



# PAPERCUTS

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Papercuts

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Signature:           H Walne          

Date:           08 / 12 / 2006

The baboon watched her wash, black hands in his lap, a pink penis between his thighs. The insides of his legs were naked and hairless, the skin almost human. Behind him, the sun haloed the hairs on his head and he waved away a fly, leaning back to lounge against dry rocks.

Grace kept eye contact, her head raised as she bent to scoop the river. Naked, she looked softer and the skin on her belly rolled, her breasts hanging in milky cones. The baboon scratched a thigh. It gazed up at the sky. Grace's fingers felt the graze on her forehead; it had bloomed into hardness. The ape watched. She watched. All was slow and solid. In her hands, the water swirled with flecks of lichen – green, brown, grey. It was the water she had wanted.

She stood up and twisted round to examine her injury. The stitches ran like a small railway track down the back of her thigh. They almost seemed to be smiling, like tiny mouths of cats, upturned with the grin of pulled thread. Emergency embroidery. She touched them with her hands, counted them. Twenty-eight. It would be a big scar. It would heal and go dry, and eventually seal itself with the enamel of skin.

The baboon yawned, its fangs small tusks, and scratched its belly. It looked at Grace, leaned forward to pick at its foot, yawned again, and stood up. Grace watched as he wandered up the slope, the aerial of his tail disappearing into the grass. The rocks lay exposed.

Grace sank back into the water, floating in the faded sun, her ears submerged in silence. She moved her head to the left, her right ear filtering the lone call of a thrush. Down below, the rocks creaked in the blackness.

Bathing was where she was best. At home, she would slip into the bath, stretching the session out to half an hour, turning the hot tap with her toes. The loofah propped against

the tiles had started to grow roots. Hiding in the foliage of the shower curtain, she withdrew and vanished into alertness. She understood everything. The tiles above the taps threw out their whiteness, and she connected with the absence of colour. Peering through the steam, she looked at everything with the eye of science. There was clarity and angles. It all made sense.

In the bathroom mirror she saw herself, but couldn't read the image. It was just there – a visitor with dark eyebrows and dark eyes set deep in dark, tired bone. As she cleaned her teeth, she wondered how she seemed.

Here in the mountains, there was too much space for clarity. The current flowed past her, down algae-seamed ledges, through pastures, past shacks and huts, under bridges, beside highways, through dams and towns and cities and pipelines. Out to sea. Above, clouds travelled quickly, disintegrating, regrouping, reforming.

Grace waded to the shore towards the pile of clothes lumped on a rock. It was starting to get cool and the sky above the cave was being overtaken by a luminous twilight. It wouldn't be long before the bats arrived.

Grace dried herself. There were other scars on her body: the crescent-shaped scratch on her shoulder was from Adam poking her with a branch while they collected firewood; the white line on her calf held a memory of barbed wire; and the nick under her chin was the engraving of a swimming pool. There had been a smell of chlorine. So much blood.

Behind her, the mountains were royalty – granite kings taking up their positions, thrones of green, crowns of clouds. That was what she had imagined as a child. Her father would stride out in front, and she would be a few steps behind. Father and daughter would always arrive at the top first, waiting on a rock for the others to catch up. There was almost something conspiratorial about being up there alone with her father. Their quick legs excluded her mother and brother as they marched away from them. Grace and her father

wouldn't talk, and their alliance was sealed by water and shade; the chorus of Christmas beetles.

Her brother had always lagged behind, a small cutout against blue and green. His shorts were too big and he wore school socks, and under his hat, Adam's face was white and moist. When he took off the hat, a rim of wet hair was gummed down where the brim had been.

Grace would be up ahead, oblivious, her mouth thick with guava roll; the small swellings beneath her T-shirt warm, rosy snouts.

Adam told her he hadn't disliked the mountains. He just hated walking.

Sitting next to the gas stove that night, Grace could feel her allergies returning. Her feet were hot and she had started to sneeze. A row of pink flowers, their petals squeezed shut in nests of silver foliage, grew like a cultivated border along the periphery of the cave. Robert would know what they were called. She dug through her backpack for something to cook. Carrots, onion, a tin of tomatoes. Her eyes burned as she chopped the onions. She hadn't cried since the accident. She should have a drink.

The bottle of wine lay next to the backpack, its label coming unstuck from the glue. She knew the dark liquid inside would move through her, drying the dampness, changing the chemistry, setting her alight. She craved the combustion. The obliteration.

Turning back to the pot, she cranked up the stove, feeling the heat of the blue ring of flame.

After supper, Grace sat and smoked. She studied her fingers, how the skin puckered over knuckles and joints, how the bitten nails grew second layers. Her hands were growing older.

She was aware of fire, of the moss on the cave's ceiling. Conscious of her breathing and the itch of her wound, she could barely make out the escarpment, black now against the sky. Three stars poked their way through the gauze. They were distant and dry and frozen.

She hadn't told Robert she was coming here. He wouldn't have understood. They laughed a lot, but through the noise, they sometimes missed each other. Robert was of the world. Nothing surprised him. He bounded through the days with an enthusiasm that unsettled Grace. He would work out the politics of a situation and dissolve it with humour. People wanted to be near him and he was always made head of the table. Nothing bothered him.

But she knew he would be worried, and Grace could picture him on the phone, curling strands of beard with his fingers, smelling of agar.

Adam, on the other hand, would know where she was. He had hidden maps of her beneath his indoor skin. Swamped in his own sadness, he too would be smoking, sitting on his veranda, the Kreepy Krauly chugging in the pool, his jaw muscle pulsing. He had always done that – clenched and unclenched, like a man holding on. Adam would understand. He would not be angry with her. They were from the same dank place. He would set aside the accusations; he would pack nuts and come looking for her. Adam would know where to look.

Grace pulled on a grey sweatshirt and flapped out her sleeping bag. She had never been here alone. If she'd been with Robert, they would have opened another bottle of wine and would be sitting shoulder to shoulder, murmuring stories into the valleys. She would have noticed the cold air rising from the river and the animals cracking through the bush. But tonight she chose not to be receptive. It was safe to be alive with somebody else. On your own, it was better to peel away.

Grace rummaged in her bag for her toothbrush, the camping light casting a halo of fluorescence. Her hands felt a towel, a hair elastic. At the bottom of the bag, she felt something hard. Unsure of whether she could look at it, she pulled it out. It was a takkie, small and white. Size three.

She breathed in sharply. The inside of the shoe was dark with dirt and playgrounds. On one corner, above where the small toe would go, was a splotch of black.

## 2

Grace woke before dawn. A cool breeze slid through the crack of light widening above the hills. It was ancient and smelt different from the city breeze. There, the wind seemed fake, as though it were masking the city's mistakes. It blew over the schools and supermarkets, it lifted the caps of the newspaper sellers, it tumbled litter and leaves into corners. The city smelt of tarmac and old fruit, and when the garbage men descended, the streets were sweet with leachate. Cabbage leaves, fish skin, half-eaten take-aways.

It was Robert's job to put out the garbage. He would whistle as he humped the stinking bag to the bins in the back courtyard. It was Grace's job to do the shopping, and she did it unsteadily, throwing tins of tomatoes into the trolley, snatching up cheese and combing fresh produce for the ripest. She bought halves of purple cabbage for the art of their insides. Near the milk fridge, she would catch sight of herself reflected in the silver cladding, her dark head sucked up and her body warped in a hall of mirrors.

Some days she would see someone she knew. An old school friend entwined by a child would want to talk. Someone would show her a new baby. Grace tried to hide behind tins.

Sometimes she wished for the world to become extinct. Except for Gabriel. She wanted him to live forever.

The stitches were starting to itch. Grace felt for them in her sleeping bag, and could sense the skin around them tightening and turning red. She tried to not scratch.

Down below, the river had carried on all night, and Grace was almost surprised by its continuity. It sounded gentle this morning, secretive in its tenacity. Soon the sun would expose it, transforming it from dark stone into something confident and shiny, flashing signals off its surface, clarifying the depths so that crabs and fish could be seen against the rocks.

She lit a cigarette. She didn't usually smoke so early, but the wideness of the view was making her think. She had had the nightmare again. In the dream, the river was there, dipped by the tendrils of weeping willows. Her mother and father were in their usual positions, sitting on deck chairs in the sun. There was the food: huge legs of meat; a roasted pig with an apple in its mouth; pink jellies and cakes, torn-off hunks of white bread. In the dream, Grace was sitting with Adam on a log.

Then the crocodile arrived on cue, moving robotically out of the water. Its tail flicked left, then right, as it padded across the mud. As always, it first went for Grace's mother, chewing on her legs, snapping the bones as she disappeared down its white gullet. Grace and Adam carried on eating. Her father was next, disappearing into the creature's jaws, his hands stretched above his head like a drawing from a comic. Only his sun hat remained. The crocodile then ambled across to where Grace and Adam were sitting. Oblivious, they continued eating. As the crocodile approached, they both lifted up their legs, stretching them out in front of them, like they had done when their mother vacuumed.

But last night the dream had changed. A small boy was sitting on a chair near the river. He wore a white school shirt too big for him and was swinging his legs. He turned his head towards the log. He had no face.

The creature headed towards the boy, who was strapped to the chair in a seatbelt, struggling to unclip it. The crocodile moved closer, sniffing at the boy's shoes like a dog. Grace stopped eating, unable to move, willing the boy to push the belt's red button. The reptile then opened its jaws, its teeth double rows of wire and needles, and closed them around the boy's legs. Blood coursed into his grey socks. He started screaming. Slowly, heavily, the crocodile dragged the boy and the chair into the water. A small white shirt growing smaller.

Grace knew what the dream meant and felt betrayed by her mind. How could she trust it with her thoughts? This was the mind that had forgotten to strap Gabriel into the chair,

had made her sing hymns along the road, had guided the car out of the school parking lot. The same mind that had taken her eyes off the road.

Grace closed her eyes tight, the pink of lashes moving inwards. She could see the mowed sports ground on the left, with its rings of white, and the tree on the corner, leafless with branches covered in yellow flowers. She knew the road well, had driven it a thousand times. She could navigate it blind.

She opened her eyes. Dawn had handed its baton over to daylight, and the birds in the valley were starting to sing. Dew clinging to a nearby cycad was evaporating, and Grace could almost see the moisture spiralling into the sky. She wriggled out of the sleeping bag and stood up, a long piece of straw stuck to her sweatshirt. She could taste smoke. Kneeling down to light the gas stove, she struck the match, put it against the ring and slowly turned the dial. The cave had crept onto her hands and her fingernails were rimmed with dirt. The flame flared and the stove hissed. Grace balanced the kettle on top, pulled a tin of tuna and a roll out of her pack and started making a sandwich. Today she would walk.

She sat back on her heels and looked around her. How many times had she been here? Ten? Twenty? The ledge at the back of the cave was so familiar – the studio apartment, her dad had called it. Raised above the rest of the cavern and covered with the same mattress of straw, it was like a perfectly proportioned bunk bed. Adam would always choose it. “I bags this one,” he would yell, leaping over the boulders and throwing his pack onto the ground.

Over the days, he would collect otter droppings, clumps of quartz and speckled pebbles and would set about creating a shrine. He would chalk “Home Sweet Home” on the wall above him, oblivious of the smell of bat guano breeding in the corner.

Back then he had been oblivious to many things. The farm had been their universe, its fields of maize papering acres of land and the bleached paddocks pocked with sheep. Oblivion had come on the hot summer wind and on the smell of manure rising from the lawn in front of the house. There had been too much to do to think of thinking. Adam had been

restless. He would ride his BMX bike up dongas and plunge down the other side, whooping. He would make things – a bow and arrow, a suit of armour from welded workshop scraps, two fishing rods from bamboo. He had even made Grace a skirt from maize sheaths sewn together with red thread. On warm evenings, they would pull their mattresses onto the lawn and lie looking at the stars. Nearby, lambs would chuckle.

Below the ledge was a clear area covered in a layer of dust. Someone had placed five rocks in a circle. In the middle lay the shiny remains of burnt, black wood. Grace could picture the scene: A fire, sleeping bags, a game of rummy, sunburn, rehydrated goulash. Grace's job had always been to refrigerate. Her parents would load her up with bacon, chocolate, beer and cheese, and she would head down the steep path to the river to anchor the food onto a large rock.

There were photographs of those holidays at her parents' house. They lay in the trunk among piles of books and paper, held together with yellowed rubber bands. A stack of exercise books covered in brown paper bore her name on the front: "Grace Jackson, Hillside Primary School, Standard III". Inside were accounts of weekends spent away and weekends spent at home, all of them printed in pencil, the letters softly gigantic on the page. Nothing happened in the week.

The photos were all khaki and brown. There was the picture of Adam and Grace in their school swimming gear. They were holding brown suitcases and curling their toes under. There were photos of birds in trees. There was also the picture Grace had tried to tear from her father's hands when he had shown the holiday snaps to the Thompsons. In it, Grace is fifteen and sitting on a rock next to the river. Her dark hair is streaked with red dye and her face is angular, her eyes haughty and sunk deep into rings of shadow. She is holding a thin stick between her lips, pretending to smoke. Her look is one of feigned arrogance, like an actress. She is wearing a yellow T-shirt with squiggles on it, and her legs are white and growing, curled up against her body, the knees dimpled.

In the centre, her striped tanga panties are pulled tight and two patches of dark hair creep out on either side.

### 3

*Grace and Adam are touching tongues. She is eleven, he is nine. They sit on planks, holding on to the wood. Down below, the pop of tennis balls pokes holes in the heat. Around them, the fig tree's branches are like secret paths that lead from the tree house to other lands. An old Koffiehuis tin holds a collection of sparkplugs.*

*Grace bends down to bring her face near Adam's. "Close your eyes," she hisses. He obeys, and Grace takes a few seconds to survey him. Black hair hacked around his face, a dusting of freckles across his nose, a large mole on his earlobe, like an earring or a clinging insect. He will do as today's suitor.*

*"Okay, now stick out your tongue." Slowly, a short, wide tongue stained red with Koolaid pokes out from between his lips. Grace can make out a rash of white spots at the centre. Wild strawberries. She leans forward and quickly touches the tip of her tongue to his. It tastes shocking, like metal and blood. It tastes green. "Sis," spits Adam, wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his jersey. "That's disgusting. I'm never going to kiss a girl."*

*Grace knows she will kiss someone real one day; someone like the guitar player from Duran Duran. Someone with a cleft in his chin. Someone with hair cut by a proper hairdresser and not by his mother in the kitchen with orange-handled sewing scissors. Grace has seen the new hair salon in the village. It has a picture of a woman with flowing, curled hair painted in black on the window, and is owned by a short woman who wears leopard-print tops and black leggings. Inside, the salon is pink and smells of burnt hair and experiments. Grace's mother talks in disapproving tones about the salon lady. She's originally from Jo'burg.*

*Grace can see her mother from here. She is playing doubles with Mr Meyer and is wearing a short white skirt and socks with bobbles on them. Her panties are showing, but it's alright because they are special tennis panties with frills and lace and layers. On other ladies, they look like nappies, but her mother's lean, tanned legs make them pretty. Like a wedding.*

*The tree's leaves block out her father, and Grace has to hang on to the plank and lean forward to see him. He is playing opposite her mother with Mrs Joubert, and is running all over the court, his white shirt with the tennis racquet embroidered on the pocket sailing behind him. He is hitting most of the balls. Mrs Joubert is round and wears a gold crucifix on a chain around her neck. She laughs at everything Grace's father does, especially when he leaps into the air and shouts "Ace" when he has served a perfect shot.*

*"Shall we go and find the Jouberts?" Grace asks her brother. He is poking a dead hawk moth with a stick. Its body is busy with ants.*

*"Let's take some stones, just in case," Adam says, getting up and dusting off his corduroy trousers. He still has traces of Koolaid on his T-shirt, the "I love kung-fu" logo speckled in red. The edges of the picture – a Chinese man smashing his way through a pile of roof tiles – are peeling. Grace thinks the man looks gnawed.*

*They climb backwards down the ladder, stretching their legs to reach the wooden rungs. At the bottom, Grace waves at her mother, who comes to the fence to ask her if she wants money for a Coke. She can see the liquid, so dark it's almost maroon, in a glass dewy with cold and ice. A slice of lemon would give it an adult look. She takes the money and heads to the clubhouse, Adam trailing behind, sniffing.*

*Saturdays are bliss. During the week, there is no Coke, no chips, no television. They eat pork chops on Mondays, mince on Tuesdays, fish on Wednesdays, sausages on Thursdays and macaroni cheese on Fridays. On Saturdays, however, Adam and Grace lick jelly powder off their palms, eat packets of chips and are allowed one Coke each.*

*But it's not so much the eating and drinking Grace looks forward to each week. It is the damp smell of the clubhouse, the curved Coke glasses, the tree house with knots and roots, the ping-pong table in the back room, the sound of scoring. Fifteen-love. Deuce. Thirty-all. It is also Bobby the barman.*

*Grace clambers up onto a wooden stool. The words "Face 2 Face" have been scratched onto the seat, the 2 resembling a lightning bolt or a Z. Her eyes are adjusting to the light, and for now Bobby is a dark wobbly shape floating amid the bottles that hang upside down like glass udders from the wall. As the light becomes real, Bobby comes into view. He turns from the till, into which he has stashed a wad of R20 notes, and smiles at Grace.*

*It is a smile from a million years ago, and speaks to Grace of dinosaurs and gramophones. A long, horny incisor tinged with brown leads a procession of small, shabby teeth that jostle for space along the gums. There is a black hole where the front teeth should be, and Bobby sucks on the gum with his tongue, feeling the void. Above his mouth grows a timid moustache, thicker strands of grey mixed in with the black. His eyes are watery and small behind a pair of black-rimmed glasses, the lenses so thick they are yellow in the centre. On his head is a slick of dark bryl-creemed hair, delicate tracks where the comb has left its mark.*

*"So what will it be, my princess?" asks Bobby, wiping an ashtray with a cloth. "The usual? Or could I maybe make you a little G and T? A ginger square with a twist of lemon? A lime and soda with a dash of vodka?" He winks and tucks in the white shirt billowing out of the back of his black trousers. A thin brown belt, the brass buckle tarnished, seems to be holding all of Bobby together.*

*"I'll just have a Coke," says Grace, scratching her shin. Next to her, Mr Coetzee the magistrate is filling a glass with ice. He wears shorts that creep up his thighs and he has black hairs on his legs.*

*Bobby puts the glass of Coke on to a paper coaster. "So where's your rascal of a brother today?" he asks. Grace swings her feet and one of her slops slides to the floor. "He's coming," she replies, studying the bar counter for signs of her. Her mother had told her that when she was a baby she used to shout out from her car chair, "I saw my name!" each time she spotted a billboard that contained the letter G. She has always wanted to be part of the world.*

*Today, she can't work out the signs and symbols. She is struggling to be natural and can't bring herself to ask after Kuben. She watches Bobby serve the Johnsons – a Tab for her and a rock shandy for him. Mrs J is Grace's maths teacher, and when she bends down in class, her large breasts push forward into the V of her blouse and you can see her bra. That's why Victor Ferreira always calls her over to help him. One times one equals two.*

*Grace stretches out her foot and hooks the fallen slop with her big toe. She wants it to be like it was, before last weekend. She wants to laugh at Bobby's jokes and help him count the chocolates. But now things are different. She is in exile. A mummy's girl. A bed-wetter. A bad friend.*

*Kuben had come to the tennis club the weekend before. His cricket whites were stained with grass and his knees scuffed white. They played cops and robbers in the afternoon, hiding in the long grass behind the clubhouse, ambushing each other around corners. Adam, herself, Kuben, the Joubert boys, Simon Henning, Lisa and her cousin from Margate, and Kevin O' Grady. When they were deciding who would be on what side, Wayne Joubert sniggered and said they should be playing cowboys and Indians, and Kuben could be a team all by himself.*

*In the evening, when the adults were smoking and getting loud, Kuben and Grace sat on the bank eating chips. The skin on Kuben's face was so smooth, Grace believed he must be made of different things. A square, white mark was stamped on his neck. She thought it looked like nougat.*

*"Do you want to come and stay at my house tonight? We've got a big TV," Kuben suddenly asked. Grace hesitated. She hadn't stayed at a boy's house before. In fact, the only sleepovers she'd had were at Lisa's house, and she lived just down the road. "And we've got Pacman," said Kuben.*

*She sat in the back of the car, with Bobby and Kuben upfront, Bobby's sleeves rolled back past knobby elbows. She had never seen arms so thin. They stopped off at her house to pick up pyjamas and clean clothes. Her mother hugged her goodbye and asked if she was sure she wanted to go. They would pick her up the following afternoon.*

*Kuben's mother welcomed them at the door. She was small and pretty and had wide eyes and delicate ears that held back a tide of long, black hair. She spoke softly and warmly, like a nurse, and wore gold rings on her fingers. A row of metallic painted toenails poked out from the bottom of her sari.*

*That night, Grace ate breyani for the first time, perched on the edge of a blue vinyl couch. Kuben sat next to her, and laughed as she waved her hand in front of her mouth. "It's hot," she said, her eyes smarting. After supper, Kuben's mother brought them ice-cream in cones, a blizzard of hundreds and thousands smudging their colours into the vanilla.*

*Later, Kuben's mother lit a stick of incense and placed it in a shiny holder next to a figurine in front of the fireplace. She kneeled on the carpet. Grace began to feel homesick. On the narrow sideboard against the wall stood a tall vase filled with silk flowers. Fake blossoms curled around over-sized stamens topped with bright yellow balls. The incense made her head sore. Bobby had had a bath and was wearing a white vest. His bony shoulders frightened her. It was late – almost 11 'o clock – and the future seemed so uncertain, as though Grace would have to stay awake for the rest of her life, hanging in a void of yellow, eating rice.*

*Grace thought of her mother. She smelled of Oil Of Olay and had soft cheeks, and would iron in the evenings, humming along to the English Service, stopping to wipe her upper lip with the hankie she kept stuffed up her sleeve. She didn't use mayonnaise in tuna*

*sandwiches. Instead, she dribbled a little vinegar into the mixture, and added chopped cucumbers and slivers of onion. It tasted definite, like the ocean or a field. On Sundays, she sang in the church choir and wore a long white dress and sandals. Grace began to cry, sucking back the sobs so Kuben wouldn't notice.*

*In bed that night, Grace lay with her eyes wide open. Trucks on the nearby freeway were braking down the hill. It sounded as though they were clearing their throats, and she imagined white phlegm stuck to their wheels. She needed the toilet, and could feel her bladder swelling and pushing on her kidneys. But she remained still, barely breathing, conscious of the sweet smell of the duvet and the rushing of her heart.*

*If only Adam were here, with his posters of motorbikes and his warm sleep. When Grace had nightmares, she would tiptoe across the passage into Adam's room. He would be sprawled across the bed, a brown checked duvet twisted around his body, his summer pyjamas so proper he almost looked clean. Grace would stand next to the bed, afraid to wake him up, but desperate for comfort. Adam would stir, conscious of a shift in the air, of someone standing over him, and would move over to the edge of the bed, sigh and fall back into his dreams of seaplanes and caverns. Grace would slip beneath the duvet and lie with her back to her brother, waiting for a tide to wash her out to sleep.*

*Grace felt a warm wetness spreading out beneath her. It terrified her. Pulling her knees into her chest, she burrowed her head in her arms. The wetness clung to her. She would be revealed for the dirty girl she was.*

*She would have to fix it; would have to cover her tracks. She closed her eyes and saw lions stalking a herd of buck. She could sense the freeway, the lone truckers thundering their way through another dimension. She saw black farm roads illuminated by headlights.*

*Grace got out of bed and found the towel she had brought lying on the floor. It had a picture of a whale on it, and was blue and had a hole in the centre. She pulled back the top sheet and could make out a grey patch on the peach sheet. There would be a stain on the mattress, which would go the colour of rust, but she only had to deal with the surface*

*problem. Sitting on her knees in her pink nightie, Grace rubbed and rubbed. Bits of blue fabric from the towel stuck to the sheet, but she continued, feeling the spot with the back of her hand. It was slowly drying. By morning, there would be no trace.*

*When she woke up, the house was noisy and smelt foreign. Bobby was whistling in the garden as he clipped the hedge, shouting encouragement to Kuben as he practised bowling against the wall. Grace could smell onions frying. She peeled back the duvet, rolled over to one side and saw the outline of the stain. It was ragged and grey, like the coastlines they had to draw in geography. She wanted to go home, to the gentle wish-wish of the garden sprinkler, the brown mound of Taffy as she lay sleeping on the Slasto. She wanted to open the fridge and peer inside, call to her mother across the house. She longed to see Adam, hear him sniff.*

*She found Bobby outside. "I want to go home," Grace said, her eyes focusing on her bare feet. "I want to phone my dad to come and fetch me." Kuben was listening quietly, his face a pool of rejection. Grace ignored him, trying to minimise the interactions, keeping the negotiations between her and the adults. When her parents arrived half an hour later, dressed in the cream of church and brunch, Grace murmured thank you to Kuben's mother and gave her friend a small wave.*

*Sitting in the truck as it reversed down the driveway, she felt as though she had killed someone.*

## **4**

She forced down the tuna roll. The bread was hot and soggy and stuck with bits of grass. She picked off the filaments and swigged back some water. The sun pulsed overhead. The climb to the top of the hill had been tough and bands of sweat spread across the front of her T-shirt. She lit a cigarette and exhaled grey on blue, leaning her arms on her knees, looking out across the valleys towards the dirt road slitting the scenery in two.

It felt strange to smoke here. There was so much air to be had, yet she chose to constrict it, reject it for more necessary sustenance. Her father would have strangled her.

Behind her, the sky gathered its thoughts in clumps of clouds. For now, they were white and bright, a laundry of softness, but it was summer and Grace knew that billowing brought thunder. It was strange to be so silent, to be here without conversation, the smell of Robert's sweat and his knees sticking to her. "One day, my dear, all of this will be yours," he would have said, sweeping his arms theatrically.

Beyond the mounds of hills, Grace thought she could make out the hot winks of corrugated iron. She had driven through the settlement where women in headscarves hoed red fields and the wreck of a car was being eaten by rust. She had passed black children walking in black tunics. She had swerved to avoid a soccer ball.

Gabriel had been waiting at the gate, his T-shirt tucked into his shorts. Lynn had come up the stairs, red toenails in peeping shoes, a floral scent rising from her dark shirt. "I hope you don't mind," she had said. "I've got this big meeting and Adam can't get off work." Thin, plucked eyebrows curved over blue eyes. She had cut her hair and added blonde streaks. "It's just a case of dropping him off. You don't have to watch the game."

In the car, Gabriel had fiddled with the laces on his takkies, strumming them as though he were playing a guitar. Lynn had said he was not ready for proper soccer boots yet; his feet were still growing. Next year he might be into something different.

"Do the other boys have boots?" asked Grace.

"Most of them," he shrugged. "I don't really mind because maybe next year I'll be doing some other sport."

Grace pulled into a parking space outside the school. Around her, mothers in large cars released armies of eight-year-olds, their soccer boots letting off machine-gun fire.

"Are you going to watch?" Gabriel asked, gathering together his backpack and jersey.

"Course I am. Wouldn't miss it for the world. And I know you'll score a goal."

Gabriel grinned, his gappy teeth making him seem vulnerable, apart from the other boys.

Grace found a chair in the sun. The bricks of the school shone red. The last time she had been at a school was when her classmates had autographed her shirt and they had walked away from the building forever, into an afternoon of humid strangeness. Gabriel's school looked so small, as though the air-brick corridors and the windows pasted with projects were designed for a smaller race. She was sure her primary school had been normal-sized. It had been too significant to be small. That was when she had felt closest to Adam.

A creeper grew up a wall and wound around a telephone line, anointing the afternoon with blue flowers. Robert would have pulled it out. Aliens didn't belong here. But Grace felt comforted by invaders. Gum trees coiled ribbons of bark around their white femurs, bearing the heat near roadside tables, growing thin in plantations, bulging in the bush. On the farm, she used to collect their leaves and file them away in sandwich bags for a menthol thrill. Their silver leaves had made her think of tambourines and bells and exhaust pipes.

She loathed the foliage at the flat. It was too hot, too red.

There was the sound of a whistle and the two teams scattered and swarmed. The white ball bounced around the field, unable to find a way through the legs whirring in the grass. Gabriel was on the opposite side of the pitch, watching and running, pulling back when the ball came too close. Grace could see him willing the ball to dribble towards him, and for everyone to step back while he positioned himself and banged the leather into the goals.

Grace started to clench her fists. He looked so small. So neatly turned out. She wanted him to be victorious.

The mothers sat in the shade of a wattle tree, its yellow pom-poms sending out a sweet scent of tuckshops. On the dry grass beside them, baskets filled with blankets and snacks leaned against each other. Some of the women drank coffee from flasks, others

sipped wine. They all had streaked hair pulled back and some wore gold earrings. The air above them was crammed with the clatter of their chatter. They weren't watching the game. One of the women leaned forward in her chair and Grace saw a red thong smiling out of the top of her jeans.

A volcano of ants threatened to set fire to Grace's feet, and she stood up, carrying the chair away from the pyramid of sand. Her toes in the sandals were dusty, the nails edged in black. From behind her sunglasses, she stole glances at the women, moving her eyes from Gabriel to the shade, shooting eye pins at the mothers. One of the women turned to look at her, said something to the others, and then turned again.

At half-time, Gabriel walked towards her, his head down. He smelt of orange quarters and warm cotton. "I'm never going to score. The others are much better. I didn't touch the ball once."

She wanted to hold him, gather up his smallness and breathe him into boldness. The mothers were talking in lipstick voices, their freckled cleavages expanding and contracting, their gold chains clasped with tiny truncheons.

Gabriel trudged back onto the field. He had lost interest in the game. Only his fringe seemed confident, standing up, reaching out.

Grace could see herself on the sports field of Hillside Primary, her white legs churning the air as she rounded the corner in the 400-metre, Louise Selleck on the inside, the taste of guns in her throat. School still seemed so close. Everyone else was now wearing stockings and hairdos. They knew what to say, they picked out jewellery with their husbands and they smelt like shops. Grace felt silly in gold.

When she did wear lipstick, she spoke formally and sat stiffly, too scared to ask for the salt. She chose jeans and T-shirts and seldom brushed her hair. It was enough to pull the curls into a ponytail and tuck strands behind her ears.

Grace tried not to focus on Gabriel. She didn't want to draw attention to him. A blond boy with a cherished face ran up and down the side of the field. His socks had fallen around

his ankles and his shirt hung out of blue shorts. He yelled commands: "Go right, Andrew", "Tackle him! Tackle him!", "Get in there, Vusi!". Grace watched him. She saw his head grow with each instruction, as though it were being inflated. One yelled instruction equalled one good puff. By the end of the game, he would float into the sky, content and triumphant, his body a limp, dangling scarecrow attached to a globe of blond.

After the game, there was tea and cake for the parents, served from trestle tables. The boys were given orange juice in polystyrene cups. Grace stood to the left, sipping her tea, one leg crossed in front of the other. Gabriel sat on the bank with two boys, scratching his leg inside his sock, listening as the others replayed the game, holding the empty cup limply in his hand.

"Shall we go?" asked Grace. Gabriel ran to get his bag, slipped his hand into hers and they walked to the car.

As they pulled out onto the main road, Gabriel turned to her. "How does heaven and nature sing?" He sat in the passenger seat, his back straight, his brown fringe sucked up. The hair was damp with sweat. His face had no marks of childhood – no freckles, no scratches or nicks. He had Adam's eyes – balls of amber caught between black lashes. There was a sense of daring in them; as though they had explored every corner of the world and were now waiting for something to happen.

"Heaven and nature sing?" Grace replied. "Well, let's see. I guess the angels in heaven could do the singing, and in that way the whole place would be filled with music. And maybe heaven sings when there's thunder and lightning, or rain."

"And nature? There's no way nature can sing. I mean, granny can sing but nature's just trees and animals and stuff. Lions don't sing and plants haven't even got mouths."

Grace smiled and pulled up at the red light. "See that bed of pansies over there," she said, pointing to the violet and blue in the park. "If you look very closely, you'll see the flowers have faces. They're not real faces, but they look like faces, so we imagine that that's what they are. It's like birds too. They don't really sing. Granny sings. Birds are more, like,

chirpers and squawkers. Very few actually sing a song. But we like to think they do, so in our heads they do.”

Gabriel was listening carefully, scratching the back of his head. His right hand was scribbled with ballpoint ink.

“So, even though nature doesn’t really sing, we can imagine it does, and this makes us happy. We can imagine that blades of grass hum, birds sing, lions are double bassists and worms whisper in high voices. Like this,” and Grace began to sing the hymn in a thin voice, straining to reach the high notes. She hadn’t sung it since school, and her enjoyment was a surprise.

Gabriel pulled himself into his shoulder blades and giggled. Joy to the world.

## 5

Leaning against a rock, Grace could feel her mind expanding. The winter sun felt light and it flooded her skin in dams of warmth. A sail of dust moved along the distant road and Grace’s mind hovered over it. She could make out the glint of a windscreen as the car clung to its whirling parachute. Everywhere else in the world, people were driving. They were going to work, they were dropping off envelopes, they were in lift clubs, they carried golf clubs. They turned in, they turned out, they indicated and accelerated.

Grace rubbed the tops of her knees. Her bones were dry. She lay down in the grass and closed her eyes. Behind the lids, two dark circles peered back at her, faded, and then all turned black.

She could smell yellow. She could see the flowers on the tree, could smell the sour brewery and the white scorch of brakes. Gabriel’s face hovered above her. His mouth was open, the lines growing wavy. *Grey. Billow Grey. Carbon Smudge. Too fast. Too fast.* The face grew, expanded, dragging clouds behind it, filling up space. *Blood. Two wide eyes.*

She opened her eyes. Above was an acre of vapour, and a breeze sniffing the sky's borders swarmed the yellow into her nostrils, poking holes in the tissue, stinging her insides. It hissed: *Why wasn't he wearing a seatbelt?*

She sat up, stiff and gaping. The wind had stopped her heart. It had brought Gabriel to her, and behind him jostled a queue of other sights: the burglar creeping in their flat; the woman stabbed on the railway line; the baby born with one eye; the rusted water pipe wrecked on the beach, slowly filling with bottles and used blankets.

The only way to navigate the days was through darkness and distance. When the fear rose, she hid from the thieves by turning off the lights in the flat. If she found the dark first, they couldn't slip through. At high school, she had cut herself off from the others by imagining she existed in a parallel universe.

When her mother phoned, they kept the conversation light, talking about rainfall and relatives who had given birth. Only rarely was her father mentioned. "He's doing as well as expected," her mother would say. She would tell Grace about a friend of a friend who was in remission.

And when Robert went away on field trips, she would pretend she was looking forward to being alone. But once she had drawn the curtains, the furniture closed in and she would spend the night rigid. She would want to phone Adam, but he wasn't scared of anything. He had travelled through the caverns and had washed up on the other side.

Robert didn't even think to fight the tide. His whistling made her fake a smile. *If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands.*

She had never faked it on the farm. Each day had spilled over with air and emotion and her moods had flashed in the gum trees and bounced off the lightning tearing the sky. When she'd been happy, she had given herself over to the clots of bees in the guava tree. She had absorbed the air and grass.

When her mother had told her the lambs had been taken to the abattoir, Grace had hid in the cupboard. In the folds of clothes and the rubble of shoes, she had put her head in her arms and cried. Her mother had opened the door.

“That’s life,” her mother had said.

That’s death, Grace had thought.

That’s death.

It was getting late. The basalt walls had gone soft and a soundless waterfall streamed. Grace gazed up. It was strange to think that over the mountains, the terrain unfurled into green where houses smoked and children danced on tiptoes. How far their world was from the mess of rush hour and freeways, of men selling socks at traffic lights, people hawking headlines at roadsides, of buses, adverts, sirens and dogs barking at postmen on bikes.

The stitches ached from her legs being stretched over the wooden drainage rungs laddering the path. Someone had been out here to lay them down, securing them into place with twists of wire, excavating through the grass, building the stone cairns that carried the signs: Blind Valley this way, Sunlight Pools that way. Grace rolled the names around in her mind: Blind Valley accessed by fingerprint paths where eland dreamed the grass.

It would take two hours to get back to the cave, and Grace started down the path, the scratch on her shin a mild claim to pain compared to the back of her leg. Going down, her knees felt dependable and she could smell semen and cement.

The cement smell spoke to her profoundly. It told her of the earth’s core; of a surface damp with reality. The earth was plastered over her bones, staked out with string, the green eye of a spirit level like a stick of voodoo. She had smelt it once in the city, flowing out of an alley in a cool wedge, filling her nostrils with elsewhere. She had breathed in trees.

The semen smell had always startled her. In summer, it would burst through forest heat and swagger along the path. Robert had told her the bush’s name.

“God, I can’t believe how it’s the same!” he would exclaim, scrabbling through the undergrowth to find it. He would breathe it in.

It never made Grace want to take her clothes off.

Grace stopped to fill her bottle from a spring murky with grit and droppings. It was still cleaner than sea water, with its swirling plasters and plastic bottles. She stood up and surveyed her route. The path was visible for about fifty metres, then it disappeared into the grass. She had to trust the future to take her back home.

She could have stayed, sat it out at the hospital with Lynn and Adam, waiting on a hard bench. But what if the surgeon had told them Gabriel hadn’t made it, that he had died on a bed too long for him, the sheets starched like heaven already welcoming a new arrival?

She could also have waited at home, the walls closing in, the new couch mocking her with its imported purple, the vacant parking space a stark reminder. Nasal insurance men would have phoned and there would have been police to deal with. She and Robert would have sat down to careful dinners. All the while, the telephone would have sat like a smug bomb.

Grace crossed the river and sat in the grass. The skin on her arms had developed goosebumps and she dug in her backpack for the grey top. She felt stuck, as though she couldn’t carry on, and her chest blackened inside. It felt as though existing in this gap next to the river, the stems of grass tickling her legs, was the only possibility. She would take it for now.

She focused on a large rock in the centre of the water. Its smooth stony face seemed to be watching her, its blank solidity drawing her out. Picking up a twig and throwing it at the rock, Grace watched as the current carried it downstream, bobbing it on the water’s surface. How many times had the rock watched her? How many times had she entered this water, her toes sinking into mud while her feet sought gaps between rocks? Why did this place, with all its rocks and gullies, have a claim on her?

The sky opened up above her like a bowl of clear soup and the breeze settled on the pores of her face, lifting the hair from her forehead. A bird flying overhead clip-clipped its wings like a secret and nearby, the branches of a protea twisted skywards and a swarm of gnats unpicked the blue.

Heaving herself up, Grace dusted off the back of her jeans, scanning the river for the floating twig. Pulling on her pack, she looked at the rock, and started up the path, feeling the wind strengthen as she crested the hill and started through the veld.

The day after the accident, she had wanted to escape. The noise of traffic had woken her early and the snoring of the ocean had seemed louder. She couldn't face Robert, with his sandwiches and his scuba face and the way he rubbed his stomach when he padded barefoot through the flat, looking for clothes and towels. She hadn't wanted to admire the sun making blocks of gold on the parquet floor. Instead, she had wanted to lose herself in another world. She wanted to go somewhere foreign to leave her face on a bar amid the cheer of locals toasting the hours after work.

The night of the accident, she had searched the internet for cheap flights, typing in the date, hitting enter. In the kitchen, Robert had been digging in the fridge; digging for a way to eat up the silence. The computer screen had gone blank, and then a green box had flashed up: "You cannot book a seat in the past." *Damn right.* If she could book a seat in the past, Gabriel would have been strapped into the seat and she would have seen the grey land cruiser barreling towards them. There would have been no stupid singing of hymns, no scattering of yellow blossoms, no shattering of glass.

Anyway, Spain was so far away.

While Robert slept the following morning, she had scoured the cupboards for rations, feeling like a stowaway. She had never caught a taxi into town, never hired a car. In the kombi, a large woman sat next to her, a string-bag of cabbages between her knees, the

thump of hip-hop pounding them along the streets. Grace had felt scruffy and encased in skin; her outer layer growing thicker.

The car-hire place had a coffee machine in the foyer and Grace rinsed out one of the cups in the sink and poured. It tasted weak and thin. She had sat in the foyer and flipped through a men's magazine. In it a woman made breakfast in lingerie.

A man in a crumpled shirt had approached her, gesturing for her to wait while he answered his cellphone. He opened a glass door and had stood in the parking lot. Through the window, the metal blinds dissected his body, and Grace could see that one hand in his pocket was jiggling his crotch.

In the vacuumed car, the radio had leaked out its tones in violet, and a talk-show host had discussed cash-in-transit heists. Gliding into the fast lane, Grace had studied the painting on the back of a bus – a leopard under a thorn tree with paws that looked like shoes. In the rear-view mirror, windowless office blocks rose out of the sea.

Grace had stopped for lunch at a country hotel that smelt of white sauce and window sills. She sat outside in the courtyard, the engines of the cars in the parking lot creaking in the sun. Wild roses grew over a wooden pergola, creating spikes of shade among the plastic tables, waving their pink heads in the breeze, and past the cars, a herd of cows in a field had flicked and flinched as they dozed in the winter warmth. A crowd of flies settled on the butter like currants. Grace ordered beer and chicken pie.

Behind her, a mother was speaking to her son in tight tones. He kept repeating himself in whines. Chewing on the nail of her middle finger, Grace tuned in.

"Gareth, I don't want to hear another word about MP3 players. That's it. Dad said no, and no means no."

The boy made a sound like a strangled bird and there was a thump of hand on plastic and the mother hissed. More threats, more whines. Silence.

Grace looked over her shoulder, pretending to admire the row of hanging baskets throwing tendrils of white down the hotel wall. The woman and the boy sat in silence, the

child's arms folded across his grey school jersey as he slumped back in his chair, swinging two angry legs. He was about Gabriel's age, with dust-coloured hair cut short around his face. On one arm, a red digital watch sprouted dials and buttons and on the floor next to him lay a large camouflage backpack. He had shiny shoes.

His mother sat looking the other way, her chin in her hand and her pink, heeled sandals crossed neatly, a leather butterfly hovering near the toes. Her toenails were pink.

Grace turned back to her beer and lit a cigarette. A leaf settled on the empty chair next to her. She thought of Gabriel. She thought of goodness.

Driving on her way out, her belly full of pastry and white sauce, the cows seemed to stir and looked up. She made eye contact with a bull as it lifted its tail and let a stream of dung tumble out. A white arc gleamed in its eyes as it followed the car down the driveway, past the lily-lidded pond, out towards the mountains.

## 6

She was still a resort pony, her legs easy on the path. As a child, she would stride out ahead when they hiked back to camp, and her father would tease her. *Turn her for home and she's off.*

Today was no different and she could feel her steps quickening. Dry reeds brushed against her arms, the same blades that had dished out papercuts at the farm dam. Wading through them was like floating back in time.

She and Adam would go fishing. They never caught anything, besides a bout of bilharzia that landed them in bed for a week. Grace was repulsed by the idea of a larva burrowing into her. Adam invited boys from school around. The doctor told Grace they were both peeing blood. Even in sickness, they had been together.

Things were different now. When Adam married, he had disappeared into the suburbs. He had cut his hair and started wearing chinos. He sold his old hi-fi and bought a surround-sound system, and when Grace went to visit, he seemed grey and beaten, smoking on the veranda. Only Gabriel made him smile.

During those visits, they seldom talked much. Sometimes they would share a bottle of wine, and amid the bleeps of tree frogs and the distant pah-pah of shanty gunshots, they would reminisce about the farm. Adam remembered the town he had made under the fig tree, the roads demarcated with lucky beans and the houses made of twigs.

He smiled when Grace reminded him of the doll's house he had made for her, how he had later destroyed it in an argument over silk worms.

Then Adam would stare into the darkness, his dark fringe hemming him in. Grace knew he wasn't listening but she talked on. She needed to hold onto the years before he had disappeared into silence. Before the sniffing boy was snuffed out.

Being with Adam was like fishing in polluted water. Sometimes you would reel in a surprise – an old fork with floral engravings on its handle. It could come clean. Other times, the line would drag through the water and dangle a fetid tangle of algae and plastic.

After a good night with Adam, when he would allow himself to laugh at her jokes while Gabriel burrowed into his neck, Grace would drive back to the flat content. She would sit on the balcony with a cup of tea, smoking and watching the waves whitening as they rolled. It was as though she and Adam had never left the dam and were still crashing around in the bulrushes, laughing as they hooked their bait.

Adam seldom visited her. During the day, she was busy with work, doing an illustration or sitting at the breakfast nook staring at swatches of colour. The paint firm couriered them to her – thin cards of blues, greens, pinks, creams, greens and yellows – and it was her job to name them. Summery names for yellows, sky words for blues, foliage for greens, arctic for whites, wheat for beiges, florals for pinks and metal for greys. It was mostly easy. A blue with grey undertones became Lark, a dusty green became Sage. Bright yellow

became Blazing Sun. Green was soothing and herbal, blue was holidays and white was a colour.

But there were times when the colour evaded her. She would question the pinks and interrogate the creams. Pure white was not Iceland. She had seen pictures and there were rock and forests. Everything was done to comfort. But at the ends of the grey swatches, the blacks bristled with weapons and factories: Steel, Gun powder, Graphite.

Some days it was hard to concentrate. She avoided the strips of card and walked along the promenade where men sold chunks of masala-dipped pineapple and tourists clutched their cameras. Mynah birds argued on the grass verges where tramps lay asleep.

Sometimes there would be a coffee at the café near the pier. She would sit among the surfers pretending to read the paper. Other days, she would walk to the furthest beach and sit on the sand, watching dogs fetch balls from the shallows.

Still it didn't soothe her. The sea felt artificial, as though it were on a timer. Even with its breakers and rollers, it was unable to transport her. The horizon was so finite. It curved round, containing the water, the sand, the scrap of grass running up to the toilets. A smell of urine rose from the beach showers.

Robert didn't understand her. He would come back from the beach sunburnt and sandy, happy as a dog. His whole family was a litter of smiles.

At those first family Christmases, Grace had become aware of how different their families were. Robert's father would put on a CD of carols and whistle as he carved the turkey. He would force his wife into a mock tango in the kitchen while Robert's sister clapped encouragement. Strawn with sunlight, the old family home had views across the bay. There were palms in the garden and a hedge of waving red. Over Christmas lunch, Robert's father, his bald head shiny with sweat and his round face florid, would tell Grace stories about his son. How, at the age of fourteen, Robert had become the town's youngest lifesaver. How he could sail the family yacht single-handedly. How he had been head boy. The sea breeze always made Grace sleepy.

Robert's mother would listen and smile, her large breasts wrinkled and squashed together in a vest, her blonde hair blow-dried into a parched reef of curls. Above her lips, a fine moustache of dark hair grew, and she would clink gold charm bracelets against gold-rimmed wine glasses and throw her head back to laugh at jokes. There were always jokes.

Robert would sit back in his chair looking pleased. Amid this blondeness and gnawing of bones, Grace had felt like a dark stranger, somehow scandalous.

She had often wondered about Adam's transition; what had made him shed his skin. Her mother believed it had been the army, but Grace had noticed it long before then. There had been the anarchy signs painted on the school wall and the visit from Mr Brodie. That night, Adam had sat defiant on a chair in the lounge. She hadn't been able to see the two men, but she could hear her father's clipped voice straightening the walls and rearranging the curtains. At dinner, her father had scowled and dug his fork into the mashed potato. Grace had filled her mouth with peas.

There had also been the fights at school – Adam against the rugby hero who shot signposts on weekends. They would fight on the bus, head-butting each other in the aisle. Whenever Adam came home with a ripped collar, their father would take him into the garage. Grace would see Adam later, sullen and mute, rubbing his arm. He had been hooked and cast out.

During those years, Grace had shied away from her father. She told him he had to knock before entering her room and she no longer went with him to inspect the fences. She had become conscious of Adam snagged below the surface.

Gradually, Adam pushed her aside. She was one of them and she could not be trusted. While his fury spewed out from under his door in guitars and bellows, Grace had turned to the outside, sneaking out at night to lie in the paddock. Like they used to.

She would collect the bobbles of wool snagged on the barbed wire and push them to her nose, inhaling the grease of living things. If she closed her eyes, she could see the white

skin below the lambs' coats. She would wake early and climb the ladder to sit on the garage roof before the iron got too hot. Down below, the thatch would gleam like porcupine quills in the dawn light. The curtains would be drawn and the eyes would be out. In the evenings, she would work on decorating her magic garden with pieces of china saved from the dump. As she crouched, the hot wind would lift her sundress.

Her mother would walk across the garden, ducking under the May bush. "It looks nice," she would say, handing her pieces of plates and cups. She would take them and press them into the soil, fitting together a jigsaw of other love – her love for the vagabond hadedas, for the lambs with shaking tails.

Grace sighed deeply as she walked, pausing to pull a blade of grass from the bank and sticking it in her mouth. It tasted neither sweet nor sour and dry splinters of stem peeled off. The core was hollow. She spat it out, the tiny black seeds sticking to her hand.

The sky was filling with soufflés of cloud and the afternoon had let go of its light. Grace hummed as she walked, an old Simon and Garfunkel song. *The only living boy in New York*. She couldn't remember all the words and didn't like Paul Simon's voice, but as she walked, she hummed, content to let the sound slip through her.

Around the corner, she saw smoke curling out of the cave and a flash of red. She hadn't booked or filled in the mountain register, and there had always been the possibility of others – tight hiking groups walking single-file in primary colours. Flushed women standing with their hands on their hips at the top of a hill. Graphite walking sticks, compact backpacks with badges sewn on them, collapsible camping stoves, foreign soup mixes, jokes in French.

She could find an overhang out here and curl up in her sweatshirt. A greasy piece of cheese lurked at the bottom of her bag, and there was still a roll. She could wait until morning when they would go for a walk.

The cave glowed, a pocket of lava in the rock. She could sense the atmosphere, the order that comes with reaching a destination – the division of labour as the newcomers unpacked, laying out the ingredients for the evening meal, the valley growing silent.

She watched like a spy. One of them walked down the path, a grey-haired man in a red shirt wearing large boots and carrying a pot.

Swifts sliced the air on ninja wings and she could almost smell coffee. Damn tourists.

Grace watched as the man bent awkwardly over the river. There was no choice. From behind the mountain wall, the clouds were mounting an assault, their bases dark as plums. Damn tourists. Damn people.

Robert's launch had been on a Friday. Grace had spent the day indoors and was looking forward to getting out, even if it was only to the bookshop. She had taken a long bath, brushed her hair and chosen a black pair of trousers and a plain purple shirt. She dug out her old makeup bag and applied a thin smear of maroon lipstick. It made her mouth take over her face and she smiled self-consciously in the mirror, rubbing the lipstick off her front teeth. The colour clashed with the shirt, but it was the only lipstick she had. Pulling on the skin below one eye, Grace leaned into the mirror and lined the rim in black. Her iris streamed back green and red. She quickly pencilled in the other and stood blinking, her reflection gradually becoming clearer. With their borders blackened, her eyes looked even smaller and closer together and the socket swallowed them up.

Grace had done the illustrations for Robert's book. He had been insistent that the title be handwritten. Inside, she had decorated the pages with borders of blossoms, and had revelled in the science of it, the Latin names and the sketches identifying each species. The book classified each flower according to its hue and the familiarity of the swatches of colour on the edges of the pages – pink strengthening into red, pale mauve becoming blue – connected Grace to the book. Robert had spent ten years researching the area, trekking alone into the hills to collect data, filling his days with xylem and phloem.

Grace had arrived early. The bookshop staff were setting up tables and a girl with dyed-red hair and a stud in her chin was lugging crates of glasses from a back room. Platters of cheese and biscuits sat on the floor next to a pile of the books. Grace picked one up, stroking the cover with her fingers, feeling the hours of work within. Below the title was a watercolour painting of a wild gladiolus, its salmon petals clinging like dancers to a green blade.

A few people milled around the cleared space between the shelves, talking quietly. Grace wandered through the fiction section, picking up books, reading their back covers. She yawned, folded her arms and moved towards the drinks table, now lined with thick-stemmed wine glasses.

"Could I have a glass of dry white please," she asked the pierced girl, who uncorked a bottle and poured.

"Have you seen the book?" the girl asked. Grace nodded.

"I mean, it's so pretty. I love flowers and I've been to the mountains, like, a hundred times, but I don't know if it's going to sell. I mean, people who come in here want, like, detective stuff and crap books on embroidery."

Grace took the glass and stood next to the travel section. The room was filling up with women in shawls and men in botany shoes. Robert came up behind her. "Ah, so there's the lady of colour," he said. His hair was damp and Grace could smell shampoo. "I'm dying for a drink," he said, and went across to the table.

Grace watched him from behind, his tall figure loose among the spines of books. He seemed to tumble through spaces, a warm animal at ease the world. She swallowed her wine and watched as Robert bent to talk to an elderly woman dressed in beige. He put his hand on her shoulder as he listened, his brown eyes sparking. When he threw back his laughing face, his Adam's apple stuck out like a little volcano. Grace could sense skin and saliva, and that small peak, with its skin pulled tight, made her hot and dark, unsure of herself. She was relying on the wine to unfold her face.

Robert came across to her. "So here's to old-fashioned graphic art, flowers and little old ladies who will persuade all their friends to buy the book," he said, raising his glass. He wore a digital watch on an arm spun with hairs.

Grace laughed. "It looks good. I reckon we could take it round to all the knitting circles and round up at least a thousand old crones who can't resist the allure of a man obsessed with flowers."

She reddened as she spoke, imagining his house crammed with flowers, his bed a mound of lilacs. She had dreamt his skin would be soft as pollen.

There were the usual plodding speeches, and the fluorescent lighting and green carpets reminded Grace of school assemblies. The head of the botany department praised Robert for his endurance and foresight. In turn, Robert thanked the department for allowing him the time to collect the data. "I never want to see the inside of another tent," he joked. There was a chorus of laughter; a kinship of green, of loose-knitted jerseys and wooden sticks. Grace made her way to the drinks table and, in a whispered voice, ordered another glass of wine. She needed a cigarette.

After the speeches, Robert signed some books. The wine had made Grace hungry so she sliced chunks of soft cheese onto biscuits and ate them in salty bites. She could feel her cheeks starting to flush, her eyes contracting into black pips, but she didn't care. In here, tonight, she felt part of something. Out there somewhere was her life, waiting for her like a five-day stew in a burnt-out pot. Out there, was the semblance of a life. It was white and straight, vacuum-packed and frozen. It didn't belong to her, but it was the only one she knew.

Robert bounded up to her, the knobs on his shoulders hanging the brown T-shirt off his frame. "Let's blow this godforsaken rice paddy," he whispered. "If I have to breathe in the halitosis of one more country rambler, I'll kill myself."

His flat was sparse. There were no lilacs or roses, no fields of daisies. Grace felt disappointed, almost repulsed by the browns and beiges, the dark hessian frames of the paintings of Chinese junks. Things lay around – a copper ashtray filled with cup hooks, a teacup with a broken handle, three jade monkey figurines not hearing, speaking and seeing through a layer of dust. “Tea or wine?” asked Robert as he clattered in the kitchen.

“Wine, of course.” Grace moved two orange cushions aside and sat on the couch. She could feel the springs beneath her, the sharp coils prodding her to say something. *Say something.* “Have you been to China?” She felt demure and useless sitting on the edge of the couch, watching him inspect two glasses he had rinsed in the sink. The kitchen was small and stark with white linoleum and seemed to barely contain him.

“No. My father gave them to me. He has this weird fascination with boats. I know, they’re pretty ugly, but they remind me of the world and the places out there.”

He sat down next to her and they clinked their glasses. “Here’s to the book, the world and us,” he said, tipping his head back and drinking. There it was again – that peak of skin and bone, that centre of heat. Grace gulped her wine and smiled. She was glad to be away from the chatter, the women queuing up for his signature.

“You hungry?” he asked.

Tonight she would be taken care of. She wouldn’t have to sit at her pine table listening to the conversation of her knife and fork on the plate. Tonight a man would cook for her, and all she had to do was sit on a spiky couch and exist.

Robert put on a CD, a Cuban fiesta of trumpets and drums, and returned to the kitchen, opening and shutting cupboards. Grace opened the sliding door and stepped out onto the small balcony and lit a cigarette. Pots of green foliage and yellow buds waved at her in the dark breeze and she could almost hear them breathing, shivering out pulses of deep air into the salt of the city. She could hear the ocean putting out, stoking up, putting out, stoking up, as it moved along the beachfront. Down below on the street, a drunk couple were

arguing, the woman staggering ahead with a pair of shoes slung over one shoulder, shouting "Fuck you. Fuck you".

"That happens all the time." Robert was beside her, resting his arms on the railing, smelling of tomatoes. "They get drunk in the shebeen down the road, have these arguments all the way along the street, and by the time they get to where they're going, they've sobered up enough to realise what they've done and fall into bed with each other."

Grace pointed at the plant pots. "What are the yellow ones?"

He bent down and held a flower between his fingers. "Ah, this is my little experiment. Hibiscus trionum, otherwise known as the rather unsavoury Bladder Hibiscus. It's a grassland flower found in mountainous regions, and I'm trying to find out if she can survive at the coast. It's not doing well and I reckon I might lose her."

Grace stared at the plant, sighed, and looked out at the city. The black outlines of the office blocks moved closer, their yellow windows vacantly eyeing her. "Let's go in," she said.

They ate in murmurs. Spaghetti with tomato and basil. Grace had abandoned herself to exposure, carelessly sucking up the pale strands that left a ring of red around her mouth. She could feel Robert watching her, but it didn't matter. Hiding was unnecessary.

At the sink, Grace slid the plates into the foam and found a sponge on the window sill. A length of blonde hair was snagged in the green scourer. Robert was on the phone, talking in low tones, offering comfort. "I know it's hard, but you know I love you. No, I can't get there tonight." A laugh. More cushioned talking. Grace took the pot from the stove and picked out the bits of spaghetti, already hardening. She should finish washing and leave.

"My sister," Robert said as he came into the kitchen. "She's going through this bad break-up and she phones me at all hours of the night wanting me to go round. She can't sleep. Poor thing."

Grace felt him come up behind her, and her hand slowed its circles inside the pot. He lightly put one hand on her waist, the fingers waiting for approval. She placed her hand on his, burning her need into them. *Let someone in.* Grace turned round to him, the sponge still

in her hand, anchoring her to the moment. His eyes were blue and there were tides everywhere. He brought his face close and paused. Grace could feel his space, smell wine and wheat. His mouth touched hers.

“Will you stay?”

In the bedroom, Grace took off her clothes, her hands struggling with the buttons on her shirt. Robert watched as he balanced on one leg to unlace his hiking boots. She didn't know what to say. There was nothing to say. She stood in her underwear; white cotton on white skin, her head down, waiting. She felt small and bony, like a child about to perform her first monologue.

Robert came across the room. He was naked, his wide chest soft with hair. Would he feed on her too earnestly, raising his head for approval?

He unhooked her bra and kissed the hollow of her collarbones. She tipped her head back, a tingle spreading onto her lips, down her sides, into her legs. She could feel the blood thickening, gathering itself up into a force, soaking through the bones. The dampening of red across white.

## 7

The man's shirt was more orange than red, and Grace could now see he was older than she had thought. He had an unhealthy look about him, as though he ate too many pies and spent hours in front of the television. He looked English. The collar of his golf shirt was buttoned up and his arms were sunburnt.

A woman stood next to him in the centre of the cave, her yellow towelling tracksuit a flare against the brown. The couple watched as Grace trudged up the last few metres. In

their yellow and orange, they were tropical fruit, or the layered ice-lollies she had eaten as a child.

“Hi,” Grace said, smacking the dust from the bottom of her jeans, avoiding the tourists’ eyes. *What were they doing here?*

The man shuffled his feet together and his eyes flicked over her. He was probably her father’s age, but his cheeks were smooth and the skin around his blue eyes was almost creaseless. His small, pinched mouth seemed to pull the rest of his face forwards, as though he were pouting.

“Is that your bag over there?” the man asked, looking over his shoulder to the back of the cave. He had a British accent, posh and stiff as though his mouth held a dozen date pips. “We’ve been worried sick about that bag. We thought you might have fallen off a cliff or been murdered.”

Grace shrugged. “There aren’t many cliffs in these parts, and the only things silly enough to attack would be baboons.”

The woman moved forward. Lightly anchored to the ground, her white canvas takkies seemed more suited to yachting than hiking. Two large brown eyes, their lids clogged with blue powder, widened and narrowed as she spoke. In one of them, a burst vessel floated next to the iris, a prick of dark blood like the spot on a yolk. Above the eyes, there was alarm in the woman’s brows, plucked into a thin line and pencilled in with brown. If she’d been paint, she would’ve been Autumn Frost.

“We read in the paper on the way up that four tourists in the next reserve were attacked last week. That’s why James has a knife. You can’t be too careful, even out here.”

Grace shrugged again and glared at the woman. *Out of all the caves, why this one?*

Out against the horizon, Ragged Peak towered and the sun was dying in its corner. She wished she were out there with the orange in her lap. She didn’t want the earth to be filled with footprints.

"Well, I've never had any problems and I've been coming here since I was a kid," said Grace, squatting in front of the backpack to undo the straps. She pulled out a new pack of cigarettes and lit one, standing up to address the tourists. "There's obviously been some confusion with the booking because I'm supposed to have the cave until tomorrow. If it wasn't so late, I would head out to another one, but it's getting dark."

Grace was conscious of the cigarette and she could feel the woman looking at it. A light breeze carried the smoke away.

The woman ran a finger beneath two gold bracelets. Her knees had puffed the tracksuit pants out into two pouches. She was thin, the curve of her collarbones visible through the white long-sleeved top. "I thought the lady hadn't quite got what I said. She had a very strong accent. Oh, well, I've brought far too much food."

Grace stubbed out the cigarette against a rock and put the butt in her pocket. She didn't want to eat the food of strangers.

"Thanks, but I've got my own food. I'll just keep out of the way and you carry on. I'll be out of here tomorrow."

The woman shrugged her shoulders and smoothed her hair, the bracelets jangling together. "Suit yourself, but if you change your mind, you're welcome to join us."

Grace began to arrange her sleeping bag. The couple had claimed the large area on the opposite side of the cave, but Grace was happy with the ledge. It made her feel close to Adam and she could almost make out the scratches of his name.

The man had disappeared down a path at the end of the cave and the woman sat on a rock, chopping onions on a plastic board. Food always smelt so different out here, and Grace breathed it in. Undergrowth. Spring bulbs. Vacant plots. The woman sniffed, pulled a hankie out of her sleeve, and wiped her eyes. Grace's mother always kept her tissues up there, and as a child, she had found it comforting. Now it was unhygienic.

"If you put a match in your mouth, it helps," Grace said, pointing at the onion. "It's the only thing that works."

The woman continued slicing. "I'm okay. By the way, I'm Margaret and my husband's James. From Sheffield. Out for three weeks."

Grace thought the name didn't suit her. All the Margarets she knew were heavy-limbed and matronly. This Margaret was wiry and shrewd, with nothing homely about her. She was an onion, carefully layered, stinging at the core.

Grace watched the woman chop, the pile of sliced onions threatening to topple off the board. The woman's back was bent over, her shoulder blades moving as she cut methodically, the thin hair on top of her head barely concealing scalp. *You should be down at the camp having dinner cooked for you. You don't belong here.*

The tourists had colonised the cave, and their stuff lay everywhere. There were bags and zips and aluminium, plastic and down and string. Grace wanted a bath. She needed to be out in the open, lying on her back in the river as the water darkened.

Margaret lit the gas stove and the canister's breathing brought the world closer. Grace felt it pressing in. A drawstring bag filled with crockery sat next to the stove, the initials JM stitched in red.

Grace pulled her towel out of the bag and fished out the shower gel.

"Did that happen out here?" Margaret asked, pointing at Grace's head.

She had forgotten about the graze. For a while, she had even stopped thinking about why she was here. The edges of the wound felt raised and tight, and she saw it now flashing from her forehead: Exhibit A.

"I was in an accident."

Margaret's eyes searched for more information. She sat with the knife in her hand, a smear of dust stuck to a wet cheek. Grace wished she had lied. There was no story to tell, not to a Margaret from Sheffield who had invaded her space, filling it with onions and eyebrows.

Grace stood up and started down the path. A white washing line was strung up between two bushes to the right of the cave, its nylon ends neatly tapered. Flapping from it like a raven was a black bathing costume. Next to it, a brightly coloured towel squawked.

On her way down to the river, Grace muttered under her breath, kicking pebbles with her boots so they rolled into the grass. *How was she going to spend a night with these people? The cave was small. There was nowhere to hide.*

The water was slightly warmer than it had been that morning. The sun must have plunged its thermostat into the depths, radiating out ripples of heat. It was familiar and Grace felt comforted by the rhythm of the water, how it plunged and bubbled, dipped and washed. She wondered how many of these boulders were the same ones she had clung to, watching as Adam dived down to pick up stones. He used to be able to hold his breath for two minutes. Now he could hold it forever.

Grace waded naked into a deep part, the surface of the water pricked by insects. The cold penetrated her shins and the stitches numbed. On the banks, coarse sand washed up into the grass. Down below, she could see her feet dangling, white where the socks had been.

Adam would hate this. He hated the domesticity of others and declined invitations to dinner parties. He loathed small talk and refused to visit their father at the retirement complex. He said being around so much old skin made him uncomfortable. He said people were a waste of time.

Lynn often grew exasperated and would go to functions alone, sweeping out of the house in a swarm of silk, leaving Adam to sit on the veranda, a beer glass of tea beside him and Gabriel perched on one knee. He hadn't hiked since they were children. Grace felt she was eternally on a trail, her boots sending up puffs of dust, Robert somewhere behind bending over a blossom.

If Robert had been here, he would have taken over the cooking, shoos Margaret away to sit on a rock. He would have poured her a glass of wine and told her about the

local flora, working a few funnies into the script. His accent would have taken on Margaret's inflections.

Grace bent her knees and sank her torso into the water until her neck was encircled by a band of cold. She spread out her arms, allowing the wet draught to nuzzle the tendons, then opened her legs, feeling the shock of the water flowing into her. It was the softest intrusion.

She ducked under and propelled her hands to force her body to sink to the bottom. Down here, the world was small, and while she could make out shapes of rocks, clear vision was not necessary. Down here, you didn't have to try so hard.

Pulling her knees towards her chest, she floated to the top and gazed up at the cave.

The man was standing at the washing line, feeling the towel. His eyes were on the river, on Grace, on her face.

## 8

*Lisa's mouth is moving but there's no sound. Mrs Davies's face is so close she can see powder clinging to the edges of her nose, tiny broken veins barely masked. She too is talking soundlessly, and Grace can smell cigarettes and deodorant. The roots of Mrs Davies's hair are grey amid the black, and a metal piece of dentistry is attached to the gum below one incisor.*

*Behind them, the background is a blur. The jacaranda blossoms are smudged in one corner, an eyeful of bruises, and the rest is a clatter of green, smeared with brown and a wobbly kidney of swimming-pool blue.*

*Grace feels for her head. It's there, warm and hard and attached to her neck. She knows she is at Lisa's house, and knows her own name. Sunday's child. But there is no*

*volume down here. Their faces are warped, coming closer, shrinking away, as though she's been mummified, separated from her surroundings by a layer of air. She is aware of blinking.*

*It's not an unpleasant feeling, to be lying in a bubble while Lisa and her mother frown and lean and open their mouths. They are fish coming in for small bites, reef dwellers in yellow and pink and black.*

*Grace feels embarrassed. Something has happened. She has done something wrong. She remembers running, Lisa's voice singing, the mothballs swamping her head with chemistry. The sun had seemed too bright, the bushes around the pool too green. Turbo had been a white dot floating next to impossible blue. Lisa had called soundlessly, her body flooding into a mass of shade and then whiteness. All Grace could do was stop and watch her vision spinning. Her heart had risen into her left clavicle, and there it had pummelled and pounded. She had hoped she would die before it exploded. There could be nothing worse than the red pop of a heart.*

*Lying there, next to the birdbath with its snapped-off concrete, Grace begins to smile. Sounds are returning. She can hear the throb of the pool pump; can hear Turbo yapping.*

*Mrs Davies is kneeling next to her. "Gracey. Can you hear me? Oh, God, please hear me." Her voice is wobbly and she is squeezing Grace's hand so tight her rings dig in.*

*"I can hear you. Mrs Davies, don't worry, I can hear you. I haven't died," Grace says, pushing herself up onto her elbows. Bits of summer lawn stick to her hair like tiny grasshoppers and Mrs Davies picks them off.*

*"Jesus, Gray, you nearly scared us to death. We thought you were, like, dead." Lisa is standing with her arms folded, her blonde ponytail flipped over one shoulder. "One minute you were running after me, the next you were on the ground, completely blacked-out."*

*"I must have tripped and hit my head," says Grace, feeling her skull for lumps. "Maybe I hit the birdbath."*

*She knows there will be no evidence, no swollen nodes pushing up beneath the skin. Egghead. But she must pretend.*

*"Now, just sit up slowly," Mrs Davies says, supporting Grace by the shoulders. "You might have broken something. I don't know what I would have told your parents." Mrs Davies puts one arm around her shoulders, pulling Grace's head towards her large breasts. "Really, you gave me such a turn. Strange girl!"*

*Grace knows these words might be a compliment. They could mean she is something ethereal, with wings folded neatly inside her clothes. Or perhaps she is strange like Cyndi Lauper, with her hair delicious as tangerines. But Grace flinches at the words. She has heard them before.*

*"C'mon Gray, let's get in before Mark and his friends get home." Lisa drops her towel on top of the plastic pump cover and walks to the side of the pool. Her blue bikini matches the jacaranda's froth.*

*Mrs Davies helps Grace up. "Are you sure you're okay?" she asks.*

*Grace nods. Outwardly, she is okay. As she walks towards Lisa, she is aware of the flesh on her hip; her white, mottled legs.*

*"C'mon Gray. Let's do bombs." Lisa flings herself into the air, tucks her knees against her chest, lets out a squeal and explodes the water.*

*Grace follows, closing her eyes as she sinks into the blue, the white tiles like china. Holding her breath, and still clutching her knees, she floats face down. Deep inside, she feels the darkness retreating. The sun weaves platinum waves on the floor and Grace feels the heat on her back as she breaks the water.*

## 9

James poured her sherry in a real glass. There were only two squat tumblers, so he filled a green plastic mug for himself. They sat in a triangle, each perched on a boulder in the cave's clearing. With each sip, Grace could taste wallpaper and china cabinets, and she

could almost hear the ticking of a grandfather's clock. That heavy-lipped sound always reminded Grace of too many nights spent in too much silence while her mother cleared the dining-room table and measured out her father's medicine.

James sat leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees, the nylon sports jacket too formal for this safari. Margaret had pulled on a blue jacket with checks on the lining. She sat, her takkies on tiptoes and one hand thrust under her buttocks, as though to protect her trousers from the grime. *Plimsolls*. Grace smiled as she imagined the word spelt out. Like pimples and primulas and fish and prostitutes.

Between them, the air grew gaseous and chemical, and Grace peered at the couple: yellow and thinning; nervously light on the ground. Their voices reached her in bytes, edited by division and distance. On the gas stove, a pot chuckled and spat out a dribble of liquid, and beyond the cave, the milky way curdled in the sky.

A savoury smell rose up from the stove, filling the cave with the warm comfort of cooking. Grace was hungry. It had only been a day, but she could already feel her ribs poking through her shirt. Eating with the tourists wouldn't mean she owed them anything. It was only food, and then there would be sleep.

Grace looked at the woman and cleared her throat. "Actually, I will have supper, if that's okay."

Margaret smiled and looked pleased. "Well, I hope you like soya mince." She rose to calm the pot. "I could only find the dehydrated stuff. It was either that or carting tins of food."

Her accent was stronger and less formal than James's, the vowels plumped out by a countryside dialect. But there was something tight about her, as though her mouth and eyebrows restrained any human leakage. Margaret's fingers were long, each ending in a pink fingernail filed to a point. On her wedding finger, gold shone.

Grace drank the last of the sherry, feeling its warmth spreading in her chest. She had two choices: keep her distance or try to be civil. There were no tins behind which she could

hide. Crammed around the gas stove, surrounded by air and altitude, there was only one option.

“Anyone for some wine?” Grace asked. “I lugged a bottle of the stuff up here. It’s not very good, but it should mellow after the fifth glass.”

Margaret didn’t laugh, but James slid his mouth into a small grin, the tips of beige teeth showing, and stuck out his mug.

“I’ll try some. Back home, we only drink South African wine. The French stuff tastes like perfume and the Chilean reds are like chalk. Our local Sainsburys stocks a huge range of South African wine. Not too keen on the chardonnays, but the merlots and pinotages are good. Aren’t they, Madge?”

Margaret shrugged as she lowered herself back onto the boulder, her knees making cracking sounds. Grace knew her amiability hadn’t convinced her. Margaret was the type of woman who spied on new neighbours and disapproved of women who drank too much, laughed too loud, walked too fast. Her sock drawer would be orderly and she would greet people in supermarkets, all the while archiving them with her hard-boiled eyes.

“Dinner’s almost ready. I’m afraid it’s not up to my usual standard. The tomato puree seems thinner than at home. But it’ll fill us up nicely,” Margaret announced.

Grace thanked her.

Her mother had always made them thank people. “Thankyou Mrs Galway for having us”, “Thankyou Mrs Du Plessis for the delicious cake”, “Thankyou Mrs Davids for the lift”. Back then, so many women had done so much. She remembered the dinner parties and how Mrs Galway would use their names when she greeted them, and would set up a table in the kitchen. After dinner, Grace and Adam would be banished to Mr and Mrs Galway’s bed. The framed photos of their grown-up children had fascinated her. The girls had looked so pretty.

Grace put her plate on top of the others. Margaret was enveloped in a cloud of steam as she removed the lid of the pot and there was a smell of vegetables. Grace was ravenous.

The hike had been longer than expected, and one tuna roll hadn't been enough sustenance.

The mince made a moist sound as Margaret dished it out.

Grace blew on a forkful and ate. "It's good. It tastes quite fancy."

In the moonlight, the river became louder, as though the night allowed it freedom to grow.

James got up to pour more wine, bending stiffly to fill Margaret's glass, his shaking hands clinking the bottle against the rims, his shoes making grinding noises on the stones.

Grace's father hadn't been here for years. He was bundled up and disappearing, his feet too weak to touch the floor. He read newspapers in his room, propped up by a stack of pillows. He left the crusts of his sandwiches, and they collected on plates next to his bed. His hiking boots had long gone mouldy. In the afternoon, he slept.

Grace felt her head speckling. *Two eyes float. They widen, shut. Smell of leather, a missing shoe. Someone touches her face. Disinfectant. An ambulance. Why wasn't he wearing a seatbelt? Someone holds her hand.*

Grace ate with her plate in her lap, the glass on the floor beside her.

"Can I top you up?" asked James, holding the bottle out.

She nodded. "But I think I'll go for a bigger vessel. This one hardly touches sides," Grace said, getting up and walking to her backpack. The mug was still sticky with the morning's coffee, but Grace didn't mind. Being drunk would make things easier.

Margaret ate as though the meal were poison, and Grace watched her moving the food around with her fork, eventually scooping up a few granules of mince and slowly nibbling on it before swallowing and pausing.

The conversation was lean and polite and Grace kept her answers short. They owned a paint shop and were fascinated by her work.

"I've always wondered who dreamt up those names," said James. "We just get the stuff in and hope we can shift it. I thought they'd have a computer programme."

His favourite colour was Monet. Margaret said hers was Summer Sky.

Grace told them she was married with no children. They told her about their daughter and how much Britain had changed under Tony Blair. As Grace wiped the last smears of red from her plate with her fingers, James spoke about his boat in Dorset, how the family would spend summer holidays cruising the coast, fishing for whiting and eel.

“Nothing quite like the sea,” he said, wiping his mouth with a striped hankie, and then blowing his nose. “As far as I’m concerned, there’s nothing as relaxing as being on the sea. Buying that boat was the best thing I ever did.”

Grace sipped her wine. She had never been overseas, but somehow the image of a foreign sea was more appealing than the one that lapped and spat below their balcony. She imagined turtles and pebbles, plankton and lobster pots. The sea would be clear, the depths scoured by pebbles. It would be clear as an eye.

After dinner, Margaret scooped up the plates and pots into a plastic packet. From her backpack, she pulled out a thick length of black elastic and put it on her head, adjusting it so a small light sat in the middle of her forehead. She then flicked on the light and set off like a miner down the path, the pale beam catching on bushes.

“She could leave the washing till the morning,” Grace said to James. “I usually do. It’s so hard to get things clean in this light.”

James shook his head and clicked his tongue. “She’s obsessed with cleanliness and order. We’ve been married thirty years and in all that time, Margaret has never allowed things to slide. Our kitchen back home is like a laboratory. If you leave one granule of sugar on the counter, she has a cadenza.”

He smiled. The wine had relaxed his mouth and there was a floppiness about his jowls. He felt familiar, but Grace wasn’t sure how much of that was due to the wine. Sitting beside her, his bulk hunkered down on the rock, he reminded her of her father when he’d been able and active; when they’d hike ahead, leaving the others behind. Her father had always encouraged her to be out front. “Nothing worse than mediocrity,” he would say. Now he was in the back room, out of the running, scratched from the race.

The silence was too much for her.

“Cheers,” Grace said, raising her mug and glancing at James. “Here’s to bad plonk, good wives, sharing caves with strangers and gourmet soya mince.” It was too easy to be light.

She could hear her own voice. It was loud and her head felt red. She moved to sit on the ground, leaning heavily against the rock, and lit a cigarette. She was getting drunk, and deep in her chest, Grace welcomed the floating darkness. The warmth of gas.

“Filthy habit, I know,” she said, waving the cigarette in the air. “I’ve tried to stop a million times, but it never works. Ever since Lisa Davies made me share one with her behind the boys’ toilets. It makes me relax, especially when things are tough.”

“Like now?” James leaned forward on his rock so his jacket rumbled itself around his waist. He looked into her face for signs.

Grace smiled and sucked deeply on the cigarette, exhaling the smoke in a sigh. Gabriel’s face floated into her head. His mouth was shut tight and his eyes sparked with terror. There were bandages and petrol. Green leaves and knees.

She heard Margaret rattling up the path with her shiny pots, and Grace was sure the brightening moon would be bouncing its light off the lids. The woman came into the cave, unclipped her headgear and stacked the washed things on one of the rocks. She turned the stove on and balanced a kettle on its top.

“Anyone for tea?” she asked.

“I’ll stick to wine, love,” James replied. Grace shook her head. She was on the crest of the hill with her father, watching Adam and her mother walking towards them, the Christmas beetles screaming in her ears. Adam’s face white. Gabriel’s face white. She gulped her wine.

Behind them, in the corner of the cave, Grace could hear Margaret arranging her bed, rustling the sleeping bag, blowing up an inflatable blue pillow. *Mouth to mouth*

*resuscitation*. Grace wondered if Margaret would pull out a dressing table and sit in front of the mirror, brushing her hair.

The boiling kettle rattled its lid and Margaret filled her mug and sat on a rock behind them, stirring her tea and sipping loudly. Grace felt those bowed eyebrows shooting arrows into the back of her.

"It's bright tonight," said Margaret, her voice hard amid the wine. "It was almost like daylight at the river. Didn't really need the torch."

Grace and James sat in silence, their blackening tongues stripped of small talk. Through the bushes, the hill across the valley was a field of silver. Gabriel would have called it an afternoon. He had made it up one night when they were having dinner with Grace's parents. A moon had risen above the complex, shedding itself across the lawn. "Afternoon, Grace. Get it?" he had said, thrusting his hands into the pockets of his shorts. He was a clever boy.

Margaret put her cup on the floor next to the stove and yawned. "I'm going to turn in for the night. James, you'll come soon?" He nodded, rubbing his ankles, and Margaret wandered over to the corner, unzipped the sleeping bag and sat down to take off her shoes. Once inside the bag, she mumbled goodnight and rolled on to her side, facing away from them.

Grace poured more wine and she and James dragged their rocks to the cave entrance for a brighter view. Now the hill merged into the sky, scattering showers of stars off its surface.

Grace cleared her throat and whispered: "Once, when I was little, we were all sleeping here and my brother woke me up. He couldn't sleep and he'd been sitting here watching the river. He swore he'd seen a unicorn, said it was this huge horse buck with one horn."

There was phlegm in her throat; a cigarette in her fingers.

"I was a bit older so I was sceptical. But I got up and sat with him for hours. It was winter and my toes were freezing. Adam sat dead-still, like he was in church. Every now and then, he would think he'd spotted it and would get all excited, only it was a rock or reeds."

James stared at the river below, fish-silver in the moonlight, occasionally turning over to flash its belly. Tonight the reeds were still and shabby.

"Then we saw it – this beautiful, enormous white creature wading into the shallows, its horn sticking up into the sky. I nearly died. I've never forgotten it."

"Only it wasn't a unicorn, was it? Are you sure it wasn't an escaped rhino?" James sniffed, glancing back to where Margaret lay.

"No. It was an old albino eland with a horn missing. It was found dead weeks later. My father read it out to us from the newspaper. The vultures had picked the bones clean. Adam cried for a week."

They sat in silence, their shoulders heavy with wine. Grace focused on the river, trying to catch its motion as it flicked and twisted in the darkness. It kept slipping away from her, and what remained was its voice, gradually filling up the valley.

"Well, I've had enough excitement for one day," said James, slapping his thighs and standing up. "Keep the light on if you want. We sleep through anything. And goodnight, thank you for the wine, and sleep well." With that, he gave a mock bow and walked across to where his wife lay.

Grace turned back to the outside. She didn't want to see his thin legs crawling into a bed on the floor. From her pocket, she took another cigarette and lit it. A light snore came from the corner, and Grace found herself waiting for its regular sound. The tourists were asleep. Everyone was asleep. Her father would be in his single bed, shuffling painfully through dreams of the past. Her mother would be in the other room, barely resting in her bed socks. Robert would be on his side of the bed. Adam and Lynn would touch elbows. And Gabriel? *Gabriel.*

She pulled her knees towards her chest and lay her head on her folded arms, dragging on her cigarette and breathing out the smoke. Simon and Garfunkel slipped back into her head and she hummed. *The only living boy in New York.*

## 10

*Everyone else is going. In big break, they were given invitations with pictures of punks in the corner. Brent is talking loudly about how many brandies he will drink. Ian is shaking his head, his glasses reflecting the squares of summer windows.*

*Mr Hopkins tells them to sit down and be quiet and Ian takes his place at the desk behind Grace. She feels his glasses reflecting into her back. He smells of damp washing.*

*The lesson starts. King Lear. Grace likes it when they are asked to read parts in class. She always volunteers. There's something about Shakespeare she understands.*

*Her parents bought her two black fish for her birthday and she named them Othello and Mandela. They look artistic in their stark surroundings. The pink clutter has gone, replaced by white walls, a mattress on the floor and black and white picture of John Lennon.*

*Grace has read King Lear before and is waiting for the part when Cornwall shouts "Out, vile jelly!". She has written out parts of the play on the cover of her English book. On the back are the words to a Tracy Chapman song.*

*Mr Hopkins starts reading, his clipped moustache moving up and down. He walks between the desks, his veldskoene listening soundlessly.*

*The class is restless. Brent is whispering across to Deon and flicking his hand so his thumb makes a smacking noise against his palm. Grace knows he's still talking about the party. How wrecked he'll get.*

*Lisa says she's been invited. So have Debbie and Chantal. Even Kevin Murray is going and he was nearly expelled last year. Grace has been to a party at Ian's house before,*

*and had spent most of the night in the kitchen stroking the two ridgebacks curled in their tractor tyres. The squealing in the lounge was too loud and the boys were throwing ice cubes at each other. Grace had worried about leaving the place in a mess.*

*Brent had thrown up in the corridor and Grace had seen chunks of chicken in it. She had asked Ian for a bucket and mop, but he said to leave it. He was showing everyone how to do the moonwalk.*

*After class she'll ask him, just casually. There's probably a good reason. Maybe he did it by surname and mixed her up with Louise Watson.*

*Mr Hopkins has stopped reading. He asks a question and the class is silent. Grace hasn't heard; she is too busy thinking about the party.*

*"Grace?" Mr Hopkins asks. "Any ideas?"*

*She shakes her head, and again senses Ian's aquarium eyes. They peep out of his skin, protected by the glass. If she confronts him, he'll win. He has somewhere to hide.*

*"Sorry, sir. I wasn't paying attention. Could you ask the question again?" Grace can't not answer. She knows that old man stumbling across the moors, his hair knotted in weeds. She has felt him while walking on the farm, her own hair tangled up in a wind fanned by the oven of evening.*

*Mr Hopkins repeats the question, his hands thrust into his jacket pocket. He perches himself on the edge of his table and looks at Grace.*

*She answers. It's not a good one, but at least it fills the air. The others pretend to listen. They have neat hair and name badges, but Grace knows that's just for show. On Saturday, they will be crowding around the fridge in Mrs Farley's kitchen, digging for more drinks, their voices growling. There will be music and new jeans and gherkins. Someone will get kissed. Someone will have sex in the bathroom. One of the boys will try on Mr Farley's golfing shoes and everyone will laugh. Glasses will be broken. Brent will probably puke. The girls will dance and the kitchen will be empty.*

*The bell rings. Mr Hopkins tries to give homework instructions amid the clap of desk lids and the bundles of chatter. Ian rushes past Grace's desk, as though he's avoiding her. She hurries out after him, squeezing past Lisa.*

*"Hey, where're you off to?" asks Lisa, grabbing Grace by her jersey, stretching it into a gauze. "We've got a decoration committee meeting."*

*"I need to grab Ian. I'm going to ask him why I'm not invited."*

*Lisa raises her eyebrows. "That's a first, Gracey. You go, girl. Stick up for yourself."*

*Grace smiles, waves and runs out the door. She sees Ian walking down the corridor towards the boys' toilets.*

*"Ian!" she yells. "Wait. I need to talk to you."*

*He turns and waits with his hands on his hips. Grace can see his glasses watching her as she runs up to him.*

*"Um, I was just wondering if there was any reason why I wasn't invited to your party. Maybe you ran out of invitations?"*

*Ian scratches behind his ear and looks out across the pool, the red floats of its lanes chipped and peeling. Beneath his lenses, his eyes are the colour of kickboards – palest blue flecked with white. No one is swimming there.*

*"My mom said I could only invite thirty people," he says, confronting her with his eyes.*

*Grace feels the gallop of black deep inside her. Ian has disappeared from her vision and she is thinking about the others; the ones who make fun of her sundresses and tease her about having sheep for boyfriends. She wants to rip them apart in the changeroom, gas them to death. Her nostrils burn as tears start to form. She blinks them back.*

*"Whatever." Grace shrugs her shoulders, flicks back her hair and looks into Ian's eyes. "I wouldn't have been able to come, anyway."*

*"What, got a date with one of your prize rams?" He sniggers, pushing past her.*

*She turns and walks along the corridor. Brent rounds the corner and jogs towards her. "Gracey!" he says, pretending to dodge her. She glares at him and turns her head.*

*He runs past her and turns around, jogging on the spot, his hands thrown up.*

*"Shit! What's wrong with you? PMS or something?"*

*Grace carries on walking, clutching her English books against her chest.*

*"Or maybe it's scrapie," Brent yells.*

*She hopes he chokes on his vomit.*

*In the empty classroom, she sits at her desk, puts her head on the wood and breathes in the smell of old varnish. A spot of ink has stained her green skirt near the side seam. Grace scrunches up her face and starts to sob soundlessly. Wetness drowns her face, the tears pooling on the hand under her forehead. She feels as though she will never stop.*

*On the desk, the cover of King Lear shows an old man with a white beard laughing. Grace picks up her head and looks at the book. Right now, she feels so far away from him. It's as though she had never really understood him after all.*

*It's as though he never really wore nettles.*

## 11

Grace lay awake. She wasn't sure who was ministering to her from the ceiling above. It could be George Harrison or Jesus. It was only a smudge of lichen, but the portrait was perfectly created, the cheekbones sharp, a dark shading beneath each one, and the jaw muffled by a shadow. Two spots softly looked and Grace felt seen, as though this was a deliberate vision, a compassionate reminder. She hoped it was Jesus.

A rock dug into her back below the scattered hay. There was no-one lying next to her, and she felt like a child banished to an early bed.

Some nights on the farm, when she couldn't sleep, she would sneak into the closed kitchen where Taffy lay sleeping on a stained blanket. The dog would raise a heavy head, old fish-eyes watching as Grace in her nightie tip-toed to the food bucket. She would hold out a handful of cubes and watch as the dog rose on drumstick legs, joints cracking, and follow her down the passage.

Once in the bedroom, Grace would heave Taffy onto the bed, tucking her under the green blanket. With the dog's bulk pressing against her, shapes in the room lost their menace - the haunting of the nightgown behind the door lost its potency, the pile of books on the chest of drawers returned to themselves and the hockey stick leaning against the curtains grew back its wood and sticky handle.

Taffy would doze sitting up, eventually sighing deeply and flopping down onto her side, her back against Grace, her greying legs hanging off the bed. Moving her pillow and wriggling up the bed, Grace would curl around the dog, sticking her face close to the wet nose, the sleeping muzzle, the thin smile loosened from thick jowels that ended in jagged corners of soft black flesh. Then, putting her nose against Taffy's mouth, Grace would breathe in the smell of tongue and rot. She would close her eyes, savouring it, drawing it deep inside her, allowing it to swill around her fear, sending it to the parts that made her human. She hadn't been able to get enough of it and would sometimes pull back Taffy's lips, the worn teeth little planets in the gloom, and push her nose into the sticky warmth and breathe.

It felt shameful but it took her away from herself, down into a nest of damp leaves, the loam of another world in which she felt understood. It was the smell of a sweet decay that felt as familiar as Adam's sniffs.

Now she would give anything to have Taffy lying next to her. The cave was dark and quiet, but out in the wilderness, the blackness was filled with wind and predators. On the far side of the cave, the tourists were two dead sacks.

There was a rustling in the bushes near the washing line, and Grace pulled her head up and searched the darkness. The bathing costume was an amputee, limbless and headless. She lay down again, her heart sending shudders through her chest, and turned back to the ceiling. Jesus's eyes were closed. She didn't matter.

As she lay staring at the rock, her face was filled with too many eyes, and her mind leapt across the sky – above the sleeping villages and barren highways, the flaring towns and the lawns kennels, to her bedroom. Robert on his side snoring quietly, his clothes in a heap on the floor, a glass of water going brackish on the bedside table. She wanted to be there, stuck against his back.

*Yellow flowers. Windscreen. Newspaper in the air. The smell of brakes. Gabriel screaming, twisting the cuff of her blouse. Strangling skin. Onlookers in flip-flops. The smell of leather.*

The wine gradually seeped in. On her way down into sleep's dark barrel, Grace touched the sides, felt old wood. At the bottom, she began dreaming.

She was walking down an alley lined with antique shops. Gabriel was holding her hand, only he didn't look like Gabriel. He was blond and had a monkey's tail. She went into a secondhand clothes shop packed with rails of ballgowns and cloaks, and felt each one. They were pearly and large. When she looked around, she couldn't see Gabriel. The shop assistant with the horn-rimmed glasses said she hadn't seen him either. She said she hadn't even see him come in with Grace. She walked between the racks of clothes, calling his name. The coats rustled and swayed as she moved past them. Then she saw a tail sticking out of the gowns, but when she pulled back the hangers she saw a monkey sitting with its back to her, preening one leg.

It was still dark when she awoke. The cave's damp smell seemed stronger at that hour, darker and wetter with corners not yet discovered, like an open, sleeping mouth in which small creatures had been allowed to lurk. Grace's own mouth felt as though it were

filled with a thousand desert ants. She lay on her back in the sleeping bag, hunching her shoulders down into the warmth as the cold pinched the air above her. She rubbed her feet together and felt how the socks bunched and stuck. Across the cave, the tourists slept. Blue shiny larvae. The empty bottle lay at the entrance. Grace sat up and stretched for the sweatshirt she had tossed off in the night.

As usual, it hit her quickly – that snuffing in her head, the bashing of her heart, the dry possibility of vomit. Closing her eyes, she put her head between her legs and took deep, measured breaths. Too much air too quickly made it worse.

She hadn't told anyone about the attacks. Even after the first one, she had lied to her mother. She had told her she had hit her head on the birdbath, and that Lisa's mother had seen the whole thing. Even Lisa hadn't known. Even Robert didn't know.

She had recently gone for tests. An unfriendly nurse with epaulettes had jammed a needle into her arm and dropped the blood into three vials. Thyroid, blood sugar, iron. Grace had looked away, not wanting to see her inside on the outside. She didn't want to see the bottles clutched against the woman's blue uniform, labelled and capped like perfume samples.

Initially, the ECG had been novel. She liked medical equipment – it was like spirit levels. There was always a green eye somewhere.

When they had lived on the farm, Adam had fallen off his motorbike, and Grace had begged to see him in hospital. She had imagined his head fat with crepe bandages, a forest of tubes and wires hanging like creepers from steel poles. Her father had banned her from going. "It's not a pretty sight," he had said.

Adam had never worn a helmet. He had said the track he'd built behind the shed was made of compost and chicken manure, and was soft. Anyway, he never came off.

The woman doing the ECG had been round and short, a plait of black hair like a blade down her back. As the nurse fitted the rubber cap onto her head, plugging in the

electrodes, Grace had felt her jersey against the back of her head. She had closed her eyes and absorbed the warmth.

After checking the plugs, the woman had moved across to a laptop on a nearby table. In her peripheral vision, Grace had seen thin red wires stretching out to the left, veins ready to drain her thoughts. When the woman instructed her to open and close her eyes, Grace had tried to shut down. She had wanted the screen to be filled with smooth, regular waves.

After looking at the ECG results, the doctor had said she'd been having panic attacks, and should cut down on her alcohol intake, consider taking medication.

He'd asked her if she had fallen asleep during the test and showed her a copy of her brainwaves, pointing to a patch of calm. Grace had smiled. Her mind had learnt to disappear. On the page, the black lines rose and fell like knitting.

Now Grace's mind felt unstitched. She didn't know why she had woken so early. Beyond the crack of the cave, mist spread a cataract across the hills and the river continued. She lay down again, burrowing into the sleeping bag. It was too early to get up. She closed her eyes and sank back into absence. She travelled along a smooth black road.

## 12

*The bus bumps to a halt outside the boys' school and Simon gets on. He searches for an empty seat, and sits down in front of Grace. His auburn hair has been recently cut and the white skin behind his ears is exposed. He holds onto the seat in front of him as the bus pulls off. He has short freckled fingers and pale hairs on his wrist. Grace looks out the window, feeling him too close.*

*From her seat near the back of the bus, she can see Adam's head. It looks too big for his body and the collar of his white school shirt is sticking up over his nape. He is wearing his leather watch with the pouch over the face, and Grace feels mildly embarrassed.*

*It's a privilege to be sitting back here, with the boys who shave and the girls who roll the tops of their skirts up to show off their legs. Simon's blazer glitters with metal badges: swimming team, debating, drama society. He smells of pink sweets and scalp.*

*The bus is cramped, and the brown vinyl seat sucks her skirt and sticks her blouse to her back. On her arm, beneath the short sleeve, the inoculation scar speaks to Grace of summer. Of exams and swimming pools, Pop Shop and shorts. Someone at the back is smoking.*

*She has never spoken to Simon, but she knows everything about him. His family moved here at the beginning of the year and his father runs the city mortuary. He wants to be a vet. He is popular and writes plays.*

*He leans across the aisle to talk to Ronel and Grace feels a pang of envy. His shoulders are so near. She writes him a letter each day, but doesn't give them to him. She writes them on her bed, pressing on a file, decorating the borders in leaves and flowers.*

*The afternoon bus is noisy. It slows and stops at intervals, the door hissing open to deposit pupils into cars growing hot under trees.*

*One stop to go. Up front, Grace can see Adam getting untidy. A chubby boy with curly hair is shouting across the aisle at him. His voice is garbled and his face is turning red. A red ant itching to bite. The boy stands up and moves across to where Adam is sitting, hanging onto the back of the seat. A button is missing on his shirt and white skin pushes out.*

*"Your feet stink like old cheese, Jackson. And you wear garters. Only moffies and girls wear garters." The boy's face goes redder, his small eyes retracting into the pudge of his face. Calvin is pulling on Adam's shirt, telling him to ignore the boy, urging him to stay out of it. Grace pretends not to notice, but as the ant boy raises his voice, Grace thinks she*

*should say something to the bus monitor. She turns to tell him, but he is talking about motorbikes to the headboy.*

*A yellow police van hurtles past the bus, swooping in ahead as it howls up the blind rise. Adam is now standing up, his head in line with the chest of his tormentor. "At least I'm not fat," Adam spits at the boy, puffing out his chest and tightening his fists into balls. The boy's face freezes and there is a hushed pause. Then a savage flurry of blood and forearms and shirts. The boy hits Adam on the nose. Three times. Adam shoves the boy into the glass partition of the driver's seat.*

*Simon rushes to the front and pulls the boys apart. Grace wants to go to her brother, who now sits sullenly, his face a stew of blood and tears. Instead, she hooks her bottom lip with her teeth and stares out of the window. Sugarcane, the Miller's entrance with the rusted sign, the bowling-green slopes of the grass farm. The bus is quiet and the fat boy sits across the aisle from Adam, touching his head. Simon returns to his seat and frowns at Grace.*

*"You should look out for your brother. Someone could get hurt."*

*He sits back down in front of her, adjusting his blazer, pulling on the cuffs. She stares at the back of his head, wanting to say something. He knows who I am. He knows who I am.*

*She turns back to the window.*

*The bus slows down at the dirt road. Adam heaves his bag onto his shoulders and clammers down the metal stairs, waiting for the door to open. Grace gets up and makes her way down the aisle, bumping elbows and shoulders.*

*They climb out and the bus pulls off, its windows shuddering, black exhaust smoke dissolving above the tarmac. Adam walks silently, his head down. A square of blood is drying darkly beneath his nose.*

*"Mum's going to kill you for that shirt," Grace says. The afternoon air is hot, and the paddocks smell of manure. Adam trails his feet, the black school shoes matte with dust. Grace looks over. He's crying, the tears collecting on the wound. "Hey," she says, putting one arm over his shoulder. "Don't cry. I'm sorry I didn't help you. I should have. I should*

*have beaten off that oversized sumo wrestler and given him a few karate chops around his ears. Now you look like a really weird version of Hitler.”*

*Adam smiles blearily, rubs his eyes and sniffs. She squeezes him to her and ruffles his hair. “I’m really sorry. I won’t ever let anything like that happen to you again. I shall protect and serve!” she says, in a mock American accent. Adam laughs.*

*In the field next to the silage tower, lambs are shadowing their mothers. Around each tail is a black rubber band, strangling the flesh until it falls off.*

## 13

She could smell eggs, could sense beneath the calcium and ivory, the whorls of matter holding the yolk in place. In biology class, they were told to find the dark spot on the yolk. It had repulsed her and she had wanted to dig her fingernails into it. She remembered how she would count how many times Kate Marsh used the word “I”, how she would look out of the louvre windows at the flower beds filled with government plants – strelitzias, hydrangeas, sword ferns – and focus on the loam beneath them. The dark spot on the sun.

Now she wished for shade. On the other side of her eyelids, the sun simmered, and in her sleeping bag, she felt like a boil-in-a-bag meal, a sauce of wine and sleep coating her flesh. She was thirsty and needed water, but she kept her eyes closed and lay still. She didn't know how to find shade anymore, but this had been a choice – to stagger out into the sun with all her skin exposed.

She couldn't face the tourists. Night made interacting easier – and there had been the wine. Now it would be bread and coffee and an analysis of how everyone had slept. Margaret would have coloured in her eyebrows and her hair would be damp and combed. There would be a smell of other people's shampoo, of strawberries and fake ocean.

Morning was such a responsibility. Grace preferred evening. By then she was ready to submit herself to its vacuum, opening up to the death of day. From her balcony, she would watch the sun fall into the sea, while others watched from the beach, turning away as soon as the sun lumped the horizon. Grace would keep watching until the last bulge was gone.

The tourists were talking. Margaret was asking James if he wanted two eggs, her voice jamming the air, its upward inflection at the end of sentences leaving behind a scattering of questions.

Grace would have to get up, and she would have to do it slowly. She didn't want to black out in front of them. She lay listening to the activity around her – the opening and closing of zips and packet, the talking, the planning. She was back in the ambulance. The paramedics were tearing plastic, pulling out instruments, talking, planning. She turned her head to the side, searching for Gabriel; looking for him in the past. She saw his dark fringe, him sitting cross-legged in a mess of wrapping paper. She saw him in the marine light of the movies. She watched him playing soccer. Getting into the car.

She sat up. Orange and black flowed into her head. When the doctor had asked her to describe it, she had told him it was like a piece of film burning on a projector. White, then molten, widening into orange, dissolving into black. He had frowned and nodded.

She breathed slowly, drawing air in a steady stream.

“Are you alright, pet?” Margaret asked, bending over Grace, her hands on her knees.

The colours had gone.

“You probably sat up too quickly. Probably also the wine. I know James is feeling it a bit this morning. I'd hoped to go for a long walk.”

Grace looked up. Margaret seemed to loom towards the ceiling, her grey curls merging with the rings of lichen. Her nose veered up at the tip, and from down here, the thin lines of her eyebrows curved even more sharply. Grace wondered if she had brought a mirror.

"I'm okay. It's just the sun," said Grace, blinking her eyes. "If you like, I can show you where some bushmen paintings are. It's a nice walk, about six hours there and back."

Grace could have kicked herself. She didn't want to spend the day with these egg-eating tourists. She had been thinking of heading back down, perhaps driving back to the city.

Margaret bent closer, her eyebrows raised into a V. "That would be super. We've always wanted to see the paintings, we read about them in a book at the curio shop."

James was sitting hunched over a cup of coffee, holding the cup with both hands and blowing on the surface. Steam twirled up and his cheeks were pink.

"Morning," he mumbled, turning back to his blowing.

"Would you like bacon and eggs? I haven't washed the pot yet." Margaret watched as Grace pulled out a clean T-shirt from her pack. There was something softer about the woman this morning, as though the wilderness had infiltrated her sleep, coaxing her out of her ordered existence, smoothing out the sharp edges.

Grace ate eggs with thin teeth, picking at the white that wobbled and chucked up phlegm onto the bread. In her mouth, the food made a moist sound. Eating soil. She was eating herself from the inside, the sun in her eyes and the moles on her arms growing wider, joining up in a drift of pigment.

Margaret gathered the plates and pots together. "I'll come down with you," Grace said, tucking the washing-up liquid beneath her arm. Perhaps she had been too harsh. Perhaps Margaret also relied on distance.

Grace bent to pick up her toiletries bag. As she rose, she saw the lichen. There was no Jesus or George Harrison. This morning, it was just a smear of green, like steamed spinach.

Holding the bag of dirty dishes in one hand, Margaret clutched onto clumps of grass as she walked slowly down the path, her pink nail-polish bright against the green. Grace

could only think of the dirt packing itself under those perfect arcs. She could see Margaret's toes bunching under the white canvas of her shoes.

Grace strode ahead, glad to be out in the sun. A smell of hair and skin rose from her and she could taste metal, as though wine rust was leaking from her brain. She couldn't wait to drink the river.

Squatting on a flat rock, Grace unpacked her toiletries and squeezed some shower gel into her hand. Its scent coated the air; it was men and mints and dashboards. She didn't want to look at Margaret, and could hear her crab-walking, the pots and plates jangling, the rose pincers grasping.

Grace closed her eyes and foamed her face.

There was a metallic crash as Margaret stepped onto a boulder, and the packet flew through the air and lodged itself between two rocks in the middle of the river.

"Blast!" Margaret said, slapping her thigh. "It's ridiculous to have the river so far away. It's such a to-do. I told James I'd prefer a nice country hotel somewhere, reading books and lying by the pool. But, no, James always knows better."

Grace hopped across to the packet. She couldn't think of anything worse than a country hotel smug with tanning and reading. When she was fourteen, she had sulked for an entire weekend when her father had booked them into a Holiday Inn for a mountain break. The only consolation was finding a cricket jersey in one of the hotel cupboards, which she'd packed into her luggage for Adam. He had said wearing other people's clothes gave him the creeps.

Grace fished out the bag and made her way towards Margaret.

This morning, she reminded Grace of Lynn, just older. Lynn liked shopping malls and Gabriel's wardrobe was stacked with designer clothes – canvas sneakers in camouflage, fleecy tops with hoods, flared jeans. There would be a label somewhere, a small, rectangular piece of status stitched into one of the seams.

Holidays were spent in timeshare apartments on the coast, or in country hotels with wrap-around verandas and raffia chairs. There were always waiters. Grace had offered to take Gabriel camping, but the answer was always the same: There are so many bugs out there.

Grace had once taken Gabriel to the zoo. The place was a dry, sagging camp in the middle of endless thornveld. No one went there anymore and there had been reports about diseased animals. But the lions hadn't looked too bad. Their hair was even and the colour of mayonnaise and Gabriel had squealed with terror and delight when one of them padded across to the fence. Grace had enjoyed watching him as he held on to the fence, pushing his face against the mesh, examining the tigers, lemurs and leguaans. His eyes had darted as he soaked up the richness of muscle and hair. He said the crocodiles looked like lazy dogs.

Margaret crouched next to the river, her shoes sunk into the coarse sand, a thin wind lifting her hair, exposing a pale hairline. She was bent over the pot, wiping furiously.

"If you chuck a bit of sand into the pot and swirl it around with water and soap, it should come clean," Grace said, one hand inside her T-shirt as she washed her armpits.

Margaret looked up, her face pinched with indignation. "Surely that's not hygienic. All sorts of animals have probably walked over this sand, never mind all the bacteria we can't see. I'll just stick to my cloth, thanks. It'll come off in time."

A pair of thrushes sat watching from a rock across the river. They were silent on their stick legs, their wings folded into their bodies. Grace wondered what they saw. Two humans, one moving stiffly through the softness, a jigsaw piece that didn't fit. The other, she hoped, was blurred into the surroundings, like an object seen from a coin-operated telescope. Grainy, indistinguishable and barely there.

At the top of the hill, Margaret begged for a break. "Can we stop for a few minutes? I need water. I haven't done this much exercise since we went to Mallorca two years ago.

James insisted we hire bicycles and I went home with such stiff legs I could hardly get out of bed.”

A lick of sweat shone on her brow and the edges of her eyebrows had melted into her skin. Flecks of dried saliva stuck to her lips and she wiped her forehead with the sleeve of her shirt. In her blouse, she looked like a travel agent.

They found a collection of flat rocks and sat down. James’s face had turned the colour of stoep polish, and he dug in his daypack, pulled out a jersey and used it to wipe the back of his neck. A few long white hairs sprouted out of his collar.

They sat in silence. Margaret gulped back a bottle of water, stopping to gasp and catch her breath. Then she sat with her head between her knees while James studied the guide book.

A warm breeze swept across the yellow grass, leaving behind a sound of a hundred skirts rustling. This was what wheatfields must sound like. Across the valley, a pubic forest clung to a cleft, and above it cliffs in red and salmon fought their way to the top. Grace wished for an animal. Any animal. She wanted to watch unseen as it meandered through its daily business. Even a baboon would do. Best would be an otter. She had shown Gabriel their droppings, like dry crab mousse, all dense with crushed bone and claw. He had insisted on taking one home. To study, he had said. Grace had laughed. Boys of six don’t study. They explode ticks on heaters.

She felt her head speckling with orange, the dots fireflies in a swelling dark. She pictured Gabriel in white, his shoulders thin as an orphan’s. Her chin fluttered and she put down her head, concentrating on the rock, how it was composed of millions of grains, some sparking in the sun. Grace felt the rosary of stitches. *Let him be okay. Let him be okay.*

“Shall we press on, then?” she asked the tourists. Their flushed faces and heavy shoulders answered her. “It’s just over this hill and up a short path. I promise it’s worth it.”

James groaned theatrically as he pulled himself up. "You do realise we're pensioners who would normally be at home watching Wimbledon on the telly," he said, feigning a hobble.

Grace laughed. She felt safe with him – he was intuitive and uncomplaining. Margaret was hard work.

Down the path, the wind dropped and the silence was broken only by the thud of shoes on packed soil. Their steps were almost synchronised and Grace could hear the hollow tread of James's boots. Margaret's walking skulked in the background, her thin shoes obediently following where the others had been. Grace knew she was trailing at the back, but the shelter was almost in view and they could rest there.

Grace watched her feet. The thick socks were folded down over the tops of her boots and the bulk made her legs look like a child's. Robert said they could carry her a hundred miles.

It was Saturday. She wondered what he was doing. The malls would smell of popcorn and plastic shoes and the school playgrounds would be screamless. He had probably gone to the beach, tucking the board under his arm, putting on his shoes at the door. Robert revelled in the weekend and didn't like to waste time. He didn't mind going to the supermarket on a Saturday; he said he enjoyed being among the throngs of shoppers. The smell of wares from the stand on the pavement made Grace feel ill and the sight of families shopping for fruit made the world seem too small.

And Adam? She hoped he was rescuing water boatmen and spiders from the pool, a cigarette jammed in the side of his mouth and a jazz album playing through the speakers on the veranda.

Striding out, feeling loose and warm, Grace watched herself walk. As she threw out her foot, flexing it and then making contact with the ground, the long muscle in her shin bulged. *I could walk a hundred miles. I could walk anywhere. Away.*

Above, the slow dart of a plane moved across the sky, bald-headed, confident in its ability to stay afloat. Its screws and bolts were hammered down tight enough to keep the metal from flapping off. Inside the plane were sachets of tomato sauce, the pickie smell of cold sandwiches, seats with rubbed vinyl where a thousand arms had brushed against each other and contracted. Internal flights.

Grace watched its silence, imagining a stowaway clinging to the undercarriage amid the roar of diesel and rubber. He would be in rags and have ice in his hair. Somewhere overland, he would fall off onto a lawn, frozen and stiff.

Looking up at the crags, she breathed in deeply. The air was vacant and balanced.

"Look. There's the shelter," Grace said, turning to the tourists and pointing at a dark patch on the top layer of rock. "It looks quite small from here, but it curves around the corner. We can have our sandwiches there."

James stopped and put his hands on his hips. He was puffing. Margaret was still coming down the path, walking gingerly.

"I think I've got blisters," she said, wincing and looking behind at her heels. "I've got plasters, but they're in the cave. I'll have a look when we get to the shelter."

The air inside the cave was cool and organic. James pulled off the daypack and went to examine the walls and Grace pointed out the prime spots. The paintings weren't easy to see; the ochre blended with the sandstone and some had begun to fade.

People had scratched graffiti onto the back wall. *Dinesh loves Primmy. Brad was here.* The thin strokes were jagged and yellow; underfoot, stones lay like chalk.

"Look! Here's one," James said, turning to find Margaret. He crouched in the corner and brought his face close to the rock, and Grace squatted next to him.

Four eland, their heads shrunk onto bulky, square bodies, arched across the surface in autumnal coats. They were a frieze of dreams leaping across a lunar scape, their bodies sacks of muscle, white flashes illuminating the belly and legs. Behind them, two long, black human figures ran on bicycle legs, their arms outstretched.

"My, they are quite something," said Margaret behind them. "It's amazing to think they're so old."

Grace stared at the figures. She could feel herself being drawn into the paintings, her chest opening up inside. The smell of hooves dug into her nostrils. It was raw and wild and galloping; horses with flattened ears and dust thundering. She closed her eyes.

When she was at school, everyone had horses. On Mondays, they came to school with sunburnt noses. On weekends, they won rosettes. Her father had said horses were too much trouble.

She had ridden once. Her father had paid for an outride in the mountains. He'd told her to cling on. Adam had ridden next to her, fiddling with the saddle, turning around to look behind them as the camp disappeared from view.

She remembered the wind in her hair, the giddiness in her head as the thorn bushes had flashed by. The bursting of her cells as she clung on with her knees.

Margaret found another painting on the side wall. Five figures danced in a circle, their black legs leaping out as though they were doing the splits.

A hiccup of white light snapped in the corner. James was crouched in front of the eland, his digital camera aimed for the next shot.

Grace bit into her sandwich. She could taste the yeast, the days she ate lunch with her father in his darkened room. It all seemed so far away. All that remained were the crusts.

On their way back down, Grace paused to tie a shoelace. James brushed past her, striding out ahead, brown socks pulled up to his knees. A sliver of leg gleamed white at the back and his green shirt was gummed to his back with sweat. Between them, the path grew longer.

"He always does this," Margaret puffed behind her. "Goes marching off, leaving me behind. I don't know why I go on holiday with him. He never waits. Always wants to get there first. He's like a little boy."

Grace pretended to focus on the nicks on her legs. She didn't want to be stuck with Margaret, and she too felt the urge to stride out into the breeze. Up ahead, there was a fork in the path and a river crossing.

"Maybe we should try and catch him," Grace said, straightening up.

Even though they had been in the sun all day, Margaret looked pale, sweat pooling in every pore and her hands trembling.

"Are you okay? Do you want a rest or some water or something to suck on?"

Margaret frowned, pulling a strand of hair out of her eyes. "I'm fine, absolutely fine. I'm not an invalid. I'm just not used to the heat. Just don't leave me behind."

They started along the path. The afternoon sun stretched long shadows in the grass and a protea tree rummaged dry fingers through a wall of shade. As they waded through it, Grace felt her own skin cool and contract. She needed a swim.

"I hope James remembers which way to go. There's a fork just around the corner. Right takes you to the cave, left goes all the way back to the camp. Maybe he'll wait for us," Grace said.

"Wait for us?" Margaret's footsteps stopped. "Wait for us?"

Grace came to a halt and turned around. Margaret had sat down on a rock at the side of the path, her hands flopped on her knees, their pink knives drawn. She was out of breath.

"When I married James, I was nineteen. I hadn't even been out of Horsham, let alone to London. James was this real man about town. He had a good job and a fancy car. I thought he was fabulous. So when we started courting and he eventually popped the question, I was over the moon. It was like winning first prize. Now I wish I had just settled for Malcolm Gladley. He's a vicar now."

Grace looked past Margaret towards the mountain border. "So what's the difference between Malcolm Gladley and James?"

"Malcolm Gladley would wait. He would worry."

Margaret bent over to pull up her socks, sniffing wetly. Grace knew she was crying.

"Hey," said Grace, crouching next to Margaret. "You're probably just overheated and tired. You might even be a bit dehydrated, you should have some water. James probably just wants to get back to start a fire. I'll help you over the river. We'll just take it easy."

Grace reached into her bag for the water. "Here. Just sip it slowly."

Grace watched as Margaret put her head back and sipped. The plastic bottle looked vulgar in her hands. Those nails were meant for sherry.

Margaret replaced the lid and wiped her eyes with her sleeve, her make-up leaving behind a smudge of black.

"Right, let's carry on. See if James is waiting." Grace snapped her backpack straps together and waited as Margaret slid awkwardly off the rock. Grace knew she would have to keep her going.

As they walked, Grace asked her questions. How old was her daughter? How long had they had the paint shop? Did they have a garden? She steered all the questions towards home.

As they rounded a corner, Grace saw them – a troop of baboons ambling up the opposite slope. Babies with thin hair rode on the backs of their mothers and a large male was too busy delousing himself to notice them.

"Look," whispered Grace, "a whole troop."

Margaret clutched Grace's arm. Her eyes were wide.

The baboons walked randomly, bending over to grub in the soil, their fur merging into khaki and rocks. Grace peered through the bushes, moving her eyes from one group to another. She had spent most of her childhood wishing she could be an animal. Her favourites had changed over the years. First it had been cheetahs and she had cut out pictures from her father's National Geographics and stuck them to the wall under her bed. That way, she could hide with them and her destruction wouldn't be discovered. After that it

had been the three-toed sloth, then the giraffe and finally pigs. Now she just watched. How easily the baboons wandered through the grass. The mountains had no boundaries.

A baby baboon clung on as its mother clambered up the stump of a protea tree. Its pink ears, like curled shells, stuck out between strands of coarse hair and its fingers disappeared into the fur on the mother's back. While the mother settled herself into the bough, the baby looked across to where Grace and Margaret stood. Its hooded eyes became Gabriel's deep orbs, swimming then focusing, beckoning her to cross the veld, to come closer. Grace stared at the baby, wanting to stroke its fur and scratch the top of its head. Riding on the back of its mother, the little ape looked smug in its safety. Nothing could harm him if he stayed close.

The male yawned and scratched the back of his ear with a heavy hand. Grace wondered if he was the same baboon that had watched her bathe. Was she now stamped in his memory?

"They're amazing," whispered Margaret, so close to Grace that beneath the perfume she could smell old teeth. "Wait till I tell the people back home."

Grace imagined the people back home: supermarket cashiers in skin so luminescent you could see blue veins; friends with hip replacements and photo albums; a ticking house; a cat. She was almost glad Margaret was with her.

The baboons moved up the hill, receding into the bushes, and the male did a last check before turning into the foliage.

The women continued walking, Grace conscious of the chatter of her voice, aware of the occasional grunt behind her. Margaret was breathing heavily and her sighs fluttered around them.

At the bottom of the hill, the path split. James was nowhere to be seen.

They paused by the river and Grace squatted next to it and drank, the sun above starting to spread nectarine across the clouds. The water was too good for mere tasting.

"Let's have a swim," she said, pulling at her T-shirt.

“You must be joking. I didn’t bring my costume. Anyway, it’s too cold.” Margaret folded her arms. “You go ahead, though.”

Grace picked her way across a huddle of boulders to a small pool collecting the sunset on its surface. Grace unzipped her shorts, folding them on top of her T-shirt. Looking round at Margaret standing staring up at the ridge, Grace decided to leave her underwear on. Then, without a second thought, she waded into the water, slipping into the depths. Rose water.

She floated on her back, the water soaking her ears, blackening the sound. The only thing she could hear was her breathing, and her lungs were familiar. Above her, a lone cloud slid into the syrup.

Everyone was far away, and in this deafness Grace could see them more loudly. She could sense the heavy rustle of her mother’s apron as she sweated over roasts. She felt the gap left behind by Adam, how she had tried to fix it by being good, by visiting her parents on Sundays, smiling for all of them. She bore her father’s dry hands as he held hers when she brought him a glass of water. It was all about gaps and spaces and things left unsaid.

Adam had chosen to lift anchor, and had cut himself off from their parents. “They always preferred you, anyway,” he had said. He had created his own family, assembling them around him, cutting them off on his own terms. His absence was like a hole in the ocean, whirling and sucking with the flotsam he had left behind. Grace felt it, and was stung by it. Her father never mentioned it, choosing instead to talk about Adam as though he were temporarily gone, on a noble voyage from which he would eventually return. Her father still believed he would send postcards; still hoped Adam would return, a child snuffling under the brim of a hat, sunburnt and distracted.

But Grace knew he had drifted away for good. Weighted down by that, she moved within Adam’s void, making up for his absence by being present, helping her mother in the kitchen, setting the table, dusting the sideboard where photographs of Gabriel were framed in too much gold.

She brought books to her father and sat awkwardly on his bed, reading out snippets from the newspaper. When she was preparing to leave, he would ask her when next she was coming. Could she bring Gabriel? Grace hated watching her father with Gabriel; the way he winced in pain when Gabriel flung himself on top of him. The way her father's watery hands would rub Gabriel's arms, and he would ask: "And how's your daddy?"

But she knew that despite Adam's absence, and despite the resentment she felt about standing in for him, she was always tethered to his dark dock. She still sought him out as an ally, balking against the sunlight and the smiling families eating sandwiches on the shore.

Robert didn't mind gritty sandwiches. He couldn't understand why, on a Friday evening, Grace would collect her keys from the table, take a bottle of wine off the shelf and head out of the door to visit Adam.

"He's an anti-social bastard," he would say, his eyes raging. "Why don't we do something nice tonight? Just the two of us?"

But she didn't want to do something nice. Being with Adam allowed her to float into a reality she craved. It was swampy and wild and unformed.

Now, as she lay in the water, her eyes tracking the cloud, she wondered what would happen if she swam back to Robert on the shore? She feared there would be nothing left, that she would dissolve in the salt.

Adam kept her afloat.

But she knew he was drowning her.

The swim had made her legs move easier and she could feel wet hair on the back of her T-shirt. They walked in silence, the mountains settling back into the blue of twilight.

They were nearly there. Grace stopped to wait as Margaret limped down the path, trying to walk as lightly as possible.

"We're nearly there," said Grace. "See that sticky-out bit of rock? We're just below it. Hopefully James has lit a fire."

Grace had decided this would be her last night. She would pack up and set off early the next morning, then it was just three hours to the city. Three hours in which to prepare.

Around the last corner, Grace could see the cave flickering with fire. The river gushed loudly and somewhere in the distance, a baboon barked. Darkness had begun its descent, flowing into every hollow.

"We made it," said Grace, turning up the path towards the cave. "And it looks like James has prepared a welcoming party." She could feel Margaret on her heels.

"I'm going to give him a piece of my mind," she said.

The cave was neat. James had stacked the packs and laid out the sleeping bags. The walls leapt as the glow from the fire lengthened and shrank, and there was a popping noise from the burning wood.

James sat on a rock, warming his hands as he stared into the flames. He looked up and smiled as they entered.

"Ah, there you are. I was starting to get worried."

Grace looked across at Margaret, who threw her daypack on the ground.

"Worried? Worried?" Margaret said. "If you were so worried, why didn't you wait for us? You went striding ahead like there was no tomorrow, leaving me behind with blisters. And now you're worried? We could have got lost or had an accident or you could have taken the wrong path."

Grace busied herself with clearing out her daypack, throwing the bread packet into the rubbish bag and shaking out the crumbs.

Grace wished it were morning; she could be done with the tourists. They operated on a different wavelength and their static scratched the air.

James stood next to Margaret, his arms around her and his mouth pressed into her hair. He apologised as she sobbed.

"It's just that you always leave me behind," she wailed. "I'm always the one trailing behind."

James pulled Margaret close and looked across at Grace. She was sure she saw him roll his eyes. He folded his jersey and placed it on a rock, patting it for Margaret to sit on. Then he knelt in front of her and took off her shoes. She sniffed loudly and pulled out her hankie. James examined her feet. They were clean and smooth, neat meringues of skin. One of the heels had a raw blister.

"It's bad, but not too bad," James said. "Nothing old Doc Jimmy can't sort out. Let me look in my medicine chest."

He unzipped a pocket in his pack and pulled out a bag bulging with tubes of cream and plasters.

Margaret leaned back as James smeared Savlon on her heels.

"It tickles!" she squealed.

Colour had returned to Margaret's cheeks and Grace saw she was sunburnt. Once her wounds were salved and stuck, she changed into her yellow sweatshirt and began preparing dinner, humming she emptied a tin of tuna into a pot of tomato puree.

James pulled up a rock and watched.

"Okay, I've got a joke," said James. "This guy goes into a Muslim strip bar and guess what everyone is shouting?"

Grace shrugged her shoulders. She hated punchlines.

"Show us your face! Show us your face!"

Margaret giggled and turned from the stove to smile at James.

"Didn't you get that, Grace?" asked Margaret, waving a spoon around. "I think it's so funny."

Grace wanted to go to bed. The tourists had seen cave paintings and groaned along the paths while Grace had distracted them with birds and plants. They had drunk from the river and been swept along by sheets of sky. Now they were comparing wounds.

Herringbones of scratches nicked James's shin and a sun blister on his upper lip glistened with lip balm.

Grace sat near the entrance to the cave, shooting cigarette smoke out of her mouth. The outside had changed, shifted into a darker spectrum. The river choked its way through the mist, slipping out sounds as though it were talking in its sleep. The sky had disappeared, taking with it its torches. The lack of stars made Grace feel abandoned, as though a team had moved in and dismantled the stage. As though the search parties had been disbanded.

Inside the cave, James and Margaret had relaxed. Their English house lay far behind, cool and ticking. Their paint shop was in good hands. The bathroom shelf sat happily vacant, waiting for their return.

"Do you want some supper?" Margaret's voice seemed warmer, the vowels fattened by the sun. She had lost her circus face, the crayoned eyebrows replaced by a thin path of pale hair.

Grace felt trapped, as though the air around her had turned yellow, while all around the tourists, pink glowed. They were so clearly made of skin and flesh. They were so obviously human. Grace shrank back even further into her haze.

She missed Robert. It was a feeling she had not experienced before. Now it had become a tension that stretched down the back of her head and throat into her chest where her rib cage clenched its teeth. What was she doing out here? Why had she decided to run? There had been no crocodiles lurking in the river. There was a boy. There had been some damage. She wanted to see him.

"Do you want supper or not?" Margaret asked, her eyes burrowing into the yellow.

"That would be nice."

As she answered, a gurgle rose up in her belly. Grace smiled.

The smell of hot tuna mingled with dust. James had emptied the contents of his backpack on to the floor in front of him and was sorting through the clothes. Pairs of white socks were rolled up into each other.

Cold air trickled into the cave and Grace wished she had brought her fleece. Her toes felt red and frozen.

"We read that winter is the best time to come because there's no rain. But I didn't think it would get this cold. It's like a night at home," said Margaret. Without make-up, she looked destitute, as though her face had been robbed of its décor. She sat hunched over on the rock, rubbing her legs and blowing into her hands.

Grace tried to imagine them having sex, but could only see darkness. A bedside lamp would be clicked off and an eiderdown would roll noiselessly. It was hard to imagine anyone having sex, even herself. It was as though people underwent a nocturnal change, like werewolves, bleeding through the everyday into a realm of dense pressure, of teeth and hands and clenched eyes.

Sex with Robert was never furious enough. He touched her with coral fingers, reaching out with tentacles, entwining her, enveloping her, absorbing her. There was never enough air between them and Grace felt powerless to the pull of damp tissue, growing smaller and smaller until she was a white cloth waving surrender on the corner of the bed.

He had sex with her as though he loved her. Grace wanted him to hate her. She wanted him to be as removed as a butcher, cracking her open and shoving himself into her darkness so he blotted out the life within. It wasn't enough to be loved.

"I'm going to head back tomorrow," said Grace, standing up and stretching. "How long are you planning on staying?"

James was packing his socks into a side pocket, and with his legs stretched out wide, the mess of clothes littered between them, he looked like a boy who had been told to sort out his room. Margaret sat with her chin in her hands, watching.

"I think we'll stay for another night. After this we're off to Cape Town. I've heard it's beautiful," said James. "Margaret can go off shopping while I find myself a nice pub."

Grace had been to Cape Town. The mountain overlooking the city felt like a dam wall holding back a tide, and she had felt hemmed in, unable to pick her way through the

boundaries. A cable car packed with tourists ran between the ground and sky. These mountains were different. If you wanted to get to the top, you had to walk.

“Supper’s nearly done. Grace, can you pass me your plate.” Margaret was stirring the pot.

There was no wine, not even sherry, but it didn’t matter. Grace was finished here. Tomorrow she would step out of the shade into the brightness.

Margaret dished out the meal and they sat on their rocks, clanging cutlery against tin. Grace didn’t feel like talking.

“So you didn’t tell us what happened in the accident,” Margaret asked, chewing. “I mean, if you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine. Going through something like that can be very traumatic. Especially for someone like you.”

“What do you mean, someone like me?” Grace said, slowly putting down her fork.

“Well, you seem like a sensitive person,” Margaret replied slowly. “I mean, you’re not like our Fiona. She had an accident last year – collided with a bus in the middle of Birmingham. Her whole face was smashed in. It was awful. James and I practically lived by her bedside. But she’s tough. An IT manager for a big insurance company. When she got better, she got straight back in her car and drove that route, just to get it out of her system.”

“Well, when I got better I ran for the hills,” Grace said, confronting Margaret with her eyes. “You see, I just can’t cope like the rest of you.”

Grace dug angrily at her plate, a patch of red spreading across her neck.

James spoke softly. “I think what Margaret is trying to say is that people respond differently to difficult situations. It just came out wrong, didn’t it Madge?”

Margaret stared into the darkness, the plate balanced on her knees. She had stopped eating. Suddenly, she rose, scraped the food from her plate into the pot and clattered utensils on top of it.

“I don’t know what I was trying to say. I was just being concerned. Just trying to be friendly.”

Grace shoved food into her mouth and chewed quickly. She was tired of being inspected. Margaret sat with her back straight and her hands in her lap, like a guru waiting for an appearance. James ate quietly.

Beyond the fire's glow was blackness, as though the night had chipped away the world, leaving only their platform of orange.

Grace ate her last forkful and got up to collect the other plates. As she took James's, she turned to Margaret.

"Look, I'm sorry. It's just been hard." Grace's eyes filled with tears.

Margaret rose and put her hands on Grace's arms. "You poor thing." Grace blinked back the tears. She couldn't be caught crying.

"Anyway," Grace said, turning from Margaret and clattering the pots together, "I'm going back tomorrow and everything will be fine."

She fished out a packet from the rubbish bag and loaded the plates and cutlery into it. "I'm going to do the washing up tonight, so if there's anything else that needs washing, hand it over. Margaret, can I borrow your headlamp?"

In the thickness of the night, the light struggled to illuminate the path. Grace passed through pockets of cold air, like gatherings of winter ghosts breathing. Around her, the bush lay swallowed up. The environment had lost its familiarity and there was something suffocating about it. The sky held a hand over the mouths of valleys.

She stopped by the river at the bottom of the path, directing the beam of the lamp into the water. It looked too shallow and cluttered with pebbles. She moved further downstream, clinging to clumps of grass as she felt her way along the bank. A mist of air rose from the river, entwining its chill around her ankles, and the river was solemn and dark, as foreign as the sea.

Grace found a small beach of sand and squatted down to unpack the bag. The breeze had now become a wind and it shifted in her ears. She pinned down the empty white

tail of the crackling packet with a pebble and filled the pot with water and detergent to soak while she washed the plates.

As she scrubbed and rinsed, Grace's thoughts raced forwards. There would be a house with a garden where things would grow. There might be a child or two, and her parents would drink tea in the garden, surrounded by birds and leaves. There might even be a dog lying in the heat.

Grace smiled to herself as she submerged a plate and flicked a piece of tomato skin from her fingers. For once, she felt certain of the possibilities of the future. It had been so easy to lean towards the past. Nostalgia came wearing green and gold, pulling her in to the folds of its dress, giving off a scent of herself. She had not allowed herself a future. She and Robert had never discussed children, a move or the threat of mortality.

Her father was papery and lived in pyjamas, the cancer gnawing away at his belly, leaving him slow and gravelly. He had long since put away his tennis racquet and the only women laughing at his jokes now were two sausage-armed nurses who helped her mother bathe and dress him.

When she visited, her father smelt sweet, of custard powder, and that same scent infested the linen cupboard where maroon towels were stacked on sheets of floral paper. He wore plasters on his toes and had food in the corners of his mouth. The slivers of wrists escaping the cuff of his pyjamas were often splotted with dried blood. "I have old skin," he would say.

Grace's mother would fuss over the tea tray, laughing at her own shakiness and smoothing the front of her dress. She would usher Grace into the bedroom where her father sat propped against a pile of pillows. They never discussed death. It was too close; too negative. Instead, they trotted on like all good farmers, surveying the landscape from a distance.

A gust of wind pulled the packet from under the rock and scudded it into the sky, dropping and lifting it like a puppet moon. But there was something else in the air, and Grace

stood up and listened. Beyond the wind, she thought she could hear voices. They were low and urgent and there was a crash of metal. She thought she could hear a lamb bleating.

Grace left the dishes and stumbled along the bank, grazing her shoulder on a rock. The voices had stopped, but she thought she could hear scrabbling and pounding. The darkness sucked up the torchlight and Grace yanked off the headlamp, holding it out in front of her, the path bumping its way up as she started to run. She could hear her name being called from the cave above her. Turning up the path, she saw bits of paper strewn all over a bush like Christmas streamers. They clung on and then floated away with the wind. As she sprinted up the path, digging into the dirt with the toes of her boots, the stitches on her leg threatened to burst.

At the entrance, her own backpack lay split open, the contents leaking on to the dust. She rushed over to where Margaret lay in the middle of the cave, moaning. Between gasps of breath, she gurgled Grace's name, blood and spit bubbling from her mouth.

The bleating came from the corner where James lay, his body twisted over a pile of rocks. Grace went over to him and knelt down. His right arm flopped next to him at an inhuman angle and the blood on his face was sticky and bright. One flooded eye looked at her through red.

He took a rattled breath. "Came out of nowhere. Two of them," he whispered, sucking in air. "Didn't even have torches. Took our wallets and camera." James's left eye was swollen and shut, his blue jersey streaked with blood. A piece of lichen clung to his hair, and Grace reached and pulled it off. She put a hand gently on his chest. "Where do you hurt?"

James blinked his red eye. "My arm. My face. My arm."

Margaret turned her head towards them and Grace moved over to her, squatting down to hold her hand. She was in a bad way. Her upper lip was split in the middle and she clutched her ribs with her free hand, the nails dead with dust. Blood leaked out of a hole on top of her head, gluing the hair together and mixing with the dust. Grace could almost smell engine oil.

"Margaret," Grace said, bending down to examine her face. Both eyes were open, but they were distant planets frozen in place. One of her cheeks pressed down into the floor. "Can you hear me, Margaret? Don't move your head."

Her pupils floated upwards, focusing on Grace. Margaret squeezed Grace's hand and made a hissing sound, the breath struggling out in gasps. Her teeth were chattering and her body began to shiver. Grace would have to act fast. She scooped up the three sleeping bags and picked through the clothes littering the floor. Two fleeces, one sweatshirt and a jersey. She could pack T-shirts against their bodies for added warmth. She found James's first-aid bags in a heap next to the dying fire. Gauze, bandages, cottonwool, plasters, the Savlon, bite cream, headache pills and antibiotics.

The gas lamp threw shadows around the place, and Grace began to panic. The men might still be there, hiding in the bushes, their teeth filled with blood. The cave could be surrounded by hundreds of faceless murderers panting in the scrub, signalling to each other, waiting for their next strike.

Something popped in her ear and a wave of dizziness floated in her head. Fear tightened a valve in her chest, squashing her heart into the side of her ribs. Grace could feel the orange coming, the thunder of beastly hooves across ploughed soil. She heard Margaret moan her name, could see her through half-closed eyes. Grace clung to the present. *Mustn't. Can't. Mustn't.* She stumbled towards the ledge and sat down, taking slow breaths through her nostrils, gripping on to clumps of straw.

*This is Adam's bed. He kept prized stones in socks. His name is scratched beneath the surface.* The orange dissipated and the thundering receded. Grace breathed slowly, her eyes fixed on James and Margaret, her chest expanding, her heart settling.

She crouched next to Margaret, pulling the sleeping bag around her and tucking it under her chin. She lay one of the fleeces across Margaret's chest, all the while two scared brown eyes watching her. Grace touched Margaret's forehead.

"It'll be okay," said Grace, "I'm going to clean you up and then I'm going for help. Okay?"

The woman moved her head in a weak nod.

Grace went across to James.

"Do you think you can move off the rocks?" Grace asked, kneeling beside his head.

James shifted his head to look at her with the red eye, the blue iris floating, determined. He nodded. "If you grab my right side, I should be able to."

"Just wait here for a second," Grace said, getting up to pick up a thick branch from the pile of firewood. "We'll need this."

She pulled a pair of Margaret's tracksuit bottoms from the mess, found the bread knife and began ripping the fabric into long yellow strips. James winced and gasped as she gently lifted up his arm enough to allow the branch to pass underneath. She then bound the arm to the wood in a makeshift splint, tying the fabric loosely around the elbow where flecks of stone stuck.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

James opened his eye, his face scrunched up with pain. "I'm okay. Just be careful when you move me."

"Okay, I'm going to try to support the arm and your head. You're going to have to do the rest. Use your feet to shuffle." Grace placed one hand beneath James's head and cradled the arm.

"Okay. Move towards me. One, two three," Grace said, crouching over James and shuffling slowly backwards.

James wormed his way towards her on his back, stopping to catch his breath. After three shuffles, James was clear of the rocks, lying in the dust panting. He was about two metres from Margaret, and Grace wanted to get them together before setting out. Margaret's eyes stared motionless at the ceiling, the wind lifting the corners of the fleece on her chest, a wounded bird trying to lift off.

Grace knelt next to James. "We're going to have to do a few more of those to get you next to Margaret. I'll do the arm thing again if you shuffle yourself this way."

James bit his lip, closed his eye and nodded. As Grace supported his head and arm, she saw the tendons in his neck bulge and redden. He pulled his thighs up and wiggled to the right, breathing heavily through his mouth, the red eye blazing.

In one movement, he was there, easing himself on to the floor next to his wife. Reaching his left arm over his body, James stroked Margaret's shoulder. Tears wet her cheeks as he murmured to her. *It'll be okay.*

Grace covered James with a sleeping bag, unzipped the third one and spread it over both of them. Among the clothes spread across the floor, she found the two inflatable pillows and placed them beneath their heads.

She would have to hurry. Margaret had lost a lot of blood from the wound on her head and she was so pale Grace could see a blue vein pulsing near her temple.

Dousing a piece of cottonwool in Savlon, she dabbed at Margaret's wound, taking care not to push too hard. *It'll be okay.* Some of the blood had thickened and turned dark and Grace pulled the lumps up the strands of her hair.

Unravelling the bandage, Grace used the bread knife to cut a length which she strapped around Margaret's head, securing the end with a safety pin. It wasn't professional, but it was the best she could do.

Grace wasn't sure what to do with James's arm. If she left it on the splint, it might set the bones in the wrong direction. If she unstrapped it, it would lie aching and loose.

"How does your arm feel?" Grace asked. "I don't know what to do with it."

James rolled his head to the right, his eye tracking Margaret's profile as he focused his attention on his arm. Grace could see movement under the sleeping bag.

"Don't move it. Just tell me how it feels," she said.

"It feels okay," James said hoarsely. "Just leave it."

Grace threw a water bottle into her backpack and found one of James's jerseys. She didn't want to leave them. The blackness outside the cave had blotted out everything. Nothing existed anymore except the tourists beneath the blue sleeping bag. It was like leaving someone behind in space to drift through nothingness. Grace feared they would evaporate, get blown into another atmosphere.

They would have to rely on each other. They would have to keep each other going.

She crouched next to them, tucking the sleeping bag under their chins. Blood had already seeped through Margaret's bandage and it looked purple in this light. Grace wondered whether she should leave the lamp on. What if something went wrong with the gas? What if it blew over and set fire to the clothes, filling the cave with flames, trapping them?

She moved the lamp from the floor onto a flat rock and encircled it with bigger rocks. The beam was dimmer, but the rocks acted as a wind barrier and the flame burnt solidly, the canister's gusty hiss waning.

Grace filled a bottle with water from the kettle and placed it next to James.

"Okay, I'm going to get help," said Grace, strapping on the headlamp and pulling on her pack. "Keep talking to each other. Keep warm. It'll be okay."

She bent to stroke Margaret's hair. "Just think about Fiona and how brave she is," Grace said. "And how wonderful it'll be to see her again."

The woman nodded with wet eyes closed.

At the cave's entrance, Grace looked back. Her nostrils burnt. The violence of the motionless bundle filled her with grief. These were someone's elderly parents. They were not supposed to be lying next to a flame, their bodies wrecked and bloody. She thought of her own parents, how many times they wandered off to bed leaving the doors unlocked, spreading themselves out in a sleep ripe for plunder.

Starting down the path, Grace felt the immensity of her task. It was six kilometres to the camp and the sky was like tarmac. Not a cat's eye in sight. She would have to run most of the way.

The wind lifted strands of hair that had escaped the elastic and her cheeks slapped with cold. Adjusting the lamp so the beam struck the path, Grace began to run in small, quick steps.

## 14

Everything was in focus, even though she felt drunk and trapped in a wormhole of rocks and light. The path was fabric, lurching and dipping away from her, and the lamp struggled to find the earth, catching only the crests, sending up raised little heads in a glow of yellow. The elastic was tight and caught the bone behind her ear. Grace could feel the pulse of her brain – full, pumping. Everything was in focus.

On either side of the path, charcoal hills sketched themselves into black and she could feel the sinew of nearby trees, the breeze shuffling them. It was all angles here. The great outdoors. The wilderness. The soft and hard. The outside.

Air rose coldly from the river, baring its black teeth. Grace's eyes already ached from concentrating. A step here, a swing of the torch to see the next log. Her surroundings didn't want her. They wanted hooves and eyes, the smell of fur. She was pink and percussive, the swish of the backpack forming a rhythm with her soles. She listened for it. It was as though someone else was with her.

The wind lifted and burrowed into her nostrils, and Grace was thankful for it. Stillness would leave her too exposed, a clumsy mammal being watched by hunters. The wind filled in the space, finding her, greeting her, ruffling her hair: *It'll be okay.*

She crouched to climb over a rock. The path, filled with chalky stones, ran slippery downhill and the headlamp made Grace nervous. If the men were still here, they would find her. She was a satellite rattling down to the river. They had claimed this darkness as they stalked with their teeth, and they would find the gaps in the black and slip through, finding her back. Slitting through.

James had said they were unarmed – not even a knife or piece of rope. Bare hands. Bare, strange hands smashing and grinding, then drinking tea, washing feet, caressing breasts. A knife would have been easier to understand, or a gun's steel – the blam-blam of movie shooting.

She tried walking with the lamp turned off but it was almost impossible. There were no moon or stars. She stopped to listen, couldn't stop long. Margaret's eyes floated into the darkness. They were scared and savaged. Behind the wind, there was nothing but the rustling of the grass, the skirts of a thousand tribesmen painted ochre. She strained to hear footsteps. The men would probably be headed in the opposite direction, up towards the amphitheatre, out across the border. The cave was behind her, jammed between years of rock. Everything was so clear. This was within her reach. There would be no broken glass.

Grace stumbled on the path. "Damn!"

She snapped on the light. The path ran down a bank and the cool rush of the river rose up below her. Ducking her head into the wind, Grace scanned the ground and kept moving. She had to keep moving forward, dodging the obstacles, trusting her navigation. As she broke into a trot, the backpack jiggled, the sound of bouncing canvas a rhythm of nostalgia. Her mother and father would be behind her, with Adam in the distance. Then, she had relished the feeling of being up front and alone, the grass waving at her as she pounded through the heat, the camping kettle rattling on her back. The victorious feeling as she waited next to the car, watching for the appearance of their sunhats.

Her father would be the first one across the wooden bridge. "You're a real mountain goat," he would say. She had felt like a game ranger.

This urgency was different. This journey was real.

What were James and Margaret feeling? Would Margaret be conscious? Would they be clinging to each other as the wind creaked the bushes? She saw James's eyeball floating in red, a buoy waiting to be reeled in. It was staring at her, keeled over, bulging towards the shore. She saw Gabriel's wide eyes, heard his scream.

She stumbled forward and doubled over, clutching onto a clump of grass. The vomit rolled out in tides of tuna. She vomited and cried, a strangled noise wringing itself from her mouth and nose. She felt warm liquid on her chin and strings of bile heaved out of her. The ground seemed so near.

Grace stayed bent over. Flakes of tuna lay pink in the veld, snagged on the grass. Wiping her face with a sleeve, she inhaled the smell of James. She would do anything to not be there alone. It suddenly all seemed too big.

"Focus," Grace said aloud. She felt like a drunkard, swaying, nauseous, clinging to the grass. *Pull yourself together.* It was getting colder and there were no more pockets of warmth. She could be anywhere. This could be the Grand Canyon, a street after midnight, a meadow, a park. Over there was a tuckshop selling orange juice. Across the way, a man was throwing a ball for his dog.

This is what she had to believe. This was just night.

Stumbling over a lump hidden in the shadows, Grace started running again. The path was match-bright, flickering. Above, a tiny star shone like a pore in black pelt held up to the light.

The path disappeared near the river and rocks littered a patch of sand where the water had run in flood. Grace took off the headlamp and held it out like a torch, snagging the beam on a huddle of boulders and an area of flattened grass. Beyond, the current slid away from her. She inspected the bank, retraced her steps to the path and tried a different direction, struggling through the grass. It was no use. After winding down the river bank, the

path vanished into the sand. Grace flashed the torch across the river to the opposite bank, looking for an exit, a furrow in the reeds. Nothing. She would have to cross.

Snapping the light back onto her head, she started on a flat rock, leaping onto a smaller one in the water. The river was the colour of creosote. As she stretched and lunged, Grace kept an eye on both banks. She didn't want to launch herself into the arms of hunters.

Then a sudden movement, a flash, and a low, dark shape creeping through the grass on the bank. Grace's breathing quickened and she stood still. They had found her. They had crawled after her from the cave, their yellow eyes radiating and their kneecaps thick with soil. Now she was trapped, a flamingo in their sights. She should just put up her hands and surrender. Her bones could die in the grass.

The shape appeared behind the tree and sprang onto a rock.

"No!" shouted Grace, covering her face with her hands. She had seen Margaret's wound. It streamed with blood.

The shape bounded across a row of rocks. There was a splash, then the silence of breath being held. Grace scanned the water.

Further downstream, the otter surfaced, its slick head shining in the pale beam. It slipped out of the water onto the bank and hunched over its prey, lifting its head and pausing, then dipping down again. There were cracking noises.

Grace switched off the light. Around her the water slid, split, then streamed again. She couldn't see the otter but could sense its eyes and whiskers. Down here, the air was thin and cold, and Grace merged with the darkness, knotted to the tugging wind.

As the otter fed, Grace stayed on the rock, her eyes wide open to the night. She laughed with relief and the river answered, chuckling and muttering, feeling its way with wet tongues. The world seemed to exist only in the middle of this river.

There was a splash and the otter was gone, padding on air through the reeds, its wet fur dripping. The water seemed to recede and the wind drowned out the sound of the river. Shivering, Grace turned on the light, shuffling her feet on the rock to face the bank. Still

no path. A dark cloud scudded across the sky and sealed over the star. Now she was truly alone.

Grace hopped onto a small rock, then another, plunging her left foot into the water, the cold spreading up her shin, her bones dissolving. This was no river for swimming.

With a final jump, she landed on the bank and clung to a bush. The elastic around her head was so tight it made her forehead throb. It cut into the graze, cut her back to that afternoon and the mess of glass on the dashboard, the seat. She scrambled up the bank, panting, her nails clawing plants and soil. Gabriel was still so out of reach.

She pushed aside a tangle of bushes and peered into the blackness. Nothing. Not even an animal track. Nearby, a small protea tree, its branches blackened, struggled against the sky. The path had vanished and she had wasted time. She needed to move faster. Heading into the veld without a path was out of the question – it was hard enough by daylight. The grass was stubbly and the ground uneven, and the torch would only illuminate a few metres in front of her. There were dongas and ditches.

Grace flashed the light downstream. The current flowed fast but the low level had left it bony with rocks.

Digging in the pack, she pulled out the water bottle and sipped, watching as the river cartwheeled a pebble until it jammed against a rock. Replacing the bottle, she pulled on her pack and hopped onto a flat rock in the water.

“Here goes,” she murmured, leaping across a line of boulders, making her way down the river. Join the dots. The torchlight cast an eerie glow on the water, making it seem clear and luminous. It made her think of gin. She would have one when she got back.

She knew the river eventually ran past the camp. She and Robert had stayed in one of the huts during summer and the rushing of the water at night had swum them out to sleep. Green, mown grass sloped gently down to the water and a couple with two young boys had spent their days fishing and lying on tubes.

She would carry on until she saw the lights.

The going was easier than she had thought, and she was able to pick out routes by working out the rock patterns. There was always a way through. She tested each boulder before stepping on it. The wind spun an unfamiliar smell around her – aftershave from James’s jersey, the scent of fir trees and sports clubs. In that moment, she felt close to James and she knew he would be keeping Margaret awake. He would be telling her jokes.

Leaping and balancing, her arms two wings, Grace imagined she was walking along Church Street with her mother, holding her hand, paying the game of not stepping on the cracks.

In the distance, she thought she could hear her name being called. She stopped to listen, but the wind returned no message. The muteness was oddly comforting. The world was cluttered by too much sound. Grace preferred the ether of quiet. Lying in bed at night while Robert stayed up to watch TV, she would become annoyed by the sound of the dialogue and music. American accents mingled with guitars and, without the context of the images, the soundtrack jarred and invaded. Sometimes she was envious of people who had lost the ability to understand speech.

Grace stretched a foot onto a large boulder near the shore, and as she transferred her weight, the boulder clunked and wobbled in the water. She yelled and windmilled her arms, steadying herself. Her breathing quickened and her cheeks began to burn. The boulder rocked to a standstill and Grace took a deep breath, looking up into the darkness.

On the far side of the bank, a triangle of light appeared and she could make out a dark shape moving inside. Grace snapped off her headlamp. There was the sound of zips and the white spot of a torch shone towards her. The wind stuck a stray piece of hair to her cheek, curling it across her mouth. Grace remained frozen.

“Who’s there?”

It was a man’s voice, sludgy with sleep.

Grace stood silently. It felt as though she was doing something wrong. It was like being caught sneaking back into the house after spending the night smoking at Lisa's. She let the wind curl between her and the man. Her heart was pounding.

"I heard you. I know you're there."

The torch was pointed towards her, its round pupil straining through the blackness, its beam too weak to find her. The rock began to wobble and she stepped off it into the water. The beam stayed fixed in her direction. Grace glanced up at the sky. Her star had definitely gone.

"Hello? Anyone there?" The man's voice was light and adenoidal, as though he had a blocked nose. He sounded young, a teenager or student, and Grace imagined him in an old rugby jersey, woolly hat and red-laced hiking boots.

The wind dropped and between them was nothing but the flow of water. Grace felt the muscles in her shoulders and legs unclench, and she suddenly felt tired and tearful.

"I'm over here," she said, her voice thin, coming from somewhere small inside. She waved one arm in the air. "I'm here. There's been an accident."

The white globe moved towards her, swinging from left to right.

"Down here," Grace shouted, her voice choked with tears.

"I'm coming. Just stay where you are."

There was a sound of boots and soil and scrambling as the beam caught stubbles of grass and swung onto the river, bleaching the rocks and river. It found her jeans and swung upwards onto her face. The fuse of white was like a headlight and she shielded her eyes with one arm. The beam shifted to the left.

"There you are." The voice was close and seemed lighter. Grace strained her eyes towards the light. A large dark shape clambered cautiously down the steep bank, and with one jump, it thumped onto the shore. Now Grace saw it wasn't a man, but a woman bundled in an oversized puffer jacket, a stream of blonde hair tucked into a woolly hat.

"Are you okay?" she asked, leaning in with her face. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm okay. Two tourists were attacked. The woman's quite bad. It's just so dark and there's no path. I've tried finding it but it's just so dark." She spoke quickly, in fast-forward.

"Okay, just slow down." The woman's jacket rustled as she took Grace's arm. "Come up to the tent. We'll figure something out."

"I can't," said Grace. She didn't want to be calm. She didn't want to sit inside a stranger's tent surrounded by the mess of clothes and the smell of sleep. If she left this route, she left the tourists. If she left the river, she lost her link to the mountains. She left Adam and Gabriel.

"I've got to carry on," Grace said, one hand fiddling with a strap on the pack. "They're waiting. I've got to follow the river."

Grace pulled her arm away and became unbalanced, one foot plunging into the water, lodging itself between two boulders. The woman grabbed her arm, her grip so tight that Grace felt her fingers digging into bone.

"I'm okay. I'm okay," said Grace. Cold rose up her legs, through her jeans and she started to cry. "Shit. Shit. Shit." The woman pulled Grace towards her and the hard fabric of the jacket brushed her face, its thickness comforting her. She held onto the jacket, the woman's slow breathing barely detectable through the padding.

"It'll be okay," said the woman, rubbing Grace's arm. She had dropped her voice to an even whisper and loaded it with length. It was the voice doctors used when they talked about remission. It was the voice of loan applications, missing children, paramedics. It was a voice familiar to Grace. It was Mrs Davies leaning over her in the sun. It was her mother's voice as she told Grace there would be more lambs. It was the sound of someone offering a hand.

The woman stepped back and surveyed Grace's face. "Come up to the tent and we can make a plan. I've got maps and stuff."

Grace wiped her eyes with her fingers, their cold leaving icy prints. Pulling away from the woman, she jumped in a single leap onto the shore, the coarse sand crunching beneath her boots. The woman followed her and they walked in silence towards the glow.

The tent was neat inside; the sleeping bag was still warm. There was just enough space for two, and the camping light flooded the tent with white fluorescence. There was a smell of new plastic.

The woman was probably Grace's age, her pale blue eyes the colour of bathrooms. Even in the harsh light, her skin was tanned and healthy, and she crouched over a map, tracing a long finger along a dotted line. Grace followed the route, its brown contour lines bunching and receding.

"Okay. That's the path," said the woman, her face close to the map. "There's the cave and there's the camp."

Grace peered at the map. Outside, the wind flapped the tent.

"One of us should get onto the path and head for camp and the other should go back to the cave."

Grace sat back on her heels. She didn't want to be alone. Couldn't be alone. It was safe here in the light, the woman's hands moving over the map, her hair falling over one shoulder. Outside was the blackness, the thrashing wind. The resort ponies had gone home.

"I can't go alone," she said. It was done. She had asked for a hand. "I don't want to be alone."

She thought of the times she had visited Adam. Lynn would be out somewhere, busy with something, and Adam would be in the garage, holding tools and examining his fingers. As she pushed open the door, she would feel like an intruder, reading his scowl as a desire to be left alone. She would pretend she had come to drop something off and would leave, walking through the house to look in at Gabriel's room with its scattered toys and posters.

The woman looked at her with clear eyes. She smiled. "Okay, then we'll go together. You lead and I'll follow."

Grace looked at her. "No, I'll follow."

The woman got up and rifled through a backpack. "Here. It's cold." She threw an orange fleece at Grace. It was large with a hood and had a badge on the breast pocket.

"Work clothes. Free and comfy," said the woman as she tucked bits of hair into the beanie.

Grace pulled on the top, holding down the sleeves of James's jersey. A scent of hair and skin rose up and mingled with aftershave.

"We should go," said Grace.

The woman turned off the light and zipped the tent behind them. Even with an extra layer, Grace was cold, and pulled the hood over her head, following the woman up a bank. The two torches cast a wide light around them and they moved like shadows across the grass.

The path ran up a steep hill and clung to its contours, the veld falling away towards the river. Grace couldn't work out how she had lost it. Perhaps there had been more than one crossing, or maybe the path petered out and then picked up again. Grace walked quickly, keeping up with the chafing sound of the woman's jacket.

They hardly spoke, their conversation restricted to navigation. "Keep left." "Rock there." It had all come down to geography, and Grace settled into it. Each hill they descended and each stone she avoided brought James and Margaret closer to safety.

The woman would stop to look over her shoulder. It felt strange to be this quiet and comfortable with someone. Her last close friend had been Lisa, and that was twelve years ago. Apart from Sunday conversations with her mother, Grace seldom interacted with women, and had always relied on herself. Sometimes, she talked to herself in the car. She had Robert and Gabriel and Adam.

Now it felt good to be following, to see the back of someone and be chased by nothing but vastness. There was nothing to look back at, there was only forward.

They were walking fast enough to get warm, and Grace pulled down the hood. The wind had dropped and it no longer clattered in her ears.

“You okay?” the woman asked, stopped in the path. She had taken off her beanie and her blonde hair was flattened on top, a parting of dark roots making a jagged line. “Want some water?” she asked, passing Grace a plastic bottle. “It’s not mineral. I just use the bottles.”

Grace gulped it down.

“What’s the time?” Grace asked.

The woman stuck the torch in her mouth and pressed a button on her watch.

“Quarter past eleven.”

The river was further away now, and the path had dropped down a hill and was out in scrubland, away from the water. On the map, the dotted line joined the river about a kilometre from the camp. Grace would have to trust the camp to be there.

“How did you know them? The tourists?” They had started walking again.

“James and Margaret. I didn’t. I don’t. I’d gone to the cave without booking and they came along.”

The beam from the woman’s torch moved in sweeping arcs as it scanned the grass, the path, the grass, the path. Their dull footsteps were leather and trench soldiers.

Grace stopped to tie a shoelace and the woman shone the torch at her feet. The lace had lost a plastic tip and the frayed khaki unravelled towards the eyelet. She made a double knot and stood up.

They started walking again, and the woman was silent. The wind had stopped, taking with it the loamy darkness, and the sky ahead was clearing, sowing a field of stars.

“Do you have kids?” Grace asked.

The woman's voice came from far away. "Two. They're with their dad this weekend. We split up two years ago. The kids live with me."

Grace trotted to catch up. The woman was a fast walker. Even in the dark, she was able to stride, swinging an arm and taking long steps, the torchlight remaining constant, beaming out from a hand held rigid.

"No-one knows I'm here. Not even my husband," Grace said quietly, catching her breath, quickening her steps to keep up.

They disappeared into a tunnel of reeds and there was a smell of straw and mud. The reeds rustled dryly as they walked, the torchlight texturing blonde and shadows, and Grace had to slash with her arms to protect her face. She could see the woman's torchlight waiting ahead and headed towards its warmth.

They drank water. Grace threw her head back and pulled the liquid into her chest. It was tight. The woman took a few sips and crouched down to pack the bottle away.

"Do you miss it? Being married?" Grace asked.

The woman paused and stood up.

"Nah. Now I get to be myself. Last year I went on holiday to England. Spent a month surfing at Cornwall." She struggled her shoulders through the pack straps and looked at Grace.

"What's the sea like in England? Is it clear and green and full of lobsters?" Grace felt stupid for putting it like that. The world wasn't a storybook.

The woman looked away, then chuckled. "It's kind of like phlegm. Like flu."

As she walked, she allowed herself to think of Gabriel. Every step felt familiar, as though she had dreamt this. She thought of Gabriel head-on, staring at the image of him pinned to the front of her mind. He stared back, his eyes clear as a sage, smiling at her as he reached out his hands, the brown T-shirt matching his eyes and hair. Light radiated in a prism behind him.

As the glow from her torch caught the reflectors on the heels of the woman's boots, Grace merged Gabriel into the darkness, spreading out the thought of him into the space around her. There, he contained her and drew her towards him, warming her up, lightening her step. She could almost hear him giggling in the blackness, as though he were being tickled.

The woman's back remained bulky and strong as she kept walking. There was something soothing about her height and her home-dyed hair; as though she were invincible. She would never have run away.

Their bodies moved through the night, their steps synchronised, the silence thick.

"What colour is your bedroom?" Grace asked suddenly.

There was a laugh and Grace heard those boy notes, slightly adenoidal. "That's a weird question," the woman said, shaking her head as she bent to shine the torch on a rocky cluster in the path. "We'll have to go around this way."

Grace followed the woman's beam as she picked her way around the left of the rocks. The path disappeared and emerged again when the rocks gave way to soil.

"Well?" Grace asked. "What colour is it?"

"Yellow. Pale yellow. Why do you ask?"

Grace could sense the blonde of the veld and she was drawn to it.

"I invent names for colours. Pale yellows are usually something like Lemon Curd or Butter. Or there might be some weather references like Spring Zest or Citrus Sky. I have a theory about people and colours."

"Yellow probably means I've got no imagination. Or I have an obsession with cheesecake, which I do," laughed the woman.

"Actually, I think yellow is courageous and optimistic. Cream is unimaginative. It's like compromised white."

The woman laughed and then fell silent. They were carried forward by the sound of their footsteps and the swishing of the jacket. They were carried forward beyond themselves, and they couldn't stop to think. Instead, thoughts drifted, bobbed and disappeared.

"How close are we?" Grace asked, suddenly aware of the pull in her legs. Besides the stitches, there was a new pain deep within her shins, and she resolved to avoid flexing her ankles.

Grace could barely hear the woman, who strode ahead into the wind.

"Those reeds we went through way back are at the start of the last valley. Now it's just a long path through the grass. We should join up with the river soon."

Straining to hear, Grace broke into a jog and felt her toe catch on a stone. She stumbled forward, her arms outstretched. One of the straps on the backpack came loose and the bag slung under one arm and hit her in the face as she thumped to the floor.

The smell of earth was everywhere.

"Jesus!" said Grace.

The woman's face hovered over her, a tip of hair tickling her cheek.

"You okay?" she asked.

Grace could taste chlorine. She could hear Lisa shouting "Marco" in the pool. She could smell her father's skin.

"I'm okay. I wasn't watching where I was going."

"Your nose is bleeding," said the woman, pulling back and kneeling as she searched her pack. She pulled out a wad of pastel-coloured tissues.

"Here," she said, offering Grace a peach one.

"Too orange. Can I rather have blue?" Grace asked, grinning through the tears.

The woman threw back her head and laughed. Grace began to laugh so much the noise was trapped in the contractions of her belly. She laughed and rolled onto her side, leaning her forehead on one arm. She laughed into the dust, into the sleeve of James's

jersey. She breathed in the wool, her laughter becoming a quiet sob, diminishing into the night.

The woman crouched next to Grace and dabbed at her nose. The blood left bright spots on the blue, and Grace saw James's eye; Margaret's splintered bones.

She struggled up, wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

"Let's keep going," she said. A cold burn spread through her nostrils as they started along the path.

As she walked, she felt her nose. A lump was forming on the right side. She thought of Margaret. She knew she would give up too easily. Even though James would be talking to her, she would turn her face into the dust and let go. There would be no more need for eye pencils.

Grace needed Margaret to hold on. It was like the game she used to play: if she walked over the railway line and that same squashed coin was on the track, it meant she would find a good seat on the bus. She needed Margaret to stay in this world.

"I see a light," said the woman. She was close to Grace, pointing to a white spot in the distance. "There's more."

As she walked, Grace kept her eyes on the lights. They shone with the warmth of beds and bathrooms, and she was afraid that if she let them out of her sight, they would vanish.

"It must be the camp," she said. She needed the words for confirmation. Grace wondered whether James and Margaret had filled in the register. She could get their address from it and track down Fiona. What do you tell someone?

The afternoon of her accident, Adam had been the first to find out. One of the paramedics had reached under the seat and found her cellphone, and once they'd got to the hospital, someone had phoned him. He had arrived within ten minutes, looking taut and pale. Lynn had twisted a tissue into a hundred pieces and bits of it had stuck to her jacket.

They had spent a few minutes with her, Lynn hovering behind Adam, avoiding eye contact, sucking on the tissue. Then Grace had watched them walk down the passage into the emergency room.

In the ambulance on the way to hospital, she had cried all the way. Gabriel's face had been turned away, but she had seen the exploded skin and the darkening blood. She had cried for the flawless pieces of skin and the hairs on his arm. His wrists had lain limp. They were the wrists of a child, plump without the bumps of bone. Beneath the oxygen mask, his nose and mouth had seemed older. Children breathed too.

When Robert had arrived in casualty, there had been nothing to say. She hadn't wanted to talk about the accident. She had struggled with the sound of Gabriel's name. How was he? Where was he? Was he going to be okay? She had wanted Robert to shut up. With his sunglasses on his head and tanned collarbones, he had come from the outside where cars were still driving and groups of girls were going to the beach. Grace had hated him for that. For asking if Gabriel had been wearing his seatbelt. He was supposed to bring flowers. He was supposed to be on her side.

When Robert had gone to find Adam and Lynn, Grace had begun to feel her wounds. She felt ripped open, a frog on a piece of glass waiting for a biology class. The pain in her leg had poisoned her whole body with its lip of slashed flesh. She hadn't wanted to see it. The doctor would come and stitch it up, numbing her shut with a nest of spiders.

The woman had gone quiet.

"Are you alright?" Grace asked. "Not too tired?"

The woman shook her head. "I'm okay."

Grace didn't know what else to say. They had walked so far together yet they were just cogs turning in place. Still, she should say something.

"So, what do you do?" Grace asked. She hadn't been able to work out the emblem on the fleece – a silhouette of buildings embroidered in black against a turquoise

background. Underneath it was the name of a firm. Milton and Morris. Perhaps she was a lawyer.

"I'm a town planner," said the woman, her voice loud in the stillness. "Grids and sewage. It's all wildly interesting."

Their boots made a hollow-heeled noise.

"What's the time?" Grace asked.

The woman stopped and peered at the blue glow on her wrist. "Twenty past two. We should be about another hour."

It was strange that the lights were an hour away. If she reached out her hand, Grace felt sure she could grab one and feel its sulphur in her palm.

They were descending, and the air came in pockets of cold. Grace clutched tufts of grass as she edged her way down the path, dislodging stones that trickled towards the woman, keeping her head up to shine the lamp out front.

Going downhill was deceptively difficult – climbing steadily upwards was easier than this scrambling. Grace felt the outer edges of her knees throb. It was a cramp like those she had felt underwater when she pushed away from the side of the pool too fast.

Tiredness came in waves of lightness, as though she had passed into another realm. She only existed as two swollen kneecaps attached to strings. Her breath was undetectable, but Grace knew it rose and fell somewhere deep inside. If it didn't, she would be dead.

At the bottom, the woman offered her the bottle. It was nearly empty and Grace took small sips.

"You can finish it," the woman said. "We'll join up with the river soon."

She had such faith, such confidence. Grace would have hung on to every last drop. The river might not be there. This could be a different path. With one eye fixed on the brightest light, Grace tipped the bottle up and finished the water.

"It looks like an airport," Grace said, handing back the empty bottle. "The camp. All those lights in the middle of nothing."

The woman looked at the camp and frowned. *Had she said something wrong?* It was like being back in school and Grace felt like a stranger again.

The woman smiled. "Ja, you're right. A small one in a field. The ones that don't sell coffee."

"Exactly. The ones where the toilets smell and the only people flying are businessmen," said Grace brightly.

They looked at the camp. A row of white lights pricked the black on either side of a darkened strip, the thin air tripping them on and off like Morse code. At the end of these, a larger orange glow glared steadily.

"Come on," the woman said. "The final haul."

There was that rhythm again, of nylon and leather and skin. Grace wanted to start running. James and Margaret still needed to be fetched and there would be diagnoses. There could be no sleep. She would have to phone Robert. She would have to say Gabriel's name.

"Gabriel. Gabriel," she said under her breath.

"Did you say something?" the woman asked, swinging her torch off the path so it jaundiced the grass.

"No." Grace lowered her head and followed the arc of the beam. "I was talking to myself."

The woman gave a short laugh. "I do that too," she said looking over her shoulder at Grace. "Especially in my car. I always hope other people think I'm talking on my cellphone."

"I make it look as though I'm listening to music. I sometimes tap my steering wheel." Grace laughed, and it came through her nose as a snort. "I've had conversations with actors and musicians. I've pretended to be famous. It's all quite sad. I think I'm a bit of a freak."

"I think we're all a bunch a freaks, the whole lot of us." The woman sighed and jiggled her backpack, tucking her hands under the straps. The beam from Grace's torch licked at the woman's elbows.

"Aren't you hot?" Grace asked.

"Nah," the woman replied. The chafing sound of her arms against the jacket had stopped. "I feel the cold. My nose is always like an ice block."

Grace's armpits were damp and her clothes stuck to her back beneath the pack. She was used to backpacks. When they used to come to the mountains, Grace would volunteer to carry the pots and kettle. She would beg her father to load up her side pockets with food and cutlery. She had wanted to impress.

It was the same with Robert, and she would sometimes end up carrying more than him, struggling up the hills with a ton of food on her back. "Do you want me to take some?" Robert would ask with a wry smile.

She would always refuse.

Out of the air came the sound of running water, as though someone had seen them coming and had ordered for a fountain to be turned on.

The woman stopped. "Listen."

The river offered itself to Grace. It was a familiar friend, a soft anchor. Its voice came in an even flow – the conversation was still there. Grace felt connected to it. It had returned to her in all its clarity and depth. It had twisted its spine around for her. It was welcoming her home.

The woman shone her torch towards the noise, but the beam weakened and pattered out between the path and the distance. It was only in the cocoon of light that they functioned. They were still cowboys riding in the canyon.

"The path must head down to the river somewhere around there," said the woman, craning her neck to peer into the blackness. "There's a bridge near the camp and a fence with a gate. Not far now."

She swung her beam back onto the path. "You sure you don't want to go ahead?"

"I'm fine," said Grace. Tiredness threatened to overwhelm her and she felt like sitting down. She couldn't remember sitting down, how it felt to relax her legs, the feet resting lightly on the floor. She sat cross-legged whenever she played with Gabriel and he would tease her about her knees sticking up, showing her how he could fold his legs across his thighs and keep his knees flat on the carpet. When he did that, his eyes were almost arrogant and Grace would feel annoyed. But, a few minutes later, she would watch as he drew or painted or clicked his Lego together, his tongue feeling the corners of his mouth. She couldn't resist his skin.

She marvelled at his nose, how its wide shapelessness would eventually become its own form, how his monkey ears would grow and collect the world. How the down on his cheeks would toughen into a beard for shaving and how his spine trawled its way in fish bones down his back, every day growing bigger. It was difficult to grasp the growing. She could remember being his age, but she couldn't imagine her spine having been that small.

The path was flat and smooth and Grace walked on, out into the far corners of Gabriel's bedroom, the pile of soft toys crammed below the window. His bed was white, with stickers of strawberries gummed to the headboard, and on the walls were drawings framed in blonde wood, all signed by Gabriel, his shaky handwriting little lightning strikes. Grace had one of his dinosaur pictures stuck to the fridge, and its blue spines shot out like welding. He was good at art.

He was under sheets.

Grace shook her head to bring herself back. The woman was far ahead and the air closed in, wrapping her into its dark armpit, holding her back as she struggled. She wanted to give up. She couldn't focus on Margaret's face – all she could see was the pencil line of two eyebrows smeared across her forehead. She shook her head again and hit her forehead with a cold fist. She had to keep them with her. She had to gather them into the front of her mind where Gabriel sat smiling. Everything was important.

Looking out towards the camp, the main light tunnelled through a chink in the wind, beckoning with its chemistry.

## 15

They stumbled down the hill, tripping over their feet as they walked faster. Grace moved towards the camp lights, allowing them to reel her in. Who slept within those lights? Families with plastic scooters parked on the veranda? Sunburnt foreigners wearing mosquito gel, their expensive hiking boots guarding the door?

The woman was trotting in front of her, and Grace felt her shoes skid on stones as she tumbled down towards the river, the wind urging her on as it tugged her hair.

“Nearly there,” the woman yelled over her shoulder. “The path runs next to the river and then there’s just the gate.”

Suddenly, a spasm of energy grabbed Grace’s chest. It felt like that last corner of the 400-metre sprint, where winter grass licked the white lane lines. She was aware of her elbows, and the sensation of a figure next to her, flying in its own bones. Iron filings rasped her throat and the leaping in her chest startled her.

“Come on,” Grace shouted to the woman as she ran past her. The river swamped her voice, gathering its sound from around the rocks and surging towards the camp in a loud roar. It was a stadium of supporters. It was applause. Behind her, the woman’s jacket made a continuous rhythm, the chorus of nylon adding to the clamour of the river.

As she ran, the backpack thumping down onto the small of her back and the headlamp jiggling against her forehead, Grace’s legs grew strong. Her feet picked out routes around rocks and her knees leapt over the drainage poles. Now the camp light had grown too big to be seen as an entity. Instead, it lit up the plane trees around the lawn and cast a

protective beam over the sleeping chalets, and Grace thought she could even see insects flying in its centre.

Grace kept running as the path bumped alongside the river. Patches of reeds to the left of it obscured the view of the camp. Grace believed in the water. She kept running.

“God, you’re killing me,” panted the woman as she followed Grace’s heels, her face flushed, her bulky jacket weighing her down. Grace turned to look as she ran, snapping her head back again to keep running forward.

Margaret was now so clear in her head that Grace could sense the contours of her skull and the dark crusting of the wound. James was peering into Margaret’s face, stroking one cheek with his good hand, and Grace saw Gabriel kneeling next to the woman, holding her hand, a small scab tightening on one knee. They would be waiting for her. They would have said her name.

Grace came to an abrupt stop in front of the gate. It was a school gate, with crinkled lengths of grey wire woven onto a frame of metal rods and a bronze padlock clipped onto the latch. She shook it, releasing a dull clang.

“Damn. The bloody thing’s locked. We’ll have to go over.”

The fence, meshed with chicken wire to contain leaping buck, towered above them.

“There’s no way we’ll get over the fence,” the woman said, painting the fence with the glow of her torch, “but we could get over the gate.”

“I’ll go first,” said Grace, flinging her backpack over the gate into a crop of spiky grass. She took off the headlamp and tossed it towards the pack. “You shine the torch up here.”

Jamming her right boot through a gap in the wire and holding on to a thin rod in the centre of the gate, Grace pulled herself up, her left foot searching for a place. Her feet felt the size of watermelons.

“Go left,” said the woman, indicating a hole in the wire with the light. “Then there’s another hole further up, and then you should be able to balance on the top.”

Her arms shaking, Grace rasped the gate with her boot as she peered down, searching for the gap. She found it and hoisted her right leg up, squeezing it into the hole next to her other foot. She was about half a metre from the top.

“Okay. I’m going to have to balance on the top and then jump into the grass.”

The woman nodded, holding the torch above her head as she tried to illuminate both the gate and the grass on the other side.

Grace grasped the top of the gate, paused, and then pulled her face, then her chest up towards the bar, her shoulder blades burning in bunches. She glanced out towards the camp. From up here, she could make out a bench under one of the trees on the lawn and she could see the office veranda, its light brighter than the others. In a paddock at the end of the camp, the shapes of horses moved as they grazed and Grace could hear one of them snorting.

Now pushing with her arms, she lay draped over the top of the gate, her head swinging towards the ground on the opposite side. Wriggling her hips, she hoisted her legs sideways, and in one swift movement swung them over the top of the gate and let go, landing with a heavy thud in the grass. She lay in the grass, winded, her shoulder sockets wrenched.

“You okay?” The woman’s voice came from the bushes. It came from the past. Grace was lying in the dust under the fig tree at the tennis courts after jumping from the tallest branch. They were asking if she was okay, Adam’s sniffing face swimming above her. She could almost smell mucous and bubble gum. Wayne Joubert was touching her shoulder and his eyes were brown as a dog’s. Suddenly there were Robert’s blue eyes, their clarity soothing her, his hands shining blond hairs as they stroked her darkness.

“You okay?”

Now Gabriel lay beneath her, one shoulder, the shirt smeared in blood, jammed against the grey dashboard. The other pushed down into the foot well where glass lay in piles of shattered glinting. Little crocodile teeth.

"Hey! Are you alright?"

Grace lifted her head. The back of her skull ached. *Egghead, egghead*, Adam would have said, his voice girly with hysteria as he pointed and taunted and ran round the side of the clubhouse where mushrooms conspired in the grass.

Pulling herself up slowly, she sat dazed in the grass. There were no conspiracies here. With the wind reduced to a breeze, the yellow veld had lost its voice, its voodoo parade of dancers and grass skirts snuffed out by a lightening sky, drawn towards dawn.

The torchlight burnt Grace's eyes and the woman on the opposite side of the gate clung to the wire as she peered anxiously.

"I'm okay. It's higher than I thought." Grace rotated her head in slow circles, loosening up the muscles, hunching her shoulders up to her ears and letting them go.

The woman's backpack sailed through the air, thumping down in a bald patch near the river. She took off her bulky jacket, squashed it up and flung it over the top bar. Without her nylon shell, the woman was compact and agile, her collarbones visible in the light from Grace's lamp, her faded purple sweatshirt hanging off her shoulders.

Climbing the gate in three swift movements, as though she were running up a wall, the woman paused at the top, hoisted herself up, swung her body over and jumped neatly into the dark, landing with bent knees on both feet.

"You're like a superhero," Grace said as the woman got up, sifting through the grass for her bag.

There was a chuckle in the dark. "I wouldn't go as far as that. I've climbed cliffs before, that's all."

The woman put on her jacket and pulled on her pack, and Grace stood up, dusting off the back of her jeans and tucking loose strands of hair behind her ears. She strapped on the headlamp and could feel the elastic pressing down on her bump. Pulling on her backpack, she narrowed her eyes and gazed at the camp, shooting the lights with her retina, sending herself out ahead.

She took off without warning, her body feeling heavy as her feet struggled to synchronise with the path. The pack on her back felt slack and soggy as it thumped against her, sending out an awkward rhythm of things and stuff. As she ran, Grace caught the straps with her fingers, wriggling her shoulders. Behind her, the woman was pounding, pushing Grace on with the hard slap of leather on sand.

Grace kept the light in focus, flicking her head up and down as she looked from path to camp. Soon the thin glow from the torch would merge with the camp light. Soon it would be swallowed up by a beacon of light as bright as day. Grace ran on urgent feet.

## 16

*The calf's eyes are closing. White foam rings its mouth, and its muzzle looks soft as moleskin. Disney suede. Tendons run like seams down the inside of its thin legs. The tail is a frayed bulrush. If he were a horse, he would be a chestnut. Grace isn't sure if cows have colours. Horses are piebald, skewbald and strawberry roan. This cow is cinnamon.*

*A breeze waves its whiskers, flaps gently at her jeans. She should call her father. He would know what to do. But it's best to keep adults out of this. They don't understand.*

*The mother stands nearby, eating grass from around the water trough. It's greener there. Grace can almost see the cow's jaws moving from side to side, and she imagines the seven stomachs like parchment balloons.*

*Perhaps the calf is just waiting for its legs to fill with blood, the bones to strengthen. But she knows something is wrong. She's watched enough wildlife programmes to know that animals get up straight away. Even giraffe work out the maze of their legs and unfold into the sky.*

*The breeze turns into a wind, fluttering the plane trees lining the driveway, like green doilies. The calf must be cold. She thinks she sees it shivering and a stream of mucous snails out of one nostril. It looks at Grace with panic in its eyes, the whites flashing half-moons in the corners. The sun slipping away. Grace takes off her cardigan and moves closer. The calf tries to get up, its eyes moving with her, the whites now large slices threatening to slide into the skull. She squats down and gently lays the jersey over its body. In her T-shirt, bumps spread on her arms. The hadedas have stopped shouting and are bouncing on the ends of the jacaranda.*

*Across the paddock, over the barbed wire fence blowing with animal hair, the house glows. Warm squares of light spill from the French windows and the thatched roof is a prim hairdo, darkening now in the fading light. Inside is macaroni and Knight Rider, the blue couch with the cream tassel trim, the smell of onions, her father reading the paper, Adam transfixed by the TV.*

*She should go back. The calf looks calmer in its pink blanket, breathing wet into bleached grass.*

*Grace walks around to stand behind it. Its eyes stare forwards. Quietly, she kneels down, then lies beside the animal on her side, studying the rise and fall of its flanks. The smell of brown. She shuffles closer and feels its warmth. Down here, the grass is spikier. It prickles and swarms as though alive. She can see soil.*

*The mother continues chewing. The first star is gassy in the thickening sky. Not day, not yet night. Grace can hear her mother calling from the veranda. She can picture her, a worried furrow on her forehead, her purple apron smudged with flour and fingerprints.*

*Grace reaches her arm up and brings it gently down to enclose the calf's body. It feels so different from Adam's or her mother's. Large animal ribs corrugate the fur. The calf doesn't move. She strokes the fur, whispering into its body. You'll be okay. You just have to get up. She charges her fingers with vets and doctors.*

*A second star is pierced onto the vellum. The wind swarms around them as they lie in silence.*

*Then movement. She feels the calf strain against her, rocking on its torso. Then quickly, it lurches away from her, snorts and staggers to its feet, legs rising like scaffolding above her. It takes a few steps, stops, shakes its head, and walks to its mother who then draws the calf towards her, licking its face. The calf pushes its head beneath her, finds the udder and starts drinking.*

*Grace smiles and draws her shoulders up, relishing the satisfaction. She turns on to her back, closing her eyes to the congealing sky.*

*She hears her mother calling again, her father murmuring. He calls her name out into the darkness, and it drifts across the dry veld.*

*“Coming!” Grace yells, getting up and dusting herself off. She stumbles over the molehills, heading for her mother waiting in the glare of the security light.*

## **17**

The grass was spongy underfoot and felt like spring. The line where bush ended and the lawn began was visible even in the yellow glow. Each side kept to itself, as though the veld, with its neighing wind and mane of winter, had reined itself in before the camp, coming to a stop at the edge of the green.

Grace enjoyed the texture of the lawn, its sleeping scent of worms and stems. Behind her, the bush seemed shabby and parched, the mountains murderous.

“Shit!” hissed the woman as she tripped. “Bloody hose pipe.”

They ran across the lawn towards what looked like the office. On either side, the chalets were in darkness. An empty charcoal bag lay on its side next to a cement braai, pinned down by a half-brick. Cars sat in driveways, their out-of-town registration numbers

making everything seem temporary. There were no people here, just visitors who arrived in dust clouds with sunblock and cameras. They ate steak, swam, slept and left.

Above them, the plane trees towered, their barren branches sending roots into the night.

"There'll be no-one in the office," whispered the woman, jogging next to Grace. "We should go to the house. It's at the top."

Across in the paddock, a horse gave a low whinny and shuffled its hooves. Grace was drawn to the movement, turning her head towards the field. There was life in that corner beneath the gum trees. The rest of the world had been turned off and only the horses, with their liver chests, were alert and ready.

Running across the lawn between the tombstones of braais, Grace felt like a thief. The strangeness of the night stippled her thoughts. She hadn't wanted to share the mountains with James and Margaret. Their Englishness had repulsed her and she hadn't been able to look at Margaret's flat, pelican shoes without feeling a sense of futility. Instead, she had wanted to abandon herself to the wilderness, trace the outlines of summits, and absorb the shapes into her cells.

But after this, the mountains might be lost to her.

She hurried on, slipping through the darkness, taking comfort from the geometry of the camp, the knowledge that behind the drawn curtains of each chalet, a family slept safely in tight-sheeted beds, the doors locked and the fridge stocked with plates of meat congealed into coolness. Small boys would be sunburnt, their sleeping legs nicked with bramble scratches and grazes from rocks in the river. On the bedside table would be curios: a porcupine quill, a display of pebbles, a brochure with a map, borrowed binoculars.

Gabriel would be guarded by machines standing on thin, metal legs, leashed to the wall by cables and wires. White would be everywhere and there would be eyes. Eyes of nurses wearing chubby lace-ups peering through the window during their midnight patrol. Eyes of doctors glancing up from charts at the end of the bed as they imagined their own

child lying there. Lynn's blue eyes reading his face. Adam's brows shutting out the looking. Even the sheets would have eyes, their blue hospital logos gathering and dispersing as the heavy cotton twitched and waited. Grace felt left out. Her eyes were nowhere, but now she wasn't afraid to look. She could say his name out loud.

The woman jogged ahead, turning right to join a cement path that curved round to a short set of sandstone stairs that climbed up a grassy bank. She waited at the top, turning round and putting her hands on her hips. Grace started up the path towards the woman. There was something final and victorious about her stance, as though she were standing at a beacon at the top of the world, breathing in thin oxygen, breathing out victory. Grace ran past her up the stairs. She wasn't ready for celebration. The finish line lay in the distance, waving in the heat like a white ribbon. There could be no giving up.

The manager's house was set away from the camp, with its own driveway and green gate. Thick hedges grew along the fence and curved flower beds overflowed with shrubs and clumps of large-faced blossoms. As the woman lifted the latch of the gate, a security light on the wall above the carport clicked on and the yard was swamped in a white blaze. A row of dahlias grew on either side of the paved driveway and there was a smell of petrol from the green bakkie, a pile of maps strewn on the dashboard. To the right of the carport, the light caught the crayon colours of a swing and slide set straddling the dark lawn. A child's red bicycle was propped up against the struts of the swing, a cartoon of a mouse drinking a milkshake printed on the white seat.

"There's no doorbell. Shall we knock?" the woman asked from the shadows of the porch. The spotlight clicked off, the bulb silenced, and the garden expanded into the surroundings, opening up its soil to the city of stars fading in the sky. Grace could hear the wind.

"We'll have to. I'll do it." Grace stood next to the woman in front of the wooden door, its silver handle and lock shining at them. She knocked quietly, stepping back from the door and waiting. The wind was sea-spray in the hedge. The house was silent.

“You’ll have to do it harder,” the woman whispered, glancing over her shoulder.

Grace knocked four times slowly and forcefully. With each rap, she muttered through clenched teeth: “Come on, open up.”

The woman stepped off the porch and stood looking out beyond the garden gate, rocking on the heels of her hiking boots, her hands thrust into her jacket pockets as she whistled quietly through her teeth. The sensor light flicked on again and the woman glared up at it.

Then Grace heard movement in the house and a light above them in the alcove went on, softening the spotlight. On the other side of the door came scrabbling and barking, then the sound of a key in the lock. The door opened, releasing a warm scent of laundry and onions.

The Indian man wore a blue towelling gown, the belt tied too loosely around his waist. A prim collar of brown pyjamas stuck out of the gaping neckline. Beside him, a cream-coloured puppy with a black face and bat ears snaked around him as it thumped its tail against the door frame. It came towards Grace and sniffed her hands, then jumped up on her legs, digging its claws into her jeans.

“Get down, Max,” said the man, pulling at the dog’s collar while clutching at his gown. The dog sat beside him, its back wiggling to the beat of its tail. The man smoothed down his hair with small hands, his accent pruning the words. “Is there a problem?” He rubbed his eyes and tightened the belt on his gown, peering at the women with a drowsy face.

“We need help. Some tourists have been beaten up. They’re in a bad way.” The words were like punches.

The man looked at the ground and cleared his throat, shifting from one grey slipper to another, rubbing his eyes again and yawning. The top of his head was balding, the hair growing around the glade of a shiny crown.

The woman stepped forward. “It’s urgent,” she said. “It’s bad. We need to get to them as soon as possible.”

Grace wanted to take the man by his shoulders and shake him. Instead, she put her face up to his. "They could be dead. We can't hang around."

A light went on in the lounge and a woman's voice asked: "Who is it, Gopal?"

A squat woman peered over the man's shoulder.

"You can't leave them standing there," she scolded her husband, pushing him aside. "Come in, come in. It's freezing outside. Gopal, go and make some tea."

She picked up a nest of plastic toys from a large brown couch and balanced them on a glass-topped coffee table.

"Sorry, my husband's not much good when he's half-asleep. And my son is a messy little monster." She clicked her tongue and sat on a scuffed chair, leaning forward to pat the couch next to her.

Grace didn't want to sit down. She didn't want to inhale the sleep and domesticity of a family. It felt wrong to be inside, to be warm and among glass and curtains and walls.

"Come sit." The woman nodded towards the couch.

Grace and the woman sat down, conscious of their heavy boots on the white tiles. The puppy lay down at their feet, resting its chin on the woman's pink slippers. Overhead, a harsh light escaped its rectangular shade of glass and threw sharp geometry on the walls. Grace now saw her companion clearly for the first time. The chlorine eyes were still there, but they were surrounded by deep lines that scrunched together when she smiled. Slumped back on the couch with her hands clasped on her stomach, the camp woman's neck was soft and a roll of flesh gathered beneath her chin.

"So, what happened?" she asked, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees. Her shoulder-length hair was a mass of looping waves cresting in all directions and her pink nightgown parted, revealing two plump brown knees. She had a wide, absorbent face and her large eyes were deep brown above a straight nose. An armful of gold bangles silvered as she leaned closer.

Grace told her about the tourists. How dark it was without the stars.

It seemed the woman wasn't really listening. She kept looking past Grace, and then bringing herself back from her distraction by nodding vigorously and frowning. Grace could feel her cheeks starting to burn.

When she came to describing how she had met the woman, Grace paused and turned to her companion who was staring into the floor. Beneath the beanie, her face was pale and tight and her hands flopped heavily in her lap.

"Do you know," Grace said softly to the woman, "I don't even know your name."

The woman looked up from the tiles and smiled tiredly. "It's Jillian. Jill."

She leaned her head back and turned her face towards Grace, her eyelids shuttering as she struggled against sleep.

There was a clattering of crockery in the kitchen and Grace could hear Gopal yawning.

The woman with the bangles stood up, left the room, returning with a folded blanket crocheted in squares of webbed colour. She flapped it out and let it settle over Jill's slumped form, gently stuffing a green velvet cushion behind her back.

"I'm just going to get changed," the woman said, disappearing down a passage to the left of the lounge. Grace bit her nails, taking in the room around her. It was cold and impersonal, like a hospital waiting room. She picked at a piece of skin around the nail of her middle finger. *What was the woman doing?*

In the kitchen, there was the sound of a spoon in a cup. It was a regular rhythm, an everyday sound, but below it Grace could sense silver and china. Margaret and James had water in plastic. Everything was going too slow.

Gopal emerged with a red tray, using it to nudge two television remotes out of the way on the coffee table. There was a plate of white-bread sandwiches and the smell of spice.

"It's chai," Gopal said, pointing at the four coffee cups standing in a slosh of brown.

"It's good for calming."

Grace didn't need calming; she was as alert as an otter. She didn't belong here. The curtains brought no comfort, and the scatter of toys and the lights did not protect her. They cut her off from James and Margaret. They removed her from Gabriel. They taunted her with their safety.

The man reached forward and took a sandwich. "Cheese and Marmite," he said, biting into the bread. Grace could hear his gummy chewing.

She didn't feel like eating. Next to her, Jill slept, her mouth slightly open and a faint chug coming from the back of her throat. All around, there was too much passivity, as though these people occupied a different time frame, moving within it with heavy legs. Where was the woman with the bangles?

"You know, we don't have much time." Grace leaned towards the man, her eyebrows in a frown. "And it's freezing out there. What's going on?"

The man turned his eyes towards her, raising one eyebrow as he leaned forward and picked up a cup of tea. "Rita's the manager," he said through strings of dough. "I just do maintenance."

He sank back into the chair and took a loud sip, and Grace bounced her legs, chewing at the skin around her thumb, keeping an eye on the passageway door. Nothing was as final as it seemed. During the walk, the thought of the camp, with its lights and houses, had driven her on. The sense of community, of returning to the tribe after a long period of hunting, had quickened her steps. But she hadn't factored in the humans, with their clothes and conversations. Like one of the many false summits out there, there was always something else to climb.

Grace reached forward and took a mug, blowing at the liquid. Next to her, Jill's breathing washed in and out as she slept, the blanket pulled under her chin.

Grace took a sip, feeling the burn of sugar and cardamom in her throat. It tasted like the funfair, like doughnuts and candyfloss. Its sweetness spiked her molars and made her forehead sweat. It jarred her thoughts. It was baths with Gabriel, making foam beards from

scented bubbles. It was the zoo and the ring of ice-cream around his mouth. She took another sip, swallowing the burn.

“Can I smoke outside?” Grace asked, twisting strands of hair between her fingers.

Gopal nodded. As she rose, Grace’s thighs pulled. They were like golf balls, filled with a hot tangle of elastic. She walked across to where the backpacks lay and dug in a side pocket. Nothing but an empty plastic bag. She unzipped the main section and shoved her hand down to the bottom, moving it among the objects. As she grasped the pack of cigarettes, her hand brushed something hard. Grace felt the plastic tips of the laces, the neat eyes, the stitches on the edge of the tongue.

The sound of America filled the lounge as Gopal switched on the TV and blared the volume. Putting the cigarettes in her pocket, Grace dived into the pack with her other hand and tugged on the shoe. It emerged from the tumble of clothes, whiter than she remembered, the sides slightly bowed from being stretched. She turned it in her hands, avoiding the spot at the toe, concentrating on its form. Underneath, the sole was rippled plastic, the colour of caramel. Balls of grey sock fluff stuck to the inner sole, on which was written the size and make. On the stitching of the inner heel, a flesh-coloured plaster peeled back its sides, sticking to the mound in the middle. Grace’s heart lurched as it leapt over the tide rising in her throat. This single takkie was so different from the other lone shoes she saw lying in the city. Unlike them, this was small and clean and recently used. The others lay squashed against fences, on parched traffic islands and in rock pools. They were murdered and filled with sand.

Gabriel’s shoe was still alive. Grace put her nose inside it and inhaled. It smelt of soil and glue. She closed her eyes and sniffed again. It was tucked-in shirts, knees and orange juice. It was rubber and marbles and satchels and sleepovers.

She went out onto the veranda, pulling the sleeves of the top over her hands. She sat on the floor and lit a cigarette, the shoe in her lap. Through the haze of smoke, she could

make out the silhouette of a horse in the paddock, its head hanging heavily, two ears donkey-flopped.

She flicked her cigarette and blew away the ash. In the house, the Americans were still advertising and she could also hear the crackle of a two-way radio. Rita talked in official tones, trading her clear voice with the muffled dialogue of a man speaking too loudly.

It all felt unreal, and out here in the wide silence of dawn, Grace suddenly felt emptied. It was out of her hands. The vacuum rose up and swallowed her. She was at sea, shoved out from the dock into a tide that dipped and flung, mounding up before her to blot out her vision. She dug her fingers into the takkie and closed her eyes, unable to catch hold of Gabriel as he bobbed and sank in the waves, disappearing and reappearing as a white dot in dark water.

On the horizon, a searchlight swung into action. It moved towards Grace, exposing her face, pooling bushes into a blooming circle of light. Two men hunted it down, stalking in boots. Grace flattened herself against the wall. They had found her. The sensor light tripped on and she could see the men's green uniforms and brown balaclavas.

They stopped in front of her, a radio crackling loudly and a mossy voice speaking in Zulu. The taller man put the radio to his mouth and barked instructions, his voice and the sound of static jarring the gloom.

Grace stared at them, clutching the small shoe to her chest.

"Ah, there you are." Rita swept out of the doorway towards the men, her bracelets jingling as she pulled her tracksuit top down over the pink bottoms. She talked with the men, her curls springing as she looked from one to the other, talking rapidly and pointing towards the peaks, their black shapes now backlit by bleached blue.

She turned towards Grace. "This is Johnson and Siphon. They're in charge of the search."

The men nodded at Grace and she gave a small smile, her back stiff and her eyes fixed on the holes in the balaclavas where their eyes shone through.

Rita smiled at her. "You must be cold. We must get you a blanket." She turned and jangled off into the house, leaving behind a smell of hand cream.

The tall man said something to his companion, and they leaned their rifles against the veranda, peeling off the balaclavas, their teeth emerging first.

Johnson had wide-set eyes in pale yellow skin, the grey hair clinging to his temples receding towards a bald crown. His face was mapped with lines and creases and old skin swung on his neck. But the fingers holding the balaclava were square and young. He smiled at Grace, his eyes disappearing into the skin around them.

"Don't worry, we'll find them," he said, his voice gruff. Siphon, squat and round with a face as black as burnt grass, nodded.

Grace could feel the wall spreading its cold into her back.

Rita came out carrying a cardboard box, a green wool blanket slung over one shoulder. She handed the box to Siphon. "Go through it and see what you need," she said, and the ranger began rummaging through the equipment.

Rita draped a blanket over Grace's shoulders, patting and pulling it into shape around her chin and neck. As she looked up to thank her, Grace felt a warmth flowing from the woman, could sense her mother standing in the light on the veranda, calling her name.

"Thank you," said Grace, smiling up at Rita, who bent over and smoothed Grace's hair. The touch left a cold imprint on her head, and she smiled awkwardly.

A shape emerged from the doorway behind the woman, curling and swaying, hiding away.

"I was wondering how long it would take before you came to investigate. Come here, my little monkey. Come and meet Grace." Rita bent over, leaning her hands on her knees, the dressing gown bunching up over her breasts, the belt pulled tight around her middle.

A small boy in Spiderman pyjamas coyly emerged from the doorway and curled himself around Rita. Barefoot, the cuffs of the blue pants shuffled up over his calves, he sucked on his thumb.

"Come on, Don," Rita said, slightly impatiently. "Stop being so silly and say hello to Grace. She's been walking all night and she's very tired."

Grace watched as the boy pointed the toes on one foot, and slid towards her, and then slid the other foot forward. Slowly, he raised his head, with its hair cut in a neat, straight fringe, and looked shyly at Grace, keeping his chin tucked into his chest.

"Hello," said Grace, reaching out a hand to touch his arm. The boy pulled his arm back and pulled his shoulders up to his ears. Siphon clicked his tongue and said something to Johnson, who laughed and shook his head.

Sliding her bottom towards the boy, Grace hugged her knees to her chest, leaning towards the boy's face, cocking her head. "So, what's your name?" The skin around his mouth flickered and the boy sniffed, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. He looked at Grace, two large dark irises slinking into the corners of his eyes, his lips slightly apart as he breathed muskily.

He took a deep breath, and pointed a foot in front of him, tracing an arc back and forth. "Donovan. But I'm called Don." The boy closed his lips tight, as though he regretted saying too much.

Grace shuffled closer, looking up into his face. "Donovan's a nice, long name. It sounds like a pirate or a famous horse rider. But Don, that's a lovely punchy name, like Tom or John or ..."

"Mom." The boy raised his face and laughed with small teeth, his eyes round and steady. Johnson and Siphon laughed, and Rita shook her head.

"I'm going to radio the helicopter guys to be on standby," she said, turning back into the house, the shiver of her bracelets the sound of dawn.

Don put a hand on Grace's shoulder as he balanced on one leg, twisting round to examine the sole of one foot. She could feel his fingers on her skin, and she relished the smallness of them, how they stuck onto her clothes, releasing their weight.

He let go of Grace's shoulder and twirled a few circles towards the two rangers, hopping and skipping in a private jig. Perhaps he had imaginary cracks.

Standing on tiptoe, Don shook hands with Johnson in a sequence of thumb touches, knuckle bashes and squeezes. Siphon had squatted down next to the box, and was examining a large torch, flipping open its end and checking the batteries. He put it to one side among a small pile of ropes and climbing clasps, and continued sorting through the box.

Donovan tugged on Johnson's jacket. "Can I hold one? Please?" He pointed at the rifles leaning against the veranda.

"Only if I stand next to you," said Johnson, picking up the gun and handing it to the boy. Holding it with two hands, Donovan studied the rifle and then tried to hold it with the butt against his shoulder, struggling with the weight of it.

Johnson knelt beside him, his leather boots squeaking, and supported the barrel as Donovan took aim at the trees, closed one eye and pretended to pull the trigger, making small explosions with his mouth. Bang, bang, you're dead.

"Cool," said Donovan, turning to face Grace.

Grace nodded, aware of the pyjamas and the varnished wood; wary of the thin black barrel pointing at her.

"Come, Don, we have to go," said Johnson, taking the rifle from him. Siphon had stuffed the equipment into his backpack, and bent to pick up his gun. He nodded at Grace and the two men marched off towards the paddock, their torch light straining through the mist.

Donovan disappeared inside, skipping through the lounge, calling for his mother.

Apart from the television, there was no human sound. There was only the hiss of a few leaves blowing in the breeze and the showy call of a lone early bird. Everything smelt of basmati, and it was as though the husk of dawn had been cracked open, releasing the scent of the air, the earth and the trees.

It was almost comforting to be sitting spent and still. It was like Sunday afternoons on the farm, when Grace would take an apple from the fridge and slice a thick wedge of cheese, and sit among the weeds, watching and chewing as the sheep clumped together, leaning their heads on one another's backs. She had often wondered if they slept like that, and what would happen if one sheep moved. It would be like dominoes. The flock would fall.

Humans weren't like that. They rarely clumped together, and if they did it was in special circumstances. They clumped at weddings wearing pashminas and queuing for profiteroles. They leaned on each other at funerals, smelling of stockings and collars. But if one person moved, the clump didn't collapse.

Grace got up and went inside. The dog was lying at Gopal's feet, its thin legs outstretched. Jill lay asleep on the couch, her feet still on the floor.

In the kitchen, there was the sound of Rita and Donovan talking and the gurgle of running water.

Gopal turned to look at her, the remote still clutched in his hand.

"Come sit," he said. He smiled and then turned back to the TV.

Grace hovered near the door. The air from outside was cold, but it was too bright indoors. She didn't know what to do. She was in the hospital ward. She was back in the flat. She was searching for a place. The mountains had gone, their scaffolding dismantled, and they had disappeared from view. Everything was gone. There were no bulrushes, no sheep, no bus journeys, no paint, no gum trees, no verandas.

Grace wandered into the kitchen. It was warm and smelt organic. Rita was on the phone and Donovan sat on a high stool, bent over a bowl of cereal. Swinging his legs, he filled his cheeks with pink Rice Crispies, puffing out his cheeks and staring at her. A two-way radio crackled in the dining room and the window above the sink collected condensation. Donovan kept shovelling, swinging his legs violently and nodding his head as he swilled.

Rita frowned at him and wagged a finger. She saw Grace and smiled, holding up a hand to tell her to wait.

A row of plastic containers sat on the white bench. They had handwritten labels on them: tea, coffee, rusks, sugar. A pile of dirty dishes sat next to the sink, spoons like antennae sticking out of the pots. Grace thought of the river, of swilling sand on plates, of birds and bits of food floating in water. She thought of Margaret and felt sick. She thought of bits of food floating in water. She felt sick. Donovan kept shovelling.

She went down the passage and found the bathroom. Closing the door, she flipped up the toilet seat and kneeled in front of the bowl. Her stomach contracted, expanded. There was nothing left inside. The water in the bowl waited. The screws on the toilet seat had left two rusty marks on either side of the porcelain. The floor felt hard. Her stitches pulled back, her insides pulled back, retreating into the slime, settling into a corner.

Raising her head, Grace pulled a wad of toilet paper off the roll and wiped her mouth. It was dry. Kneeling back, she looked up at the small window above the toilet where grey light struggled to make it through the mottled glass. The white window frames were peeling and a large, cream geyser loomed over the bath like a bomb.

She got up and flushed the toilet, watching as the water spewed down the sides, spat and thundered. Then it was still again. She turned to the basin and brought her face close to the mirror. Through the bottles and jars and the quills of earbuds, she saw herself: flat, pale, swamped in white light. Although her face was splotted with dust, the neatness of her appearance surprised her. There were no aliens here, no grey faces watching her with insect eyes. She moved closer to the mirror and stared into her eyes. She was there. She was alive.

Back in the kitchen, Rita was off the phone and Donovan was playing with the dog on the floor.

"Any news?" Grace leaned against the door frame.

"The guys radioed. They're getting there. It's pretty misty down by the river." She dug in the bread bin and began slicing a white loaf. "The helicopter guys are waiting."

Grace watched her cut. The kitchen buzzed with appliances and the tap dripped into the filled sink. The dishes sat.

“Can I wash up?” Grace asked. “I need something to do.”

Rita laughed and shook her head. “That’s so bad. You washing our dishes. I meant to wash them last night.” She stopped cutting and looked up. “But if you want to, there’s a drying cloth in the cupboard under the sink. Donovan can show you where everything goes.”

Rolling up her sleeves, Grace moved to the sink and picked up a sponge lying in a saucer on the window sill. She added hot water to the sink and started to wash.

“Once they’re there, how long will it take for the helicopter to come? How long will it take before they’re in hospital?”

Grace looked out of the window. Trees left an imprint in the spreading cataract of mist.

Rita bustled around the kitchen, opening and closing the fridge, wrapping things in foil. “The chopper should only take half an hour to get to the hospital. It’s a private one overlooking the river.”

The cutlery bristled on the bottom of the sink, poking Grace’s hands as she dived for cups and glasses. A pile of pots, some half-filled with filmy water, sat in an enamel tray, and bobbles of broccoli stuck to a yellow sieve. She picked up a stray mug from among the dishes. A lipstick mark had left pink grease on the rim.

She washed and stacked, her eyes drawn to the outside, past the glass of the window and the dead knuckles of trees, through the mist, past the stirring families, out across the lawn, into the scrub, through the gate, along the river, through the thinning air, the shards of grass. Up in the cliffs, between the rock, the mist would be engulfing them.

Donovan tugged at the bottom of her jersey, stood on tiptoe and stretched his face towards hers.

"I'll show you where everything goes," he said, looking up at her and crossing his eyes. He turned to Rita and pointed at his face as he crossed his eyes and rolled them around their sockets. "See mom, my face doesn't stay like that. You just say that."

Rita laughed and swatted him with a hand towel. "I just don't want your eyes to pop out. Then you'd be blind and you wouldn't be able to play cricket."

The boy skipped around the kitchen, pretending to evade his mother. "No cricket?" He skipped in tighter circles until he was twirling round and round, his arms flung out at his sides like a rotor blade. Then he fell on the floor, the soles of his feet black with dirt and stuck with floor crumbs.

Grace looked at his body on the floor. She could see his curved spine through the pyjamas. She could see Kuben hitting a cricket ball against a wall, could smell linseed oil and hear the sound of hedge clippers. She could see the tennis club, tasted the Cokes she had shared with Kuben.

She hadn't killed anyone.

Rita nudged Donovan with her slipper. "Hey, you've got to get up to help Grace. Come on." She nudged him again, and he grabbed hold of her foot, forcing Rita to hop on one leg. Shrieking and laughing, Rita staggered across the floor and leaned against the counter. "Stop it! Stop it, Don!"

Donovan sprang up and came across to the sink.

"I'll dry," he said. Grace handed him the dishtowel.

They washed and dried in silence, the boy's face concentrating as he picked up plates and cups, wiped them and carried them in small hands across to the cupboards.

Rita went through to the lounge and the sound of low talking mingled with the infomercials. *This offer only valid for today.*

Grace washed the last of the pots, scrubbing with steel wool to dislodge the blackened oil. Donovan continued his drying. Outside, the mist was thinning and a weak sun

touched the window, thawing the glass, leaving droplets of condensation. The bottle of washing-up liquid glowed green.

Inside, Grace could feel herself thawing. Her eyes were wide open.

## 18

The radio issued static, and then a voice talked loudly. *Come in, RB. Come in.*

Through the serving hatch between the kitchen and dining room, Grace watched as Rita picked up the black receiver from a wooden sideboard. She spoke quickly and ran her hands through her hair. On the other end, the man's voice was far away.

Grace went and sat at the dining room table and Rita looked at her as she talked.

"So, I'll tell them to not even try landing. You've got the flares?" The radio went dead, and then hissed and spat. It was the frequency of emergency. The man replied in muffled tones. *Over and out.*

"Well?" Grace asked as Rita slotted the radio into its holder.

"They've found them. They're okay. They're awake. The woman's quite bad, but she should be okay."

Grace felt the blood rising. She felt herself flying over the cave, watching as the two rangers tended to the tourists. She saw Margaret with her eye shadow. Margaret with her thin shoulders, her feet, her look of disdain. Margaret and her brightening eyes when they watched the baboons. Margaret the mother of Fiona, the wife of James. Margaret with a past and now Margaret with a future.

Grace moved forward and touched Rita's shoulder. Relief flooded her. It flowed through her head and down into her chest, filling her outstretched arm. She could feel it in each strand of hair, each pore. She could smell it in Rita's neck. It smelt of hand cream and shampoo. It smelt of everyone.

Grace pulled away. "So what happens now?"

Rita smiled. "Well, now I have to radio the chopper guys. And they'll be there in about twenty minutes."

"And the mist?" Grace suddenly felt the fog pressing in.

"I'm going to tell them not to land. It's too risky. They'll have to winch them up. They know what they're doing."

Rita turned back to the radio and started the code-speak. *Alpha. Bravo. ERH.*

Through the serving hatch, Donovan watched his mother, absent-mindedly picking his nose while humming. He looked at Grace and then went cross-eyed, thrusting his face upwards so she could see his irises. Grace returned the taunt and scooted her eyes to look at her nose, sticking her tongue out for added impact. She felt liberated and reckless. The boy squealed with laughter and pointed at her, ducking out of sight behind the wall.

"Right, they're on their way," said Rita, turning towards Grace. "Now we just have to wait. Let's go and sit and I'll put the kettle on."

Gopal was still on the chair in front of the TV. He looked up as Grace sat down on the couch next to Jill, who remained bundled and sleeping.

"There's still some sandwiches." Gopal offered her the plate, his hair now smooth against his head, his eyes small and alert. Grace could smell toothpaste.

He watched as Grace took a sandwich, pulling it apart from another triangle where the bread hadn't sliced right through. Smiling, he took one for himself, bit into it and put the plate back on the table.

Grace chewed slowly, staring at the Marmite like a dark vein between the bread. She stared at the television. She was used to waiting. She was used to pretending to focus while her mind bobbed towards something else in the distance. In the sheen of the screen, she saw her reflection. It was bug-eyed and suck-faced.

Next to Grace, Jill moved her shoulders, trying to bury herself into the couch. She rolled over onto her side and yawned, opening her eyes. She rubbed her face and looked at

her watch. "Sheesh. I can't believe you guys let me sleep so long." She pulled herself up and sat blinking. "What's happened?"

Donovan came and sat on the floor at Grace's feet as she told Jill about the mist, the chopper, the tourists. He sucked on his thumb as he turned towards the screen, his face flooded with aquariums. That same nose was there – small and still forming – and his ears were neat shells.

"And what about you? Have you phoned home?" Jill asked Grace as she leaned forward to scoop up a sandwich.

Grace remained facing the screen. She took in the news reader, absorbing the colour of her lipstick and the way it glistened under the studio lights. She tuned out the news reader's voice and tuned in to Jill's chewing.

"No," she murmured.

Rita wedged a red mug onto the tray. "Coffee?" she asked Jill, the silver espresso pot in her hand.

Grace felt herself being sucked out to sea. This was the second wave. The first had come crashing, but she had ridden it to shore. Now she was back in the shallows, watching the ocean gather itself into a dark lip, blistering as it frothed and caved, storming towards her in a fury of white.

There was no escape. She had to call Robert.

It rang. The end of each call tone was clipped, then a pause, and then another one. They blipped out across the country. Underground? Satellite? Grace didn't know. When she was a child, she had wondered how they laid cables underwater. When she had spoken to her gran in England, it had sounded as though she were talking in bubbles and clams.

He answered just before the ninth ring. His voice was sludgy with sleep, his tongue tousled. She didn't know what to say.

"It's me."

There was a silence, a sharp inhalation, then a flood. "Grace, God, I've been so worried. Are you alright? Where are you?"

She sighed and leaned her forehead against the wall, twirling the phone cord in her hand. Someone had doodled patterns and flowers in ballpoint pen on the pine phone desk.

"I'm okay. I'm in the mountains."

"I knew that's where you'd be. God, it's so good to hear your voice. When are you coming home?"

Someone had been practising their signature on the back of the Yellow Pages, and slight variations of the scrawl were squeezed between blocks of blue adverts.

Grace sighed deeply.

"Rob, something bad happened. I was at the cave with a couple and they got attacked. Beaten up badly. I was down at the river when it happened. I'd told them the mountains were safe."

She paused, breathless. Her jaw tightened and the hand coiling the cord began to tremble.

"The rescue guys are out there now."

Robert was silent, but Grace could feel him close by. Was he trying to shape the words? Was he foraging for gentle phrasing? Would he tell her on the phone?

"I'll come and get you," he said. "I'll leave now. I'll organise with the hire guys to come and fetch the car."

"Okay."

She swallowed.

She felt herself thrust out into the water. There was no turning back. Her eyes were open to the streaming wind and she had opened her arms, inviting in the cold.

"And Gabriel?"

She smoked. Through the trees she could see a man digging in the boot of a red car. She smoked. Inhaled black. Exhaled grey. From the camp came the sound of children. They had woken up from a too-long sleep and had found sticks and river secrets. She smoked. She inhaled Margaret. She exhaled Gabriel. She inhaled Gabriel. Exhaled Margaret. She thought she could hear a helicopter cutting up the air. Straining her ears, she listened for the rhythm, the iron rhyme of rescue. There was nothing, just the loud lapping of the puppy drinking water from a birdbath near the garden tap.

The mist had lifted and the bark of the plane trees had darkened with the moisture. Dew glossed the grass and bushes. The air was clearing.

The front door opened and Donovan came onto the veranda. He ran his hands along the moist bricks of the low wall, trailing his fingers through tiny puddles. When he reached the end, he turned back and trailed his fingers again, looking from the wall to Grace.

“Did you see me with the gun?” he asked her, flicking the water from his fingers. “I’m not allowed to shoot it, but I can hold it.”

Grace nodded and smiled, and the boy skipped off down the path, opened the garden gate and sprinted out beneath the plane trees. She watched him run in the shade.

Adam shot someone once. They were at the dump after school, a warm pool of air rotting around them. Across the garbage field, a mechanical digger scavenged with its yellow claw and a dead rat hung over the electricity cable.

Three black boys were throwing stones, the red clods landing in puffs next to Grace’s feet. Adam waved the pellet gun at her.

Grace should have known what would happen. She told Adam to give her the gun, to calm down. He lifted the gun and aimed at the boys, his eyes two shining bullets. She was

scared of the gun. It reeked of adults and carried with it the possibility of entry, of lead driving into flesh, opening up into whiteness.

When the boys threw another stone, hitting Grace on the shin, Adam's eyes detonated. Before she could stop him, he scrambled up onto a pile of chipboard and raised the gun.

There was a pop, then a scream. Grace imagined the stud of lead like the shining poppers that fastened her sundresses.

She stood frozen, watching as the boys hobbled up the path towards the top of the hill. Adam threw the gun to the ground and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. Small and out of reach, consumed by the afternoon heat raging around him, he started to cry. To Grace, he belonged in that glinting wasteland, dishevelled and malfunctioning. He belonged with the fridge near the gate leaking its rust out in surgical stripes, a faint trace of sour milk, plastic and gas.

From then on, there were no Saturdays of hunting down the Jouberts, no more dens, hide and seek, Morse code, Monopoly.

Grace learnt how to bake custard creams and started shopping with her mother. She shaved her legs.

Now she yearned for Morse code. She would tap out those submarine noises to Adam and Robert. She would be prepared to go deep.

She watched as Donovan sprinted around the trees, getting slower and slower, exaggerating his panting. He waved at her from across the fence and put his head down, sprinting back towards the gate. He came through the gate, his feet making a noise of sand and mud, and stopped before the steps. He puffed, sticking his tongue out down his chin, looking at Grace to say something.

"Were you pretending to be an aeroplane?" she asked.

Donovan's breathing had slowed. "Na, I was just running." He shrugged, pulled up his pyjama bottoms. "Do you want to see something?"

Grace nodded. Anything to fill the waiting.

“Come.” The boy wiped his feet on the mat and opened the front door.

She followed him through the lounge and down the passage, its walls filled with framed photographs of fishing trips and fetes. Donovan grinned out from many, dangling small fish on rods and standing on sports-day podiums, a shy smile with rice teeth.

His bedroom was dim and messy, an eruption of toys and games, the milky light trickling between a gap in the red curtains. Gabriel’s room was always so neat and grown-up. Beneath the window was a green beanbag, its corners plumped up and a spider-line of marker pen down the middle. On one wall, a poster of a robot, its red eyes glowing and blades for fingers, loomed over the room.

Donovan sat cross-legged on the carpet in the far corner.

“Are you ready?” he asked. “You must look over here.”

Grace sat on the bed, the tangle of duvet still warm. It felt safe in here, away from the television and the radio.

Donovan looked back at her. “Are you watching?”

She nodded, crossing one leg over the other, the boots brutal against the cartoon print of the duvet.

The boy flicked a switch attached to a cord and a ball of light floated against the wall, softening the robot’s armour.

“See, it’s a globe,” said Donovan, shuffling closer to the light.

Grace got up and went to kneel next to the boy. The light was a perfect ball made from rich yellow paper, like the vellum of old charts, and on it was a map of the world. Red lines of latitude and longitude dissected the world into blocks, and blobs of blue islands were scattered throughout the seas.

“I’ll show you where we are,” said the boy, slowly turning the globe on its wooden axis. “My mom got it from Reader’s Digest. My dad doesn’t like it ’cos it’s hard to change the bulb.”

His fingers crept along the sphere as he searched with frowning brows. He stopped and held the globe steady with both hands.

"Here's Africa, and there's South Africa." Donovan stuck one thin finger on the base of Africa. He leaned closer to the light, and Grace leaned with him, conscious of her unscrubbed mouth. Studying the names of the towns marked in black, and trawling his finger from the coast inland, he stopped on the name of a town, then moved his finger northwards.

"Here we are. Kind of."

She peered closely and found the name of the town. The boy's finger pointed to a section of nothing in the country's interior. Around the coast was a line of blue. It started nowhere and ended nowhere, lapping at the shores of Angola and Namibia, Israel and Sierra Leone. Everything was contained within these waves.

Donovan's finger was still resting on the globe, his hand dwarfing land and sea. He was breathing through his mouth, occasionally sniffing, and Grace could hear the click of his nostrils. She glanced at him. The globe cast a strange light on his face, turning him a warm orange, almost the colour of skin but not quite. His eyes were large and black; he was larger than the earth. Grace wanted to gather him to her, inhale his circulation.

Donovan snapped off the light and the world disappeared. He got up and walked towards the door, turning around to wait for Grace. She rose and felt the stitches pull.

She followed the boy out of the room into the passageway, closing the door behind her, extinguishing the robot's red eyes.

Rita was sitting with Jill at the dining-room table, cups of coffee steaming between them. Jill smiled as she came in and tossed her hair back, pulling it into a ponytail and tying it with a red elastic she took off her wrist.

"Any news?" Grace sat on a chair next to her.

Rita cupped her chin in one hand, and leaned her elbow on the table. "They're having trouble getting the helicopter to hover at the right spot. The cave's got quite an overhang, so the guys are having to move the tourists out into the open. But they're getting there."

Donovan was laughing in the lounge and the puppy growled.

"What are you going to do?" Grace asked Jill. "You don't have to stay."

Jill smiled and got up from the chair, stretching her arms above her head. There was that smell of deodorant again; of change rooms.

"I'm not going anywhere, except to the kitchen to make you some more tea." Jill squeezed Grace's shoulder as she passed her. In the kitchen, the kettle began to steam and there was the sound of crockery. The sound of a telephone.

Gopal came through. "It's for you," he said, nodding towards Grace.

She walked through the lounge, stepping over Donovan who lay on his stomach, his feet crossed, teasing the dog. The air in the alcove was cold and she could smell her cigarettes. The phone receiver lay on its side on the phonebook. Someone was on the other end. Her heart began to bang.

"Hello?" Her voice was brittle, protecting her. She hid in the darkness of the alcove.

Silence.

"It's Addy."

There was a pop in her head and the walls seemed to move.

She heard Adam swallow. The phone smelt of dust.

"Robert gave me this number. He said you were okay. Said there was some accident."

The orange swarm was there. Margaret was there. James was there. The eland was there. Gabriel was there.

She bit her bottom lip and hung on.

"They're okay. The helicopter's there. I'm okay."

Grace could sense Adam's jawline, his hunched shoulders, the padded stool near the telephone. Would Lynn be hovering?

"Grace, we don't blame you for what happened. It wasn't your fault. It's over now, anyway."

Adam's voice was soft, his tongue stripped of poison. He had been washed clean.

"It's been so hard." Grace smiled, felt her nostrils burn. The orange swarm faded.

She leaned her forehead against the wall. There was the smell of new paint.

"We've been so worried about you. I've been so worried about you. I didn't tell mum and dad you'd gone. Robert's been going nuts." Adam laughed nervously. "He's been like a neurotic granny."

Grace smiled. Adam always managed to stick a needle in somewhere. But now, here, with her head against the wall, she let him go. She allowed him to gather some flotsam around him. He too needed somewhere to hide.

There was a fumbling sound on the other end of the phone. She heard Adam speak to someone. He came back on the line.

"There's someone here who wants to speak to you." More fumbling. The warmth of the phone pressed against her ear. Grace pushed her forehead hard against the wall, closing her eyes. She heard the breathing first. It came in small waves.

"Hello." The breath was still there, open and hot, moving in and out, holding the high voice in its swell.

She laughed and pulled away from the wall. "Hello, Gabs." She breathed into the mustiness, connecting herself with the breath on the other end. Engaging herself. "I've heard you've been so brave. You must be happy to be home."

Gabriel giggled. He would be shrugging his shoulders, showing his teeth. "I didn't like the hospital. The food was icky. We had to eat porridge."

Grace smiled and swallowed. He was free of the tubes, the disinfectant, the steel and swabs. She felt a surge of lightness deep inside. It swept through her stomach, moved into her chest and streamed out the top of her head, lifting her up, opening her up, relaxing her shoulders.

"I also hate porridge."

There was a gap. Breathing. She saw the phone in his hand, too big against his ear.

“Gracey, remember we were at soccer, and you were singing that song.

Remember?”

She breathed out. Looked at the floor. That day was a blur – the pansies, the park, the grass, the field, the mothers, the shade, the gum trees, the small head turned towards her.

“I remember.” The small head turned towards her.

“Well, when granny came to see me I made her sing it. All the nurses clapped.”

There was a mug of tea waiting for her on the table and Rita was filling in a form. She smiled and Grace sat down.

“What’s your address? I need it for my files.” She looked up at Grace, pen poised.

As she said her address, the words felt fresh and strange. Grace’s mind zoomed in: cream paint, flaming hedge; mirrorless lifts; the plants in the passage. Inside the flat, a large green rug softened the tiles. On the wall next to their bed hung one of Grace’s illustrations. It was a pen-drawn landscape of a forest.

The radio in the corner fuzzed into life and Rita picked it up.

“So, you’re on your way?” Rita asked, looking at the floor and tapping one foot.

There was a muffled answer, the sound of helicopter blades. The sound of a voice from the sky.

“Thanks, Guy. Over.”

Rita turned and sat down. “Well, they’re on their way to the hospital. They’re both stable, so it seems everything’s going to be fine.” She smiled broadly.

Jill stood up and arched her back, yawning. She cleared the mugs away and carried them to the kitchen, coming back into the dining room and leaning her hands on the back of a chair.

“I think I’m going to head back to my tent. Don’t want to find it’s been ripped off.”

She looked across at Grace and smiled. "And I think we've had enough adventure for one night."

Grace rose and followed Jill to the front door where their backpacks lay in a heap. Muddy boot marks criss-crossed the tiles, and the TV was switched off, its grey screen picking up streaks of sun filtering through the curtains.

Rita opened the front door and the puppy barged in, jumping up at Grace's legs, sniffing her shoes. Jill swung the pack onto her back and went out onto the veranda.

"That was fun," she said, turning to Grace, then looking out towards the mountains, clearly cut against a now hardening sky.

Grace moved towards her. "Thanks," she said, putting a hand on Jill's arm, the heavy jacket familiar on her skin. "Thanks for everything."

Jill laughed, scratching the back of her head. "We should do it again sometime."

She pulled on her backpack straps.

"We should swop numbers. Maybe we can go and have a drink." Grace went inside and dug in her bag, returning with a pen and a scrap of paper.

Jill folded the paper and stuck it in her pocket.

"Take care," said Grace as the woman headed down the garden path, her blonde hair shining in the sun, her jacket swishing. She watched as Jill walked through the plane trees, a warm body beneath winter fingers. Jill greeted a man and his son blowing up a lilo on the lawn outside one of the chalets, and then turned and did a thumbs-up towards Grace, continuing across the dewy grass, out across the line, into the bush beyond.

Grace breathed in the morning air, saw how everything was taking up its rightful place. The sun had burnt the mist away and doves were dozing in the foliage. The peaks of the mountains had revealed their stone and the families were emerging from their chalets into the light.

"You should go and rest. You must be tired." Rita came to stand with her on the veranda. She was wearing heavy hiking boots, her socks turned down over the top of the

leather. "Gopal's gone out to fix fences. I'm going down to the office. Don's out with his dad, so you can use his bed. It'll be a few hours before your husband gets here. I'll be around."

"You're right," said Grace. She felt tired. Her eyes had retracted into the skin of her face and there was heaviness in her jaw. She felt her wounds, how they were imprinted on her, the stitches on her leg knitting together, the scab on her forehead tightening.

"I'll keep an eye out for the car."

The room was quiet. Outside, on the other side of the curtains, a lone bird called in the trees. Grace listened for traffic. There was none. No fighter jets, no spanners, no cars or trucks or brakes or bonnets.

A row of shoes was neatly lined up against one wall. From the bed, Grace could make out three pairs of white takkies and a pair of grey sneakers with a red stripe, its Velcro strips sticking up like tongues licking up the wall. The robot glared down from the poster on the wall, its red eyes crablike, two jewels in a pit of ash. Beneath the poster was a collection of child's paintings - houses painted in too much yellow, a spider-sun in the corner of each one.

Grace turned to look at the ceiling, her eyes unable to catch hold of anything in the whiteness. Not even a smeared mosquito or a yellowed stain of rain. Her body felt heavy and used. From the pillow rose the familiar smell of cheekbones and napes and she could make out her feet in their socks at the end of the pine bunk, grown-up in their grey wool as they pushed up against the wood.

She closed her eyes and began to drift. She thought of horses. She thought of the films they had watched as children. Her father would come back from town with a projector in a brown case and two reels of film. He would take down the zebra picture, hang a sheet on the wall and balance the projector on a pile of encyclopaedias.

They would watch Westerns. Adam would sit cross-legged on the floor, digging into the chips. The women had small waists and long hair, and the men didn't shave.

In the movies, the cowboys shot dirty assassins and rode into canyons, the horses' flicking muscles parting the red mountains. Somewhere in a canyon, the cowboy would be shot. He would slump over the saddle, his head dangling near the horse's chest, a line of sweat striped up the back of his white shirt.

When he eventually fell off near a cluster of cacti, the horse continued, disappearing around a corner with stirrups flashing.

Grace had always worried about the horses. She would ask her father what had happened to them. Would they be alright? Each time, the answer was the same. The horses had galloped back to town. The horses knew their way home. The horses went home.

Her ears became aware of a sound in the room. There was a shift, a small draft, a clatter on the floor. Then she felt breath on her face and smiled at the thud of a tail against the mattress. She opened her eyes. The puppy was leaning its black face on the bed, licking her nose, and Grace inhaled malt, cereal, milk. She patted the bed next to her.

When its body was crammed up against hers, the claws of its back feet digging into her thighs, the dog pushed its nose into Grace's neck, then lay down its head, letting out a sigh and retreating behind its eye skins. Grace snuggled nearer, flung one arm across the dog's body, and drifted into the tar of sleep.

## 20

*The first try hurts her stomach. She crashes into the water, her legs stung by the impact. They will be red. From beneath the water, she can see the outline of her father. He is wavy and weird, and she can see his brown shirt.*

*"Okay, let's try again. You alright?" he says, bending down, checking her face for signs.*

*"I'm okay. My legs hurt a bit."*

*Grace pulls herself up, hunching her shoulders as she hooks one foot up onto the side. It's strange to be at school on a Saturday. The buildings look old-fashioned, their blank windows like sad eyes, and the field sprouts yellow buttercups. The hundred metres looks shorter. Someone has left the high jump pole out.*

*"By the time swimming season comes, you'll be diving up a storm," says her father, rolling up his sleeves. "Right, now do what I showed you. Head down, looking at that imaginary spot just past the black line. Put your arms out straight in front of you, and stretch your fingers. Now, you're going to go in head-first. Don't raise your chin and let your hands hit the water first."*

*Grace stands on the edge of the pool. The tiles of the white rim have sparkly bits. She tucks her head down, stretches out her arms, takes a deep breath, and pushes herself off the side.*

*Her hands hit the water, but her chin smacks the surface, kicking her head back. Chlorine burns her nostrils and she comes up spluttering.*

*"That was better, Gracey. Much better. Let's try again. This time, I want you to just slip into the water. Let's forget about the imaginary mark. Don't push yourself off. Just put your head down, arms out and slide into the water. Can you do that?"*

*Grace nods. Last summer she was the only one who had to jump into the pool when the gun went off. Everyone else pierced the water like needles. This year, she would be diving.*

*Arms out. Head down. She lets her body go and drops into the pool, her hands cutting the water, her head pushing it open for entry. She feels her feet, the toes pointed, slip into the cool behind her. She imagines a seal's tail.*

*"I did it!" she yells, coming up, her mouth filling with water. "Dad, I did it!"*

*Beneath her, the imaginary dot blurs into grey.*

Someone was stroking her head. The fingertips were warm and they followed her hair from the roots, lifting the ends softly. The bed was heavy with someone. Someone was stroking her head. Stroking her into wakefulness, stroking her back to life. In the dim light she saw the someone. He was large and familiar, he was connected to her. He smelt of the outside; he smelt of her inside. She smiled in the dimness and raised her hand to touch his face. It was warm. She stroked the cheek. It was soft. It was rough. It was scrub.

It was lawn.

He leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

“Let’s get you home,” Robert said softly.

On the floor, the puppy’s tail beat out a rhythm. In her chest, her heart was slow and red.