that late. Bad shit happens. I know."

"You be careful then."

She scanned the room and then held out her hand. "I'd best be going."

He reached into a pocket and withdrew the notes, counting them one by one, holding them out to her. She took the step forward to take it. With most customers it was always money first, but not with this old man. He was a regular. Sometimes she wouldn't even take money from regulars.

She thrust the money into her bag, her fingers brushing against her canister of pepper spray. "When do I come again?" she asked.

He grinned, stupidly, and she could see he wanted to make a worn joke of it as his eyes disappeared in antiquated skin. The smile faded though, and he said, instead, "Beginning of next month. I'll be here."

"I'll put it in my diary."

"Yeah. Right there next to meeting the queen."

"She doesn't like girls." Kaitlyn was at the door now. "Next month then."

"Look forward to it."

"You *better*," she quipped, finally. "You think I do this only for the money?"

She closed the door behind her, the smile quickly off her face. The hallway was dark and empty. Rubbish had piled up in places and the air was thick and unpleasant with human smells and rubbish. On her cell phone she typed in a short message to her aunt that she was on her way home, then followed the passage to the stairs, declining the old elevator. She was soon out of the lobby and on the small back street it gave onto. She followed the sounds of cars and people, eager now to get home, to have a proper bath, to talk to her aunt and relax.

Restoration workers were making noise on an old building as she passed. She looked, briefly, at how they cleaned the sandstone, blasting it clear of dirt and time. Towering above the old building, some way off, were two cranes at work on a new office monolith. She walked, heading for her bus, the city awake with people on their ways to jobs, at banks and shops, pavements, parking lots, offices and suburbs. She passed all the familiar windows and their displays and then a pavement with mats and stalls selling all the same oddities and contraband. She barely looked as she walked, until she glanced at her own darkened reflection in a bank's smoky, brown glass panels.

For Pete's sake, Jennifer.

It had been nothing like any dream. Even now, it made her want to look at her own hands, half expecting to see the fingers of the girl. When she'd looked in the mirror just now she had been half relieved to see her own unlovely face, instead of the girl's.

What the fuck are you doing?

Because, God knew, it had felt real. It was inexplicable, but there was something very real about all of it. And there was much about the dream that disquieted her now as she walked on, eager to just be gone from all the bustle.

Run. You want to run.

Someone passed her then, and looked at her, as if sizing her up. She frowned at the guy, thinking at first it could be someone she knew, an old John perhaps, but his face was not familiar and she was good with faces. But it was nothing, just another person looking. It happened, sometimes, that she got the impression that people were looking, when there was nothing of the sort. The sensation continued as she walked, aware of people on the other side of the road, knowing somehow that they were eyeing her, though she had no desire to check. It tensed her muscles. But this was Angerby. Nobody ever saw you, much less stared at you. Except the beggars and hawkers and that was nothing.

A guy in beach clothing, a street sweeper, a group of teenagers, not talking, just looking at her, quietly staring, without real interest or acknowledgement. As if they were all aware of something terrible she had done, and were bored by it. But when, at last, she looked more carefully, she had to admit that they weren't looking anywhere near her, that it was just her, with that same feeling of being a small child in school who has to brave walking past older brats clogging up a hallway.

Staring at the ground, she followed her feet to the bus station. There were clumps of people and she found her stop and stood against a railing, to wait, with a

small group standing there already. The feeling of being watched grew stronger and she glanced up, but there were, still, no eyes upon her. The people there talked quietly, not so much ignoring her, just being there, as human and normal as clothing and shoes. The glances she received were ones of idle curiosity, and at last she began to relax, lit a cigarette and bought a newspaper from a passing seller. She scanned the headlines as she paged and puffed on the smoke. Skin cancer, one in thirty-six, school system failing, a list of Oscar nominations, terrorist bombings. She stopped at the classifieds and ran her finger down the tiny columns in fine print, advertising bodies for hire. There was hers. She'd given some thought to how she would put her ad of a few words. She'd been twenty two now for a few years and it was a standing joke among her regulars. *22 yr old white girl, it said. Good body. Adventurous.*

The bus arrived and she climbed aboard. It dropped her near her aunt's house, a small, yellow building with a dusty front yard and two bastard dogs that barked as she approached the ramshackle fence. Inside, her aunt was watching the television, her big forelegs propped up on a patched, brown Lazyboy, as she stirred a cup of coffee. She muted the morning news as Kaitlyn entered.

"I was worried," the aunt said.

"You knew where I was," she said, looking at the aunt's cell phone on the table in front of her. "I keep you informed."

"I know," she replied, "But I've been thinking."

Kaitlyn felt the kettle, which was still warm, and poured herself a cup, piling in a heap of coffee. She lit another cigarette. "How many sugars you got in there?" she asked her aunt, thinking of her diabetes.

"Just the one," she said.

Cigarette drooping from the bottom lip, Kaitlyn pulled off her shoes and flexed her toes. They ached.

“I was just worried,” the aunt said, taking another sip from her cup.

“You always worry. It’s something to do.” Kaitlyn stood up. “I need a bath. And then I need nothing. Look. Maybe I’ll get a bodyguard or something. Just to make you feel better.”

The aunt grimaced and then said, “David didn’t want to go to school either. He was also worried.”

Kaitlyn sighed. “Well, hell. I’m so sorry. He better have gone, though.”

“Sure he went. Kicked up a fuss, though.”

“He can’t miss school, just because I may not be here in the morning. What’s that going to help?” She took another sip of coffee, then felt in her purse, removing a small bottle of clear fluid, together with some cash. “Got your insulin. And this money’s for David. For those soccer shoes and whatever other stuff.” Her aunt took the money, crumpling it in her hand.

“You’re still putting money in the account, right?”

“Of course.” She put the half empty cup of coffee on the table, stubbed out the cigarette, pulled off her stockings and stood. She went to pack her shoes into a cupboard, threw her outfit into a laundry basket, found a towel in the cupboard, opened the bath taps and drew the curtains near the bathroom’s ceiling, which kept out most of the morning sun. She lit two candles, one at the foot of the bath, the other on the washbasin. Bathwater sealed around her as she dropped down, until it licked at her ears. She shut her eyes and thought that she could not complain too much. She was used to her life.

She washed her hair, soaped down her body, and soaked for some time. She pulled the plug, then just lay there, feeling the gradual drop of water. There was a strange, tugging pull at her feet then, as if something cold had clamped around them. When she opened her eyes she was confronted by the impossible sight of missing feet.

It took her a moment to realize that they had slipped into the plughole, and that her legs were following. Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open soundlessly, before she pressed her hands on the bath sides, feeling her fingers slipping as she was dragged. The pull intensified as her legs slipped still further into the impossibly small orifice. She was into it to above her knees now, and descending faster. She could feel it touching the fold of her behind, up around her waist, her navel, squeezing at her breasts, and then her chin was touching the porcelain, her body entirely gone, the inexorable pull about to rob her of light. She screamed at last as a splash of water coursed in upon her, choking the sound as the plughole grew to nothing but a small ring of light made bleary by the falling water. She clutched at it frantically, her fingers trembling at the small, steel rim of the drainpipe's mouth. She was a germ, about to be washed into the city's drains, mixed with dishwater effluvia and sewerage. She shrieked, feeling her fingers whitening on the small edge of steel. Then the last of the bathwater was gone, draining away, dripping from her body into blackness. She tensed her muscles and lifted herself, cursing and gritting teeth. Then she had an arm on the inside of the bath, slapping the wet porcelain frantically. Then another arm. She dragged herself from the drain, slowly, forcing herself out, pressing up with her feet. Her body collapsed back into the bath, spat from the drain like something newborn. She coughed and heaved from the fight and exertion of it, gasping at the steamy air, her feet pressing hard against the bath, her head bent inwards into her shoulder.

Oh Lord. Oh Lord, she kept telling herself. She lay there, prostrate for some time, until the numb cold of shock and terror began to fade, and she was coughing and shaking, twisting in the bath like the drug addict she'd somehow avoided being her whole life. *Oh dear God, no,* she told herself. *This isn't happening.* She fell from the bath onto the tiles like a sick patient, weak and enervated, lying there until at last

she rose, looking in the mirror, leaning hard against the basin. By the light of the drawn curtains she looked monstrous to herself, her harelip somehow even more contorted and the slight twist of unsightly skin on one side of her face grey and pallid. It was as if someone had grabbed a hold of a clutch of skin and turned it, wrinkling it just enough to give her this succubus face. As it stared back at her, she saw a tear fall from one eye, and then another. The tears began to stream, and she sobbed and shook, clutching at the basin still, allowing her face to collapse into abject despair. She heard the door and her aunt entered, to throw her arms around her and say, "There, Katie. Dear Katie." Her aunt wrapped the towel around her shoulders, then steered her from the bathroom. She led her into bed and pushed the bedclothes up to her chin, then told her to sleep. Sleep.

She was back in the streets of Angerby, but this time the people stared for real. Everywhere she walked, strange faces confronted her, until she could take their stares no longer and was attacking one of the staring people, but his expression did not alter, even as her hands flailed at him. He merely blinked as she slammed her hands into skin and bone. And then there were small hands at her shoulders, squeezing gently, to calm her. Kaitlyn turned, and the girl was standing behind her, green eyes wide and searching. She shook her head, sadly. There was no one else now, in this dream, just the two of them, and she wanted to ask the girl something. Ask her something about dying. Because Kaitlyn remembered the pain of dying. As she thought of it the girl screamed suddenly, the hands clutching at her own torso. She was jerked aside and then back again, shrieking, the light around her blackening. There was another violent twitch and Kaitlyn felt a spatter of something heavy and wet on her cheek. The girl's mouth hung open in a silent wail, there were tears of excruciation from her eyes, and as she lifted her hands, trembling, from her own breast, they were smeared and dripping with blood. She stared at Kaitlyn and then fell forward, the blood-

soaked hands fastening on Kaitlyn's cheeks as the light dimmed in the green eyes and the girl was hanging limp in her arms. *No. Don't die. Don't die*, she thought, until the body was cold and rigid, its embrace hardened into death.

Kaitlyn awoke. She had slept for some time. She sat up, groggy and disoriented, then bent to reach her ankles, massaging them without thought, her head on her legs, working her way up. She was crying. She felt it on her face, and throbbing from her stomach. She lay there, holding herself for some time, until at last she was able to breathe without a stutter. She put on a robe, just to be out of bed and see the sun, perhaps. Music. She would play some music. She went into David's room, stepping over comics, clothing and loose pages of homework. She found his CD player and was looking for the CD case of the disc inside it when her eye fell upon a flyer on his desk.

Above the face of a girl that she recognised at once, with immediate shock, were the words, "Have you seen this girl?" The CD fell to the floor. She picked up the black and white page, reading: "Exhibition. February 2. Deats Mraf Gallery. 19:00." It was a painting, but very well rendered, of the girl from the dream, whose fingertips, drenched by life, Kaitlyn remembered as her own. The flyer, here in her brother's room, was a great enigma to her, the sad painted face, what would no doubt be a principal piece at this exhibition, staring out like a prisoner of soul. Had she been dreaming of this painting? Had it all been started by this, as a face lodged in her mind for a reason most obscure? She imagined, for a moment, going to this gallery to be confronted by dozens of others like herself, perhaps all there to look at this one painting and to complain that they had been having bad dreams. There was a book on David's desk beside the flyer. She lifted it, and looked at the cover for some time. *Artemis Fowl*. She turned it, to read the blurb. She knew some of what this story was about. She opened it at random and looked at the words. They were known to her,

but she had never read this book. She felt a tightening around her eyes, the sour sensation just before tears, and then one was rolling down one cheek, heavy and salty on her skin. She wiped it away, took the book back to her room and carried on reading. Perhaps, she rationalised, she had simply looked through David's books one day and forgotten about it. Perhaps that was all. She went back for the flyer and then heard David's voice, down the hallway, in the kitchen. He was home from school. She returned to her room, put on her slippers and was following the boy's voice when she heard a girl's laugh, David's girlfriend, a small, sassy blonde who lived a few streets away. It stopped Kaitlyn. If she looked a little more presentable, perhaps; so she went to dress, in corduroy slacks and a white shirt with fine embroidery, before applying make-up again. David was gone when she ventured out once more.

"How are you?" the aunt asked as she entered the living room. Kaitlyn said nothing, sinking onto a couch, staring at the flicker of colour on TV. "You want some tea?" Kaitlyn nodded. "I gave David the money for the soccer gear." Kaitlyn nodded again and then noticed the oxygen tank and breathing mask beside the Lazyboy, which had not been there earlier. When she looked back at her aunt she said: "It wasn't too bad. I just needed it a bit."

"Another attack? Just now?"

"Not too bad."

"Well, what would be too bad?"

"The one that kills me."

Kaitlyn sighed. The older woman brought a cup and teapot, and poured quietly. Then she handed Kaitlyn her cell phone, which had been left in the living room.

"You got two calls. The first guy wanted to see you immediately. I took a time from the second guy. He said five o'clock this afternoon."

Kaitlyn shook her head. "No. I can't. Not today."

"You don't look well, Katie. What is it?"

"I don't know."

"Are you feeling sick?"

"Not really. Just ... tired." Katie showed her the flyer. "Where'd David get this?"

The aunt read it, pondering it for some time. "I don't know. Maybe at school. Davie does do art."

"Yeah. It's just very strange."

"What is?"

"Everything."

The phone began to ring. Katie glanced at the screen, but there was no caller ID.

"Hello?"

It was a man's voice: "Is this the girl in the advert?"

"No. Sorry, that's a joke," she said, irritated. "I'm going to kill whoever placed that ad when I find them."

There was a long pause.

"So this was just a joke?"

"Yeah. Try someone else."

"Right. Sorry."

"Let me give you some advice. Use your hand."

"Hey, fuck you lady." He hung up, and Katie smiled at the aunt, who frowned in return. "You shouldn't do that, Katie."

"Why? Because I'm desperate for a buck?"

The aunt looked at her for some time, and Katie remembered being sixteen, being driven in the evening to a small house and having to ring the bell by herself at a front door as the aunt waited, looking on from a car in the street. Someone's father, still wearing oily overalls, had opened the door and had led her to a room with a double bed, telling her to bath and put on a robe and some cheap perfume. She'd done this, then waited on the bed for the man's son. The boy hadn't touched her, had hardly looked at her the entire time. They had spoken, though, and he'd told her that his father was a mechanic, that he was afraid his son was gay. "I'm not," he'd said. "I just don't know you. It's not right."

"It's okay. Just lie about it."

"Lie?"

"Yes. Just say you slept with me. And say that you liked it."

"But then you'll be back again."

That had been the first time, and her aunt had given her a talk about it before the time, telling her that they needed the money. It could be kept secret. "And you don't have to do it," she'd said. "Not if you don't really want to." As the aunt looked at her now, Katie could feel that same neurotic energy, the same fear that Katie would stop, perhaps, and leave, and the flow of money would end. She wanted to say something to the woman now, to tell her that perhaps it would have to end now, after all these years, that it was time.

The phone rang again.

"Yes?"

"Hello. Is this the woman who placed the ad?" The man was well spoken and sounded confident. Businesslike.

"Yes. It is."

“Well I am Pastor Waldron. I am phoning about the life you have lived, and are living.”

“What for?” she frowned. This was a first.

“I am phoning to tell you that your life is unclean. God wants you to set aside your unclean ways and follow the path of righteousness. You are involved in sin.”

“Yes. I know. That’s life.”

“No, that is the life you choose.”

“And what about circumstance?”

“God can change your circumstance. You must simply choose. You must find forgiveness or your evil will not go unpunished.” She was silent and he went on.

“For every crime there is a punishment, and for every sin there is death.”

“I don’t hurt people.”

“But you hurt yourself, and that, too, is a sin.”

“Why are you calling me?”

“It is God’s calling. He wants to save you.”

“Look,” she said, “thanks for trying, but you don’t know anything about me.”

“But the Lord knows all.”

“Yes. Poor Him.” She was back in the drainpipe now. It was closing on her. She was slipping out of the light. There was a crackle and no reply from the phone. She heard him breathing into his receiver. Soon he would get someone on the phone to break down, cry and repent her sins so that he could invite her to his church and encourage her rebirth. “I have to go,” she said and killed the call. There were many other ads in the paper for him to try.

“Who was that?” the aunt asked.

“No one.” She breathed, and it sounded like the aunt before an attack. She couldn’t allow it. The shit in the bathroom had been another dream, she was sure of it, but it had been so real. She stood up and her breathing calmed.

“I’m all right,” she told the aunt. “Just hungry.” Her hands shook as she looked in the fridge. She found cheese and ham, and sliced them, trembling. She was toasting bread when the phone rang again. She felt inclined to throw it in the oven, but she answered. Before she could speak, a voice issued from it, the noise filling the room.

“You will suffer for all the deaths you have caused.”

She threw the phone down. It bounced on the carpet and came apart, the plastic cover popping off.

The aunt was up, her eyes wide as she looked at Kaitlyn. “What was that?”

Kaitlyn trembled, a nervous spasm that shook her entire length. She rested her hands on the kitchen table. “I don’t know,” she said softly. “I don’t know.”

The aunt moved, and Kaitlyn knew this would be another hug. But she pushed the older woman off. “No. I’m fine. Forget about it. It’s that fucking priest or pastor or whoever. Playing games.”

“You think so?”

“Yes, all right. I think so... oh crap.” The toast was burning. She pulled the toaster door open, one side of the slice black as tar. She tossed it into the bin beside her. Inside the bin were human hands and wrists, torn and bloody where they’d been ripped from the body. The toast fell on them and Kaitlyn screamed.

“What is it?” the aunt looked. They were just gloves. Old plastic dishwashing gloves, covered in a mess of leftover spaghetti and sauce.

“Oh fuck. I’m losing it,” Kaitlyn said, taking a step backward and rubbing at her temples. “I am so fucking losing it.”

“It’s all right, honey. Just sit down. Relax.”

“It’s these fucked up dreams. My head’s all messed up.”

“Just relax. I’ll make you some tea.”

Katie almost shouted, the veins in her neck pushing blood to her face. “Don’t tell me to be calm,” she whispered. She was on the verge of a mad rage, but it passed and she felt nausea rising in a sudden, warm wave. Her cheeks bulged and before she could move she was crouching on the floor, staring at her own bile and acid on the carpet. She curled up on the floor, rolling away from the ugly mess. She held herself and cried, spitting the bitter taste from her mouth.

“I’m losing it,” she bawled, and coughed. “Fucking losing it.”

The phone rang again, which prompted the aunt to move over to it quickly, and cancel the call. She switched it off, then crouched beside Katie and put her hand on her shoulder.

“Let me get you some water.” She returned with it and Katie sat up, sipping slowly at the cold glass. “Don’t worry. I’ll clean it quickly.”

Katie hardly heard her. The room seemed infinite, the walls and corners stretching away to forever. She felt no sense of her body. She was anything: a fly, a snake, a cat curling up, a man carrying a knife. There was a screaming and naked girl in front of her, clutching at herself in agony and a feeling of great power and pleasure overrode Kaitlyn’s mind now as she saw it. She felt a throbbing sense of urgency. The room twisted and bent. There was a sound of wild laughter and then the feeling of her own body and its sickness returned. The room was clear again, the aunt wiping up the last of the mess. The nausea left her, just as suddenly as it had come on. She stood up, expecting a blackout or a tilting rush at her head, but there was nothing, just a great need to eat something.

She was back at the fridge, and found vienna sausages, which she threw onto bread and half drowned in tomato sauce. She sat herself down in front of the television, finished the food and then rose to get more of it. The aunt watched her carefully, but she was ignored, Kaitlyn quite content to stare at the flashing rectangle and its colours. She wanted her mind to glaze over, if just for a bit, to forget her strange sickness. The cartoons were on. She swallowed the last of the bread, lit a cigarette and sat back.

“I think I’ll have that tea now.”

“Right,” the aunt said, and smiled somewhat, nervously. “Katie...”

“Yeah?”

“You’re acting very strange.”

“I know. Forget about it.”

The aunt looked at her for a while, but Katie seemed content in front of the television now, so the older women went to start the cooking. Soon, there was the smell of meatballs and pumpkin. Colourful zombies walked the screen as all things dead came alive. Chickens in ovens broke free and hobbled down the street, with human corpses lurching behind, floating bones clacking as they found dismembered bits of flesh to merge with, all in aid of menacing the helpless people of the animated town. The show’s hero, attacking the already dead with a variety of innovations, until he was confronted by a great golem of dead flesh and bone, a conglomerate that even he ran from, trembling behind a shut door like a little boy. It was funny, but not something, Kaitlyn knew, that would have been allowed as children’s viewing while she was growing up. She changed channels, until she came across one that paused her. She looked at it again, then sat forward in astonishment. A figure on the television screen sat forward in tandem. She raised an arm and waved it around, watching as it waved on screen. She turned her head to look behind her. A cheap,

plastic clock hung there, but there was nothing more. She looked back at the television but the scene it held seemed different now, a living room still, not unlike her own, but a number of strangers had appeared and were making wisecracks. There was laughter. Then the scene ended and there was an ad break. She felt a buzzing in her ear as she stood, to examine the clock on the wall. She took it down, then threw it hard onto the kitchen tiles.

“What are you doing?” the aunt shrieked.

“Shut up.” She kicked the watch until the plastic front popped off. Kaitlyn tore at the numbered cardboard inside and then slapped her hand against the small box housing the mechanism. She threw it back down and kicked it. It broke, releasing small, fine gears and two AA batteries. There was nothing like a camera, though. Just gears and mechanism. She returned to the wall and looked it over carefully. There was a small crack running from ground to ceiling, nothing more. She stared back at the television, and the sitcom was on again, all the people strangers. She went to stand in front of the TV and waved her arm slightly. She switched it off, tossing the remote back on the couch.

“Katie.”

“Not now, OK? Take a hint.”

“What happened?”

Katie stared at the aunt and was about to speak when David returned. He was alone. He offered a brief hello before hurrying off to his room. In his hands was a bag from the sports shop.

“Wonder if he’s going to show us,” the aunt said, but there was a strained quality to her voice. She simply had no idea how to react now. David returned with a slip and change. The aunt told him to keep it. “How are your boots?” she asked, her voice still strained.

“They’re fine.”

“Good.”

“Yeah. Maybe I’ll make the A-team or something.”

“Can boots make such a big difference?” she continued, in the same artificial tone, as she found plates and began to dish up. She glanced at Kaitlyn, and her eyes narrowed, as if to say, *Don’t do anything strange now, all right?*

David thought for a bit and said. “Guess not. You can hope, though.” He looked at Kaitlyn and said: “So. How’re you?”

“All right.”

“You look tired.”

“Just feeling a bit sick. Where’d you get this, Davie?”

He looked at the flyer. “I don’t know. What is it?”

“It was in your room.”

“What were you doing in my room?”

“Getting the bloody CD player all right? Shit, Davie. It’s all fine when I’m making your bloody bed, then it’s not all ‘What are you doing in my room?’ Just tell me where you got this flyer.”

“I dunno. Never seen it before.” He took his plate of food from the aunt and went to distract himself in front of the TV. She wanted to clutch his shirt and stare him down like a dirty crook in a cop drama. She wanted to lower her tone and say, “Don’t make me repeat myself.” Instead, she sighed, picked up the remote and muted the show.

“Come on, Davie. Do you know anything about this exhibition?”

He studied the flyer, rolling his eyes, as if the last thing in the world he needed was his sister’s crap. “No. Why?” he asked. “Do you want to go?”

“Maybe.”

"I'll go with you."

"No. You can just watch TV. Maybe you'll see me on it."

"Aw, come on. What's up with you? You really are sick or something." He looked at the flyer again, as Kaitlyn left the room, and she heard him behind her: "What's eating her?"

She didn't hear the reply as she stepped outside, but the dusty yard offered no encouragement, so she went back within, to get her food. Without a look at the others she sat at the kitchen table and began to eat. The volume on the TV lowered again and she glanced at her little half brother, who was sitting looking at her, plate in his lap, his knife and fork stationary above it.

"Sorry, Katie. All right? For whatever. What's going on?"

She swallowed, as the aunt shuffled passed her and walked up the hallway to the bathroom.

"Do you," she began. "Do you remember your dreams?"

"Sometimes, I guess."

"Do you have nightmares?"

"Yeah. Sometimes."

"And do they feel real?"

"That's what happened to you?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

"So what happened?"

"That's the thing. It's really hard to remember it all now."

There was a long pause, and the sound of cutlery and eating. "I know a little about dreams," David added, finally. "Sue-Ann has a book about it. She analyses her own dreams all the time. Wants me to tell her mine, but it's just bullshit, you know."

“Is it?” She said it so seriously, that David paused in his chewing, another meatball already stabbed on his fork. He swallowed, and said, “Hell. Well maybe not.”

“I dreamt I was someone else. A girl.”

His eyebrows rose. “Someone else?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s pretty strange. I know that, because it says in that book that when you dream you *always* dream as if you are *you*.”

“Always?”

“Yeah. That’s what it said. Everybody plays themselves in their dreams.”

“Well I don’t.”

There was the sound of a flushing toilet from up the hallway. “So who were you?” David asked. “Michelle Preiffer?”

Kaitlyn snorted. “Dream on.”

“So ... tell me.” The knife moved in circles as he gestured.

Kaitlyn shook her head as the aunt returned and dished up for herself. “No,” she said. “It’s not important. Just a dream.”

“Oh come on. It is important. You just don’t want to say.”

“I told you. I don’t remember much.”

When it seemed clear that she wasn’t going to add anything more, David said, “Yeah, well. It’s normal to forget dreams. And they say it’s a good thing you can’t remember them too well. Or else you’d be confusing reality with your imagination. Like, you’d see things that aren’t there, and drive into the sidewalk because you’re swerving for unicorns.”

Kaitlyn nodded, and would have smiled on another day. The aunt was scooping ice cream into bowls. "And," David went on, "What about that whole thing that if you die in a dream then you die in your bed?"

"Good thing it wasn't me dying then." As she said the words they were swallowed at the end. There's been a sudden rush of blackness and it almost choked her. As if she'd been back in the drain. David didn't seem to notice and the feeling left her quickly.

"Yeah. It all sounds like a lot of crap to me, though," he said. "I mean, how do they know?"

"They don't."

He noticed the change in her and asked, softly: "You okay?"

She nodded.

David took his dessert and they ate it in silence. "I'm going over to Sue-Ann for a bit," he said as he finished. It was an old joke Kaitlyn had played on him once, when he'd said it before. "What are you going to sue Ann for?" David hadn't caught the joke until she'd explained it, and then he'd simply called it stupid.

"You done your homework?" the aunt asked.

"I'll do it when I get back."

"You should get it over with now. Then you can see her with a clear conscience. And haven't you seen her all day already?"

David looked at the aunt thoughtfully. "But if I *do* my homework I'll probably just get to see Sue-Ann with a pillow under her head. I need to see her now. I'll finish the homework just the same."

"Fat chance."

"I promise. Jeez. What do you want, my soul? It's just to go over and give her something." His expression darkened as he looked at Kaitlyn. "You working tonight?" He glanced at the cell phone on the table, the back piece still separate.

"Maybe." David seemed to contemplate saying something, and Kaitlyn wondered if this was going to be another one of his requests for her to get a decent job somewhere. Cleaning toilets and scrubbing floors. He got up and said, "Whatever." He'd given up offering to guard her some time ago already. The very thought of it was enough to turn Kaitlyn cold. She could hardly make a pimp or bodyguard of her little brother. He left and she washed the dishes and went to sit on the toilet. She thought about crying, then, but decided it wouldn't be real now. Not this time.

It was early evening. She put on a pair of sneakers and a jersey, told the aunt she was going out, and left. The trains were still shunting loudly a few streets away and she went to look at them for a while, dogs barking intermittently between the sounds of smashing metal. Across the network of steel, by the increasingly clear, amber lights of the train yard she watched the day's shadows lengthen into twilight. She walked up to the small café further up the road. Inside, she scanned magazines and walked between the little shelves, finally buying only chewing gum and another pack of cigarettes. By the time she left the shop it was almost dark. She followed patches of streetlight to get back home and she had already passed one of the posters before she noticed the next one. "Have you seen this girl?" it said, again, and this time she paused, to stare at the poster with its painting of the girl, which was in colour now, made dull by the streetlight. The poster was expressionistic in its way, in bright reds, blues and yellows. She looked ahead and there was another painting further on. She felt suddenly alone, and looked around at the houses. There were lights on, and the distant sounds of the city, but there was not a car or fellow human being to see. She walked to the poster following and the next, and soon she became aware that they

were subtly changing. The lips had parted a fraction. She walked to the next one, barely aware that she was veering away from home. She began to run, and with each poster she passed, the lips were open further, until they began to close once more, as if in reverse, and there was a noticeable change in expression on the poster face. It went from rest to something more fatigued. The girl's hair seemed to cling more with each poster, as if from sweat, and then Kaitlyn could see the sweat, rolling slowly on each frozen image. Then, from street pole to street pole, the expression itself began to change, as Kaitlyn broke out in sweat herself, beginning to hear her own breathing. It seemed to her as if life itself had been trapped in these posters or paintings, a slow form of animation that would perhaps mean more to someone driving quickly in a car. The expression on the streetlight poles continued to alter, as the lips tightened and then opened again, the eyes widening. She stopped running as she came to a streetlight with a blown bulb. It was hard to make out the image on the steel pole's cardboard rectangle. She caught her breath and then walked up to the poster, but it was still unclear, the painter's colours hidden in the dark. She reached up and touched the poster, then pulled and was most surprised when it came free in her hands. She held it on one side and walked into light, moving backwards to the streetlight before. She looked at the face, and then, startled, dropped the poster, which hit the tar in a flap of air. The face there was contorted in a scream, so vivid that Kaitlyn could almost hear it from the paint. She ran on, and the faces continued to scream, all along this street and down the next, beneath an avenue of taller trees. The faces screamed, and then there was blood. There was so much of it that it threatened to consume each changing image. And then the sequence of paintings ended abruptly in a poster devoid of anything but a black background. The girl had disappeared from it. Kaitlyn ran on, but the street poles were empty now. She

stopped, her heart still beating frantically. She hadn't passed another human being the entire time and the feeling of being alone in the world was like an enfolding cold.

She became aware of a large entranceway, the pillars painted white. On the wall outside of it, it said, "Deats Mraf Gallery." She looked at the sign for some time and then walked between the white pillars. The driveway was tar, which soon gave way to dirt. It passed between a thick clutch of bushes and as she emerged from them she was struck by a cold gust of air. The stars above her seemed suddenly far too bright, the night filled only with the light of a distant universe and the sickle moon. She turned around, but she could not see the main road and its streetlights, which should have been there. She was struck by a vast sense of openness and could make out the horizon only where the stars terminated. The dull glow of the city, that ubiquitous bubble of light that would pollute the blackness, was gone. She knew that she was far from the city, very far. It seemed, for a moment, that she had even left the planet. But she recognised a constellation here and there, which did little to dull her rising sense of panic. On either side of her were fields, grazing lands, the sound of crickets emanating shrilly from the dark. She began to run again, and the air was cold against her face and lungs. She passed a silent windmill, pressed darkly against the starry sky. Then she noticed an animal smell, of dung, and then a distant sound that reminded her of something, pigs perhaps. She could see a building ahead, a farmhouse, its lights solitary, like something floating on a sea of night. Behind her, she heard the sound of a distant engine. It made her stop. She watched as headlights flickered into view and a pickup neared. She was already waving and shouting, long before the small truck was close. As it pulled up beside her, she walked around to the passenger side. The door swung open, which half surprised her, but she climbed inside and looked at the driver. His face was obscured by the dark, but then there was a click and an interior light came on. It took her a moment. She was speaking, saying

something, babbling perhaps, when she stopped, abruptly, frozen. The face that was looking at her was one of a middle-aged man, in his late forties. His jaw was square and unshaven. Straight tufts of hair had been left to grow untidily on his head. Both his hands clutched at the steering wheel, the wrists disappearing into a heavy jacket. He spoke, but she was unsure of what he said, because she was pushing at the car door again, opening it, getting out, and preparing to run away.

“Where the fuck are you going?” he said. His hand was on her arm and it was strong. It held her. Her other hand went instinctively for her handbag, feeling for her pepper spray. Her fingers landed on her phone, felt the leather of her purse, but then the man struck her and snatched the handbag from her. “What’s wrong with you?” he said. “Calm the fuck down.” She started screaming and he tugged at her, pulling her to his side of the car. The engine was still idling and the pickup set off, leaving the Doppler wave of Kaitlyn’s scream to reach no one on that black, unpopulated field. One of her legs hung out of the passenger door and, still driving, he reached across, pulled her in, slammed the door and slapped her. She continued to scream. “Shut the fuck up!” he told her. She stopped screaming for a moment, but the panic was alive in her, like a caged animal, and he heard her say, “Don’t. Don’t kill me like the girl. Don’t kill me. Please. Please.”

“What the hell?” he said and drove even faster. She screamed again and this time he struck her hard. The world swam. He struck her again, and Kaitlyn plummeted into unconscious dark.

She awoke into shadows. Her head throbbed as she adjusted, trying to remember herself, and what was happening. She thought of her brother. She was slammed into a wooden chair and winced as the man grabbed her hands and roped them behind her. He did the same to her feet. He walked around the table and seated himself on the other side, taking off his trench coat. There was only a T-shirt

underneath. She saw that he was thickly built and strong, the big muscles rippling in a thin coating of sweat. Between his fingers he held one of Kaitlyn's cigarettes. He lit it, inhaled deeply and stared at her. She was shaking and whimpered, a horrible, inhuman sound that she felt could hardly be coming from her.

"Why so scared, eh?" he said, blowing the smoke towards her. He raised the pack of smokes, offering it, and then with sudden speed he'd propped a cigarette in her mouth and was holding the pepper spray to her face. "Oh silly me," he said. The finger came down and her eyes and skin erupted in acid fire. "That's not a lighter. Oopsie. Nice little girls like you shouldn't be carrying ugly things like that around. Uh uh." He wagged a finger at her, but she was blind, screaming from the pain. "No one will hear you down here," he told her. "Scream all you like. I don't mind." As she quietened, he said: "Seems like you have a secret you want to tell me, don't you?" She didn't move. "Don't you? Well go on, tell uncle Grindle. You know what uncle Grindle wants to know." He fetched a glass of water and threw it in her face. The relief was immediate, though the pain continued.

"I ..." she began.

"Yes?"

"I don't know."

He stood up and walked over to what she realised was a painting easel. He sat himself down on the other side of it, lifted what she imagined, through her blurred eyesight, was a palette, and began to paint. As he spoke, he looked at her, then back at his canvas, and she realised that he was painting her. Her portrait. Or something.

"Yes you do," he said very calmly. "Oh yes you do. Tell me about the *girl*. Tell me what you're doing out here. So far from home."

She took a while, but he was patient, continuing to paint as if he had not a care in the world and finally she said it. "I saw you kill her." The words emerged and

then seemed to want to scramble back into her mouth, down her throat, like panicked rats.

“How?” he whispered. “*How* do you know? That is what I want to know. And who have you told?” He was mixing more paint onto the palette. He was coming back into better focus now and she could see this.

“In a dream,” she said. “I saw it in a dream.”

“Liar.”

“The girl. She was running. She’d come from a party. It was you. You did it.”

He stared at her and she saw the rage suddenly pulsing along his face, like a poison. “Liar,” he whispered again. “Who have you told about this?”

“No one.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I don’t know. Where am I?”

He held up a tube of paint and said, “This, my dear, is burgundy red. Don’t make me have to paint with this tonight.”

She said nothing.

“Tell me the truth,” he told her.

“It is the truth,” she whispered. “It’s what happened.”

“Liar!” He shouted, the painter’s stool overturning and falling as he stood and walked away. She was left alone. She thought, desperate for anything. She was in a basement, or a hole in the ground. A weak bulb hung above the table and the smell of earth, mud and roots was strong. She could hear him, there was a scuffling noise and the sound of something slamming. The sound came from a passage that gave way to dark. When he returned he was dragging something. He dropped it on the floor, righted the chair, picked it up and sat a body in it. Kaitlyn closed her eyes and looked

away. It was the girl. She was pale and had started to putrefy in the heat. Her lips were cracked and there was blue and white on the face, the globes of the eyes protruding in a dead terror, the head hanging to one side. At the neck the wound gaped horribly, and Kaitlyn saw dark, red flesh of vocal folds, tubes and muscle. The body was naked and there was dried blood spread from the neck and rubbed over the body in handprints, covering it to under the table, where one leg hung askew, the arms hanging straight down.

“Please,” she said. “I’ll do anything. Just let me go.”

He began to laugh. “Don’t be fucking stupid. Now tell me the truth. How do you know about *this*?” and he grabbed the body of Jennifer by the head and shook it violently. The head yawed back and forth, the wound at the throat like a great mouth.

“I told you. Last night. In a dream. I saw.”

He was silent and he let the head go, pushing the body forward. Jennifer’s face thumped on to the wood like any piece of meat, a wet, hollow sound. For some time, the man just stared at Kaitlyn, who was crying freely, moaning words she was hardly thinking.

“God, you’re ugly, bitch,” he said at last. He touched her face and revolt and disgust spread over his own. He spat on her. “I’ll be doing the world a favour.” He looked from the corpse to Kaitlyn and a grin split his face. “Ever want to be beautiful, babe? Huh? Ever want to look at your face and go, ah! I’m gorgeous. Well tonight’s your lucky night.” He lifted the corpse’s head and dropped it on one cheek. “You wait right there, my darling. We’ll make a princess of you yet.”

Air from the night outside came into the hole as he opened something and left. Staring at the corpse before her, she rocked back and forth, finally toppling the chair. She writhed and struggled and finally got one hand free. She untied herself and stood for a moment, then felt along the wall until she came to steps. She climbed them until

her head slammed against a trapdoor. It stunned her, but she stayed on her feet. Through gaps in the wooden planks she could see a light outside, orange and dim. She tried to lift the trapdoor, but it was heavy. She strained and it loosened, giving way slightly. She pushed with all she had and it lifted, the night air striking her face like life itself, but she did not hear the wooden door fall. She was thinking it could be the hinges, but then there was movement and the man appeared from around it, holding it, his face dark, the orange light surrounding it.

“Fuck it, woman. Don’t you fuckin’ listen? He kicked her and she tumbled back down the few steps, smacking into the gravel below. He was beside her and lifting her now, looking at the blood. He pressed a nail into her cheek, which burned from impact with the ground. She screamed. “Good thing we won’t be needing this then, will we?” he said and threw her onto the table. She felt her hand touch the corpse and she screamed. He hit her again. “Keep still. Keep still. It’ll soon be over.” He sat her back in the chair and placed a carving knife on the wood. He pulled the corpse’s head over to him, picked up the knife and began to cut at its face, all along the hairline, down past the ear, under the jaw, along the neck and back up the other side. He took his time and the sound of the blade in the flesh was soft and nauseating.

“No. No, please. No ...”

“Don’t worry darling,” he said, favouring her with a slight smile. “It won’t be so bad.” He began to cut inwards, into the corpse, releasing all its fibres, tendons and muscles. Finally, he placed both hands on the face and pushed. It shifted under his hands and when he pushed again it slipped off. He lifted the severed face and held it up to the light. Flesh hung in strands from the uneven butchering.

“No ... no.”

He held the face over Kaitlyn's and the touch of the cold blood and muscle on her own sent her into renewed fits of screaming.

"No," he said. "This will never do." He fetched the carving knife again and held the blade to one of her cheeks, allowing it to slip in. She struggled horribly, her head trembling and shaking like something electric, but he had one strong hand pressed unavoidably against the bones of her skull, and the vision of his bulk before her was unchanging. He gripped her and cut. And cut. There could never be words for this pain. Not even screams could describe it. She shrieked in agony, but still deeper the blade went. Mercilessly and without pause. She longed for death, but knew that pain would be endless and without respite.

"Shhh, shhh," he said, and she felt him release her head. She was unable to move. After all this pain, she remained perfectly motionless, breathing in fits and starts, brokenly, in tears which burned. Her breaths were the laboured sounds of the asthmatic, the very act of breathing threatened by pain.

She felt him running his hand through her hair, soothing it, trying to calm her. "It's okay," he said, then stopped, wiping sweat from his face on one shoulder. The world was swimming for her now, jumping into sharp focus and back again, bringing the pain with it as it came and went, like millions of tiny teeth, chewing at her, gnashing. He raised the knife again and she shrieked and screamed, uselessly, against the cold and evil intrusion. At last though, the great force of life within her began to ebb, draining down her neck and front, into her shirt, onto the floor. The madman in front of her became an indistinct presence. She was fading. She gave in to it, willing it to release her, and as the man pulled at the last of her skin, she gave up and felt nothing but a throbbing, self-preserving numbness. There was only the shock and the numbness. He went back to the table, picked up Jennifer's severed face, turned the skin side to her, the rich blood thick and dripping from his hands. He raised each side

of it and addressed Kaitlyn in a puppet voice, moving the dead face with it. Kaitlyn could barely see now, aware that he'd done damage to her eyes as well, but she heard enough of what he was saying. He was bringing the face to her and it would be the face she would bear in eternity. This face that she had dreamed of.

"I'm gonna fuck you now, bitch. You're gorgeous." The face came down on the ravaged wasteland that he had left. He began sewing it on with a thread and needle. "Yes," he said, approvingly, "That's what I'm gonna do," and the woman expired beneath his hands.

University of Cape Town

Tertium Somnium

For Anita Rush, it did not feel like waking. It felt like escape. Tom was shaking her, calling her name over and over and she heard it as if from distance. “Annie, Annie ... Annie. Wake up. Wake up.” She realised she was moaning and stopped, blinking up at her husband, who went suddenly quiet. She wasn’t in some hole in the ground, being tortured and killed. She was at home, in bed with Tom, in the dim light of the drawn curtains, wet from sweat under the heavy duvet. She had become a child again, in the grip of great terror. Her hands were on either side of her head, the fingers curled and shaking. She let them fall onto her face, wet with tears, and she felt Tom’s arms circle around her, lifting her slightly and holding her tight around the waist. He was silent.

When her breathing settled, he spoke. “You want to talk about it?”

His voice seemed to break the spell and she shook him off, feeling suddenly claustrophobic. Tom let go and she stood up, pulling at the bedclothes as she went. Tom shifted off the bed and watched her drag everything with her to the bathroom. She shut the door, dumping the duvet and sheets into the bath, finding the plug, letting the water run. She was very thirsty and drank straight from the tap, cupping the water in both hands, gulping down the cold, chlorine taste of it. It made her half sick, so she sat on the toilet, its lid dropped, for a few minutes, allowing the dizziness and slight nausea to pass. When it did, she started the shower, threw her pyjamas with the picture of Piglet into the bath, climbed into the light fall of water and tried to fight off the horror of the dream. But it was no good. She knew, as certain as anything in the world, that what she had seen was no mere dream. She had seen something real, or almost real.

Yet, as this thought came to her, she tried to shed it. There were no such things as psychic visions. Why wouldn't she be thinking and dreaming of psychopaths when it was all she'd been reading about for the last month and a half? She thought of the books and piles of notes on the dining room table, the covers ominous with shadow faces and cold eyes.

She had always wanted to study. Her school results had been good, but she'd had to start working right away, had met Tom, had fallen in love and then pregnant. Tom had been the one to carry on studying in what had been hard times of bank loans and difficult work to support his wife and his child, until finally he was well qualified, and working at the bank. They'd had another two children and by now he was a manager, the foolish and tempestuous rush at life of their early years now little more than a joke for both of them. Anita was studying now, though, by correspondence, forensics and criminology. There were many free hours for her. Her daughter was seventeen, her only son still off exploring the planet, out of contact for weeks at a time. Though she may have been quite happy to make sewing, seamstressing, dressmaking and home grown clothing design her primary pursuits, she'd always been curious about forensics and had wanted to test it, to see if criminology could hold her. Tom had had his doubts about it, but he hadn't interfered.

In particular, for the last six weeks she'd been learning about the world's greatest and strangest killers. Names like Henry Lee Lucas and Ottis Toole, Pee Wee Gaskins, Ed Gein, Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy and hundreds more had been peopling her imagination. This was the highlight, of course, one of the initial draw cards that had attracted her to forensics in the first place. The thought of working on a serial killer, one as intriguing as Andrea Chikatilo, the enigmatic Russian killer known as Citizen X, was strangely inspiring. A serial killer was one of nature's aberrances, a

tumour in society that everyone had an obvious duty to remove. Her reading had made this fact very clear to her.

She turned off the shower and, dripping in the steam, wondered if the strange vividness of the dream would lessen. It would be hard to function today if these images rose up constantly to distract and upset. Towelling down, she saw that Tom was out of the bedroom. She slipped on her bathrobe and found him in the kitchen, making breakfast in his boxer shorts and T-shirt. His hairline was receding and half the hair had turned grey, but he'd never stopped exercising and didn't have the beer belly and sad muscles of other men his age. He never tanned well, though, and the skin between the dark hairs of his big arms and legs was pale. His half-curly hair was still uncombed, morning stubble shadowing his face. Anita looked at the kitchen clock. It was still too early to wake Pam. She was given a concerned smile as she pulled up a chair. Quickly, she said, "You think it's possible to dream things that can really happen?"

Tom took a moment. "Premonitions?"

"Sort of. But just more. I mean, to actually *see things* in a dream. As if you're being someone else."

"Prophecy?" he asked, waving an egg lifter.

"No." She shook her head, wanting him to perceive more than he could. Tom was patient. He said nothing, merely squinted his eyes at her, then went back to monitoring his pan. "Not prophecy," she went on, and then sighed, picking up an apple and tossing it lightly, catching it. She took a bite, and then said, the piece of apple filling one cheek, "I mean something like clairvoyance."

"Psychics?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know." Toast popped up beside him. "Doesn't seem real."

“Yeah. Guess not.”

Tom stood up to fetch plates and lifted his bacon and eggs, with fried onion and tomatoes onto the slices of toast in each plate. He put one in front of her but she hardly looked at it, simply stared ahead, remembering fragments of memory, of lives previously unknown to her. She would write this. This could be a book. She'd read about writers who'd been gifted with stories in dreams, but it had never happened to her. She'd always had to sweat it from imagination. Who could this killer be? she thought. An angel of death, someone unreal, when all that would really happen to her characters was a heart attack or something like that? But, no, that wouldn't work. She would have to build on this: characters dreaming, somehow, about their killer. Perhaps if they could work out that it was real they could attempt to stop him in some way. The more she thought of it, the more the plot began to remind her of so much more that she'd already seen and read. She would just have to put a bigger spin on it, perhaps, but there was potential.

“Earth to Annie,” she heard Tom saying, waving his hand in her face. “What frequency you on?”

She blinked. “Sorry. Just dreaming.”

“You'd better eat. Don't make me sound like your mother.” He sat down opposite her and took her hand in his across the kitchen table. “You all right?”

She gave him a half smile. “I've never had nightmares like this before, Tom. They felt real. They feel like warnings, as if someone knows what's coming and is trying to ... get me ready for it.”

“Ready for what?”

“Don't worry, I'm not that upset or anything. It's just something to think about. These sensations were so ... novel. I'm just sitting here thinking about it. I dreamed of two people ... well actually I dreamed I *was* two people. I knew things

when I was these people that I shouldn't know. It was like looking at the world through a totally new pair of eyes. I've never dreamed like this. I felt the sun and the wind, and each time it felt a bit different. I felt the taste of food, smelled exhaust fumes, got tired. I was talking to people I've never met and I was not in control. It wasn't lucid dreaming, but neither was it murky and disjointed and hard to link up, like other dreams. When I woke up I hardly knew who I was."

"You're okay, right?"

"Fine. But it really gets you thinking."

"About what exactly?"

"What it might be like to be someone else, I guess. Something like that. What pain is like for other people."

He fiddled with the kettle. "But pain is the same for everyone."

"But you've never felt the worst pain. You don't know what other people have been through. It can alter your perspective."

He shook his head. "Eat your breakfast. It's going to go cold and soggy." She continued, undeterred, waving her hand back and forth, as though trying to clutch at something invisible: "After this dream, it took a moment, but then the details of my life came to me again. It was like that feeling of waking up in a strange place, just more so. Like stepping into this body of mine, and having to relearn its controls again." She raised an arm. "When I do this it feels half unreal, as if I'm expecting everything to change suddenly, and I'll just wake up as someone else. Maybe I'm still dreaming."

The breakfast was untouched. Tom was frowning and, by the tight look on his face, almost annoyed, "But what did you dream about?"

As she spoke, the effort of trying to see the dreams again was making her lose them. As if there was a light in her mind that she could shine on the dreams, a light

that she needed to see them with, but the light was too bright and she was burning up the dreams with it.

“First that I was a young girl. Then-” A long pause.

“Then what?” he prompted.

She nodded and said, “They were both killed. Killed by the same man. The second was more terrible. And well, much more spooky. That’s why I was so fucked up this morning. She was being tortured.”

“Tortured?” He had made coffee for himself. There was a cup for her there too. She took a sip of it and it was tea. “I felt real pain, Tom,” she went on. “She had her *face* cut off.”

“In a dream. Are you sure you’re okay?”

She felt a sudden twinge in her spine, and for a moment, didn’t seem as sure. “It still feels odd,” she said. “But you know. It’s just a dream. Though it’s almost like I know what it feels like to die. Or to be killed. There is that bit of a difference.”

“An important one, no doubt.”

Pam, a tall girl with her mother’s blonde hair, entered the kitchen. She had inherited her height and long, thin face from her father. She still looked sleepy, and shuffled on the tiles in cat-faced slippers and dark blue pyjamas. “What’s up?” she asked dreamily, then looked at her mother’s breakfast. “Did you make me some?”

Anita pushed her plate to one side. “Here, have mine. I haven’t touched it.”

“Anita,” Tom said, annoyed.

“I’m not hungry.”

“You can’t eat dreams for breakfast,” he said.

“Yeah. Might choke on them.”

Pam fetched orange juice from the fridge, poured a tall glass and then sat down to eat. She poured tomato sauce over the breakfast and as Anita watched it flow

from the bottle she was overcome by a wave of nausea. She stood quickly, her chair falling as she ran for the toilet bowl. She made it and opened her mouth. Tom was right behind her and he held her forehead as she retched, but it was only a dry sound that emerged.

“Annie?” he asked.

She spat into the bowl and coughed, then moved up against the bathroom wall, her fingers at her forehead. She said nothing.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” She rose to wash her face and stared at her face in the mirror, turning it from side to side. “I’m okay now. I’ll be fine in a minute.”

“I’ll get you a headache tablet.”

“Thanks.”

She felt at her own cheeks and then, on instinct, touched the mirror, but only for a second. She screamed, her hand snapping back from the reflection like a whip. Tom returned quickly.

“What is it?”

“It was him.”

“Who?”

She was silent, contemplating the flash of face. “Never mind,” she said at last. “I just felt like screaming.”

He cocked his head. Anita pushed past and went to drink a glass of water. She looked askance at her blackened reflection in the kitchen’s oven door and then touched the glass, slowly, like someone carrying static charge. She held her skin against the cool surface for a few seconds, and then allowed a small smile at herself. She looked at it and then shook her head. She felt Tom’s arms around her waist again, his lips on the back of her neck. He lifted her slightly and then kissed her

earlobe. He blew in her ear, softly and gently. Anita untangled herself from him, avoiding his eyes. She went out the front door and the sky was pale and overcast. She stepped into the front garden, densely populated by plants, rosebushes and indigenous trees, the air moist with moss and life as she followed the short concrete path to the post-box. Inside was the morning paper. She walked through the back garden, to a wooden table and benches in a corner with a koi pond. There was still a light sprinkling of dew on the wood, but her bathrobe was thick and she sat down, scanning the headlines, which went on about a new accounting fraud scandal and how thousands of jobs would be lost to it. She ignored the news, though, and searched instead for the classifieds and its adult section, her eye scanning down the lurid adverts and lascivious columns until she saw it, half expecting it, but quite unwilling to believe that it was really there. It was coincidence, she rationalised. It had to be.

She rose and went to the telephone in the house, then dialled the number. It rang. Tom approached, saw the paper on the telephone table and picked it up. His eye fell on the adult ads and he squinted at his wife, curious and smiling.

“Who’re you calling?” he asked.

“Don’t worry. I’ll tell you now.”

“Are you calling a sex line?” he asked, half joking.

“It’s the bloody dream,” she half whispered at him, irritated. “It’s like it was *really* all real.” As she finished, she noticed that the ringing had stopped. There was silence in the receiver as she listened.

“Hello?” she said. “Hello?”

She could hear a noise in the background, a dog barking far away and the sound of breathing. There was someone there. “Hello. Hello. Who is this?” Then it died, replaced by the low, electronic monotone of a cancelled call. She was trembling now, as Tom cradled the phone.

“What was-” he began, as the phone rang beside them. She jumped and slammed her hand onto the receiver.

“Don’t answer it!” she said, holding both hands over it. Her eyes were wide and she was shaking her head from side to side, her forehead creased, the lines around her eyes drawn tightly. The phone continued to ring and Tom raised both his hands, palms up.

“What the hell is going on?” he asked. She shook her head. “Tell me or I’m going to answer that phone.”

“No.”

“Who’s on the other side of that call, Annie?” She shook her head and then Tom moved suddenly, lifting her hands with the phone. “No Tom,” she whispered. He held her eye and raised the phone to his ear. “Hello.” She took a step back. “Ah yes,” she heard him say, his tone suddenly convivial. “Sorry, no, I was in the shower. No, no,” he said, glancing squint-eyed at Anita. “She’s not feeling well. No don’t worry, it’s not serious. Sure it’ll pass soon. Right. Meet you in an hour ... sure. Fine. It’s all prepared. Got it finished before nine last night. Right. We’ll review it on the plane ... great. Ciao.” Irritated, he slammed the receiver down, and ploughed his fingers through his hair.

“So who did you *think* that was, Annie?” He came and stood over her, where she was leaning on the wall, a frond of fern from a pot plant touching her face. “Or should I press redial?”

“No,” she said. She’d calmed down a bit. “No, don’t do that. *I’ll tell you*, all right?”

“So tell me.”

“It’s those dreams.” He waited as she paused. “There was this woman in my dream. She was a prostitute.”

“A *what-*”

“She’s the one. The one that felt like dying.” Tom was silent and she slipped out from in front of him and went into the living room. The timer on the hi-fi glowed 06:30. Tom would be flying in two hours. They had it worked out, that they’d drop Pam at school and have him at the airport for check-in by quarter to eight at the latest. She knew he still had things to pack and would start being even more irritated by the loss of time. She sat down on the leather couch. “I had this dream that she was killed. That’s why I was upset. And I remembered that in the dream I’d seen her ad in the paper. So I looked there now and I saw it and I called the number.”

“And who answered?”

She took a deep breath, half sighing. “No one. Well no one who said anything. They answered, but they didn’t say anything.”

“And you think it’s the killer.”

“Yes. Actually I do.”

“This is fucking nuts, Annie. I didn’t think those books would get to you like this. But they obviously *have*. I never wanted to say anything. You know that. Thought I’d just let it ride itself out naturally. But maybe I should say something now, like what the hell you think you’re achieving? You’re forty-seven, you’re a housewife for God’s sake, with three kids and a fifty year old husband, and you’re trying to become a bloody forensic criminologist who’s going to have little crime scenes taped off, stand around with the men in coats who smoke cigarettes as the bloated bodies of little girls are fished out of rivers, who is going to rid the world of serial killers? Annie ... please. That’s some child’s Saturday fantasy. And I’m going to be retiring, maybe, in just five years and then you’ll be fifty-two, coming in at four in the morning with rings around your eyes and your fingers stained from some new forensic chemical. And you, you have a lifetime of experience at making sandwiches

for your children to take to school. You think the police need that?" He stopped. His face had gone somewhat red and she realised that he was voicing thoughts he must have been having for some time now. "And now this is all turning into nightmares, and you're making up cases for yourself, because, sure as anything, no one is going to give you one."

She stared at him, amazed at the outburst. She set her jaw and said nothing as he ran his fingers along his head once more. He looked at his feet, then at her, putting his hands on his hips, then breathing loudly. "Sorry," he said at last. "I didn't mean all that."

"It's all right."

"But damn. Annie. It's true. I mean, sorry, but what the hell for? It'll help you give informed commentary on episodes of CSI, but that's about it, isn't it?" She said nothing. "Come on," he went on. "We're going to be late."

He left the living room, and she sat quietly, upset, milling over his misplaced criticism. She'd never said that she had plans to save the world. Forensics was just something to study and something to help her to write crime stories, if she could. She'd loved reading the stuff over the years and had written a few short stories by now, which she'd shown only to Lynn, who'd secretly taken two and tried to get them published by showing them to someone at her office. There had been some favourable comments, but nothing much and it wasn't something Anita felt comfortable discussing, because she knew it was half laughable. For a while, she'd even been upset with Lynn for showing them to anyone. Everywhere one looked, there'd be someone with dreams of being a writer, and the thought that somebody might mockingly call her Angela Langsbury or something similar was reason enough to keep her little ambitions to herself. Being a criminologist was a fine thing to joke

about, and she'd enjoyed joking about it, but Tom, for one, seemed to have missed the punch line. She had never really planned to fish any corpses out of rivers.

Her mind drifted from this squabble, though, and like a fly on glass, returned to the phone call. There could be no such thing, she told herself, as an accurate preternatural vision. It was possible, though, that she had once seen the advert in the paper, then dreamed about it, then seen it again now, confusing it for something that she'd seen first in a dream. And perhaps the inclusion of any twenty two year old, adventurous white girl prostitute in any given adult classifieds section was not to be considered such a surprising coincidence. It was also possible that there was never anything specific to be remembered from any dream and she had merely latched on to this advert and this telephone number as something, allowing for a mistaken connection, a bright electric pattern on the ever-changing substrate of consciousness. All of which was possible, but still felt too wrong, somehow, because the dream had felt like a portent, and there was a terrible unease thinking about it now, as if she were feeling for the bottom of a dark pool too deep to stand in. Even if the source of it were not, this feeling was real. She wanted, suddenly, to be out of the house, and far from it.

Tom had gone to the bathroom. The curtains were still closed, the bedroom dark. They were long, thick white drapes, and subdued light from the overcast sky entered as Anita opened them. She loved light in her house, and when she and Tom had decided on this place ten years before, its many windows had been a great attraction. It was by far the best place either of them had ever lived in and a sort of final proof of how far they'd come together. There were wooden floors in all the bedrooms and living room, with white tiles in the kitchen and dining room, bright spaces with bookshelves, glass tables and big, comfortable furniture. And there would always be a display of one or two of her own flower arrangements. On the

walls were paintings and drawings that Tom had bought over the years: a very rough sketch of his family, because he thought traditional family portraits or big photos too kitsch, landscapes and one out-of-place abstract that injected bright bursts of colour onto one wall in the living room. It was a painting that Anita had never liked, but it was something a university friend had sold Tom long before and he'd always given it pride of place in every home they'd been in. It wasn't so much because a friend had painted it, but because it was the first painting Tom had ever paid for.

On the bed were two business suits and three shirts with ties. The bedroom was as simple as the rest of the house. Either side of the bed had its lamp and under Anita's was a new Patricia Cornwell thriller. Under Tom's was a Wilbur Smith and a book called *The Twenty-First Century Manager*. They'd had a TV in their room in the house before this, but it had stayed out of the bedroom here, a small victory for Anita.

Almost quarter to seven. Tom emerged, trailing steam, dressing quickly, and putting on one of the two suits, the other going into a cover. Anita dressed in jeans, a button-up top and sneakers. She hadn't bothered with make-up and was stuffing more clothing into a gym bag with cosmetics and toiletries. Tom observed this and frowned.

"Why are you packing?"

"I'm thinking of sleeping at Lynn's till you get back."

He sighed, and said: "You're scared of your own home now?"

"Something like that," she said and left the room. She went into Pam's, Tom trailing her. Pam was lying on the bed, in her school clothes, paging through a magazine, her book bag on the floor beside the bed. She looked up as her mother entered, watching as the woman opened her cupboard and started throwing underwear and clothing into the gym bag.

“Hey. What are you doing?”

Anita carried on looking through the cupboard, going through a quick mental checklist. “We’re spending the next couple of nights at Lynn’s place,” she said.

“Why?”

“I’ll tell you later.” Anita was stubborn now.

“I can pack for myself.”

“This should be fine,” Anita said, lifting the bag, a large, black canvas one with bright colours on plastic covering each end. Tom stood in the doorway, silent. They had less than an hour to get to the airport now and Anita supposed he’d wait till after they’d dropped Pam at school and were driving out to the planes. There wasn’t time for any argument now. He stood aside to let Anita pass, then went back to finish his own packing and fetch his briefcase.

As they climbed into the Jaguar, Tom asked: “Does Lynn even know you’re about to invite yourself over?”

“Shouldn’t be a problem.”

He shook his head, switched on the radio, put the car in gear and reversed out into the street. As Anita pushed the button for the automatic gate to close in front of her she scanned the street, looking for cars, or a watcher standing somewhere, under a tree, or sitting on a garden wall across the road. There was nothing out of place. She breathed loudly as they took the first turn and waited at a traffic light. Tom reached over and took her hand, something so unexpected that she almost pulled away, but then she glanced at his face: serious, good looking, stable. “Look then,” he said. “If you don’t fit in with Lynn’s plans, then just go book into an hotel or something. Whatever you need to feel safe.”

Pam lent forward and said: “What’s up? Did you get a death threat or something?”

“No,” Anita said. “Don’t worry too much. I just don’t want the two of us to be alone in the house tonight.”

Pam sat back again, sighing. “Never been a problem *before*.”

Anita turned and looked at her daughter. “Remember that time when you and I were driving from Aunt Jane’s farm outside town and we almost had that accident?”

Pam squinted and tilted her head. “Sure. ‘Course I do.”

Anita nodded. “So ... we were on a double-carriage highway, in the right-hand lane, passing a fuel truck, when suddenly I slowed down and pulled off the road to the shoulder—”

Pam nodded. “And then a madman driving on the wrong side of the highway comes screaming past at like 200 kilos an hour. I know the story, mom.”

“Uh hmm. And so then what?”

“And so he crashed into the car behind us,” she said. It had happened three years ago, but Pam could still get upset about the memory, or wildly jovial, depending on the mood. There had been a family with two children in the car and all of them, including the mad driver, had perished. “What’s your point?” Pam asked.

“Did I have any reason to want to pull off the road?”

“Don’t know. Maybe you saw him coming.”

“I don’t remember seeing anything. Just – suddenly – felt a warning. And I listened.”

“And not going back to the house is a bit like that?”

“Maybe.”

Pam was quiet then. Near the school, traffic built up and she could see Tom growing more impatient. He was almost glowering by the time they were in the school yard. “Twenty minutes to get to the airport,” Pam said, opening the car door. “Enjoy the conference thing, dad. See you on Sunday, right?” He nodded and she

kissed him lightly and climbed out, saying, "That's if we're still alive, of course." The car door closed and there was renewed concern as he took Anita's hand again. She got the impression that he was compensating now, that some of this was faked, a matter of obligation.

"I can stay," he said. "The conference is not that important. I'll stay if you want me to."

"No. You go. Get moving. You'll be late. I'll figure all this out before you get back. I could've let my imagination run away with me. I'll have a good long chat with Lynn tonight, a glass of wine, and we'll see if it's possible for someone to turn into a schizo..." she snapped her fingers. "Just like that."

"Don't think so."

"No. Me neither."

"Sorry about what I said back at the house."

Anita half smiled, then sighed. "I don't want to be a big forensic criminologist, Tom. I just want to know a bit more. It's curiosity. You know, bad for cats, good for people."

"I know." They were driving again.

She paused, thought it through, and said: "I was actually thinking of using it to write, well, a bit of crime fiction. Just as a hobby, you know? Putting the knowledge to good use. That sort of thing."

He smiled. "You never told me this. Was I going to find a stack of old manuscripts in the attic or something one day, left in your will?"

"Of course not. There's no way you'll outlive me." She smiled. They took an onramp for the highway.

"You'll have to let me read it, then."

"No chance."

“So how much have you written?”

She held up her fingers, parting them a small fraction. “This much.”

“Now I’m curious.”

“Don’t be. They’re terrible. Horrible stories.” She laughed.

“I’ll find them.”

“No you won’t. I’ll burn them all before you’re back.”

“You *wouldn’t*.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

He raised his hands from the steering wheel and showed her his palms, for the second time that day. “Okay, okay. Forget I said anything. Never realised I was sleeping next to such a talented woman.”

She hit him, playfully. “God Tom, you’re a nasty tease. The absolute worst.”

He laughed, and then his expression straightened. “But, Annie, darling, there *is* a very colourful imagination in that pretty little head of yours. You might just want to keep an eye on it.”

“Oh really? Or an eye *off* it, if you prefer.”

“As you like it.”

“Well, right. You just go to your little conference then. And I’ll get a grip on my out-of-control imagination. Like they tell ten year old children.”

“Good deal.” They shook hands, Tom with one hand on the wheel.

As they reached the airport it began to rain, a massive cloudburst that whispered loudly on the parking lot tar. Tom cursed the rain for timing, popped the boot lid and hopped out into the torrent. Anita waited a few moments, then joined him, taking his briefcase for him and helping to hold his extra suit as he shut the boot and they ran for the doors. They were half-soaked and laughing as they entered the departures lounge.

“Amazing,” Tom said, and then scanned the board. His flight was on time. He looked around for Diane Lovis, the head of personnel at the bank. Anita saw her sitting at a coffee shop, paging through a newspaper. Anita did not trust the woman, who was in her mid-thirties and single. Tom had said she’d been married before, but that had been some time ago. There wasn’t much Anita could say about them taking trips like this together, but it wasn’t comfortable. She kept her misgivings about Diane Lovis between Lynn and herself, though, and hoped that Tom would keep in mind that these things were never wise. Diane Lovis was an attractive woman, her hair wine-red and cut to curl under the jaw line, her eyes dark green. Anita had kept in shape, and still went to gym two or three times a week, but after a child and forty-seven years she could perhaps not compete with a Diane Lovis’s slim hips or perky breasts.

Diane saw them and came over. Hellos were offered and Tom went to check in. There was time to have a cup of coffee and the three of them took a table. Tom and Diane spoke about the conference, about the upgrade to the computer network and the rumour of one of the directors being accused of fraud. Anita listened with half an ear, but didn’t say anything. She sipped at her coffee and watched Diane in her navy dress and high heels. When boarding was announced Tom told Diane he would join her in a moment and took Anita aside to say goodbye.

“Are you going to be fine?”

She nodded.

“Phone me any time for anything. Even if you’re feeling silly. I want to know about it. Okay?”

“Okay.” She puffed out her cheeks as he gave her the car keys.

“Don’t go swerving for unicorns or anything.”

She flinched just a touch as he said it.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Why did you say that?”

He frowned.

“Sorry,” she said, motioning with her hands, but his words had displaced and unsettled her. “Don’t worry,” she said, trying to ignore the unease bleeding into her mind. “Enjoy the flight.” Then in a shopping list tone, she added, “And try to keep your hands off Diane. She’s looking very pretty.”

He waved as he went through the detector and she watched till he disappeared around a turn in a hallway. She hoped he wouldn’t get too wet boarding the plane. She held the key ready as she ran out in the downpour to the Jaguar. Dampened, she turned the ignition, switched on the radio, found that she was not in the mood for any talk and switched it to CD. Sting came on, pouring out mellifluous jazz. On the highway she put her cell phone in the car’s hands-free kit, turned down the music and dialled Lynn’s number.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Lynn. It’s me.”

“Hey.”

“Listen, I know this is short notice and all, but Tom’s just flown out of town and I don’t want to be alone at home tonight. I’ve been having nightmares and it would be, well, a bit heavy for me.”

“Sure. Just you? Or Pam as well?”

“No, Pam too.”

“Fine, fine. It’ll be good to see you. We need to catch up on the last two weeks anyway.”

“Thanks, Lynn. Really. When will you be home?”

“Around four. I’m picking Timothy up from day care and stopping for groceries. Make it about half-past at the latest.”

“Thank you.”

“See you then. Got to go now. They’re about to start a meeting.”

Anita had been to visit Lynn once at work, a publisher’s where she was a typist. Her bosses were not keen on staff getting personal visits during working hours, though. Lynn worked hard for them. She had been married once in her forty-five years, for fifteen childless years, and her husband had died in an accident. He’d been a truck driver. After the accident Lynn had gone for a fertility test and the doctors had assured her that there had never been anything wrong with her, but by then she was near forty. So she had adopted a boy called Timothy, who was eight now.

Anita took an off-ramp near the new mall as the wiper blades squeaked on the glass. She turned them off. The car tyres sang softly on the wet tar as very small drops of moisture settled slowly on the windscreen. She was planning on driving to the library and perhaps taking another walk through the museum by herself to lunch at the café there with a book. It would keep her busy till the afternoon. Then she could pick up Pam and plan something for the next few hours, until Lynn was away from school. As she drove and apartment blocks rose up around her, people walking the pavements on both sides and cars passing, she thought again of how full of strangers the world could seem, if you were in that sort of mood. She turned left at a park and felt the same prickle of recall that had been lifting hairs on her arms all morning. She slowed the Jaguar and scanned each side of the street more carefully. She had the feeling that she had been here before, and that this was significant, something like the newspaper this morning. The school was on her right and then the school field came into view. She slowed the car in the road and stared at the field with its track, rugby

posts and black grandstand. There were children in the corridors of the school, but the field was empty. A car roared past her and snapped her back to reality. She parked on the slight rise of pavement. The front gate to the school was locked, so she walked along the fence until she came to the office entrance. Set into the face-brick wall was the school's emblem, a stylised sheaf of wheat. She took a quick left in front of the office entrance and walked along beside the classroom windows, hearing intermittently the sounds of children and loud teachers. She was in the school's main road and standing next to the grandstand as heavy rain started again. So she ducked in beneath the grandstand and sat on the concrete, staring out across the grass and the backs of houses behind concrete-slab walls on the other side. Her eyes went from house to house, settling on and studying each. One house in particular, a double-storey with red tiles, made her very still. The rain had made the sight of it hazy. So, ignoring the downpour, she stepped out on to the track and scanned the inner lane with eyes wide as she kept walking, till she was on the field's other side. The house was clearer to her now and she wondered if she should go around to the front and ring the bell. But that would take time, and she was strangely sure of herself where she was. She looked around the school field for something to stand on. There was a small drum beneath the rugby poles. It had been filled with paint for the lanes on the track. She lifted it and took it to where the field's wall connected at right angles to the wall separating the two houses on the other side. It was an effort to lift herself, but by standing on the drum it wasn't too far. Once on the wall, she was able to balance along the adjoining one, onto the red tiles of the roof. In the house's yard was a big Alsatian, subdued by the rain. It looked up at her from the house's back porch. As she went, it stood and started to bark, but stayed under the porch, out of the rain.

She was standing outside a window on the house's second storey, the dog still barking madly beneath her. There were no bars on this window, which was made to

slide upwards. She tried to lift it, but it was locked. The blinds were partly open, and through the spaces she could make out the room beyond. She followed the unreal sensation that spoke in tones too low for words, and made her way back onto the wall, dropping down to ground, where the dog still barked. She went down on her haunches and spoke to the animal. The dog merely barked louder, but kept its distance.

“Hondo,” she told it. “I know you.” Its barking faltered and she stepped forward, her fingers pressing against damp fur. She rubbed the animal’s head and it was quiet. “What happened here?” she told the dog, but talking mostly to herself. “What happened here?”

She walked around the house and knocked on the kitchen door. There was no response and she turned the handle. It was unlocked. In the kitchen, dishes had been left to pile up, on tables and in the sink. The kitchen tiles, too, were dirty. Anita called out a hello, but there was still no response. She found a staircase and ascended it, passing a potted fern on a turn halfway up. Her blonde hair darkened by the rain, the button-up shirt wet on her shoulders, she pulled up her sleeves and made her way to the bedroom she’d seen from outside. Within it she looked at the posters on the walls, the muddied streaks on the white mat, the black and white television and other objects that prickled her memory. She was standing at the room’s desk, staring at a photograph of two girls with a zoo elephant behind them. On the right was an Indian girl with a warm, heart-shaped face and long, brown hair, smiling broadly with her head half thrown back. The other girl had brown hair and light skin, and was half smiling, as if she didn’t really like the joke that had tickled her friend. It was the girl from the nightmares, and the sight of her, this apparent confirmation of her existence, the singular fact that this had been her room, raised hundreds of tiny bumps on Anita’s skin, and catalysed her thinking. But nevertheless, though her mind leapt at

the prospect of this riddle, there was nothing near a satisfactory explanation. There was the sound of feet on carpet behind her and Anita turned slowly. It was clear the girl in the doorway had just woken from sleep. She was drowsy-eyed and squinted at Anita, who stood very quietly, covered in rainwater beside the bed.

“Hello?” she said. “Who are you?” It was the Indian girl from the photograph, still in her pyjamas.

Anita recovered from initial surprise. “I’m Anita.” She walked over to offer her hand to the girl, who yawned as she took it.

“Claire,” she said through the yawn and then breathed deeply as she cleared the sleep from her eyes and looked at Anita more carefully. Then she looked at her friend’s room. “Does this have to do with Jennifer?”

“Jennifer? Your friend?”

“Yes, Jennifer, my friend.” Her expression tightened a little more.

“It does, I think. Look, I knocked down below, but no one answered so I came in. I needed to see this room.”

“What for?”

“It feels like I was led here, sort of. I think I know something about your friend. She’s missing, isn’t she?”

“Yeah.”

“For how long?”

“Five days now. Do you know where she is?”

“I’m not sure. Do you believe that people can see things in dreams?”

When the girl did not reply, Anita moved, and said, “I have to go, I think. Sorry if I woke you.”

“You saw her in a dream?”

“I think I did.”

“You saw what’s happened to her?”

Anita knew she would be unable to express it. It belonged to the realm of dreams, but was rooted in this room, and this city. “Maybe,” she replied.

Accumulated worry showed in the girl’s eyes, but they were narrowed by doubt. “What are you saying?”

“I don’t know.” Anita lowered her hands, at a loss.

“No way,” the girl replied. “Don’t say this stuff to me. I’m going to make a phone call. All right?”

“To whom?”

“Don’t worry. Just wait. You will wait?” It wasn’t really a question.

“Where are Jennifer’s parents?”

“They went to the police. Again.”

“You’re going to call them? Right?”

“You should talk to them. If you know something.”

Anita considered. “Yes. You’re right. I should.”

She tried to put her doubts aside, because it was important, even if she wouldn’t believe herself, were the roles to be reversed. “Déjà vu”, she would have said dismissively. She would have called herself a schizophrenic and have been done with it. But she would draw the face now and show it to the police. Perhaps the face from her nightmares would be on television screens and post office walls around the country by nightfall, and perhaps someone would recognise it.

The girl was down the hallway and taking the stairway down. Anita followed. As she entered the kitchen again, and her gaze travelled around the corner of the wall to where the phone was attached to the white tiles, she was confronted by an image of the devil himself. It was Grindle, the phone receiver clutched to his face. He stared at her without expression, and she jerked backwards at the sight, inhaling suddenly, cold

adrenalin forcing itself into her veins and muscles. Panicked, she moved for the kitchen door, which was locked now. Grindle had locked it, he must have. She moaned and tried to force it, the latch on the inside shifting slightly as she tugged. Shaking, she released the latch, opened the door and was back in the rain. From behind her she heard his voice. She made for the front of the house, but it was quite sealed. She heard the dog barking again, becoming louder. Without pause, she stepped onto a garden pot that flanked the wall in front, using it to launch over the front wall. She hit the lawn on the other side and rolled, was up quickly and running in the direction of her car. Behind her, the man was over the wall too. He was shouting, and his voice was angry and deep.

She swore, her limbs heavy and awkward. She tried to run faster, but the pursuing figure behind her was closing the distance. Before she reached the end of the street she felt the weight of him at her back, a hard, heavy impact. They rolled together and struck the wet pavement, Anita lashing out with her hands for anything to grab on to, and fight against. She found his face and dug her nails into it, digging at the eyes, wanting to claw and rake them. Instead, she felt skin tearing down the side of his face and the neck. There was a scream, a hollow sound, and suddenly Anita was on top of him. She clutched at his neck, and felt an immense sense of strength and power and a rush of pulsing blood within her. She wanted to scream, but not from fear now, but like a primate, old and hard and toughened by survival. She felt the rain coursing down her face, her shoulders and neck, and she was invincible. She looked down at the man she was about to destroy, her eyes angry slits of fury.

It was no man beneath her though, only a young girl, screaming. She could see this, but it was no deterrent. She tore at the girl's wet and muddy pyjama top, the buttons releasing with a satisfying pop. Underneath, a thin trickle of blood coursed from where she had hurt the girl, down onto her small breasts. The girl struck back,

and Anita was suddenly appalled, her head snapping up, her hands lifting from the girl's shoulders. She rolled off the small body, which had seemed to her, for those brief, sickening seconds, like something ripe and sweet, a fruit into which she could sink her teeth. Anita stood, and ran. She could see her car now, up ahead. She looked back. Claire hadn't started up again.

She felt for the keys in her pocket, imagining that she could well have lost them. They were there, though, and as she fumbled and pulled them free, it occurred to her that she could not use the car, not when the girl could see and remember its license plates. And not now, not after what she had just done. So Anita ran on, along the wet road, past the Jaguar and up the street, to where the school ended. She went left, looking constantly along the road at the traffic, waiting for a gap to cross. When she glanced back, the girl was following again, persistent as the rain itself. They crossed the road, Anita rushing past a group of women, clustered under umbrellas like a giant upturned flower. The rain struck at her, with behind her the intermittent sounds of the girl shouting and cursing, Anita gaining distance all the time. The girl was barefoot, perhaps unfit too, but fatigue had a growing hold on the older woman as a bright pain in the gut. She tried to ignore it, as she moved left down another road, sprinting on, using impossible energy. The new mall was ahead and she turned into its parking lot, thinking perhaps of hiding under a car, but she found herself headed for the mall's entrance, unsure of how close the pursuing girl was now, or if she'd even seen her entering.

Red-faced and wet, she dashed past curious shoppers, running on. She slowed, her lungs clutching at the warmed mall air, her eyes darting to left and right, till she came to the thick carpets of a cinema. She followed the long wall of mirrors and film posters till she was in the corridor leading to the toilets. There was no one behind her and she dashed into the ladies room, catching sight of herself in one

mirror, where she looked wilted and drained. She entered a cubicle and tried to quell the heavy feeling of nausea, swelling and ebbing, as she tried to force the air to swell in her chest, as she waited for the pounding at her temples to cease. She raised her legs off the floor and sat as quietly as she could manage on the dropped lid of the toilet seat, her ankles clutched tightly by fingers and wrists. She shivered, feeling trapped. On the wall behind was no window through which she could squeeze, behind which to find a service corridor that she could escape with or just hide in, as she had seen so often in films. She should have just continued her run to the mall's other side, from where she could have tried circling back to her car. Running like this, as she was, from nothing but a young girl who had lost a friend.

She opened the door a crack and then stepped out. There was no one else in the bathroom, but as she returned to the hallway with its mirrors she saw, reflected in them at one angle, the girl walking towards her, still drenched from rain, one arm holding her torn pyjama top shut. Anita went right. She opened a steel door at the passage's end, which gave on to a service corridor. A green sign on the bricks across from her pointed to her right, with a depiction of a figure running from flames beneath. She followed the sign and then another pointing left. At the end of the brick corridor was another door that opened on to overcast sunlight and drizzle. She glanced around and then ran left again, back to the mall's entrance. She was so tired and drained now that the world flashed brightly between spots of black around her. She moved like something slowly sinking and as she ran through the mall's entrance her stream of consciousness itself seemed to change, to become something dismembered and free. She saw herself running, and she was a wretched sight, her expression almost desperate, the girl screaming and shouting from behind. She watched herself as, almost godlike, she saw her own body hurrying by. She was looking down at hands that were not her own, the hands of another woman. Then her

vision was displaced once more, and still she watched herself moving, but now she was a boy in baggy trousers and colourful shirt. Her thoughts remained her own, and yet she was watching herself run, with Claire right behind her. Her body seemed to falter and turn, towards a steakhouse, and then run past it. The feeling of change happened again and now she was watching from the eyes of someone on an escalator, as Anita descended it, moving quickly down the moving, steel steps. She could feel herself brush against the observer as she ran past him, and then Claire followed. She could almost sense the man's irritation at the frantic rush past him. He continued to watch as Anita shouldered past a group of women standing at the parking ticket pay point.

Now she was in the underground parking lot and the sudden sensation of her own body was like a strike to the solar plexus. She was dead tired, her breath thin and hot, as if an oven door had closed on her. She ran on, towards the light beyond the concrete of the parking bays, but she had so little energy now. She slumped down and turned her back against an orange-painted pillar, with a great white C on it. She realised, then, that she was watching herself once more. Instead of seeing Claire, she knew that she was watching from Claire's perspective. The girl had slowed and was walking warily towards where the older woman had slumped. She was just as tired. Anita had seen herself on video a few times, and even that had been curious, witnessing the sight of herself as others saw her, but this was incredible. No camera could capture it. Then, just as suddenly, she was looking at the girl again. She could make out the bright, stylised, little pictures of wildlife on Claire's biscuit-coloured cotton pyjamas: lions, elephants, giraffes, leopards and zebras, drawn and painted with big, crooked smiles and spirals for eyes. Claire's hair hung straight down, in heavy, damp tresses as she continued to glare at Anita with a dark frown, the eyeballs fighting up against it. At last, she said, very slowly, her voice hoarse: "Why did you

run?" Her face screwed up and she opened her top a fraction and lifted her chin, to show the recent injury. "Why did you do this to me?"

Anita stared at it, as if she could still not accept the fact. "I'm going mad," she said at last. "I thought you were the killer. I thought he was after me. I'm sorry."

"And this?" Claire's upper lip curled and trembled as she shook her torn top. "You think I look like a killer?" They were passed by people walking towards cars, and cars drove by, filling the air with exhaust.

"I don't know."

"You're crazy. But you're going to talk to the cops, all right? No more running away."

"I know. Anything."

Anita watched a little girl, staring openly as she walked past, clutching her mother's hand. The girl was pretty, with thick, brown curls around a chubby face.

"Anita?"

Dazed, she still felt unable to move. Her mouth hung limply, open like an idiot's. She saw the girl's fingers flashing in front of her and it roused her. Her eyes swivelled and she blinked.

"That is your name, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"What were you doing there?"

"I told you. I had a dream that your friend was attacked. And then I realised that it was real. It is real. It seems that I am clairvoyant." She considered the strange experience of a few moments before and added, "That, and a few other things besides."

"What did you dream?"

Anita looked away. "Let's just go."

“Tell me. I promise not to press charges. If you tell me, all right, I won’t say you just about tried to kill me.”

After a minute in which Anita said nothing, she explained the dream, yet Claire’s look of scepticism remained. “So she’s really dead?”

“I think so. If you can believe in visions.”

“It’s happened to me, you know.”

“What?”

“Déjà vu.”

Anita nodded. “Well this is a bit like that. Just a little more so.”

“So why’d you have the dream?”

“Because I think he’s coming for me, too.”

It was a thought she hadn’t allowed herself to think out loud before, but she knew that it was probably true. And she was numb to it, as if she couldn’t really believe it.

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Guess I’ll have to stop him somehow.”

“You should really tell the police.”

“Feels like he could be looking at me right now,” Anita almost whispered, as if only to herself. “In this parking lot somewhere. He feels ... so close. Somehow.”

“I need to know who he is too. If he killed Jennifer.” Claire frowned, clenching her fingers instinctively.

“You go to an art school, don’t you?”

Claire nodded, surprised. “How do you know?”

Anita shrugged and said. "I told you. I don't know how. I just do. I've seen it. I know you. I know that you want to be an actress and that you love singing. I even know that you had sex for the first time not too long ago."

Claire blinked, and nodded. "You know this from a dream?"

"Perhaps. Am I right?"

Claire nodded and glanced away. "It was just the once. Made out it was better than it was." She paused. "Look. Never mind. I'm standing barefoot, in my pyjamas and wet in a parking garage. Can we *not* do this here, please?"

"I need something to drink. Water."

Claire held out an arm. "Here. Just squeeze my pyjama top. You'll get a few drops."

Anita almost smiled. "So you came here when you heard she was missing?"

"Took a bus. I was getting sick with worry in Greyton. I thought, maybe, I could help. Let's go."

"You should go back home. There's nothing more you can do. It's over."

Anita made to stand up.

"Let me come with you. I can help you. We can stop him together. If this is true, you need help."

"We'll just go to the police, now, and I'll tell them what I know. And then maybe they'll believe me. And you have to go back to school, and try to put this out of your mind. You have other friends. Mourn this one and move on."

"No. She was like a sister."

"Get on with your life. Believe me."

They walked back towards the escalator, very slowly now, as if their muscles had already stiffened from the run.

"Do you believe in the existence of evil?" Anita asked.

“What? Like the devil?”

“Maybe.”

“Don’t know. Everyone’s afraid of Hell.”

“Yeah. But this guy ... I don’t know.” She wanted to say a great deal more, and she remembered the case studies in her books at home, with their arguments against the unique minds of killers, the way that people were reduced in their eyes to objects to be used and abused without conscience. They said nothing of demons. It was all supposed to be the simple product of a diseased mind.

“You’re not scaring me,” Claire said.

Anita sighed. There was a sign at the escalator, forbidding shoppers from attempting to use it without shoes. Claire ignored it. Anita looked at the girl’s feet. “I’m sorry I hurt you. Sorry I made you run.”

“It’s all right. Maybe I believe you. I don’t know. Just talk to the police. Talk to Jennifer’s parents. That’s all I want you to do now.”

“I will.”

They walked from the escalator, heading for one of the exits again, when there was a great noise, far too loud, and Anita jerked her head to one side, flinching. It took her a moment to realise that the noise was from a gun. It had echoed in the mall like a small bomb. Panicked, her eyes settled on a gunman, and for a brief moment she was relieved that it was a stranger. He was an overweight man, and in a different context his outfit would have been ridiculous. Now it was simply disturbing: a green, tight fitting body suit, with on his head a domed helmet with feelers. A pair of fabric arms hung limply from a fat waist. Meant to be a bug of some sort, he was shouting, brandishing a small, stumpy automatic rifle.

“It’s you, isn’t it? It’s you.” He shot a woman in the head, and the jarring sight of it, the train of bullets shattering a broad shop window behind her as the

woman collapsed lifelessly onto the tiles, was almost unreal, a sight so incongruous to Anita that it was as if she were seeing it through the lens of a camera. The man shot again, choosing a woman clutching at her head, lying motionless on the floor. Some had run away after the first shots, others had lain down, like the second victim, a fatal mistake. Others watched from the sides, men, women and children, where they were pressing themselves up against glass and pillars, as if trying to push right through them to safety. The man waved the gun at them, responding to an unvoiced, collective query.

“It doesn’t matter!” he screamed. “None of you matter! You don’t even exist!” He was walking and moving closer to where Anita and Claire stood.

“Come on,” Anita whispered, and clutched the girl’s hand. They began to run, but there was another gunshot and the hand in her own was wrenched free at the sound of it. Claire dropped, falling without scream or protest, with only a simple inhalation of breath, and then an inhuman slump to the floor. Anita stopped and went back to the body, unmindful of the wild gunman now. She stooped over the girl and rolled the body over. It was covered in blood, the animal pyjamas darkly stained. Bullets had torn through the small chest. Death, for Claire, must have been instant. Instant and senseless. A shadow appeared over her and Anita looked up. It was the gunman, she knew that well enough, but she willed herself not to look up. If he planned to shoot her, then he would just have to do it without fanfare. But nothing happened, and then there was the hot tip of the rifle under her chin, and a slight pressure on the sight to make her raise her face. She looked up in protest, hardening her brow and lips, and there was a big grin on the gunman’s moon face, which dropped slowly into a hard grimace. “It’s you,” he said. “I know it. I can see it.”

She didn’t want to reply, but in spite of herself she did: “Why?”

“You’re the best to answer that, don’t you think?” He laughed, briefly.

“Why are you doing this?”

His laughter grew, an insane and hollow sound, which became a bitter noise that terminated suddenly, betraying the laugh as a mere affectation. “Why, you ask. Why? That’s rich, coming from you. You really don’t know, do you?”

“Know what?”

“You don’t remember?”

“Remember what?” She was angry. She wanted to jump up and throttle this big waste to death. She wanted to hear his tiny gurgle of protest as the life was squeezed from him.

“It doesn’t matter that you don’t remember. I promised a long time ago that I would kill you, and now, finally, I will.” He waved the gun in circles, indicating the mall: “Even if it means doing it here,” he said. “To think that I would kill you in a place like this. If you can call this a place.” She could almost feel the pressure tighten on his trigger, as if the intent in his voice alone could do it. There was a shout from behind the gunman, someone issuing a warning and an order for him to desist and drop his gun. It made the bug head turn for a moment in the voice’s direction, but then it snapped back, for the eyes to focus on Anita and she knew it was over. The gunman pulled his trigger and the wild expression of glee and triumph was immediately erased from his face, replaced by a look of stunned betrayal. A ball rolled from the gun’s barrel, bounced once on the floor and landed in Anita’s lap. There was a gunshot, but it came not from the gunman’s rifle. The big man, in his ridiculous suit, fell, slumping over her where she was crouched.

Anita had no response to any of this. She stared at the big, motionless form of the man, his gun having slipped from his grasp and clattered across the tiles. She could find nothing in his face, no hint of recognition. He was mad, that was all,

perhaps. The blood trickled from the bottom edge of his bug helmet, which lay askew across his sideways-laying face.

She clutched at the ball from his gun and it was cool and rubbery. She clutched it tightly, and dug her nails into her hand to hold it. She was so tired, she would just close her eyes for a moment ... and feel something almost like tears, behind her eyes. She could place her head, just for a second, on the girl's lifeless body and sleep ...

She felt someone touching her shoulder and talking to her. "Ma'am. Are you all right ma'am?"

The world became a blur of appalled faces and the bustle of people and voices. She was carried through the growing tide of people, her feelings numbed. When she bothered to focus her eyes again, they met those of a middle-aged policeman.

"Thirsty," she said.

"You're in shock." She felt a blanket draped over her shoulders and a strong pair of hands on them. A tap opening and then water on her lips. There was a kettle boiling, and then the warm, bubbling sound of water striking a cup. "Here, drink this. It's just tea." She felt the warm infusion filling her and settling her. She was in a small room with television monitors clustered untidily. In two of them she could see blanketed forms on the ground, bodies sheltered from the public eye, police keeping people back now with tape and the occasional gesture. She listened to the two policemen in the room with her. It was soon clear that, for now, they had no idea who the gunman was. Every so often, there'd be a crackle from their walkie-talkies, a burst of police code, and then a message that said much the same thing.

"I know who he is," she told them, the lie coming to her without much bidding. The policemen watched her intently. "There's another one like him." She

tried to remember, and closed her eyes for a moment, her eyeballs quivering behind the skin. She opened them and said, "His name is Grindle."

"How do you know this, ma'am?"

"Give me a pencil and paper and I'll draw the other one for you. If you find him, you'll find out about this one too." She looked at their name badges. The one called Hinkley gestured for the other one to move. When they were alone, Hinkley, eyeing her in what seemed to her an expression of distrust said: "You're saying you know the gunman?"

"Was it you who shot him?"

Officer Hinkley shook his head, his expression unreadable. He repeated his question. "Do you know him?"

"I know him. But not well. I've seen him. I know his friend better. His friend is a serial killer." The words evoked no particular response from the man and her eyes narrowed. She almost smiled at the sound of what she was saying. "He likes young women. Girls."

The policeman remained unmoved. "And how do you know this?"

"Been getting reports of disappearances lately, Mr Hinkley?"

He frowned. "Yes."

"I think the man I'm going to draw for you might be able to help you find some."

"How do you know?"

"If you find him, I'll tell you. If you don't, I probably won't be able to."

"Are you in danger, Mrs ..."

"Rush. Anita. Perhaps. I'm not sure. The other one still wants to kill me, I think. Grindle."

"Was the gunman after you, Anita?"

“He said he was.”

He had a writing pad and a pen in his hand. “Can you give me your account of what happened, Mrs Rush? We have most of the visuals on tape, of course.” He gestured towards the panel of screens, “Do you know his name?”

“No.”

The other policeman returned, and handed her a sketch pad and four pencils, no doubt appropriated from a stationery store nearby. “But I can give you his friend.” She started to sketch, closing her eyes from time to time, trying to assemble something from the somnambulist’s box of puzzle pieces that had spilled from her bed.

Hinkley was insistent. “Ma’am. How do you know these men? How do you know that this man you speak of is a serial killer? That is a very serious allegation. How many has he killed?” She silenced him with a flutter of her hand and he began to talk to his partner. It was obvious to her that he thought she was lying, and he made no attempt to hide any scepticism. She was aware that he was probably doing so consciously, too. She sketched, and was unhappy with the sketch, erasing, then continuing again. In not too long the face from the dream began to take shape roughly on the page and there was again that feeling that she knew the man from somewhere more than just a dream. This was a face tantalisingly familiar, its features to her like something intimate. Nevertheless, the face and its eyes repelled her and she was glad to hand the sketch to Hinkley.

“You draw well, Mrs Rush. And quickly. Have you taken art classes?”

She studied Hinkley for a moment, before answering, but there had been no trace of sarcasm. “It’s just a hobby,” she replied. “Tell me, officer, how good are these things at finding people?”

The policeman shrugged. "This incident is going to be news for a while. If we link this face to it we'll get a few calls, probably a lot more than we want. And somewhere in all the calls will be the real thing. It happens."

She stared at the policeman. "Do you believe me?"

"Not really," he said, his face blank. "But I am curious to know who this man is and what he means to you. You're lying, but you are at least sincere, Mrs Rush. I know that much. So what's the real story? No more lies."

"Just promise me that if you find this man you'll treat him exactly as if you believe every word I'm telling you."

"So you are lying."

She snorted softly. "I'm not saying anything of the sort."

"She wasn't your daughter?"

"No. I guess that's obvious."

"Tell me."

"I didn't really know her. I'm sorry she's dead. She should've been at school, away from this crazy place."

"What were you doing together?"

"I saw her being chased by that man." She pointed at the sketch. "I was driving along and witnessed it. He had a knife and he was chasing after her. But when he saw me he got scared off. I brought the girl here. We were going to report it. She told me that he'd surprised her in her bedroom. She'd still been lying in bed, but she managed to get away. He told her that he was responsible for the death of her best friend, Jennifer. I don't know her surname." She looked at the policeman, half expecting him to provide her with a surname, as if a disappearance was important enough.

"Where did you see the gunman?" he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You know him.”

“I don’t.”

“Try not to contradict yourself too much, Mrs Rush. Make it easier for me to believe you. I’d like to.”

She felt her face reddening. “I saw him running off with that man.” She pointed at her rough sketch.

“All right. Now you tell me what I’m going to write here, and I’ll write it. Then you’re going to sign, and that will have to be your statement, truth or not.” There was a faint lift at the corners of his mouth. She narrated her story to him again as he wrote. He finished, handed her the affidavit pad and she signed.

“Where’s your I.D.?”

“Left it in my car.”

“I’ll escort you to it.”

“Don’t you normally have to do this kind of thing at the station?”

His smile was small and dry. “No. I’m authorised to take statements. You’ll have to come to the station later, maybe. I’m going to have to refer all of this to the detectives.”

“So this isn’t really your department?”

“No. They’ll come to see you soon. If there are disappearances, a missing person, they’ll interview you.” She nodded. “Perhaps we’ll find your man.” As they drove, she wondered why he seemed to be nothing but an average officer, but she kept silent on the back seat, except for directions to get back to her car.

“The Jaguar?” the other policeman said as they pulled up beside it.

“Seems a little far from the mall, Mrs Rush,” Hinkley said, turning his head to face her.

“It does.” There was a cold silence and then he said, “We have your details, Mrs Rush. The detectives will be in touch.”

“Thank you. Don’t you want to see my I.D.?”

“You gave us your details, didn’t you? That’s something you weren’t lying about I assume.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

The skies had let loose another heavy downpour and she hurried into the Jaguar and slammed the door. For the first time she allowed herself to look at the tiny sphere in her hand, which she had been clutching tightly and had then put into her pocket. It was a very small ball, the size of a marble, dark brown and polished. There was a discoloration in it, formed by a fine line of red. She held it up to the light and then saw that the red was letters.

NOT YET, they said. She stared at it a while longer, and could feel herself swallow, a bolus of air and fluid. The ball shifted in her hand and she frowned. It popped open and there were white, wriggling things within it. She cast them from her, instinctively, horrified at the sight of them twisting silently on the passenger seat. She found a booklet in the glove compartment, opened the passenger door and brushed the squirming, pale organisms out onto the road, together with the two hollow halves from the sphere. She felt sick.

She started the engine, slipped the car into gear and drove off, half imagining the unlikely sight, breaking into clarity through the sheet of falling water behind her, of an Indian girl in pyjamas, running barefoot and screaming. The rain lessened again and it pattered lightly on the car, trickling down the glass in epileptic rivulets. At a traffic light, there was a knock on the driver door’s glass, a beggar woman, holding out her hands and saying something. She had wrapped herself in black rubbish bags against the rain and there was a shopping bag around her head, the rain dripping from

its creases. Her teeth were stained and there were deep lines on her face from years in the sun. Anita pulled first her cell phone out of the handbag and then her wallet. She wound the window down an inch and gave the old woman a note. The woman went away, without a word, heading back to her corner, where a homeless man sat, similarly wrapped in plastic. She thought of Tom. He could leave his silly banking conference and come home. She picked up her cell phone to try the call and saw that there were two missed calls on it, both from Pam, and a voice message. She pulled off the road and dialled for it.

“Hi,” came her daughter’s voice. “Been waiting for a while here. Wondering where you are. Think I’m gonna catch a ride with Quincy and we’ll go do something. I’ll phone you again later. The test went fine, not writing anything tomorrow, so I’ll see you. Ciao.”

She dialled her daughter’s phone. It rang for a second and then died. She dialled again and Pam’s voicemail came on.

“Call me urgently, Pam. Please.”

She looked through her list of phone numbers for Quentin, the boy who’d been trying subtly to get together with Pam for years, ever since primary school, and had only ever succeeded in being the shoulder Pam cried on when things went badly with other boys, of whom there had been two. Or at least two that Anita knew of. She rang his number, but found only his voicemail as well. “I’m probably doing something too cool to want to talk to you right now, so leave a message and maybe I’ll phone you back.”

“Quentin, this is Pam’s mother. If she’s with you, please ask her to call me.”

Pam must have finished writing her exam just after ten and then gone off with him in his ancient little red Escort. In her mind’s eye, she saw Pam and Quentin driving back to the house so that Pam could change, them parking the car in the street

and going in through the steel side-door, into the kitchen, to make lunch and play Quincy's latest music, sing together on Tom's old guitar or just watch a DVD. The man would be in the house already, perhaps. There was no dog at home and he could have entered through the window with the bad latch in the spare room. Tom had always joked that the burglar guards for the French windows left far too much space for someone to squeeze through. He'd laughed at the thought, especially since Quincy had once actually done it when they'd lost the keys, his baggy shorts getting caught in the bars and staying behind as he'd fallen through. After opening the house from inside he'd had to chase Pam around the yard, till she returned the shorts. The thought of it didn't seem as funny now. Quincy was thin, but they were just steel bars, easily bent. Of course, he could have just come knocking at the front door. She dialled the house phone, and it simply rang. Grindle could have had them tied up by now, in the living room or on the hallway floor. He could have done something to Quincy. He could be talking to Pam in his quiet, reasonable voice, asking her if she had been having bad dreams.

She found the familiar off ramp on Dutton Road, drove past the new music college, hit the first of five speed bumps too hard and tried to calm herself as she called Pam again on the car's hands-free. Again, there was just voicemail. She was outside the house and the driveway was empty, the garage doors closed. She parked the car two houses up and looked back at the house. They would have parked Quincy's car inside, perhaps. She looked up and down the street and, in the drizzle, there was no one. She tried the house phone again and then called the police. She was advised to stay out of the building and wait for assistance. She called Tom, reminding herself to sound calm. When she was greeted only by his efficient little recording it felt entirely inevitable that his phone be off as well.

"Tom, I need you to come home soon. Phone me."

She called the bank and asked what number she could call at the conference to leave a message for her husband. There was no conference, she was told. Mr Rush had taken two days leave and had not left a forwarding number.

“And what about Diane Lovis?”

“Diane Lovis? I don’t know a Diane Lovis.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve been the receptionist here for seven years, ma’am. Quite sure.”

“But she’s your personnel manager.”

“I’ll put you through to Mrs Heatherly.”

Anita ended the call.

She breathed, and felt the pressure at her eyes begin to cloud her vision. There was a ringing sound in her ears, a tightness at her throat, cold darts in her legs, her hands, her cheeks: an unpleasant feeling of clamminess. Like shock, and she remembered Hinkley’s voice.

Tom had been very good at his lie. Her mind went back to the first time she’d seen Diane Lovis. She and Tom had been in a bookshop together, standing, paging through a magazine. Tom had been so quick about it. Diane was a colleague at the bank, they had taken a break together, to discuss a dismissal, something too sensitive for the office walls and corridors. He’d told Diane that he would meet her back at the office, had sent her off and then stayed for ten minutes to have a drink with his wife, all the while saying how lovely it had been to bump into her, and how they should have lunch together more often.

That had been over a year ago. Hotels, perhaps the penthouse apartment he was hiring for her, perhaps on this very Jaguar’s back seat. She imagined that they had made pet nicknames for her: “the wife”, “enemy ops”, “the all-seeing eye”, “the back” to make it seem like a game. Tom caressing Diane’s spine, laughing into her

ear. Anita shut her eyes against tears, her hands on the steering wheel, her head dropping onto it, so that the hooter blew. She'd never loved another man in her life.

There was a loud beep from a police siren behind her, and she turned to see the blue and white car parked half in the road, with one man climbing out and looking at the house, the other still in the car. She was unsurprised to see that it was Hinkley and his partner, and felt almost as relieved to see them as dismayed.

She took a deep breath, then another, and opened the car door. Both men were out of the patrol car now and greeting her.

"We meet again, madam Rush," Hinkley said, tipping an imaginary hat.

"Sorry," she said. She explained what she feared. "There's probably no one. I just wasn't sure."

"Feeling jittery?"

"I thought I saw someone moving."

"Well let's go have a look around."

The other officer, whose badge, she now saw, said Clemens, asked: "You don't think it's someone who lives in the house with you. Or a maid?"

"I called. No one answered."

"Is there an alarm?"

The security company's sign was quite plain on the garden wall facing them. "Yes," she said. "But we didn't switch it on this morning. We were in a hurry. Guess I forgot."

"You have the key?" Anita ran back to the car and pressed the remote for the garage doors. There was no red Escort, just Anita's Fiat and the empty space where the Jag always stood. She went and stood in the garage, out of the drizzle. It wasn't too long before Hinkley returned, holstering his gun, to ask if she wanted to look through the house herself.

“How well do you know the building, ma’am?”

“Pretty well. Look. I’m sorry for the trouble. Really I am.”

“Best to be safe.”

She wondered if there was any sarcasm in his voice, but she detected none.

“Thank you.”

While they waited, as per their instruction, she checked all the cupboards, fetched a ladder for one of them to check the roof space, looked under the beds and behind the curtains. The policemen said to call if she needed them again and left, Anita biting down on a half-formed request for them to stay, to just remain with her until she heard from her daughter. As soon as they were gone her sense of unease returned. She half wished Hinkley had shot all his ammo into the walls and furniture. She half hated this house now anyway. She had a thought of someone carving a hiding hole into the big sofa, concealed behind its design of overhanging material. There was an urge to set fire to the entire place. She went back to her room and stripped off her wet clothing, drying with a towel and putting on a pair of slacks, a grey top and a jersey. She was cold, and she knew she should be getting out of the house, because the killer could be climbing over the wall and finding the dining room door ajar. He could be stepping into the house at this moment, freeing his knife and shuffling slowly and softly down the hallway, looking into all the rooms, moving with the patience of death itself. She would be sitting there and the bedroom door would begin to move and then he would be framed in the doorway and she would see his face again. She sat on the bed, unblinking, thinking of it, because somehow it seemed better to think upon this than to think of where Tom was right now, and what Tom was busy doing. After what seemed a long time, she put on a pair of socks, slipped on her canvas walking shoes and went to lock the dining room door, only to remember that she’d done so already. She went into Pam’s room, found a sketchpad and pencils

and began to sketch again. She tutted and turned to a clean page, sketching once more. The outlines of a face took shape, and she tried to work in more detail now: the eyes, the nose, the light eyebrows, the thin mouth. It seemed to her now that his face was changing in her mind, like wax melting. She wondered if the quick drawing she'd given Hinkley was worth anything.

She despaired. It struck her as a chilling absence of thought and feeling, together with a profound sense of self-pity. Had she been making all of this up? Was it all just nonsense? It seemed wrong to doubt now, but she did. Her desire to fight had waned. Perhaps she was as mad as the man in his green suit, and his gun with its wooden bullets.

Her cell phone rang, and she followed the sound to where she'd left her bag in the lounge. It was Pam. "Hey mom. What's up?"

"Where are you?" She spoke urgently, unable to hide her relief.

"At Quincy's. We went to watch a movie. You called me in the theatre. I'd forgotten to switch off and it was at this really quiet part of the film too." She laughed.

"Fine. Don't come home today. All right? Ask Quincy to drop you at Lynn's when you're finished, but don't come back to the house."

"There are things I need to get, mom. We left too soon this morning. You're still feeling paranoid, huh?"

"I'm here now. Just tell me what it is you want."

There was a moment of silence and then Pam said, "But if you're so freaked out about being at home, what are you doing there?"

"Just tell me what you want, Pam."

Pam mentioned her hairbrush, a few other toiletries, another two items of clothing and a book.

“All right. Go to Lynn’s, all right? She’ll be home at just after four. What’s the time now?”

“After one.”

“Okay. Tell Quincy I say hi.”

“I will.” They hung up. She could leave, and she’d expected her relief to be greater. She hurried to find the things Pam wanted, and afterwards stared for a few seconds more at the sketch on the desk before leaving it behind. She went out through the garage again and walked to the car. She wanted to be away; energy had returned to her with the call.

She’d left the car unlocked. She checked the back seat and felt a chill at the thought that someone could have climbed into the trunk. She wanted to check, but could not bring herself to. She shook off the thought, popped the lid from inside, and walked to the back of the car in a wide circle. She approached the trunk slowly. It was empty. She closed the lid and glanced around. Then she saw something. Over the street that turned into the one she stood in was the back of a college, the entrance giving on to living quarters and the buildings of an art faculty, covered in creepers. To one side, at the far end of the driveway was a large bluegum tree and beneath it stood a dark green pickup. There was someone in the driver’s seat and he was, she imagined at this distance, looking at her. She looked briefly, unable to make out any features from this far. He could have been waiting for someone from the living quarters, she told herself, but as she climbed back into her car, her eye darting continually towards her rear-view mirror, the green pickup followed. It kept its distance, but when she turned at the stop street it followed again and when she stopped at a traffic light it hung back and then it disappeared up a side street. Anita pulled off quickly, glancing back every so often, but the green Ford did not reappear. She had not had the presence of mind to take down the vehicle’s license plates. She

tried to recall the memory of it behind her, but it was useless. The truck had kept its distance.

Her phone rang and she pulled on to the side of the road to answer. It was Tom.

“Hi,” he said. His voice was breaking up all the time, and she could make out two words in three. “Got ... message. “What’s ... matter?”

“You have to come back Tom.”

“...ception bad ... hear you.”

“Where are you?”

“Been ... meetings.”

“Meetings?”

“Can ... home.”

“What?”

“Tomor....”

“You’re coming back tomorrow?”

“... flight.”

“Call me on a landline Tom. Please.”

The phone went dead. He was probably in some rural backwater somewhere. And a landline would be giving away too much. Her phone beeped again a minute or two later. The text message told her that he would be back on the first flight tomorrow morning. She considered many words of reply, then decided to keep them to herself. She drove off again, looking for a public place to kill the remaining three hours. She drove to the Carlisle shopping centre, parked the car and found a corner at the back of a coffee shop. It was lunchtime and the place was busy. She ordered a lasagne and iced-tea.

As the waiter brought her food, the phone rang. She looked at the screen, but there was no caller ID. She answered.

“I want to ask you a question.”

Everything stopped. She had no doubt. He had found her. “Who is this?” she said, her voice somehow calm.

“We live in a modern world, Anita. It’s not hard to find someone. You should know that.”

She was silent, her eyes very wide, and though the coffee shop was alive with people joking and scraping chairs, she felt quite alone.

“Now I want to ask you a question.”

She wanted to speak, but nothing came.

“What have you been dreaming of lately?”

“You.” She said it automatically and then felt a cold spot between her shoulder blades and a sense that a bony hand had come down to massage her skull.

“Ah. Well thank you. An honest answer.”

There was a long pause.

“Now, my dear Anita. That is your name, I believe. I am wary of killing you too, you understand. Because where does this end? Does someone else have another dream? Perhaps you and I can, let me see, make a *deal*.”

She listened, carefully, and then her phone beeped.

“How about I *don’t kill you* and you just carry on with your life like nothing has happened? You see, you are not a stranger to me any more, Anita. I don’t feel like it would be *right*.”

The phone beeped again. It had been days since she’d last charged it. But it couldn’t die on her now. She had to say something, but found herself incapable.

“Come now, Anita. Be a good girl. Say you’ll keep our little secret, hmmm?”

The phone beeped three times and died.

She sat with the dead phone in her hand for some time, staring at the blank screen. She tried to switch it back on. There was always that bit of remaining power. An animated mouse in a suit popped into life on her screen and then went into a sequence of looking exhausted and then collapsing. A speech bubble appeared: "You need to charge this thing. See you later." The screen went blank again.

There was the urge to get into her car, leave town and never return. She stared at the lasagne on her table and felt unable to touch a corner of it. Slowly, the sounds, smells and colours of the restaurant grew louder, more present and brighter and she began to feel less of the vertigo and the vagueness at the corners of her vision, more aware that there were people around her, that she should eat, drink some coffee or something, try to centre and focus on what he had said and how she could talk to him again.

She tried a brief prayer, but it seemed empty. She dug her fork into the lasagne. Lynn probably still had a gun, something her husband had kept with him on the truck during his long hauls and which Lynn had gone to the trouble of learning to use after his accident. Lynn had been adamant about it, as if a bit of her husband had stayed behind to protect her. She even called the gun Dan.

She finished eating, asked the waiter for a coffee and by the time she was finished with everything and had paid the bill it was almost three. She drove to a larger shopping centre fifteen minutes away, parked the car in underground parking, took the escalator in the mall and sought out the centre's Karimor store, a large, family-owned shop that had recently been in the news for its laissez-faire attitude towards selling ammunition. It sold everything from pots and pans, camping gear and home entertainment systems to school clothes and sports gear. And it sold guns. She found the second level and approached a long stand with glass cases in counters that

were designed from large, twisting tree trunks that gave the atmosphere of nature and hunting. An old man, who looked like he had a permanent sunburn, and who seemed to be in his late sixties, wearing a blue and white check shirt and jeans, his hair grey and wispy, his eyes pale blue, rose from his stool and asked if he could help her.

“I have a problem,” she told him.

“What might that be?”

“Someone is trying to kill me.”

The old man considered her.

“Why do you think so?”

“I’ve been threatened. He’s almost a stranger, but I know he means it.”

“Why does he wish to kill you?”

“Because I know something he doesn’t want me to know.” She felt disinclined to say too much, but this would perhaps be enough.

“Have you told someone?”

“Sort of, but it’s hard to talk about.”

“Are you blackmailing him?”

The very thought was ridiculous. “No,” she said. “No. I just want to buy a gun. For protection.”

“You’ll have to wait a month, I’m afraid, if not longer. And to get registered for a license is a lot of trouble nowadays. You’ll have to go for training and tests.” He said it as if the last thing in the world he’d ever have done was keep her from her gun. “It’s the law,” he added, almost in apology.

She nodded.

“You’re in deep trouble, ma’am?”

“Pretty much.”

The old man reached into his pocket and pulled out a card. "Here. It's my number. I run, well, what I like to think of as a small, friendly group of people who look out for each other."

"A militia?"

He smiled. "If you want to call it that. We make sure that when it comes to life and death you rely on yourself, your family and your friends. We try to make sure that bad things don't happen to some of the better members of our society."

Anita looked at the card. It gave the number for the store, but also the old man's personal details. His name was Nathaniel Ships.

"I've got three sons," he said. "Good boys. You give me a call any time and we'll come. Where will you be staying?"

She gave him Lynn's address.

"It's a long way out for me. I live on a farm, but one of my boys lives in town. We'll do our best to look after you, I promise. You just give me a call if you need us."

"Thank you."

"We take all of this quite seriously, Mrs ...?"

"Rush. Anita."

"Pleased to meet you. Nathaniel Ships, as you probably saw. It would be good to help you."

Anita was looking at the various pistols and revolvers in the glass cases.

"May I just ask, though," he went on. "Where is Mr Rush?"

She almost said something indiscreet, but caught it. "He's away."

"Does he know about your problem?"

"Not really."

“Do you want to tell me anything more? Perhaps I can help you before something bad happens. When are you expecting him to try something?”

“I don’t know. He may never. He may do it as I leave this store.” She no longer felt like speaking to this man. He was showing too much interest.

“And when, may I ask, is Mr Rush coming home?”

“Tomorrow, I think.”

“Now don’t get the wrong idea, Mrs Rush ... Anita. If you want to come spend the night at my farm with me then you just say. It’s the safest stretch of ground this side of anything. One of my sons still lives with me out there and we’d be sure to look out for you. At least till tomorrow.”

For a moment, she wondered if the old man was hitting on her.

“Thank you, Nathaniel-”

“Nat.”

“Thanks for your offer to help. But-” She looked back at the glass cases and said, “Isn’t there anything I can buy now?” Her finger stopped at a display of knives. “How about this?”

“Don’t know. Sometimes having those is more dangerous than not.”

She saw one knife in particular, and as her eye met it she felt an immediate chill. She knew it was impossible, but she had seen this knife before. The sight of it was scratched deeply into memory. It was a ten-centimetre blade, but it was strangely shaped, with decorative gaps cut into the upper section of the blade, which curved more than normal and ended with the point slanted sharply upwards. The handle was a milky, polished ivory, carved in lines that gave the impression of long flowing hair. The butt end of the handle had, set into it, two precious stones. She examined them more carefully. It was a large amethyst, with a smaller, brilliantly red, ruby placed in the centre of it. It gave the impression of an eye. She knew, with all

the certainty of zealous faith, that this was exactly the kind of knife that had killed Jennifer. She felt, though, that it hadn't been this knife.

"Who makes these knives?" she asked.

The old man came over. "It's a beautiful knife, isn't it?"

"Yes. This isn't the only one of its kind you've sold, is it?"

"No."

"Do you keep a record of who you sell to?"

"No. Of course not. Buying a knife isn't the same as a gun."

"I want this one. And if I'm still alive in a month's time, I'll come pick up one of these guns." She indicated a 32. revolver. "Can I fill in an application now?"

"Let me make a suggestion," he said. "Buy some pepper spray. I know some really lethal stuff. Almost blinds you if you just come near where it's been used. Near illegal."

Her eyes stung at the suggestion and almost began to tear involuntarily. "No," she said. "I just want the knife."

"All right. But then come in tomorrow with your husband if you want to buy a gun. It's the difference of a day. See how you feel when he's back."

She thought about it and nodded, unsure. He placed the knife in a leather sheath for her and, looking up, said: "These are very special knives. These ones, with the rubies and amethyst, are the best."

"Who makes them?"

"I do. I use a small forge at home for it. I'm glad you like it. I'm sure your husband will, too."

As he rang up the purchase she realised he was still waiting for an answer to his offer. He seemed sincere, but there was still something she didn't trust about him. He was too eager to help.

“You are very kind,” she told him. “Thank you. But I need to see my friend tonight. I’m just going to stay there.” She nodded, gave what she hoped was a somewhat confident smile and was about to say goodbye and leave, when he said, “At least just give me your number or something. Or I will worry. If tomorrow I open the papers and see your face I won’t forgive myself.”

“It’s all right. I’ll be fine.”

“Just so that I can give you a call a bit later.”

“Oh all right.” She wrote down both her own and Lynn’s numbers. Then she said goodbye and left. By the time she was back at the store’s entrance he’d caught up with her, though.

“I’m sorry, Anita. But I have a very bad feeling about you. I can’t let you leave like this. Give me the exact address of where you’re staying and I will come keep watch over you. You don’t even have to let me in. I’ll park my car outside and just keep an eye. Pace around the yard a bit; drink some coffee, smoke a cigarette. No one needs to know, especially not the man you’re afraid of. If you need me you just shout.”

She knew she should feel a great sense of gratitude towards this old man, but she did not. She mentioned the street number to him and as she did she realised, with a start, what it was about the old man that bothered her. He was the spitting image of Grindle, only much older. She took a step back from him, wondering how she hadn’t noticed it earlier.

“What is it?” he asked.

Perhaps she was imagining it.

“Nothing. Don’t come tonight.” She turned and fled from him. Could it be, she wondered, that she was beginning to see him in everyone, even old strangers? She scanned the parking garage before walking, and then as she drove she saw that

the cloud cover had thinned and opened, and afternoon light was sparkling onto the wet tar. It was still a little early, but she drove straight for Lynn's place, arriving at just after four. It was a big house, in one of Angerby's older suburbs, the street enclosed by trees. Lynn and Dan had never lived here together, but after Lynn's father had died, a little after Dan's death, Lynn had been unable to bring herself to sell the big family house. Like Anita, Lynn had no siblings. She said she would sell only if she needed the money desperately, or when she went on her Big Tour of the world, once Timothy was old enough. The place was designed in a Tudor style, with a large garden and several trees. Lynn loved the big building, with its library and study, pool, sauna room, courtyard and tennis court. Anita walked around the wet garden as she waited, stopping at a rope-swing and twisting, before circling the pool, the many birds the loudest sound. At the bird-bath she was unnerved by the sight of a swallow. She found herself moving closer to it, but it darted off, leaving her with a sense of great isolation. It was a relief when Lynn arrived. Her little Japanese car pulled into the driveway and stopped in the big garage, Timothy hopping out and coming to say hello.

"I've been learning to play the piano," he told her.

"Really?"

"I can already play some stuff. Come on, I'll show you."

Lynn embraced her and they went in. Timothy disappeared to his room. Lynn switched on the kettle, and Anita borrowed a phone charger. She plugged in her phone and switched it on, but there were no messages. She didn't know what to think about it. She called Pam.

"How about if I just stay here at Quincy's tonight?" Pam asked.

"And your school clothes?"

"I can borrow what I need from his sister. She said it would be fine."

“All right. Be good.”

“Whatever.”

“Have you done your homework?”

“We’re working on an assignment together right now.”

“All right. Bye.”

She settled on to one of the kitchen’s tall stools. Lynn raised her eyebrows at her. “You look terrible.”

Anita had no witty reply. “I know,” she said. “You won’t believe me, I’m sure.”

“What’s there not to believe?”

Suddenly Anita was crying, a shocking change from nothing to swift collapse. She felt Lynn’s hand on her shoulder. “Annie?”

“I’m sorry,” Anita said, trying to pull herself together. “Feel like I’m stitched together by paper ribbons. Don’t know what to do.”

“Tell me.”

So she told her everything, the disjointed sounds of Timothy practising on the house’s old grand piano filtering through to them from the living room. His repetitions on the piano continued still as Anita finished. “It’s hard to believe, I know,” she said at last.

Lynn had turned pale. It was after five and there was still some tea, gone cold, left at the bottom of her mug. She scratched lightly with one fingernail between her eyebrows, unsure of what to ask first. In the end, all she could manage was, “Annie, I don’t know. Really I don’t.”

“This is what came out of the guy’s gun.” She handed the two halves of the hollow wooden ball over to her and Lynn examined it.

“Not yet? Is this some kind of joke?”

"I don't know. I guess it wasn't my time to die yet. That's what it means."

"Holy shit."

"Yeah. I seem to be in it."

"Are you sure? About this dream guy? That you're clairvoyant or something?"

"Yes. Even more than clairvoyant. Or perhaps I'm just mad."

"Hell."

"Yeah, I know."

"What about Tom? What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I never thought this would happen. Not really."

"We always thought she was up to something."

Anita cried again. "Sorry," she said, feeling Lynn's hand rubbing at her back.

"Why did you have the dream?"

"I don't know. I think it has to be God, trying to warn me, or something."

"God?"

"I've thought about it. I haven't prayed for close on thirty years or so. Didn't see much need. But you know how it is. I can't explain this. This is all so much bigger than me. And it's *strange*. It's fucking strange." She used a clean dishtowel to wipe at her eyes.

"Are you sure, Annie?"

"I think so. I prayed today, just a bit. I think that God – how strange I sound to myself – but yes, I think that God has chosen me, if I can put it that way, because there's this great evil out there and I'm being given a chance to do something about it."

"And why is it you?"

“Isn’t that exactly what everyone asks? But near on all the people in this world believe, one way or the other, in some kind of God. I’ve never really bothered, for most of my adult life. And maybe that’s why. Maybe that’s why I’ve been chosen.”

Lynn attended church twice on Sundays and once during the week for a Bible study. People from her church often came to visit for what they called fellowship. It had always been something special for her and she’d spoken about it with Anita, and Anita had listened politely and said that she would think about it.

“You really think this is the reason, Annie?”

“I can think of nothing else. Not after all this. I think I was wrong. Something like this is completely outside every way I thought the world works. It must be God. A warning from a divine source.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to try and listen.”

“You’re going to try and stop this man that God has given you a vision of?”

“Yes. That’s about right.”

“You’re going to try and kill him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would God want something like that?”

“Perhaps it’s a test.”

Lynn thought about it and then clutched Anita’s hands again. “Maybe we should pray about it and hope that we receive the answer.” Anita nodded. “Do you want to do it, or should I?”

“No, please. Go ahead.”

They closed their eyes and Lynn prayed. “Dear God. We are your humble servants. We do not know why you have chosen us, but we thank you for it. We pray

that you will give us the answer and tell us what we should do in this hour of need. We pray that you will keep your hand over us and shield and protect us from evil, and allow us, and your child Anita especially, to triumph in this dark time. Give her the strength and the guidance to act righteously and in your will, Lord. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.”

“Thanks,” she told Lynn, who was silent, and still held her friend's hand.

“I'm scared,” Anita admitted. “How will I know anything?”

“I'm not sure. But when the time is right, you'll know.”

Anita's cell phone rang as she finished. She wiped away the slight moisture from her eyes and answered.

“Hello. This is Amelia Port phoning from the *Dispatch*. Is this Anita Rush?”

“Yes.”

“Can I please interview you about what happened today at the Rankin Mall?”

Anita hesitated. “All right.”

“The police gave me a copy of your statement. I was wondering if you could give me a little more detail about what happened today. What was it like for you?”

“I'm sorry,” Anita said. “Just use my statement. I don't want to talk about this.”

“Can I call you again tomorrow?”

“Perhaps that would be better, yes.”

“Thanks. That would be good. We've printed your sketch, Mrs Rush. For this evening's paper.”

“All right. But I have to go. Goodbye, Miss Port.” She ended the call. The piano playing had stopped and Timothy returned. Anita blew her nose, wiped away the last of the tears and told the boy that he had great potential as a pianist. A frown settled on his face as he looked at them. “What's wrong?”

“Don’t worry, love. Annie’s just feeling sad.”

“Why?”

“She’s going through a tough time.”

The boy nodded and, like the good boy he was, went to give Anita a hug. She climbed down off the stool, felt the light arms encircle her neck and thanked him. She smiled and this seemed to reassure the boy. She excused herself and walked down the house’s long, dark hallway, to the bathroom. She heard her phone ringing, Grieg’s melody from *In the Hall of the Mountain King*, once she was on the toilet, but only briefly. There was the sound of Lynn talking and then silence again. If you want someone to call you, go to the loo, she thought. She picked up a Reader’s Digest and paged through it, without real interest. She normally enjoyed the jokes and stories, but her mind was far from being able to concentrate near properly. As she washed her hands she caught sight of her face, the eyes dim, tension around them and the mouth. She felt unreal. In a day it seemed that she had aged a year. She thought, for a moment, that it might have been Tom calling.

In the kitchen, Lynn had fetched her groceries from the car and was preparing supper.

“Who called?” Anita asked.

“I don’t know. No one spoke.”

“Nothing?”

“No. Do you think it was him?”

Anita nodded. “What are you cooking?” Her voice sounded blatantly artificial.

“Your favourite. Chicken in citrus sauce.”

“Let me help.”

“What if it was him?” Lynn asked.

“Look, there’s nothing I can do if it was.” She reached into her bag and withdrew the knife.

“Let me see.”

Anita unsheathed it and waved it about. “It’s not much. Don’t you still have that gun of yours?”

“Yes. I’ll go fetch it.”

Anita looked at the kitchen worktable, its food at the start of preparation. “I’ll just carry on with this for you.”

“No, it’s easy,” Lynn said. “You just relax, put on some music or something and I’ll join you in a moment. I won’t be long.”

“All right. What do you want to hear?”

“Take your pick.”

She walked to the living room and browsed through Lynn’s collection of CDs. She decided, finally, on a best of Chopin. As the music began to play, her eye was drawn to a photo album that lay on the edge of Lynn’s coffee table. She sat down on one of the antique couches, with its faint smell of dust and age, and reached for the album, with its hide of brown leather and brass metal corners. She’d never seen it before. There were photographs of Anita and Lynn within, on holiday in the mountains, their trousers rolled up above the knees, and laughing in bright sunshine at the camera. Behind them was Tom, stepping carefully on the stream’s smooth stones. Anita remembered this holiday. Dan had taken these photos. There was one of Dan standing beneath a boulder that had wedged between the ravine’s walls. He stood, pretending to hold it up with one arm, while he flexed the muscles of the other. There was one of him and Lynn together, the sun setting, with a perfect outline of a mountain range extending far behind them, its crests and peaks inflamed by the day’s dying red. Anita remembered taking this photo. Its quality had surprised her. She

spent a long time looking at another one of her and Tom, caught kissing in the shade. She sighed, very softly. She turned another laminated board and then held it for a moment too long, as she frowned at the change of image. This was nothing she recognised. The expected photos of friends and family were replaced by a black and white photograph of something grotesque. The image filled a full board. It was a living room with, in it, seated on chairs and couches, corpses. She looked a moment longer, but there was no mistake. The bodies were in various stages of decay and one was, almost entirely, a skeleton. There was text beside it: *Killer's bizarre collection of bodies discovered*. She read snatches of text from the article. *Police today uncovered a scene of ghoulish proportions ... killer apparently lived with these people as if they were family, talking to them ... there are claims victims were subjected to tortures ... a profound sadist, the killer maintains his innocence, claiming that he 'found' the bodies as they are.*

The recording of Chopin's 34th piano waltz in A minor began to jump, the CD skipping and producing irritating clicking sounds, spurts of music and then further jumps, followed by the same sequence of piano notes. It fell into this interminable, demented repetition. Anita ignored it, was in fact hardly aware of it.

She turned the cardboard. There was another photograph, this time of a body dug up from a shallow grave. She recognised it from her dream. It was the girl, but where the nose and face should have been was little more than a bloody mutilation. *Coroner's report*, it said on a clipping beside it. She turned it again, her arm and hand very heavy. What she saw next made her drop the album. It fell to the carpet with a heavy thud. It was a naked woman, her chest eviscerated and one of her limbs missing. She knew the woman well. There was a part of a newspaper clipping accompanying, but it was torn and all that Anita could read was a large fragment of the headline and the beginnings of the opening paragraph. *Another body found. The*

*body of Anita Rush, forty-seven, found yesterday in the...*the text ended abruptly. She was trembling. She shouted. "Lynn!" There was no response and the CD player continued its meal of consuming its own tail. "Lynn!" she screamed again. She found that she could barely move. She reached, almost unconsciously, for the knife on the seat beside her. She looked back at the picture of the woman with her hollow chest and screamed Lynn's name, but it was closer to being just a scream.

She looked up and there was someone standing there, her face strange and unreal, but no less shocking, because it was her own face that Anita saw, looking back at her without emotion, though somewhat stretched and distorted. The lips of the mask barely moved as the person spoke, a female voice behind the latex. "Why did you do this?" it said. "Why?"

"Lynn? Is this a joke? It's not funny." She raised the knife and rose to pull the mask off the woman, but then she saw that there were other figures in the house as well, silent men and women, which she could discern only from their bodies, because they, too, were wearing masks, like the first one, and like the first one, they were all of her, Anita, each from a different age of her life, even future ones. One wore a mask of Anita's face at fifteen, others of her at twenty five, thirty five and other years in between. There was one with silver-grey hair, the latex creased into wrinkles and marked by liver spots. "Who are you?" she said to them, holding the knife up between herself and them. "What is going on?" One face was like something from a doll head. A baby's, oversized and wrapped around its adult head.

She grabbed one of the masked figures and tugged at the rubber. The figure fought her and pushed back, and she dropped the knife. She went for another one, choosing one of the older masks and its bearer. This one fought back less and then the mask came free in her hand.

She had no inkling of whom to expect beneath any of the masks. She had an idea that it would be someone who would laugh and point a finger at her, and then the others would remove their masks as well, and they would all be friends or relatives, in on an elaborate prank. It was no such thing, though. Beneath the mask was a virtual stranger, yet someone she knew only too well.

He seemed half surprised to be where he was. He looked around, at the old tapestry of a Venetian scene on one face brick wall, at the landscape paintings on the others, the grand piano in the corner with the grandfather clock beside it, Lynn's old gramophone player and all the other inherited clutter of this house. It took just a few seconds, but then he had the look of someone entirely at home. Grindle. She had the brief, irrational urge to want to replace the mask, to return the terrible visage from her dreams to whence it came.

"You really should skip to the next track on that CD," he told her, and he was bending to pick up her knife. He looked at it lovingly. She fell backwards and he lunged for her. The metal flashed and struck, at first, like something painless and cold. It was followed by a feeling like hot acid, making her want to shriek, but nothing came except a high-pitched whine. Grindle made soft sounds in the back of his throat. The figures and their masks watched as now, at last, she heard Lynn shouting something from the kitchen, and then there was terrifying movement, and the man stepped over her, lightning fast, followed by the sound of Lynn screaming, but only briefly. Then the man returned, and grabbed Anita by the hair, to drag her along the floor, back to the living room, where Timothy was standing, staring at Lynn's body on the floor. The man pointed Anita's knife at the boy, told him to sit on the couch and be very quiet. The boy, face expressionless, did as he was told, staring at the big man. Anita was dragged to the front of a couch, positioned upright on the floor and told to keep still. She could feel the wound in her abdomen burning, an

earthlike wound of magma and heat. There was thin rope in his jacket, which he used to tie her hands and feet. Though it was getting dark outside, he drew all the curtains and then went to stop the sound from the CD player. It was immediately, unbearably, weightily quiet as he stood, breathing softly in the room. The boy ran at last, but Grindle set off after him quickly, then returned, wiping his hands on the carpet and the wall. There was a bright smear of blood.

Anita twisted and moaned, her eyes feverish and wide, great droplets of sweat stinging her eyes and coursing down her face and neck. The dark figure disappeared, and the wait for his return felt eternally long. She was watched, silently, the throng of people in their masks, as they stood, without great movement or noise, scattered throughout the room, against the walls and close to her. She felt certain that even if she could free herself from these bonds, the masked watchers would keep her just where she lay. And she would not challenge the mask of another, for there would perhaps be another Grindle beneath. She looked away from them, and struggled against her bonds in any case, attempting to ignore the chafing, but then Grindle returned, with a rectangular shape wrapped in a black bag. He removed the black plastic and she saw that it was a canvas, but she beheld it only from behind, the canvas trademark showing in bright orange. Grindle perched a pair of spectacles upon his nose.

His eyes studied her, unblinking, first this side of her face, then the other. He positioned his painting on the carpet to one side of her, and without any support, it stood. He placed his hand on top of it and pushed it backwards and then withdrew his fingers, yet the canvas remained upright, at its slight angle, supported by nothing at all. In his hand he held a painter's brush.

"Sit very still," she heard him say. "You have good features. Unlike this, of course."

He swivelled his canvas, but she was unsure if he touched it. What she saw was almost a stylised depiction of a face, as if cut from an autumn leaf, lying on a table, propped up on a stick. The lacerations and jagged edges, where the face had been cut and torn from the head, were skilfully rendered. He painted well, with all the care that he had not shown his victim. It was a severed face, Kaitlyn's discarded face.

To Anita, the fear felt like muscles and tendons in her neck, collapsing inward, as if her throat were being swallowed by an expanding cavity in her torso.

Grindle gestured towards the surrounding silent cast of masked figures, and there was a single-purposed movement from them as they filed out of the room. She watched them leave, as silently and wordlessly as they had appeared.

He stared. "Alone at last. Now don't move, or I will chop something off and feed it to you. Understand?"

She nodded.

"I said ... *don't move.*" Her breath was incredibly loud in her ears, like drums of war. He looked through a bag he had brought, removed a palette, paints, brushes and a discoloured bottle of water. He began to paint, looking over at her constantly and back at his canvas. Without painting it white first, she noticed, simply straight onto it, he painted her. She could not see his work, only the side of the canvas, which remained propped up against nothing. His brown eyes searched her, and she was deathly still, but then the eyes narrowed and he cautioned again: "Keep still." She shut her eyes in reflex, grimacing at a burst of pain from the stab wound.

She took a deep breath and then felt something brush against her, tough and hard. Her top shredded. She looked at him, at Grindle, and he was grinning at her madly, and there was a strange aura around his face, as though he were suffused with ineluctable power. He held the brush dramatically over the painting and then slashed down with it. Her clothing tore further, and this time she felt something sharp against

her skin, a stinging impact. Again he moved the brush and she felt her clothing dropping from her shoulders. The room was cold and the stab wound in her side burnt. Again the brush moved and she felt it slicing at her chest. Blood ran down, impossibly, blooming from a tear in her skin that opened just above her left breast and ended at the belly. She screamed. "Stop! What are you doing?"

"Hold still," he said again, without a look at her. He returned to silence amid her continued sounds of protest, the force of which she raised as the brush moved again and she felt something drop from her head, a section of her right ear, lobbed off without discernible contact. She cried out again, mortified. She felt the warmth of blood trickling down the side of her face, on to her shoulder. She trembled violently, a cold shudder running through her like a rapid poison.

"Do you know pain, Anita?"

At last, she nodded. It seemed hopeless and small. But she was in his power. She needed to respond.

"You are a, well let me not say beautiful ... you are a woman of great potential, even for an old goat." He lifted his brush again and moved the thin stem towards the canvas.

"No!" she screamed.

"Don't worry. I'll just fix your hair for you." The brush moved, and she felt it on her scalp, each tiny outgrowth rearranging she knew not into what. She could not see the change, but he laughed at it. "That quite suits you," he said. "I can do more than just your hair, Annie, my dear. I can make you feel better." He mixed his paints again and as the brush rose to the canvas she wanted to cry out again, but did not. She simply closed her eyes and waited for the pain. Instead, there was a warm sensation in her side and then along her chest. She looked down and the bleeding and the bursts of pain had stopped.

“Would you like bigger breasts, Anita, I can paint them for you? Perhaps a slimmer waist? Let’s see.”

She watched silently as his hands moved and then suddenly, it seemed, her body had changed. In an instant, he had remade her.

“What do you think? I wonder if hubbie dearest would be more interested now? Perhaps this would have kept him out of other women’s skirts?”

“How are you doing this?” Her voice was choked.

“Ah. That’s my little secret, isn’t it?”

“This isn’t real. It can’t be.”

“That’s not a nice thing to say, Annie. And I’m being so nice. I was going to paint you a nice tight, little behind to go with your lovely new look. Now wouldn’t that have been something?”

She coughed, spitting the words. “How are you doing this?”

“Magic my dear. Magic. You should never stop believing. Let me tell you a story.” He lifted the knife with the polished ivory handle again and waved it slowly, looking at it again with what she could only think of as longing. He turned the butt end to her. “You see these jewels?” he said. “They come from the very first woman I killed. She was a schoolteacher. She gave art, not that she was very good at it. She’d come to school wearing her expensive jewels and feeling better than everyone because *her husband* was the headmaster. I got to know her, studied her for months. I got to knowing what she was thinking before she did. It was in the school hallway, on a weekend that she’d come in to fetch exam papers. She was a pretty thing, too, not even thirty. The headmaster could have been her daddy, of course. That was the evening I showed her some *real* art. It felt like nothing you can imagine. It’s like an agonising pleasure. It is joy distilled. You feel as if you will break and then cry it’s so beautiful.” He was silent and thoughtful for a time and it seemed that he was going

to say more, then his eyes narrowed, and he said, "Come now, do something interesting for me, will you?"

"Interesting?"

"Yes. Since I've given you your lovely new body, you can give me a show."

"A show?"

"Come now. Don't play dumb. Stand up. Dance for me." His brush moved again, and her bonds were untied. "Stand up," he repeated. "Come on over here and sit on uncle Grindle's lap."

His hand reached for his trousers. "It's so *convenient* being a man. And yet, so demeaning and unfulfilling. Funny how that is." He held out both his hands. "Come on over here and give uncle Grindle some love. And then maybe he won't kill you."

"No." She shook her head.

"Oh. Really? Perhaps I can persuade you."

He moved the brush along his palette again and struck with it at the canvas. She felt her waist severing and an immediate numbness as she was cut in half. She felt the life pouring out of her like a freezing current. His brush moved again, and she was whole. She felt at herself disbelievingly. There had not even been pain.

"This is a trick."

"A trick? You accuse me of trickery? How very sceptical and clever of you. What if I had made you go down on yourself, love? Wouldn't that have been sexy? Something for the books." The brush moved again and she felt a weight dropping from her left side. Her left arm lay on the carpet, twitching spasmodically. She could see the white of bone, stained darkly by escaping blood.

"That's a trick, isn't it?" She watched from the safety of shock, but then she screamed, as the feeling struck, as if the nerves had been surprised and dulled and

were now firing wildly into the unreceptive atmosphere, into a room of oxygen and nitrogen that millions of her cells should never have encountered: like torn electric cables, sparking and snapping in the rain.

He stood up, picked the arm up off the floor, turned the hand to face her and swung. The hand, fingers slightly closed, struck her. "I know," he said. "You could just slap yourself right now." The taste in her mouth was bitter as gall. It occurred to her that she was in Hell, and that she was, here, a mere passing amusement on the blood-smeared worktable of the devil.

She embraced the dark; so that, for the third time, she came to understand the meaning of death, and there was none. For all it could bring was cessation. And relief.

Quantum Somnium

He awoke to someone shaking him. He sat up, screaming and striking out with his hands. Purely by chance, he did not hurt her. He felt her arms circling around his waist and he muttered and forced them away. That was where pain was. Where pain had been. But now there was none. He was weak and as he moved to one side he fell out of bed, collapsing to the floor. He lay naked, wrapped in sweat on the carpet. She came around to him and he felt her caressing the hair on his forehead.

“Tom.” she said. “Tom.”

He breathed the carpet; dust and fibre against skin. All of this had been like several bombs detonated in his brain. All that he was had been blasted to pieces and, as he lay there, he felt it all coming together again, the material of the bombs with them. He had been altered. As he lifted his face from the floor, his shoulder finding the strength to raise him, he knew that he was Tom Rush, at a hotel called Seville Palms, with its tall view over the ocean. He was with his mistress, a woman who, two years ago, had complained about service at the bank at which he was the manager. She had been in his office for five minutes and Tom had known that he wanted her; and he had pursued her relentlessly. She had become his great obsession, the face he saw before him every night before he drifted into sleep, the figure he imagined glimpsing in crowds. She had stared back at him from the pages of magazines, in the faces of a hundred strangers. And so his marriage had become but a foil, in counterpoint to his passion for this woman that had needed only seconds to entangle him utterly and unintentionally.

He looked at her now, and she was full of concern, staring at him with eyes wide, her lips slightly parted. Like him, she was unclothed. “Get out,” he said, under his breath.

“What?”

“Get out,” he said, louder now. “Leave me.” There was a line of drool from his mouth, which snapped silently, slipping to the carpet.

“Tom?”

“Leave.” He hissed it, looking away from her. He did not watch as she opened the cupboard doors, dressing. She tried to speak, but he spoke over her, till she did it in silence. She shut the door softly. He had expected a slam, annoyance of some kind. But that was not Diane.

She had not wanted anything to do with him, for a while. A drama teacher, she'd had a long-time boyfriend, a sports coach. When Tom had almost given over to thinking that she'd forgotten him, that the many flowers and two dinner invitations that he had found himself sitting through alone were entirely useless, he'd received her call. The boyfriend had blundered one too many times and she had asked Tom if he thought a love affair with a good, but married man could in any way be seen as an improvement on a single, but repugnantly arrogant bastard. He had suggested that it might well be. And they had met that night.

Strange then, he let the thought simmer, that he knew he would never be able to touch her again. His one thought was for his wife. He knew not why he had had the vision, and for the moment it seemed unlikely that it was real. It seemed unthinkable that his wife could be dead. Even when the lies had started she had remained the friend that Tom took almost for granted. Almost. For it had been some time into his affair that Tom had come to realise how terrible it would be to lose his wife. And so he had walked this tightrope of adultery, lies and infidelity. Anita had even met Diane once. How easily Tom's mind had danced upon his own polished tongue then. He had considered, often after that, why he had been able to lie so smoothly. Diane, a true actor, had hardly blinked, speaking smoothly of banking

politics and rolling her eyes, as if just this morning she'd been involved in a heated office meeting. All it would have taken would have been a visit to the bank at a bad time, a phone call, the most cursory investigation, to show the pretence up for what it was. And yet Anita had never noticed, had often even warned Tom against this other woman, trusting him so easily, as if her words were almost unnecessary, just a little joke between them.

He had never stopped loving his wife and there was a core part of him that had always loathed what he had become: another bank manager with a mistress. A walking cliché. He had been telling Diane for how long that he would disclose it all to Anita soon, leave her and get married again. All he needed was a little time.

He lay in the morning gloom with the increasing certainty that Anita was hurt or worse. Subconscious detritus collected in his mind and told the story, like the wreckage of an old clipper spilling out on a beach. He moved from his spot on the carpet, remembering what Anita had been trying to say only yesterday, only a few hours before. He felt humbled and small, judged now by his own words. He had been irritated with her, but this was what his wife had meant all along. Not dreaming, but seeing. More than seeing. Much more. He found his cell phone, switched it on, waited for the beep, then called his voicemail. Though he had never met the man, he recognised the voice.

“Hello Mr Rush. I'm sorry to catch your phone off like this. My name is Nathaniel. I met your wife yesterday. I'm afraid that she has been attacked. She is in hospital now. The man that did this to her does not deserve to live. Anita is asking for you. You should come as soon as you can. She has suffered an ordeal that defies description. Please come soon. Goodbye.”

There were other messages after that, the first from Pam, who had been driving to the hospital with Quentin. "Seems like mom was right," said the recorded voice, harried and emotional.

Tom closed his eyes and ended the call. She was alive. He felt nothing but a dazed shock. Perhaps he should cry, break into a spasm of tears, wrap himself in sackcloth and ashes. Repent before his God. While his wife was being tortured, Tom had been in bed with another woman. At around the time the sun had been setting, when the warlock had been watching Anita bleed, Tom had thought himself in the greatest of ecstasies. He ran his hand through his hair and prayed sincerely for the first time since childhood. He dialled Annie's number on his phone and it was Nathaniel who answered. He did not question his knowledge of a man he had never met. Nathaniel, and the dreams in which Tom had seen him, were real, and Grindle was real. Sorcerers and demons, too, could be real. For Tom, the comforts of scientific materialism and its relegation of mystery and magic to the files of history, or the far-flung corners of the universe, had been destroyed by a single, epic nightmare, and its jarring presentation of the infernal.

Yet he knew he would meet and challenge Grindle, for there was no other choice. Perhaps sorcerers and demons, too, could bleed.

"Can I speak to her?" Tom asked.

"She's very weak."

"Are you with her now?" As he finished he heard her, and her voice was very faint.

"Tom?"

"I'm so sorry," he said.

"Tom."

"I am a fool, Anita. I'm so sorry. I love you."

“Do you?”

“I *saw*, Annie. I *saw*.” He knew it was more than sight, but he did not know how to describe such visions.

“What?”

“I saw it all. I know what he did.”

“You saw?” He could barely make out the words, she was speaking so softly, and his heart broke to think of the pain. He knew the pain.

“I had the nightmare, Annie. I know everything. I’ll find him. I promise. He’s going to pay for this, I swear. I’ll find him, and he’ll wish he’d never been born.”

“Tom.” She was trying to say something, but it seemed very hard for her now. He heard voices in the background, perhaps a doctor complaining that she shouldn’t be straining. Yet when she spoke again, her words were strong and focused, as if she had summoned all her energy to speak. “Tom, stay away from him. Stay *away* from him.”

“I’m coming Annie,” Tom said. “I’ll be with you soon.”

“Stay away from him,” she repeated.

He sighed into the telephone. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“All right. Come straight here.”

“Your arm, Annie.”

There was a long silence and when finally she didn’t speak, Tom said: “I’m coming. I love you, Annie. I love you so much.”

He hung up. He hadn’t even asked what hospital it was. But that could wait for later. All he wanted now was just to return. Seeing Annie, that was all that mattered.

He changed straight into his suit. He packed the rest of his clothing in a mad rush, stuffing ties and the other casual clothes he had bought yesterday into his bag. His flight was scheduled for the afternoon, because yesterday, when he'd made the booking, he had been hoping to spend a few hours more with Diane before a begrudged departure. He dialled the airport and asked if he couldn't be put on an earlier flight. It was seven a.m. already. The flight was about to leave. He was too late, the woman told him. The afternoon flight was his one option. He was welcome to try another airline, she said.

"Well, *is* there another plane leaving at all?"

"An hour earlier than your booking with us this afternoon, sir. But that's all."

"All right. Thank you. I think I'll just drive it." Angerby would be a four hour drive, if he pushed it. He had the rental car. He could just go.

"Do you want to cancel your ticket?"

"Just keep it." He hung up.

It would be unfair on Diane, he was aware of that, but hate and shame was encrusting itself on the inside of his gut, like a layer of years-old barnacles. He found her in the hallway outside, sitting staring at the door, her head up against the wall. Her expression remained blank as he stepped out with his luggage and looked at her.

"I have to go," he told her.

She said nothing.

"I can never speak to you again. I'm sorry. It's over." He glanced away as he finished and started his walk down the passage. His footfalls were lost on the thick carpet as he went. He reached the end of the corridor, which opened on to a wider one with broad glass windows along one side. There was a glimpse of sea. It would be a bright day. He stopped, suddenly overcome by shame. He could not just go, not like this. He was being pulled at, yearning for the road now and a narrowing of the

distance, but this was unconscionably wrong. He turned around and went back to where Diane was still sitting in the hallway with its little upturned spotlights. She had straightened one leg and her head had dropped. She looked up and there was no expression to discern on her face, except a light wash of hurt, like a watermark. Still she said nothing. Tom dropped his bag and crouched down before her. He took her hand in his. As he did it, he was struck by how patronising this gesture could seem.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “What I’m doing is very wrong. I know that. From the start, this has been my fault. I don’t expect you to forgive me.”

“Why?”

“Anita was almost killed last night.”

“What?”

“I had a vision of it, in my dreams. She’s in hospital now.”

He could see she wanted to ask, but in the end she could say nothing. She waved her hands. Beautiful, swan hands, that looked now like something dying.

“I still love my wife, Diane.” She nodded her head, a small sighing sound coming from her, but she did not cry. All his lies and deceit had come to this, then. “I haven’t been seeing that for some time,” he went on. “But I am hers, Diane. And I owe her better than this. I need to fix things. I’m very sorry.”

“So what am I to you?”

“I’m sorry Diane.”

“You’ve lied to me. Everything you’ve ever said is a lie.”

He breathed, loudly, and they were passed by a bellboy pushing a trolley. He waited till the white uniform disappeared up a rising bend in the hallway, and he said: “I do love you, Diane. But I can’t leave Anita.”

“You’re just a liar. You’re weak. Easily confused. You’ll be phoning me again in a few days, crying your heart out.”

“We would never be happy together.”

“We’ve always been happy. What are you talking about? Or was it all an act? I haven’t lied to you Tom. You had a nightmare. And now you want to feel guilty.”

“It really happened. I just called her.”

“*What* really happened?”

“Anita was almost murdered.”

“You really saw it? In your sleep?”

He nodded and sat back against the opposite end of the hallway. “Yeah. I really saw it.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe you do still love her.”

“I do.”

“But you love me, too?”

“I always have.”

She rubbed her palms against her eyebrows. “What should I do, Tom? This is all so sudden. I really *believed* that you and I—”

“I know. Look. I’ll call you when I get to Angerby. We can talk about this later. I know this is hard. I don’t even know what to think myself, right now. You have to help me, though. I don’t think it’ll be a good idea if we meet again after this.”

“She was really attacked?”

“She had her arm torn off. She shouldn’t be alive.”

Diane’s eyes widened and she started. “*What?*”

“She was attacked by a monster.”

“All right. Call me when you get there. Just find out what’s going on. And don’t make big decisions right now. I’ll wait for you.”

“Diane ...”

“No, Tom. Not now. Just go. See what’s going on.” She waved a hand and stood. She walked over to the hotel room door and opened it. “I’ll just stay here for the rest of the time. Call me.”

“All right.”

He stood and she embraced him. “Don’t get hurt.”

He was silent. She shook her head and closed the hotel room door in his face. He looked at it for some time before lifting his bag again and rushing out of the hotel, not bothering to check out. He had paid in advance anyway and Diane would probably do the rest. He forced down turmoil of feeling, put the car in gear and tore out of the parking lot.

He drove without conscience. The few hoots as he passed let him register, uncaringly, that he was driving badly. Using the edge of a nail that had grown a little he scratched the name Grindle into his left arm, looking up at the road and then at the arm every few seconds, shrugging at the pain as he went over the same spot again and again, till he had removed enough skin for the name to stand out in pink among the dark hairs on his pale skin. A living manuscript, a physical sign of how God himself had chosen to write this name upon him, and his heart. He was a vile man, but there was still time.

He felt chosen. The dream had given him that conviction. For what, he could not be sure. But he felt that he would have to be made pure again, somehow, and then he could go, to face a monstrous evil. And if he was pure, perhaps he would destroy it, in the name of everything just and holy. If Anita could forgive his lies, that would be just the beginning. There was more, far more to repent for. For his thoughts, his proclivities, his work and all the people who had crossed his path in life.

Grindle. When Tom found him he would stab him with all of his own knives and gouge out his eyes with broken splinters from paintbrushes. When he found the painting he would burn the evil thing, with whatever others he could find. If he destroyed it, perhaps he would be hurting the bastard more than any physical pain. He would let the oil bubble and run, and Grindle would have to watch every inch of it go. The painting would burn, like every cell that held the code for the murderous bastard's life. So that everything he was could be unwritten. And if he had children Tom would find them and they would lose all of what they had, for their share of him. For the part of Grindle that they carried.

Something in him registered that he was verging towards absolute madness, but Tom hardly cared. Madness was cleansing.

He ran out of fuel on an incline on the highway. The engine sputtered and the car cruised slowly to a halt, veering off to the shoulder of the road. He looked down at the fuel gauge in disbelief. He hadn't even thought about petrol. He slammed the steering wheel, climbed out of the car and looked around. Cars sped by him on the highway. There was a farmhouse about three hundred metres from the road, almost concealed behind a cloud of trees and surrounded by a grand expanse of vineyards. There was a canal, brimful of water, passing beside the highway, feeding these winelands. He was at least twenty kilometres from the nearest town. He stood for a frustrating quarter of an hour, waiting for someone to stop, but no one did. He considered going to the farmhouse, which was certain to have fuel. He could also just phone directory enquiries, get the number to a tow-in service for the next town, called Kellerplat, and have them drive out a can for him. Cars continued to pass by, uncaring of his problems.

He walked, choosing the first option. The canal was between him and the farmhouse. There was a bridge crossing it further along. As he looked at the water

the body of a dead swallow drifted past. He was struck by a great urge to intercept it and moved so quickly in his rush to lay his hand on the small body that he fell headlong into the canal. The current pushed at him with surprising force and he immediately kicked for the bank. But there was a great pull on his feet, and his head submerged. The pull came again and he dropped even further. He opened his eyes and the light from the surface grew steadily dimmer as something pulled him down, into impossible depths. He was dragged, bubbles bursting from his open mouth as he craned his neck to see what dragged him, when suddenly he could breathe again. He emerged in what he took to be a subterranean cavern, lit with an unnatural light. The walls of the cave were pockmarked and full of twisting runnels and thick grooves: no doubt a part of a vast underground water system, apart from one peculiarity: there was a room, a cube painted grey, and which looked as if it had been transplanted from the building in which it had once had its place, like a frozen organ from a body. It rested inside the cave, giving off its faint light from a broad window along the wall that faced him. He walked over to it and looked inside, where there was nothing but a bright, white-painted floor, a small, metal table and simple, steel chairs. Fluorescent lights ran along the ceiling and provided the space with a sickly illumination. There was a woman inside, sitting patiently with her back to him, with the look of someone waiting. He opened the door and went inside, his shoes and socks squishing on the white tiles.

She did not turn her head and he went to sit on the table's other side, canal water from his clothing dripping onto the floor. The woman's hair was long, but pinned back. She wore a grey dress, which fitted tightly and hugged her thighs, ending above stockinged knees. Her nose and chin were sharp, as was the gaze she fixed upon him from green eyes.

"Are you sorry?" she asked.

“For what?”

“You will be. Or they will be very disappointed. Personally, I think they will be.”

“Who are they?”

“I can’t tell you. They wouldn’t let me anyway, even if I tried. I just wanted to tell you that I was against this. Entirely against this.”

“Against what?”

“Just remember that, all right? I’m glad I didn’t have to miss our session. It’s the law. They couldn’t stop me. So here I am. But I have to go now.”

“Who are you?”

“You’ll remember me. When enough people have died.”

“What am I doing here? This is crazy.”

“Yes. I know.” She walked to the door: “Goodbye,” she told him, with the same serious, professional expression, and left him, shutting the door behind her.

What had looked like a window from outside was a mirror within the room. He stood and looked at himself. There was a louder, heavier dripping sound and one of the fluorescents began to flash, like the reverse of illumination in a lightning storm: periods of light interrupted by flashes of dark. The dripping was coming from the edge of the mirror, seeping in through the join of glass and brick. His fingertips reached for it. There was a puddle seeping in under the door as well. He walked, stepping onto the puddle, and clutched the shiny doorknob. He turned it and the door was wrenched open by an intruding flood of water. It pushed him back some way and then he swam against it, the water slowing as it filled the room. He swam out of the door, his cheeks bulging from air he had hoarded. Entirely disoriented and blinded by the water he was unsure of which way to swim, when ahead of him was a glowing red light, its rays suffusing the dirty water. He swam towards it and saw that it was

encircled by a ring of purple. He continued to swim, but it seemed to remain at just the same distance, and he was beginning to feel the oxygen burning in his lungs, and so he released air, bit by bit, swimming desperately for the light. When he thought he could go no further, the red and green became clearer, blurred only because he was right up against it. It took him a moment to realise that he was free of the water, in sunlight, and tasting the sweet relief of air. The colours encircled the eye of a dead bird, and he clutched its tiny body, swimming with it to the side of the canal, where he lifted himself from the water, exhausted.

I am dreaming, too, aren't I? he thought, and, as if in answer, the bird wriggled in his hand and he opened his fingers. The swallow burst from his hands and flew, a small black fleck of movement, rapidly disappearing.

He slammed his own head and the impact felt real. He kicked a stone and he felt it strike his toe through the shoe. He picked up another stone, looked at the faint imprint of Grindle's name, still on his arm and pressed deeply into the skin with the sharpest point of the stone, drawing blood in places. He winced and then screamed, more from anger than pain. This was no dream, no nightmare. It could not be.

He returned to his car, forgetting that he'd run out of petrol. When still the car wouldn't start he swore loudly and slammed the steering wheel hard. He stepped out of the car and slammed the roof of the car again and kicked a dent into the car door, swearing even louder.

An old biscuit-coloured pickup slowed and stopped ahead of the car. Driving, was a young man, who grinned and shook his head slightly. "Havin' a tough day there, man?"

"You would not believe."

"What seems to be the problem?"

"Ran out of petrol."

“Did you fall into the canal, man?”

“Yeah. It’s hot.”

The driver laughed. “Hop in. I’ll give you a ride to the nearest station and you can bum a ride back with someone. Easy enough.”

It was almost an hour later when Tom, his clothing almost dry, finally pulled the rental Toyota into the Kellerplat filling station. By the time he had the car filled and screaming down the road again, he was in a silent, burning rage. It was half past noon when he reached Angerby. On the highway, one could drive from one end of Angerby to the other in half an hour, though suburban sprawl was beginning to dot the unchanged landscape on the city’s southern side. Tom had lived all his life in Angerby. He had always thought of it as a reasonably safe, comfortable city, nestled inland, surrounded by fruit growers and farmers, fed by a perennial river called the Fleur. Even its city centre was not decaying much. The weather was mild, apart from very heavy wind in Autumn, which was the most anyone had to worry about. The city’s dark lifeblood had drained anaemic several decades before, when the rich oilfields upon which the city had grown like a parasite, were finally depleted. There were still small operations, pumping what remained of the thick crude from the crust of the earth, but dusty, rusted oil works littered the landscape on that side of the city, where it was not unusual to see a farmer growing crops around the tall husk of an oil derrick, if the steel had not been reclaimed. The oil pipelines snaked from the city, now, like collapsed and useless veins. Industry for the city had changed, so that Angerby was best known now for producing cars. It had gone from producing the fuel, to producing its primary combustor. He did not think of the city as benign any longer. As its skyline came into view, obscured slightly by the lower atmosphere’s blanket of pollution, the towering buildings that floated on the horizon before him

seemed like the prongs of some robotic hand, sprung up from the earth, to clutch and hold the people of the city and pull them down to oblivion with it.

After the rain, the day was hot and humid. He entered the suburbs from the east, passing first dilapidated old houses built close together in the dust, bricks exposed behind peeling paint. To one side of him was the railway workyard, and at the sight of it his memory flashed and fragments of the second dream tumbled into consciousness. He slowed and stopped the car at a small café, from it looking up and down the street. He drove further, taking a few turns. When he saw the house, he knew. It was the small, yellow house. Two dogs were lying at the rusty front gate and they barely moved as Tom opened it and knocked at the front door. A woman spoke from inside.

“I’m Tom Rush,” he answered.

“What do you want?”

He considered how he would say this. He spoke to the door, imagining the woman with her slightly swollen joints and puffy face. A woman perhaps still wondering if her niece would ever return. “It’s about a young woman,” he said to the closed door. After a second or two he added: “I’ve forgotten her name.”

There was no response for a while and then the sound of a chain and a lock. The door opened a crack and the aunt’s eye peered out. “Whose name?” she asked.

Tom could not be entirely sure now. “Your niece? Your daughter?”

“Katie?”

“Yes. That’s her.”

“Are you looking for Kaitlyn?”

“No. I never met her myself.”

“Do you know where she is?”

Tom nodded. The woman unlocked the door and opened it for him. He stepped in, aware that she had a small revolver in one hand. She put it back into its small brown bag and motioned him into the TV room.

“Tea? Or coffee?” Perhaps she was postponing this, he thought. She knows.

He shook his head. “No, thank you.” She came to sit across from him. He took a little while to speak. “I’m Tom Rush, as I said. And I never met her myself. But last night I had a dream, and in it I saw things as if through her eyes. I was here with her, in this house.” The look on the aunt’s face was terribly strained and Tom realised he would not be able to go through with this. There was no easy way to say something like this. “I’m sorry,” he said, and he could no longer meet her eye. “I had better go. I shouldn’t have come here.” He made to stand up.

“Was it you who killed her?”

The directness of the question surprised him. He remained seated. After a time, he said: “No.”

“I think it *was* you. What are you doing here?” He noticed that she still had the leather bag with her.

“That’s insane. I would never kill someone.”

“But you did. It was you.” The woman’s breathing was beginning to sound laboured, as if in prelude to another asthma attack. Before Tom could say a word, the crazy old woman had the gun raised and pointed at his face, the barrel bobbing up and down from her increasingly laboured breathing. She pulled the trigger and he flinched, the bullet whizzing past him. He threw himself towards the woman, reaching for the gun. She shot again, but again the bullet missed him. He wrestled the gun from her grasp easily, twisting it in her hand. It went off once more, a loud, cracking sound that distorted and frazzled the senses. The old woman moaned and slumped to the ground. He dropped the gun, ran out of the house and back into his

car, panic stricken. The neighbourhood was unbearably quiet. What had possessed the woman? Still, he could not be sure that she was dead. He had to be sure. He had to return to the house.

His stomach hard as a stone, he approached the front door. He was sure that he had left it open in his hasty retreat, but it was shut now and locked. He tried to twist the doorknob and shake it, but he could gain no access. He tried to recall: had he in fact shut it as he'd left? He could remember doing no such thing. He knocked, feeling a fool. Nothing happened. He walked around the house, but the curtains were shut. He tried the back door, but it, too, was locked. He returned to the front door, raised his foot and kicked it. His leg passed right through the cheap, thin wood. He kicked again. There was room for him to put an arm through. He undid the latch and went inside. Where the old woman had fell, on the living room carpet, was nothing. He checked through the rest of the house. It was similarly empty. He stood quietly, his jaw muscles limp, breathing in huge breaths through his open mouth. He stared at the carpet. He searched the house again, checking cupboards, beneath beds and behind furniture. Finally, grudgingly, he stepped out of the house, looking back at it continually, as if expecting to see the face of the old woman at a window, but there was nothing.

He was passing the rusted wire fence and its post-box, when he was startled by a noise from the post-box as its metal lid fell open with a tinny clank. Envelopes fell from the open receptacle and there was one that caught his eye. It was bordered in gold trim and embossed. It was the same kind of envelope they used for important clients when the bank wished to improve or consolidate the 'personal touch', as the PR person who'd given him the stationery had once put it. It had his name on it, and he recognised the handwriting at once. There was no stamp, nor address. He opened the envelope, which was not properly sealed. He noticed several things almost at

once. First, that the letter was addressed to him; second, that it was Anita's handwriting; and third, that the date was highly unlikely, seven years into the future. He read, the late morning sunlight bright against the white page. He squinted to make out the words.

Dear Tom,

My therapist thinks it's a good idea to write you a letter now, after all this time. But, just between you and me, I don't think there's much point. After all, I'm actually writing this for my therapist, who thinks I need it. I pay her to listen and let me ramble about my life, and yet she feels obliged to think up these pointless little homework assignments. To top everything, she doesn't even want to read the letter, I'm just supposed to tell her what I wrote. I have to write all of this and then throw it on the fire, a nice little touch Doctor Sullivan borrowed from her childhood, I imagine. How she'll know I actually did my homework I'm sure you have to spend seven years studying psychology to be able to answer. I wonder if Dr Sullivan ever wrote letters to Santa Claus? I can't even remember if I believed, myself. I don't know if I've believed in anything, really. However, it seems I do believe Doctor Sullivan, because here I am, writing to you after all. She may be right. It feels like something, as if somewhere, somehow, you will read this.

Well, first to let you know how things worked out for me.

I published a book four years ago, a thriller type of thing that sold pretty well. It's about these people who dream about the deaths of all a killer's previous victims and since each successive victim is given more clues as the book unfolds, they are finally able to piece the killer's identity together and stop him. I think I needed to write it as a kind of catharsis. There's a lot of my own crap in there. Anyway, the person who has the last dream is the hero. I'm working on a collection of short stories at the moment, also crime-genre things. I wonder what you would have

thought of them? I met another man about three years ago as well. We got married. I don't talk to him about you much. Don't see why he should be jealous, after all, but he is. I can see that he is and it's like he wants people to think that he and I have spent our entire lives together, that he and I had Pam and that you never existed. That little fiction might be easier to maintain if it wasn't for the way I look. I live in a different town now, and if I wanted to I could pretend, and come up with another explanation for how I lost my arm, but what for? Just because I've had rotten luck doesn't mean the world's going to start treating me like I carry it around with me. People I've met here are still surprised when I tell them. Well, actually they're completely shocked. They say things like, "I'm so sorry," and act all ashamed, as if they had something to do with it, though my therapist says that's just a perception. She thinks I'm still bitter.

Just between you and me, I liked you a lot more, but Trevor's a good man. He loves me, even though I'm the one armed bandit. I wonder if you would have been able to? Or would you have taken off with your so-called Personnel Manager, leaving me to wave a tired arm goodbye? What can I say? You were a man. I forgive you. I would have never wanted you dead. Trevor and I, we've had a few memorable moments. Even Pam likes him. And he helps me to keep my thoughts off you.

What about you? If I believed in such things I would try to picture you looking down at me beatifically from heaven, and shaking your head like only an eternal cynic can. I'm so sorry you died, Tom. I'm sorry that bastard killed you. Every day, I think of him rotting in his cell, and I have one wish: that he could understand what he's done to all of us and all these other people. I just don't think he gets it. Well that's my wish ... that he can feel what it's like for them. I know I'm being ungenerous; that's what my shrink would say. He supposedly had this tough life

himself, or so his lawyer tried to make out. Putting a spin on his loneliness and trying to make the jury feel sorry for him. So they didn't give him the death penalty. They should have, though. Life in prison that's all he got. And he was smiling all the way through it. What I wouldn't give ...

But enough of that. My therapist says I should forgive and forget. Find my inner karma, and so on. Bla bla bla. I know what you're thinking.

So anyway, this thing is pointless. And it isn't helping. It's just making me angry again, from scratch. I'm not even going to bother throwing it on the fire. I'll just chuck it in the trash.

Livingly yours

Anita

He blinked, and then the letter was not a letter at all, but a water and lights bill. He turned it over and then looked at it again. There was a dull throb at his temples. He folded the bill, feeling utterly displaced, and put it in a pocket. Even the envelope had changed to a basic municipal one, complete with plastic window and official stamp. It was possible that he had imagined it all, but he doubted it.

He dialled his wife's phone again. This time Anita answered.

"It's the university hospital," she told him. "Ward five." She sounded a little better. It was almost two in the afternoon now. He was surprised that he had managed to keep the complete confusion out of his voice.

He went home first. He wasted no time, going into the house and then to Pam's room. He was not surprised to find the sketchpad there and the face of the killer. He stared at it. It was the face. He tore the page out, folded it and put it in his pocket. He left the house and made straight for the hospital. The grounds were large, the main building rising up to seven floors. He found the admissions desk, where a nurse pointed him to ward five. Anita had visitors, a married couple in their forties,

who Tom, were he paying more attention, would have recognised, the old gentleman called Nathaniel and Pam. Tom stood in the doorway for a short while without being noticed and looked at his wife. She had never stopped being a beautiful woman, and it was heart-rending to see her now, pale, propped up on the hospital bed, talking to her visitors, even smiling, moving her one remaining arm.

She was the first to notice him. She called his name and held out the arm. He went to sit on the side of the bed and found himself taking her hand, the feel of which pushed a nerve deep in his brain. He stroked it, letting her run her fingers along his own arm. He held the other one out to Pam, who he clutched close to him for a time, feeling as if all of this had been snatched from the jaws of oblivion.

He looked up at where Nathaniel was standing, then spoke to him. "What happened? I thought she'd died."

"I went to the house last night," the old man explained, speaking slowly as if he'd told this story often enough already. "The door was open. I went inside with my gun and then he rushed me. It was dark in the entranceway. He came right for me, and he was fast. I warned him that I had a gun, but he kept running. Naturally I had in mind what the lady had told me earlier about someone trying to kill her. So I fired, but the bullet missed him, and he was almost on me. I dodged, trying to hit him on the head with the gun. But that was it. He had me, took the gun and turned it on me. I was dead, or should have been. But then he switched on the light and when I turned to look, he warned me not to, in a muffled voice. He switched off the light again, but he didn't shoot. He hit me with the gun, just here," and he showed them the bruise at his temple. "By the time I could see straight again he was gone. I found your wife, unconscious."

Anita spoke, her voice calm: "He stole my arm. Took it with him."

Nathaniel could only shake his head, and then in a lowered tone, addressing Tom, he said: "Mind if you and I just step outside for a moment?" Tom glanced at Anita, but she nodded. For the first time, Tom paid proper attention to the couple in the room, and then he recognised them. They were Jennifer's parents.

In the hallway, Nathaniel said, "Your wife, Mr Rush-

"Call me Tom."

"Your wife is still a bit delirious from what happened to her. The story she tells is a bit unlikely. Just thought I'd warn you."

"Thank you."

"She claims the killer had magic powers."

Tom nodded. "Why didn't he kill you?"

"I don't know. Lucky son of a bitch, I guess. I always have been."

"Did you get someone to look at that?" He indicated the bruise.

"I'm fine. It's nothing." There was a long pause after this and then he asked: "What the devil did he want with her?"

"What she's been saying, about him having powers of magic. Well I'm afraid that's true. He's not just a killer. He's like an evil force. And he's probably been killing for a long time. We've been seeing the murders. In dreams."

"That's what she said."

"Well it's true," Tom told him, and went back inside and introduced himself first to Jennifer's mother, a woman who looked strikingly like the young girl, and then her father. Their names were Pete and Monica. "So you think she's dead, too?" the father asked, and it was clear he believed nothing of it.

"I had the dream too. I wish I could say differently, but yes, that's what I think."

Pete waited, then said: "We'll hold the memorial in two days time. If they find the body, we'll have a small funeral then, but at least we'll get a chance now to say what we have to. Just to say goodbye."

Tom nodded. He looked at his wife. "How long do you have to stay here?"

"Just another day."

Tom looked at the old man again, and was similarly struck by a disturbing aspect in his face. He tried to ignore it and said, "Thank you. It seems you saved her life."

"I don't know. What now? He's still out there."

Tom considered this. "I expect I'm going to meet this man," he said. "It seems to me that everyone who dreams about him, meets him, one way or the other. I expect I will not survive, but perhaps he is also just a man. Somehow."

"You're going to try to kill him?"

"Definitely."

"Right. Then we can go back to my place. You could start a war from my basement."

Tom was surprised. "All right." He turned to Anita, and he was suddenly unsure if he could leave her, remembering innumerable scenes from TV of murderers in hospitals. "I'll be back soon," he said.

"What are you doing, Tom?"

"You know. I have to."

"Tom. Please be careful."

"I'm going now."

"I don't know. I still don't. Please. Don't do anything. Stay away from him. Stay here."

"You can't stay away from him, Annie. That should be obvious."

"I know."

"I had the dream." He went to kiss her, held her lightly again for a time, and then made to leave.

Pete gave his wife his keys and told her to await his call. "I'll come with you," he said. Downstairs, Tom slipped into the hospital shop for a pie. As he wolfed it down, he looked at Pete. The man was short and thin. His eyes were a watery green. There was a light burn on his arms and neck.

"You don't really believe any of this, do you?" Tom asked him.

"It's all I have to go on."

"I'm sorry. This whole thing is terrible."

"Yeah. You end up just sitting at home, too afraid to answer the telephone, but living for the next time it rings. You go into her room. You breathe in her smell on the pillows. When you drive, every girl on a passenger seat seems to be your daughter. I've seen her a hundred times since Sunday morning. On Sunday morning, the bed was made, nothing was out of place. We assumed she'd just popped off for a jog. But she never came home." Pete's mouth settled into a hard line and he rubbed at his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Nathaniel knit his brows. "I'll get my boys. They can help."

"Right. How many sons do you have?"

"Three."

"Let's go," Tom said, motioning. Perhaps, he thought, it would be best not to involve any more than already were. He thought of the old woman he'd called on not an hour earlier. It was like he had merely watched it, been apart from it. How could he be a killer? He should have taken the gun, he considered. He'd left it lying on the carpet. It would bear his fingerprints. It would have been best just going straight to the police after the incident, but even now he couldn't bring himself to do it. They

returned his rental car and then Tom hopped into Nathaniel's Land Rover, an old white safari model. Nathaniel was playing with the dial on the radio, searching for the news. They listened to the bulletin in silence, but it said nothing about Anita, nor anything about the woman Tom had shot. So perhaps she was still to be discovered.

"Old news now," Nathaniel said. "I spoke to the police. They seem to know it's a serial killer, but they've never found bodies, and your wife only counts as an attempted murder. I'll bet they've got a file this thick on all the women that have disappeared around here. It's every few months or so. Someone goes missing. Happens all the time. A lost soul here and there doesn't stir the pot."

"Yeah," Pete said, from the back seat. "They showed us the photos back at the station. My heart fell through the floor. They don't have a clue."

They drove on. Eventually the suburbs thinned to larger plots of land and then farmland. Nathaniel made comments about the rain and how the harvest of maize this year would be better than expected. He farmed with two of his sons, who lived in their own houses on other parts of the farm. One of them was married, but the other lived alone. Nathaniel was wealthy, by the sounds of it. He owned shares in Karimor, the big store in town, and worked there infrequently only for the pleasure of it, and to keep an eye on its operations. His youngest was a lawyer, also married and living in the city. Nathaniel had a wife ten years his junior and she had been growing and cultivating Arum lilies on the farm ever since their marriage.

Finally, they came to a turn in the road with a sign saying *Nathaniel, Bertha Ships and Sons*, and at the sight of it Nathaniel joked that his wife had been teased about it at their wedding, but she had smiled and said that she was happily a Bertha Ships. It hadn't been all that funny anyway. Nathaniel opened the big farm gate with a remote. There was a sign on it warning intruders that they would be shot.

They drove along the gravel road, twisting through fields of maize and then grass, Nathaniel mentioning that they had a special variety of feed grass, cultivated on this farm. It yielded twenty percent more than most comparable types. "No genetic modification either. Just good old-fashioned cultivation." The farmhouse was on a small hill. It was a beautiful, long, brick-and-wood building with big glass fronts and a well-tended lawn with flower beds and birdbaths, surrounded by many trees: a big willow, bluegum and birch. Nathaniel parked the Land Rover under the willow and they hopped out. It was well past three in the afternoon. Just down the hill was a large enclosure with cattle, another some way beside it with a half dozen bulls. In the yard below was a big shed, a tractor and truck beside it and miscellaneous props of farming: ploughs, a trailer, dogs running up the hill to greet their master. Nathaniel crouched down and rubbed the dogs' heads before inviting the men inside. "My wife must be out at the flowers right now. She'll be back soon. Let me show you something." They followed him from one room to another in the plush house, until he had them in his gunroom, a chamber sealed behind a heavy vault door, rich with the smell of gun oil. He switched on small, faint lights to illuminate his collection of guns, mounted on the walls. Nat explained that the collection was something his own father had passed on to him. There were rifles, revolvers and pistols here from many of the most significant wars of the last two centuries. Each had its spot in a display case, marked by a copper nameplate. Tom and Pete walked from one to the other. The Spanish-American war, Anglo-Boer War, World War Two, the first automatic rifle. Smith and Wesson, Winchester, all the names coloured by blood and history.

"This is amazing," Pete said. "This stuff should be in a museum."

"This is a museum," Nathaniel told him. "Come on. I'll give you both a tour some other time. Have you ever shot before?"

"Once. In school," Tom replied. Pete shook his head.

“Come on then.”

The old man passed him a pistol and two magazines, explaining that each had fifteen rounds. He passed another to Pete, who took it carefully. He locked the vault door behind them and they went outside, Nathaniel carrying a rifle. “This way,” he said. They walked for about five hundred yards till they came to a small dam with an old, rusted windmill, which had lost several of its blades. Tom placed a clod of hardened red earth on one of the windmill’s crossbars, at eye level, and told them to try to shoot it. “That’s about the size of a man’s head,” he said. “You’ve got about fifteen metres distance here. See how you do.” Pete fired five times, missing the clod each time, the third bullet ricocheting off a bar of metal half a meter to the side. The shots were very loud, even in the open air. “Don’t worry son. You’ll get the hang of it.” Then Tom raised his pistol, sighting the clod of earth very carefully, steadily. “Have a go,” Nathaniel prompted. Tom pulled the trigger and the clod of earth exploded in a cloud of dust. “Yes!” Nathaniel shouted. “Wonderful! Let’s see you do that again. Beginner’s luck.” He found an old, muddied bottle, broken at the neck, and balanced it on the windmill again. Again Tom fired, and again with perfect success. The bottle shattered, and Nathaniel was impressed. “You have a good eye, son.”

Someone called from behind them and they all looked back towards the house. Standing on the hill, a figure waved and started walking. “That’s my son,” Nathaniel said. “He lives about five kilometres north. Farms pigs and sunflowers.”

“What’s his name?”

“Grindle. His real name’s Leonard, but we’ve been calling him Grindle ever since he was little, because he was always grinning at things. Always happy.”

“What?”

“What’s wrong, son? You look a bit pale. What is it?”

Tom watched the approaching figure, but he was still too far away. He hadn't remotely imagined it could ever be like this, him with a gun and the object of his hate walking slowly towards him in a field in the afternoon sun, with a hawk circling above them, an insignificant detail that Tom registered now as something portentous, as if this was how the Grand Playwright had deigned it, and He would be observing this scene from on high. Tom heard Nathaniel saying something more, but he was not paying attention now. It could have been anything. His hand was in his pocket and he pulled out the piece of paper with the sketch. It all seemed so slow, as he unfolded the paper and handed it to Nathaniel without a look.

"Do you recognise this face?" Tom asked, the figure coming still closer.

After a moment, Nathaniel looked up. "But ... this is my son?" Tom showed him the scratch marks on his arm. The old man seemed confused, but there was something more, because this wasn't much of a puzzle and Nathaniel was no fool. Soon, he would allow himself to understand. "What?" he asked, almost to himself.

"I'm going to kill your son, Nat. I want you to know that. He's the one."

"It can't be."

Pete was silent and Tom appreciated that he was waiting, and that he had accepted this.

"It can't be."

Suddenly there was a shot. Pete. God no. Pete, Tom thought. You fucking idiot. He had fired far too soon. There was still over a hundred yards worth of distance between them and the approaching man, who immediately ducked down at the shot, and then another shot and another by Pete who went running off towards him, blazing away like all hell. Tom set off after him, and very shortly Pete was at the spot where the killer had ducked down and Pete was readying the gun to blow the man to oblivion. He could not miss. There was another shot, very loud, and Pete's

body was snapped around, his gun flying from his hand as he went down, a burst of red from the left of his chest. Tom looked back and what he saw caused him to stop running. Nathaniel's rifle was still raised and pointed directly at Tom now. The old man was walking slowly, the rifle horizontal. "Don't move!" he shouted. "Drop the gun!" Tom did nothing, and then Nathaniel shouted again. "Now!"

Tom considered it, but then he thought of what was just a few metres from him, and he could feel it like a cold hand down his spine. Tom could see this clearly: how this moment could end for him. He would die, one way or the other, killed either by a virtuous, or an evil man.

He hung on to the gun, until Nathaniel was right in front of him. "You're wrong," the old man said. Tom became aware of the presence beside him. He did not want to look. It would be too much, but then the figure stepped into view from behind Nathaniel, and it was the man himself, from all the dark, eyelid-prison terrors. The hated face stared back at him unblinking. Perhaps Nathaniel was able to see some of the truth in Tom's eyes, but it was too late. The old man's face exploded as the bullet tore through it from behind. The bullet, perhaps not much slowed by its encounter with skull, whizzed past Tom's head, almost clipping it. Tom hardly flinched as he raised the gun to point at the killer's face and pulled the trigger. The bullet hit the man right between the eyes and there was another bright burst of red cloud where the back of Grindle's head had been. Tom stood very quietly, waiting for the body to drop, amazed to think that it could be over like this. Almost easily. But Grindle's body did not drop. The man continued to stand, as if the shock of the heavy bullet through his brain had frozen him in this posture, as a brutal sculpture of suddenly dead flesh. Blood continued to trickle in a thick stream from the centre of the man's face, over his nose, smearing his lips, down along his chin, dripping in spatters along his neck and cascading down to the dust of grass and red topsoil. As

Tom watched, the eyes rolled just a little and then seemed to be looking straight back at him again. The head jerked to one side slightly, as if there was still some essence of life in the demolished brain. Then came the smile, the blood filling the mouth quickly, staining the gaps between the teeth. The muscles of the face responded. It took Tom too long to respond, for it wasn't possible. It couldn't be. He could not be living.

But he was. Tom felt the hands close around his neck, and they were as strong as steel clamps. He felt his larynx collapsing, his gullet crushed, then the vertebra in his neck squeezed to dust. The black was descending quickly and Tom knew that somewhere, beyond all of what he thought this life was, something better began, but it was nowhere near here and he knew that he was probably not good enough for it. For this was a dream, too, and he could not really be dying. He would wake before striking the ground. He would be in bed, and there would be bright morning sunshine filtering through his curtains and life would seem hopeful and fresh. And he would be someone else again, another person altogether. He could feel it.

Postumum Somnium

The dreams were disjointed and confused to Patrick Hinkley, a policeman in the second East precinct of the Angerby police force. He woke from them after a night with a few beers drunk in solitude at *Simpsons*, the bar down the road. He was still in his jeans and polyester shirt. He'd come home and fallen straight onto the unmade blankets and sheets of the night before, bothering not even to kick off his shoes and attempt to get in somehow under the twist of blankets. He opened his eyes and felt paralysis. It was as if life were being pumped into his limbs through a hydraulic tube. He sat up, slowly, then let his head fall into his hands. This had been a true nightmare, Patrick supposed, something he could keep the police counsellor busy with for an hour or two next Tuesday. But the more he tried, now, to think of his horrific night of sleep, the less it helped, as if the dream were too large, like something scratched into the frozen surface of a lake, and he was a small observer, running across the lines, trying to see what the big image was about, and cracking the thin ice with every footfall, wrecking it.

He let it be and looked at the red plastic clock on the bedroom wall, the hands at around 5:30. He started work at six. He'd been late twice last week, and they'd given him a warning. He stood, went to the bathroom washbasin, poured a glass of water, sipped half of it, threw two paracetomols into the remainder, waited for them to dissolve and then swallowed the cloudy white result. He filled the basin till it steamed the mirror, then he took off his clothing, threw it onto the heap collecting in the bathroom's far corner, noticing, as he did so, a mouse, small and brown, scurrying into the pile. He wet his face, soaped it and sponged down the rest of his body, droplets of water falling on the linoleum. He shaved quickly, erasing the stubble of a day. He submerged his head, towelled it down and then smoothed back thinning

hairs. He'd started going bald three years ago, and he imagined that he was starting to look more like Phil Collins by the day. The hairs had started falling out after Jane had disappeared and he'd often wondered what she would have thought of him like this. It wasn't just the thinning hair. He may, even, not have lost the hair had Jane still been around. But perhaps this was one of those irrelevant questions, like wondering if someone would have liked the things said about them at their funeral.

He had been considering that question for the last few days. Last night, after *Simpsons*, he had come home and sat at his desk with the gun in his mouth for ten minutes. The taste of gunmetal and oil had finally sickened him and he had put the gun away and gone to bed.

He put on his uniform, dealing with a stain of something, some meal from the day before, by rubbing it with a cloth doused in petrol. He examined himself, and decided he didn't look too bad. He fetched his gun after dropping two slices into the toaster and had it holstered by the time they emerged, the smell of toast and melting butter still in the air as he left the house, past the long wall of mirrors he and Jane had put up together eighteen years ago. It was five to six. Outside, the garden continued in its unchecked claim on the house. The bougainvillea entirely covered the Northern windows now, the lawn hadn't been mown in three weeks and what had once been a small patch of pumpkins in the back of the yard had now extended around the house, so that there was a big, white pumpkin edging the porch steps as he stepped down. The neighbours had been on about the lawn three weeks ago, finding ways to complain about it, first with little notes left on his front door, then personally, then with offers to mow the lawn themselves. Patrick had told them to feel free. They'd probably be coming again soon, he supposed. They could take a pumpkin for the effort.

He secured his helmet, sat down on his 500cc Yamaha and set off for the station. He'd sold the car two years ago. There wasn't much point in driving around with something that weighed almost a ton to get his eighty kilograms around. He was at the station at a minute to six. He passed the front guard, waving, parked under the oak outside the charges office, slipped the helmet onto the bike, went into the dour face brick building, signed the register and poured himself a cup of coffee, greeting familiar faces as they passed him. There was always that thought, in this job, that someone you'd seen yesterday would be missing forever by the next. It wasn't the greatest job in the world, policing, but, to him, real estate had come to be much worse. After the first couple and their kids had been through a viewing, and he'd managed to keep it together till they were gone so that he could crumple down in a corner on the new carpet, faced by the deafening emptiness of the house's big living room, he'd told himself he could never do it again: talk to families with a smile and discuss their future like it meant something to him. He poured more sugar into his coffee, almost absentmindedly, continuing to greet colleagues, then the ladies at the emergency call centre. He felt a hand settling on his shoulder and a familiar voice saying: "Come on, no meeting for us this morning. There's a call. We're going." It was Tony Clemens, his partner, a tall thin man who reminded people of Patrick Cleese, but only in looks. They found their patrol car, a white Opel, Tony briefing him as they sped up the main road, switching on the siren as they approached the first traffic light. The siren was long off by the time they reached the outskirts of Angerby, the road narrowing, between plots of land and then farms.

"You're quiet this morning," Tony said.

"Yeah." Patrick said no more and they drove on in silence. By the time they had come to the farm the mounting feeling of déjà vu had made Patrick even more subdued. He felt the rush of impressions, as they struck him, without question. First

it was a farm gate, the tall grass as they drove through the farm, then a house on a hill. All of it felt scripted, particularly as they parked the car and took a walk towards the derelict windmill, after meeting a distraught sixty-plus woman in the front yard. All of it, indeed, felt scripted. Tony spoke to the woman, who burst into fresh tears. There were four dead men. She'd come upon them this morning, two of them strangers, the other two her husband and son. All night she had been worried. They'd been out there since the afternoon the day before. She'd heard shooting between five and six yesterday, but hadn't checked till today.

Tony called in the clean-up crew.

There was a loud buzzing in Patrick's ears as they reached the scene, still undisturbed. Tony took photographs as they went. It was clear the bodies had been out here for some time already, because they were bloated, the skin pale blue. First one dead man, then the next, much older. They came upon the implausible sight of one man, with a bullet hole between his eyes and his brain down the back of his shirt, with both his hands around the neck of another corpse, who, even in death, looked utterly shocked. Patrick took out his gun, pointed it at the man whose big fingers still clutched frozenly at the other's neck and began to shoot. Over and over he fired into the corpse, until all his bullets were spent. When he looked up again, he noticed that the woman had run away and was watching from a distant stretch of field. He felt a hand on his shoulder and almost punched Tony, who said his name softly.

"Patrick. Get a grip."

Patrick Hinkley breathed heavily, and he could taste the fear in his mouth, something salty and cold.

"What do you think you're doing? Firing into a fucking corpse?"

Patrick threw down his gun and walked away, Tony beside him. "Talk to me," he said. "Tell me, dammit. Do you know that man?"

Patrick stopped, was about to speak, shook his head and walked on.

“What do you know about that shit back there? Do you know something, Patrick? Who are they? Why’d you just empty your gun into a corpse? This is not sane, old friend.” Patrick was trying to catch up with the woman, but she ran further as he approached, so Patrick stopped. He spoke.

“Tony. I want to talk to that woman. Bertha Ships. Ask her where her son’s house is.”

“What for?”

“I just want to see it. It’s important. Ask her. Just say you want to know where that corpse’s house is. I have to see it.”

It took a while, but finally Tony returned. He said he would stay and wait for the clean-up. Patrick took the car and drove, till he passed ranks of pigpens, some with corrugated iron roofs, others exposed to the sun. He reached the farmhouse, which had an old shed some way behind it, but that was all. It was a reasonably small house and much older than the one on the hill. Patrick parked and examined it. The white paint was flaking off, revealing grey plaster beneath. One of the windows had been replaced with planks, but the rest seemed intact. The roof had once been ochre red, but only ragged blotches of red remained around the dark rust that had blackened the rest of it. There was a chimney, cracked and almost collapsed, the top half balancing at a slight angle where the bricks came to rest. There were no plants around the house, which was bordered only by gravel. It was a dirty, unkempt sight, so that when Patrick entered it the neatness within surprised him. The kitchen had only its fittings, old wooden cupboards with crockery and glass doors for the shelving, an old white fridge and a freezer beside it, a simple deal table with four chairs, also plain wood. Everything was clean, including the kitchen sink where cloths were hung from hooks beside it on the old white tiles. The living room had a simple, brown lounge

suite, slightly tattered, though neat and clean. There was one bedroom, with a three-quarter bed, also neatly made up, clothing and shoes hung, folded and arranged in the cupboard. The bathroom, too, was spotless. There was no bar of soap, even, on the bath or the basin, in fact almost no sign that anyone lived here at all. All the walls were the same white as the ceiling, there wasn't a book or a magazine in sight, although in the living room were a television and hi-fi, but no CDs that Patrick could see. The other rooms in the house were empty, including their cupboards. There was only one item of true interest in the house and the only thing on any of the walls. It was hung in the living room and stood out like a lamp in an overcast desert night. Well-painted, in thick, bright colours, was the portrait of a woman with one arm. He went to check the fridge and then the freezer. Under packages of food, he found the arm, layered in white frost. Disgusted, he closed the freezer lid again. He looked for some time at the expressionless face of the painting, then took it off the wall and placed it on the floor at the back of the car. He was not ready to leave yet. He took a flashlight from the car's glove compartment and made for the shed fifty metres or so from the house. Inside was feed for the pigs but, like the house, it was empty. He soon found a trapdoor, set almost in the middle of the shed. It had a rope handle and he pulled, straining to lift the wood. There were steps leading down, and the clammy smell of earth. He used the torch at first and then found a light switch at the bottom of the steps. A series of light bulbs came on and he followed them along a short passage and was soon in the madman's studio, for apart from the wooden table and chairs, there was an easel with paints, a palette and brushes. He had painted by this dim light, his subjects on this table or in one of those chairs. Alive, if they were unlucky. There were bloodstains on the wood of the table, but there was nothing else here, no bodies or other signs. Not even behind another passage, which opened onto a smaller room, which was empty.

The air outside was sweet and dear to him. Within, it had been like a cursed tomb. He walked back to the car, returned to the main farmstead, and saw that the clean-up crew had arrived. Tony was waiting for him. Patrick indicated the back seat.

“Stealing paintings now, Patrick?”

“Evidence.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Evidence?”

“I’ll show you. Don’t you recognise this woman? It’s the one from the Rankin Mall.”

Tom’s expression changed, but Patrick Hinkley left it at that for the moment. He spoke to the old woman about the painting. She cried when she saw it.

“He was always painting strange things like that. He’d call us over to see a new one, if he was finished.”

“And how often was that?”

“Not so often. Once every few months.”

“For how long?”

“What do you mean?”

“When did he start painting?”

“Oh. Not too long ago. Three years.”

They stayed for a while longer, but soon Tony was ready to leave. “You can’t just take that,” he said, indicating the painting.

“It’s too important. I’ll hand it in to forensics as soon as we get there.”

“And what do you expect them to find?”

“It’s a strong suspicion, Tone. Just go with this.”

“And what do you think they’ll say about the sixteen-hole body back there?”

“Hopefully, that it’s dead.”

“God, Patrick. I’m going to miss working with you. After you get suspended.”

“Don’t worry about that. I quit.”

“What has this thing done to you? Why?”

“Let it be, Tone. I’m all right.” Patrick considered what it would sound like if he told his partner what was on his mind, but Tony was not the kind of man for it.

“Let’s get back,” he told him.

Tony didn’t move. He still wanted some explanation. When he was unable to stare Patrick down, he shrugged his shoulders and they got back in the car and drove back to Angerby in silence. Back at the station Tony walked with him to forensics, where he handed in the painting for analysis. It was signed in by one of the new girls, a young graduate in her early twenties, still brimful of book ideas and enthusiasm.

“What should we look for?”

“Layers.”

“Layers?”

“Yeah. Layers. I don’t know exactly, but haven’t there been many artists who paint over old paintings?”

“Sure.”

“And there are ways of getting to see the old images beneath?”

“Sure. Pretty tricky. They never come out perfectly, but there are people who can do that very well. I think.” She smiled. “Let’s take a look, quick. Won’t hurt.”

She examined the back of the painting, saw where the painting’s frame was secured, fetched pliers from her own desk and soon had the frame off. She examined the canvas edge-on and then whistled. “Holy shit,” she said.

“What?” Tony and Patrick moved in beside her. There could be no mistaking it. There was a layer of paint much thicker than the canvas itself, over a centimetre thick. Different colours had stratified on the edge.

“There’s a lot of paint in there,” the young woman said.

“And we’ll be able to see?” Patrick asked.

“Yes, sure. But what to look for, exactly?”

“I’ll show you. I know now.”

“You know what, Patrick?” Tony asked again.

“I know who this is,” Patrick said, pointing. “I’ll fetch her for you. Come on.” They left, and drove to the university hospital and, after some enquiries, they found her in ward five. The woman was alone and staring out of the window at the university grounds below. He went to stand by the bed and began to talk, but found himself incapable. He shook his head, steadied himself and saw that the woman was frowning, narrowing her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Patrick said, at last. “I wish I could say it’s good to see you again.”

“You’ve had the dream too now,” she said.

Patrick was unsurprised that she could guess it. “Yes.”

“My husband?”

Patrick shook his head. He waited for the woman to cry, but instead she looked away, back out at the university and the daylight.

“He’s dead.”

She snapped her head towards him, irritated. “I know,” she said, as if amazed that anyone could be so inane.

“No. Your husband too. But *he* ... is dead.”

“Grindle?”

“Dead.”

“How?”

“Your husband. He got him.”

She nodded, and he could see she had trouble believing it.

“When can you leave the hospital?”

“I feel ready to leave now, in fact. Are you sure?”

“That he’s dead? Yes. He’s never coming back.”

“Who was he? In the end?”

“He was Nathaniel’s son.”

She let her head rest on her fingers. “Right. Whatever. And Nathaniel? And Pete?”

“Dead, too.”

“Why’d you have the dream?”

Patrick thought about telling her, but thought better of it. It could wait. “We found the painting. You’re on it. Maybe he thought he killed you.”

“Or he was still planning to. I’m sure of that.”

“Well, we’ll need you to come and identify the bodies, and to identify the painting.”

“My doctor’s around here, somewhere. You can clear it with him. I’m ready to go. I’ll just have to be careful.”

Less than half an hour later, Anita was signed out, in a clean dress and ready to leave. Tony carried her bags as they walked. She went slowly, and she was unbalanced.

“You dreamed about Tom?” she asked.

He nodded.

At the station she stared at the portrait of herself for a long time. The statement she had made in hospital was produced and given to the forensics woman and her superior, a small, pale man with thick spectacles and a look that seemed to trust nothing.

“There won’t be bodies. He got rid of them all,” Patrick said. “He had a pig farm, after all.”

“We’ll send someone to check the sties. There’s always something.”

Patrick nodded. “There will be something.” He thought of what he had seen in the freezer, but chose to say nothing.

“You’re studying forensics, aren’t you?” Patrick said, to Anita.

“Yes.” She seemed a little surprised that he knew, but not much.

“Can she come here sometimes? Help you out here?”

The small head of forensics looked at her, was about to turn her away, then promptly reconsidered. His thoughts were easily read. “All right, then. Thank you,” he said. “We could always use a hand.” The man seemed unaware of any irony.

“I don’t think so,” Anita told him. “Thanks anyway.”

The rest of the day passed quickly. Tony set about writing the report, and eventually gave up asking questions. When Anita continued with them, Patrick began to feel the sickness push from inside, and he left the station without a word to anyone. He’d left his helmet inside, so he drove home without it, no one stopping him.

He thought about what would happen in the time ahead. Perhaps they would find someone who would be able to peel away layer by layer of the painting, and face after face would come into the world, and photographs would be taken, and people who had thought someone missing would call and come see for themselves and be told about what had happened. He would get a call himself one day, and there, perhaps, he would see the layer of paint that looked like two people he had once

known and loved, painted however the killer had seen them. But Patrick did not want to know this. And even if they weren't in there, waiting for him, it scarcely mattered.

The lawn had not been mowed in his absence. There was no letter of complaint from the neighbours. He fetched a cold beer, switched on the television, rewound the tape in his machine, settled himself into his chair and played it when the sounds from the old machine stopped. The video began. They were at the sea. Angie was being held as she stood on the top of a crumbling wall of stone, her mother whispering thoughts and ideas at her as the little girl marvelled at the black rocks, the big blue sky, the crashing waves, the seagulls and seals, the distant boats and ships. The two of them turned, Philippa waving at the camera and telling Angie to say hello to daddy. He heard himself laughing. His happiness would haunt this tape for a long time, long after he himself was gone. And it would outlast his sadness.

He saw something then, which made him frown. He rewound the tape and then saw it again. He stopped the tape. He had looked at this tape and others like it so many times before that every strip of colour was part of him. Yet, he had never noticed this. He pushed play again, and there it was. They stood outside a mariner's restaurant, with the wooden building and the prows of two small yachts in view. Philippa and Angie moved to look at a seal dancing in the water. As the camera followed them jerkily, it captured a face passing by. It was Grindle, just passing, and looking blankly at Angie and Philippa, then the camera. The man's expression said nothing. Patrick was almost unsurprised at making this discovery. Somehow he had expected something like this. Somehow he had known it would be *this* tape. He rewound and paused the tape at the point where Grindle stared at the camera. Patrick stared at the face in return, trying somehow to read some thought into its blank expression, but there was nothing. That day, Grindle had been just another ordinary man passing by. The tape's automatic play kicked in and the scene rolled on, only

now it was immediately different. Though the sound had returned and there was movement on the tape, Grindle remained where he stood, staring back at the camera. He blinked. His gaze shifted back towards Philippa. He walked across to where the mother and daughter were still looking at the seal.

“No,” Patrick whispered, striking the roof of the television with one fist. “No.” Grindle looked back towards the camera and removed a knife from his jacket. He smiled. Patrick slammed the television again, shouting now: “No!” The screen turned suddenly to snow. There was noise and then two simultaneous screams, of differing pitch. The screams intensified and Patrick Hinkley stared at the snow, which burst into unclear images intermittently, as he struck the box. He kicked at the television and it toppled from the wooden table on which it stood; yet the television remained intact and the screams continued.

He found his pistol, aimed it at the set and pulled the trigger, but there was nothing. He had already emptied the gun into Grindle’s corpse. At last, he picked up the remote control and pressed stop. The screams from the television ceased. He sat for some time, unable to respond or move. Moisture flowed from the corners of his eyes, and he let it roll.

He replaced the television, rewound the tape and played it again. This time the scene progressed as it always had before. Grindle passed into frame and then out again, and there was nothing different. There was no knife, no screams and no long stare at the cameraman. The tape merely moved on to another scene, which had been filmed indoors. It had been their last Christmas together, and they were passing gifts around. Patrick had filmed Angie opening hers, a doll, and then Philippa, whom he had given a gold chain with a diamond pendant. He passed the camera to Philippa as he opened his own gift, and the room swirled and then the image settled on him, wearing a grey jersey and smiling as he unwrapped a parcel wrapped in green

wrapping. It would be two new shirts and ties. He remembered. So it was that he watched in disbelief as his hand removed a knife from the box. It was ivory handled and bejewelled. Patrick, in his grey jersey, and sitting beside a half finished glass of sherry, turned his face to the camera and raised the knife.

“Patrick? What are you doing? Patrick?” It was Philippa’s voice.

Growing larger on the television frame, Patrick Hinkley lunged for the camera, lowering his knife. The blade emerged from the television, without disturbing the glass, and buried itself between the watching policeman’s eyes. By the time Patrick Hinkley thudded onto the mat there was nothing alive to register the fall.

Report

There was a tube stretching his lips. He felt how it had been forced down his throat and it was hard and cold. The need to vomit was sudden and immediate and as he felt the tube sliding out from within him he tried to void his stomach, but there was a dry, rasping sound, and nothing more. He breathed, and the air was cold and odourless. As he heard the sound of a voice, saying something in a language he could not understand, he tried to see, but he was in darkness. He felt whatever was enclosing his body opening and then he was falling forward. He felt arms catching him, and he knew he was wet and naked, like something newborn. There were innumerable tiny pinpricks all over his body, everywhere. It was like being in the ghost of an inferno. He felt the sensation fading steadily, pinprick by pinprick, as if needles were being removed from his flesh.

Extract from Report #33/6-01

Although there were indeed several errors and problems during this procedure, I feel, overall that it was a success. One feels that the primary aim of the procedure was not only a form of punishment, but something with higher, ethical considerations. How often have we not wished for the circumstance where it is possible to inflict the same tortures and fears upon an aggressor as he has himself inflicted (Haman 2007: 69)? Often, I am sure. Public execution has also gone out of fashion in modern times, but there is an element of that here, that I am sure, upon further investigation, will prove to have value.

Then suddenly there was light, and it stabbed at his eyes, even though it was faint. They had pulled something out from under his eyelids, forced in there under the skin,

right on the soft cells of his eyes. He blinked. There were two men and a woman in front of him. He didn't recognise the men, but there was something about the woman, who was quite old. He noticed she only had one arm. Memories now, were strange and disjointed. He could recall all these other lives, but he did not know what to make of this new body and mind. He was in it, but detached from it. They let him stand and he looked at his hands, red and inflamed from whatever they had done to his skin. He was unsteady. They put him in a wheelchair.

Extract from Report #33/6-02

The procedure, if one can call it that, is nothing less than barbaric. It was performed by sadists, though even if the experience had been less brutal, psychically shocking and perhaps, in some ways, constructive, I feel that there is no way one can, with a clear conscience allow for it. There is a higher, ethical imperative that we should remember, and that is that a human consciousness should be untouchable. Experience should be natural, not inflicted.

Essential essences about his life were starting to come back to him. His mind seemed to dive towards a defining moment: it had been a bright night, the moon big and clear. For him, life had ceased to have much meaning. He did not feel like making the long drive back out to his farm, to stare at his stupid pigs and feed them crap and grow his sunflowers. So he decided that he would end it, without a note or a word of goodbye. Despair and hopelessness had consumed him. When it came to other people, he was useless, like an illiterate locked forever alone in the Bodleian library, unable to access the wonders that surrounded him. Or so it felt at times, now, though it had not always been that way.

But it is not just about public execution and punishment. The evidence that psychopaths suffer some form of brain impairment, which does not allow them to perceive the essential rights and liberties of other human beings is something amply disproven by the subject. His brain is normal and in fact of well above average I.Q. (Wolfe Report 2011). Yet, he feels little remorse for his several murders and maintains innocence, to this day. There is the possibility, in this procedure, that such a person could come to understand the horror of his actions, having felt it firsthand. There were, however, as I have mentioned, several 'mistakes' made during this experiment, that I feel can well be remedied. Somnal therapy, however, in spite of some current flaws, I do believe, is the way forward.

He'd once had friends and enjoyed his family, but something had made him withdraw to a private space, where he just wanted to be left to disappear. Like this, by killing himself, he could disappear for good. He looked down at the dark pavement some way below. He hadn't even chosen a terribly tall building. A short fall would be all he needed, he was sure. As long as he went head first, like an Olympic diver splashing into the afterlife. Not that he really believed in such a place.

I am reminded of the story by Kafka, in which the principal evil is not the machine that famously carves the sins of the punished into his flesh, using sharp tattooing needles, repeatedly carving the sin ever deeper, until the poor punished soul expires. The machine is terrible, but it is the glee and pleasure with which the machine's keeper goes about looking after the abomination, and describes its terrors, that makes it truly frightening (Kafka 1919; Tripp 1977: 103). We have become this man, the hideous and sick keeper of the machine, for which we should feel profound shame.

Perhaps, like the officer from the story, we shall end up using the machine on ourselves and expire beneath it, in a misguided effort to "be just".

At the moment when he was committed to his dive, though, he was witness to something. Someone was dragging a heavy, large object into the alleyway below, and he watched, distracted from his final task, as the body was laid down. So instead of jumping, he waited and then ran down the fire escape, to follow behind the figure, because there was something terribly suspicious about the man's movements, as if they were not the actions of someone disposing of mere household rubbish illicitly. He followed the man, who walked to a car and climbed inside.

Some of the obvious mistakes are that the procedure was placed on a public server, allowing the interested to observe. Apart from this opening of the door to unauthorised access by hackers, who, I am happy to add, were unable to disturb the programming too greatly, I fear that the element of entertainment was given too high a priority. It seems that the viewing audience was interested in scenes of great brutality. Public outrage against the procedure was not as great as we expected, in fact we were sent several suggestions, sometimes by demure, god-fearing old women, for the procedure to be made all the more brutal. To quote one such request: "Make him suffer, worse than the good Lord himself was made to suffer."

His own vehicle was not too far, and so he followed the man, keeping a careful distance, until he saw where he stopped, outside a grand house. The man went inside and he was watched for some time from the street, for through the windows his pursuer had access to sights of him greeting his wife and his three children, having his supper, watching television, drinking coffee, and then heading upstairs to sleep for the

night. When all the lights of the beautiful house were extinguished, the watcher from the street returned to the dark alleyway and examined the thing the strange man had deposited there. It was a young girl. It seemed her throat had been cut.

Think also of the old idea that a murderer would be sentenced to Hell as a devil, but misshapen in some way, with too few or too many limbs, with limbs misplaced or gifted with strange heads, heads without faces or the faces of the long dead. Murderers and their victims, if both were evil, became one devil at death. This case reminds most strongly of this. Most vile were those demons cursed to bear the faces of those whom they detested (Stern 1952: 87).

This was like a prize, this discovery, something that only he knew about. It gave him a sense of power and belonging, and he felt immediately very protective over this body. It was his, and it would be his secret. He loaded it onto the back of his truck and drove it home with him, and for the first time in many years, he was eager to be home, and to unwrap his gift, and examine it. He was so excited, it was like being small again.

I think that in future we can look at other kinds of narratives, where we again blank out the memories of the subject, but instead subject them to purely reconstructive virtual experiences. We could perhaps make the subject the hero of a great fantasy drama, replete with dragons and trolls, and by the end of it change his self-image, perhaps truly rehabilitating him (Miller 2024: 77). This is just one suggestion, of course. We now have the ability to manipulate the minds of human beings, and I fear that we do not yet know as much as we should, because this is a great power, but it brings with it incredible responsibility.

His one obsession became following the gift-giver around, and he discovered that the man was a company director, for a plant that sold parts for engines. The man's everyday life was predictable, and many weeks went by without him doing anything interesting or out of the ordinary, and his watcher knew this well, because he became an ever-present shadow. He was there, though, to witness another murder some time later, of a prostitute that the man had picked up from a street corner and then left to lie in a ditch. He did not wait long, just until the wealthy company director was gone, and then he went to fetch this body too, to take home and have join the first.

There were so many mistakes during this project that I can barely begin to name them all. The most worrying, of course, is that the consciousness of the subject provides a kind of psychic feedback, which changes the experience, sometimes in terribly frightening ways which the program cannot predict. I wonder if this side-effect can ever be corrected, owing to the basic structural nature of the program.

This was what happened, and soon he was not bothering to trail the man as obviously as he had been. He installed satellite trackers on the man's car, in his clothing and, what he found to be a move of immense help, in the man's favourite knife, the one he used to do his killings. When the knife was on the move, he would be alerted, and he would watch it carefully, and know where to go and thus fetch his newest body. He imagined that the killer was becoming ever more distressed at the absence of publicity concerning his misdeeds, and then for over a year the killings stopped, and it seemed that the company director had given up killing.

I believe that this procedure could be seen as a qualified success.

Then the knife was on the move again, and this time the man was leaving his bodies in even more public places, so that the risk of retrieving them grew, but still they disappeared, and still the headlines were none the wiser as to the whereabouts of the missing people. The killer finally caught him one day, though, watching when the young man was dragging another body back to his truck. The body had been dumped in the centre of the city square at daybreak, and the decision to take this one home was, though courageous, foolish. The collector's instinct was now too strong, and the killer had set his trap and finally come to see who it was stealing his infamy, for although it had looked as if the killer was leaving, the dot from the satellite heading away, the killer had perhaps doubled back to watch.

A procedure of this kind can be considered as nothing other than barbaric, not without the consent of a subject, and once the technology is more fully understood. We do not yet know, for instance, if that old urban legend is true about dying in one's sleep. A cyber-assassin, who hacked into the program, seemed to think it was. One wondered if he survived his deletion.

And, more importantly, having no doubt worked out the body collector's scheme, the killer had had the foresight to plant a tracking device of his own in one of the bodies. However it happened, he found himself following the body thief, who, in turn, saw the terrifying dot of the killer, following him, on his own satellite tracker. Thus, knowing that he had been discovered, the young man dumped the body on the side of the road and sped home, hoping to remain anonymous.

Once again, I can think only of the many families who share in the great pain this man brought them. Science remains helpless to truly console them, but perhaps they might have found some satisfaction in this.

Someone other than the killer had seen him take this final body, though, and so it was that the police were soon at his door. The killer had come to speak to him some time after he was sentenced, promising that one day his strange and eccentric enemy would die at his hands.

The subject remains a patient of mine, and I can say, with reasonable certainty, that the procedure achieved none of its ends. He remains convinced of his own innocence, but I fear he will never sleep again without narcotic aid. Is this the result that was hoped for from this procedure? I can hardly think so, for I don't think the aims were very clear at all. Either way, this procedure is a failure and I strongly recommend that nothing remotely like it ever be performed again.

These were some of the many memories that flooded his mind now, like a mass of water breaking through restraining concrete.

He stayed in his wheelchair, confused. Terribly confused. His hands were much older, he remembered getting old. They took him past a mirror. The room in which it was fixed was white and very well lit. The mirror was large and rectangular and it took him a moment to look at himself and to focus.

His own reflection gave him a fright. Looking back at him was Grindle. He almost raised his arm to shield his face, as if Grindle were about to attack him, but the reflection raised its arm in response. They moved him closer to the mirror, and he was right up against it now, but he struggled to meet Grindle's eye, unnerved by his

own reflection. After a while, though, he was able to look at himself. He smiled.
And then he began to laugh.

University of Cape Town

Tea

“You could blame it on lack of imagination if you want,” the old man says. “Or maybe just fear, but that isn’t it. Seeing the world from space, touring seven wonders in a day, maybe even looking after King Solomon’s harem while he’s off on an extended diplomatic holiday ... you name it. All these things are ... just fine, but if this is what you plan to be doing on your last day alive there’s something lacking in you. I think so at least. Amazing adventures, wonders, sights, and sensual pleasures are, well ... don’t get me wrong. I’m no prude, never have been. I enjoy it all as much as anyone, but there’s a time for that, and it’s *during* your life. It’s something you do so that when you’re old and burning off calories in a rocking chair you can look back and laugh. Because the sandgrains of your life have scraped a few scars along the timeglass as they fell. So maybe the damn thing’s so scratched you can’t even see how much sand is left. And you don’t care. That’s what I think.”

“Have the sandgrains of *your* life scraped any scars?” the visitor asks.

“I hope so. I hope they clung on so hard they almost broke the glass.”

“Sounds like a poem,” the visitor says.

“Yeah, well. It comes from a poem, but I didn’t write it. Anyway, as I was telling you: I think wanting to do anything spectacular and impressive is a small thing to do. I’ve always felt that small people must experience big things because there’s nothing really big inside them. I’m not talking about just wanting to do something big for the hell of it, but about the person who’d ask to sleep with Marilyn Monroe or something, maybe travel to the centre of the Earth Jules Verne style or go back in time to the crucifixion of Jesus ... anything ... on their last day, because they think somehow doing an incredible thing is going to give meaning to their meaningless lives. Like an exclamation mark at the end of a sentence; but as any decent writer will

tell you, if you can't make the words of that sentence shout out all by themselves a pathetic suggestion of punctuation at the end of it is not about to make a world of difference. Forget it. You're *trying* too damn hard. I think the really big person is the one who can do the little things and be happy anyway. The kind of person who enjoys the gates of Heaven as much as the front door to his little run-down cottage. Because happiness isn't something you get pumped into you. That type of thing can't make you happy. At best it merely distracts you from the fact that you're about to die."

"I see," the visitor says.

"I'm sure you do. Now, I've heard the stories, and I suppose every generation must have its legends, its myths; stuff to think about around the campfire. But I'm starting to think this one story might have a grain of truth to it. I don't know *how* he knows, but there is a man, if he *is* a man, who knows that day. He comes to you and tells you it's almost over. And he tells you he can give you a chance to do anything, or almost anything, you've ever wanted to. And he has the power to make it happen. Or so the story goes. He may come on the day you're feeling pretty ill, or maybe just the day you're going to step into one traffic intersection too many, but you'd be a fool not to consider his offer. Your last chance to do anything."

"Quite an offer," says the visitor.

"Yes, it is. There are lots of stories. Some people do very silly things. It will always be part of us. Others ask for something rather more adventurous, like most of what I've already mentioned. The requests, I'm sure, must get quite bizarre. As you know, it takes all sorts. Getting together for one more day with an old love, maybe even asking to kill some enemy you've always felt a grudge for. I don't know.

"Anything that is going to make you happy. Make you feel somehow that this is a fine way to round off a life."

“Ah,” says the visitor.

“There is only one minor flaw, a catch perhaps, in this happy fairy tale. The man has come to you, has offered you the greatest desire of your dying heart. It’s understandable if you don’t think it through very carefully. But what’s the price tag? And who does he work for? I’m not the only one who’s thought about it either.”

“Who he works for?”

“Some say it’s God, others the Devil.”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he works for himself, or no one. Or everyone.”

“Want to find out?”

There is a moment of uncomfortable silence. The stranger smiles at the old man, extends his hand and says, “We had better go. We’re running out of time.”

The old man looks at the big, warm hand and smiles.

“I’m already in my rocking chair, son. Nice of you to drop by, but I have some remembering to do today.”

“Anything?”

“Yes. Maybe you could bring me a cup of tea before you go. I don’t normally take sugar. But today, you know, I think I’ll make an exception.”

The stranger smiles, and moves towards the kitchen.

“Hey, make yourself a cup too while you’re at it,” the old man calls after him.

“You must be a busy guy.”

“Thank you,” the stranger replies, and then smiles.

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