Long Flight Home

by

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

Signature: Signed by candidate Date: 2009-02-16.

Descriptive abstract

Long Flight Home follows events in the life of James Van Gogh, who grapples with two fundamental tensions: his split from his adopted family and his dislocation from the society in which he finds himself.

The novel begins in Johannesburg with James returning, for the first time since their ruction, to his family home, where his mother is dying of cancer. In many ways, he is still tormented by the issues surrounding his adoption. The visit ends badly, with James fleeing her funeral service. Nevertheless, he gains a deep friendship with his mother's caretaker, a woman named Mel. His intimacy with her is one of two important relationships the novel tracks. The other is between James and a pair of young beggars – a boy and a girl – who interest him initially on a professional plane: he is researching an investigative work on street children.

Although Mel is a married woman, James influences her to take up work in Cape Town, where he lives – a decision made easier by the dubious state of her marriage. They begin a tentative affair. Mel is not sure of herself, aware at all times that she is betraying her principles. James has no such scruples, however, and he plays a wily game. Eventually, they consummate their relationship. But shortly thereafter Mel disappears. Her body is found in a patch of veld – she is dead. James uses his connections to the streets to find out the identity of the killer. The boy introduces him to an informer, who takes him into the Flats. There, James comes face to face with the man who murdered Mel, but finds himself impotent, unable to act. After that, to distract himself, he concentrates on his work. Determined to regain control of his surroundings, to reassert his will, he takes in one of the street children – the girl. But the boy, who has become involved in an underworld of drugs and crime, exerts a negative influence. James makes arrangements for the authorities to take him in, but, with the plans in place, the children disappear.

It is the cusp of dawn, the air has a wintry chill, and the young man is walking along the edge of the surf. He walks unsteadily: the effect of too much wine and too little sleep. On his face there is the untidy beginnings of a beard and in his eyes the sensation of sand. He opens and closes them slowly. To his left there is a ridge of sand dunes, carpeted in fynbos; up ahead, a protrusion of rocks on which he usually sits. His bare feet are numb, numb and aching; his lungs sting with each breath, he seems always to be gasping for air. His cheeks and nose and ears, his spindle-fingered hands, are flushed pink by the cold and flurries of wind.

He has on a pair of denim jeans, rolled up like breeches, and a hooded jacket. In one pocket, next to his car keys, are a few Rands. His cell phone and wallet he has left in his flat. He turns over his shoulder to the cove where his car is parked. It is there, safe. Further along, visible only as a dark wall in the gloom, are the Misty Cliffs; from here, he can still hear waves clap against their base.

In all probability he is alone. He fancies he hears a faraway voice, brief and twirling – someone shouting or calling – but it is no doubt an illusion of the wind or the sea. Even in the holiday period, this place has no bathers, no kite-fliers, no dog-walkers. Occasionally he has come across vagrants, deadbeats from the nearby townships. But not at this hour, not in this season.

He squeezes his eyelids closed again, opens them gradually, repeats the procedure several times. The sensation in his eyes will not go away. Also, his head aches behind one of his eye sockets. He presses the eyeball, trying to brace it against the pain. But the cold of his palm makes it worse. What he needs most now is a drink – let his body deal with that, let it forget last night – but there is none, and no prospect of one.

On the rock he tries to light a cigarette, cupping his hand as a shield, then turning his back to the sea, hunching over the flame. Finally it takes. For a long while he looks out, listens.

The sky takes on a sickly blue-grey. Later, he resumes his amble. The sand stretches out into the distance, curving eventually towards the Kogelberg, and the aloof Cape Hangklip. He crosses an inlet, treads millions of sticky shell fragments. At the limit of his sight, a blot upon his retina, there is something in the surf – a knot of seaweed, perhaps, or the carcass of a seal. He continues. The spot broadens and broadens into a viscous lump, rocking gently in the surf. Around and above it, gulls are squawking noisily, darting and swooping and turning. An appendage, he notes, is thrust out oddly from the mass. An arm? A leg? He experiences a faint throb of curiosity, but he is tired, more than tired. He exhales a weary sigh, then screws up his eyes. There is something unsettling about the lump. Again he glances back at the car standing idle in

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The gulls scatter at his approach and alight a little way off, watching. Within a few feet of the body, the thick smell of sea salt, the sweetness of rotting seaweed, assail him. He contemplates the distended and lifeless figure. Had he guessed at this discovery before, had it even crossed his mind, he would have turned back. Indeed, would it still be possible to leave the body to the waves and township vagrants? From here, only the back is visible – the face, the gender, the finer details, are hidden. It would be a simple matter to turn away, forget, and nothing would come of it.

Nevertheless, he steps up to the corpse. The gulls have crept closer again – it is no more than jetsam to them, one of the ocean's gifts, like discarded fish guts from boats. He turns the body over, the movement wafting a stench up to his nostrils. It is completely exposed, a scrawny black boy, fish-mouthed with open eyes. For a few moments, the young man cannot look into them; he turns away, spits into the sand, his mouth tasting of vomit. Pulling his jacket up over his nose, breathing as deeply as he can, he casts his gaze back. The boy's skin is discoloured, bruised and patchy. On his forearms, his stomach and skull are white scaly patches, rough and hard. There is a gash just below the ribcage, and another where the ear meets the skull. But no blood. It is difficult to tell whether these caused his death. It does not matter, really. Who will care after this?

Next, he examines the boy's hands, clenched and powerful, his blistered feet, his inflated stomach. He remarks the boy's set jaw, his furrowed brow. On the soft skin of his neck and collar, an impression has been left. James moves closer, runs a finger along it. A necklace, perhaps? And something else. He casts his eye further, onto the sand, the seaweed and driftwood – even the shallow edge of the water. He wanders around, scrutinises everything within ten feet. There is nothing, nothing but the corpse and the sea litter that clings to it. To be sure, he surveys the surrounds once more. Nobody, nothing even in False Bay. He can hardly make out his car anymore.

He considers the situation. What will become of the boy? There is no hope that the police can shed light on his demise, there is little hope that they will even come. The morgues are full, the detectives inundated. Had he not seen the boy, nobody would have, or nobody would have cared. Indeed, he is not that sure that he cares. Nevertheless, still breathing through his jacket, he squats next to the boy, slides an arm underneath his neck, the other behind his knees and lifts him up. With the boy cradled like this, slack in his arms, he scales the nearest dune. He cannot escape the putrid smell. Behind the crest of the ridge, he lays the boy down. Not far away is a part of Khayelitsha, the sun's rays glaring off some of its makeshift houses. In front of one or two, a drum fire is burning; shady figures pass through the alleyways. He has nothing to dig with. He returns to the beach, forages for a slat of driftwood, and begins; later, he uses his hands. The boy lies in front of him, watching from dead eyes. For minutes, hours, he scoops sand from the hole, deposits it nearby. He cannot remember when he has felt so tired. After a long time, satisfied with the grave, he wipes the sweat from his brow, rests his hands on his knees and meets the boy's gaze. "There, that is done," he murmurs. Touching again the place where something had hung around the boy's neck, he rolls the body into the hole. He covers the face first. Gradually the body is buried.

1.

James Van Gogh stands in front of his old family house, ringing the buzzer to no avail. He toys with the idea that he has arrived too late; that she has died already and he has wasted his time. Through the palisades, however, he can see open windows, curtains drawn to the sides. What is going on behind those placid walls? What is causing delay? He lights a cigarette, breathes the smoke in deeply. The house is very much as he remembers it. Grey walls, a steeply angled roof, windows each with a sill pot of carefully tended geraniums – his mother's pride – the garden, by contrast, unkempt and wilting.

Without warning, it starts to rain. He returns to his car, watches droplets creep down the windscreen in runnels. He could turn the key, drive off; but he came here to wait, nothing more. He may as well do it here.

A few minutes later he hears the pedestrian gate swing open. In the rearview mirror a woman approaches, dark and shapely. Her face appears at the window: round eyes, straight black hair; she motions him in.

"I've given her morphine," she says in the entrance hall. "She's asleep. Perhaps she will wake up in the evening." And then: "Thank you for coming." That is all. She disappears in to his mother's room, locks the door, leaving him to settle in on his own. He goes to his old bedroom. It is white-walled, featureless. There is a plain writing desk in front of the bed and, above that on the wall, a dour landscape. Nothing that belonged to him remains – no trace of the posters, the books, the chips and scratches that used to be here: the marks of his presence. A whitewashed space, blank, insipid. The bed is made, the cupboard doors open, the shelves empty. At the bottom are some boxes. Here he finds his things – toys, poker cards, a baseball glove, some photographs – everything. How long have they been here, these mementos? How long have they been consigned to this limbo? Since he left? He imagines what had happened, those fifteen years ago. No doubt his mother had collected each item, lifting them off the counters, the tables, the walls, one by one like picking fruit, packing them neatly box by box.

After a shower, he ventures from his room. The passageway is dark and his mother's murmuring fills the air. He makes his way to the kitchen. The nurse is preparing dinner, chopping onions, slicing carrots, tomatoes. Their smell is pungent, inviting. Next to her is an empty wine glass. For

a few moments he stands in the doorway, unnoticed. Indeed, she is completely absorbed: a strange life she must lead, tending to his mother. A life lived for another, in another's home. She is younger than he had thought - in her late twenties, perhaps - and also prettier: her body slender, her ears and mouth tiny. Around her neck she wears a fine gold chain and on her right hand there is a gold band.

He walks up to her. "Is there anything I can help with?" he asks.

"No, thank you." James passes through into the dining room, peruses the wine rack. He decides on a bottle of white wine. "To complement the meal," he smiles, entering the kitchen again.

The background muttering continues. "She is restless," he remarks, filling her glass. "Is she in pain?"

"I imagine so," she answers. "But there is little I can do - nothing that will help, anyway. Morphine is best, but I've given her enough today." She sips her wine, looks James in the eye. "She's been on edge lately - murmuring, sweating, vomiting. It's unusual for her - the thought of your arrival might have unsettled her." That is how it is, then. This woman, nothing more than his mother's intermediary, her medium. How much has the dying woman told her? How much does she know? He thinks of his mother, working behind the scenes though she cannot speak, though her body is failing her. *Who is it then who invited me here?* he wants to ask, but says nothing.

He pours wine for himself. "To mother," he says.

"To Susan," she whispers.

"Are you from Johannesburg originally?" he asks.

"No, from the Mpumalanga, a small village. I came to Johannesburg to study."

"It must have been quite an adjustment."

"I got used to it. At first I kept to myself. But now I love the city."

He imagines her, youthful, tender, enclosing herself in her dormitory: the life of a caged bird. "Your profession must be taxing on your marriage," James ventures to comment.

For the second time she looks him squarely in the eye. A long silence passes. "I work at Saint Luke's, usually. Stints like these are temporary – I don't accept them often. So my married life doesn't suffer. I like helping other people, I'm not in it for the money – I want to be somewhere I make a difference. The best way I have found is one life – one death – at a time."

While she serves dinner, he pours out two more glasses of Chardonnay. *Mel*, she gives her name. He is curious, but he has learned to treat his curiosity with circumspection. After all, it has caused him trouble in the past. Curiosity: the birthplace of discontent.

"What about interests?" he resumes. "Do you have any of those?"

Regarding him above the rim of her glass, she answers, "I used to. But not anymore."

"Let me guess: a ballerina? Or an athlete?"

She offers an evasive smile. He has surprised her; perhaps he is more than she had expected, more than his mother had suggested. "A singer," she replies. "I started when I was quite young and sang in the school choir. After that, I did a few musicals and jazz clubs, things were progressing but it wasn't long before I stopped. I had other things to concentrate on." She frowns. "And I'm not sure I was very talented."

The first indication of self-doubt; the first tremor shaking the surface. "Perhaps you only doubt your ability because that is more comforting," he remarks.

She grimaces. "Singing was never going to be a career. It's no surprise my ambitions faltered; everyone must face the reality of their circumstances."

The reproach silences him. Indeed who is he to speak, he who has run away and is still running?

She glances at the kitchen clock. "I should check on your mother," she says.

He eats alone: she does not come back. When he is finished he cleans up, goes to his room. He takes the wine with him.

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In the morning, when he wakes up, sounds filter in from outside; he perceives the edges of the room, but he cannot remember where he is. He blinks stupidly. The air is filled with brightness and a morning breeze rocks the curtains. Slowly, it pushes through to consciousness – the memory. He is in his mother's house.

Standing up, he looks at the closed door in front of him. A muffled voice comes from inside and he experiences a throbbing in his stomach. Will he have these misgivings every day? Putting an ear to the door, he pauses. There is the sound of footsteps passing, and his mother's door opening and shutting. A moment later, the lock clicks into place. He goes out into the passageway, where the air is cold, colder than in his room. The murmuring intensifies. Suddenly his name bursts forth. "James!" He turns towards the white door, his heart beating, his ears waiting. Is he being summoned? Accused? The voice reverberates through his head. But after the eruption, a heavy silence falls.

Walking softly, he goes to the bathroom. He imagines they can hear him through the wall, they can follow his movements: now at the toilet, now at the basin. He makes as little noise as possible: washing his hands, scooping water into his mouth, all the while picturing the audience in the adjacent room. Rising, he looks at his face in the mirror. With his hands dripping water, the notion comes to him in a flash: he is guilty. Is this indeed the reason that he came here? The reason he took up his things and rushed unplanned to the airport? Because he is tainted by guilt? Did he come to confess? To answer his accusers? He returns to his room, sits on the bed with his shoulders hunched and his elbows resting on his knees.

Outside, beyond the lawn with its carpet of dead leaves, is his rented car. He could abandon this sombre place. He is free. And yet he is not: to run now would be worse than waiting. Waiting for his mother to die: how does one do that? In truth, he hopes it will be over soon. He has grown impatient to carry on with his life, to return to Cape Town, to put this cobwebbed Johannesburg suburb firmly out of mind. Will that happen, though? Will he, with the bones of his parents concealed in earth, lay to rest their memory too? His mother's susurration starts again: a mill grinding his sanity.

The noise rising and falling behind him, he finds his way to his father's liquor cabinet. The key is in the bottom lock; he takes it, lowers the top section like a drawbridge. His father's old dominion, these bottles, these glasses: his old place of escape. Some bottles are almost empty, some nearly full, but all have been opened. The first he sees is whisky; he carries it and a glass to the dining room and settles at the table, slowly emptying it. There is an image he has retained from the days before he left: early one morning, soon after the news of his mother's cancer, he wakes up from a fitful sleep, the doctor's rueful voice still reverberating through his conscious mind; the sun is just beginning to rise and he can hear the maid pottering around in her quarters; he ambles into the kitchen and spies his father in the dining room, in the same place where he now sits; the maid, who has just come in, is standing over him, pouring a tot of brandy into his coffee. It is clear the man has not slept: his cheeks are flaccid, his hair wispy and dishevelled, his beard unshaven. The stench of alcohol reaches James. When they notice him, they turn – his father with puffy red eyes, the maid with stony features. They glare at him: an accusation.

Now, in the still air of the house, he is still being accused. He was not hallucinating earlier: his name resounds again. "James!" Why does Mel not dose her, make her sleep? Why must James be subjected to this? Outside it is a peaceful morning: a languid autumn day. The neighbourhood is at rest, the streets empty, the dogs sleeping. Can they hear the dying woman? Are their ears deaf to her indictments?

When he stands up his head spins. He holds onto the edge of the table for support and waits for the dizziness to pass. The room settles. He takes it in: the silverware, the plate collection, the painting on the wall: a lifetime's collecting. For what? They will pass on to strangers, they will disappear. He recognises them, he recognises the room – it has hardly changed in fifteen years.

He wanders around the house. There are few photos, he notes; what is more, he is not in any. Purposefully and thoroughly, he has been excised. The ones that remain are of an older generation; in the passageway is a series of frames, some large, some small, all with portraits of family members. In one, his mother is a child of no more than eleven or twelve, sitting at the feet of her great aunt. The photo is informal – neither person seems aware of the camera. Smiling at her niece, extending her fleshy arm, the great aunt offers her an apple. The child looks up, joyfully accepting the gift. A moment of inheritance – indeed, he has seen his mother use the same languid gesture, wear the same laboured smile.

The one that is most striking, however, is the first of the series: a distinguished man in black and white, sporting military uniform – with epaulettes and tassels –, a moustache and spectacles. Despite his upright posture, his vivid stare, he appears weather-worn, tired. Next to him on a desk are a whisky flask and a half-full tumbler. The swollen eyes, the sullen turn of the lips, resemble his father. Staring into the man's eyes, James is again overcome by a wave of nausea. His head reeling, he leans against the wall, hunches over himself, holds his stomach. The bedroom door opens and he glimpses Mel. She stoops down and, putting an arm around his waist, leads him to his room, guides him onto the mattress. He lies spread-eagled with his head pounding and his mouth dry. He hears his door close. Without a thought in his mind, listening to the quiet that has once more fallen, he dozes off.

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Later, after the gloom of evening has fallen, he finds Mel in the dining room bowed over a bowl of soup. She looks up at him, expressionless. "There's more in the pot," she says. The whisky and the glass that were on the table are gone.

He sits next to her. In silence they eat, slurping the soup from their spoons. Afterwards, he begins to say something – begins to form an apology – but stops. Into the silence she speaks. "You haven't been in to see your mother yet," she says.

James shakes his head.

"Why did you come, if not to see her?" she asks. Behind her, through the window, the oranges and violets of the sky are growing dim. The glow from streetlights seeps into the room. "I'm not sure," he says.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I don't know," he says. "I don't know why I'm here."

There is a long pause. James can hear a moth beating against the kitchen window. "Perhaps the reason has something to do with my uncertainty," he says. "I never intended, when I left here, to come back. I had cut myself off, I was free. But..." He stops, his brow furrowed. "Something has been left unsaid, whether I like it or not. There's a residue from the past, a bitter taste."

"Your mother is a difficult woman," she responds. "She is set in her ways. It has not been easy tending to her." Another pause. "There was a moment, two weeks ago, when I threatened to leave. After a month together she had done nothing to make me welcome, to accommodate me. I told her I was leaving, but she would have nothing of it – she refused. Since then she has opened up, told me… everything." James can see what is coming, what Mel will say next: that despite his mother's rigidity, despite her self-righteous demeanour, she is willing to forgive. He imagines the old woman, how she has roamed the house since his father's death, her skin growing daily more sallow, her bones more brittle, reading the papers, listening to the radio, and brooding, harbouring opinions like festering lumps inside her. Her religion too, hardening around her – her shell, a shield from the world outside, from the faces that leer in through the palisades or from street corners. Faces like Mel's. When she first saw her nurse, what did she think? What did she say? He hopes she has not come too late. "I don't think she blames you," Mel continues. "Not like the others – not like your father." The words drop like a guillotine. What should he feel? Relief? Gratitude? He does not.

"The others," he begins, his voice trailing off. Then: "I haven't noticed anybody visiting."

"They did… before. There isn't much point now: you've heard the condition your mother's in. She can't see visitors."

"Does my family know I'm here?"

"Yes." In the darkness, James can no longer see Mel clearly; her voice comes at him as if from a vacuum, disembodied. Nevertheless, he is aware of her presence next to him, her perfume, the jingle of her bangles. With a sudden fury, a vision flashes through his mind – he sees his head resting against this woman's chest, his mouth suckling her exposed breast. He breathes heavily, confused, aroused, his heart rattling in his chest. Does she judge him? Like the others? She must be wary, surely, after the weeks with his mother, after the version of events she has imbibed.

"When I left, I determined to put aside my memories, to begin as if I had no past," he says, the words flowing unexpectedly. "I've never contacted my adopted parents, and I've never looked for my biological parents. It would have made no difference, in the end. I'm a man without antecedents, a man floating in the present," he says. "And yet that cannot wholly be true, can it?" His voice emerges limp, tinny. "I phoned your hospice, I organised for you to come here and,

when you called me, I came. I don't know why that is. This is where I am from, but I don't belong here. I'm powerless against that."

She reaches out from the darkness, her soft hand touching his arm. An electric desire pulses through him. "You cannot hold yourself accountable for this cancer, James," she says. "Nobody can. Despite the time of its onset." The hand falls away. "Come with me; come see her with me." Her chair scrapes against the floor and she brushes past, searching for the switch. He hears the click and, in the sudden brightness, she stands before him, reaching out her hand, urging him. How can he refuse? Rising, he puts his hand in hers, for the briefest of moments feeling the tenderness of her palm, the gentle squeeze of her fingers. He has no thought for his mother now: it is this woman he is following, who is impelling him.

Together they walk to the white door. Without a sound, Mel pushes it open, precedes James in. The air is stale and sweet with the reek of medicines; on the far side is an empty chamber pot, and on a side table, next to a folded newspaper and a ticking alarm clock, is an assortment of needles, pills, syringes. While his mother sleeps open-mouthed in the centre of her bed, bathed in yellow light from a lamp, Mel checks her breathing, feels her pulse.

The figure beneath the sheets is fleshless, a mound of skin and bone; nothing more. Above the hem of the sheet, protruding from a gland in her neck, is a sizeable tumour. No doubt, were he to pull aside the covers, her body would be riddled with them. The spirit, as he remembers it, is gone. This is not his mother, not the woman who served in her community – on the school boards, in the women's clubs, in the church. Not the woman so strong in her convictions, the woman who had so long kept from him the truth of his origins. How did her voice rise so high earlier? It seems impossible that it came from one so withered.

There is a chair in the corner by the window; he sits, his eyes dry, his whole body dry. Taking up her seat next to the bed, Mel watches over the dying woman, clutching her knobbly fingers. How lonely his mother must have been since the death of his father! Like a wraith caught between these walls. Not living but waiting, impatiently. Mel looks over her shoulder and their eyes meet; he holds the stare. Then, smiling weakly, she turns back. What is this flower taking root in the crack between life and death?

The room is very quiet and very cold. Outside, in the garden there is a cricket chirping and, far away, the buzz of traffic. The city beyond and all around: like a fist beating against the earth.

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He awakes, still in the chair, a blanket around his legs, his back and neck stiff. Mel's seat is empty and his mother is awake, gazing at him soundlessly. One arm is stretched out as if to touch him. He throws off the blanket, walks up to the bed; her eyes are wide in their sockets, she is mouthing words that he cannot make out. Indeed, he is not sure she really sees him, that she is not looking at something further afield. Whatever the case, her eyes glare fiercely, and he shrinks away. There is in him a momentary urge to address her, to say, while she is mute, what he has been doing for these fifteen years: to justify his existence. But there is nothing to tell, in truth. She would not hear him, she would not answer. It is too late for reconciliation.

She sinks back into her pillow, her expression clouded over. The sheets fall across her waist. She is wearing a flimsy night dress and, around her neck, a pendant necklace – a family heirloom. Her eyes close. He takes the opportunity to leave. In the house everything seems still, abandoned.

He retreats outside, lights a cigarette and breathes in cool air. The trees are nearly bare; in the birdbath are twigs, leaves, dead insects. This is the way he remembers Johannesburg, this cold and death, skeletons everywhere. Beyond the wall, along the road, is a row of conifers older than he is.

Mel touches his shoulder. "Good morning," she whispers. She is wearing a nightgown and slippers, her straight black hair loose over her shoulders. "What were you thinking?" She must have been watching him. For how long?

A moment to gather his thoughts. "There are people I don't want to see when my mother dies – at the funeral," he says. "Or rather who would not like to see me. I am not looking forward to it."

"You are Susan's son," she replies. He lets that pass. "You have a right to be there. They should know that."

"On the contrary, there are those who would say I have no right to be there. The finger of blame points towards me, Mel: my family have long been muttering under their breaths. In my family, I am infamous, I am the scapegoat. It's not a pleasant position to be in, believe me."

She is thoughtful. "Cancer has no scapegoat. It happens."

He shrugs his shoulders, frowns, flicks the cigarette butt onto the grass. "A scapegoat carries all the sins, not only the obvious ones." Then, "How well do you think you know my mother?" he asks.

"Not very well, of course. But she has told me her stories, her memories, her interpretation of her life. She is a kind person, I think."

"She has good intentions, but she has never been faultless."

"Nobody is."

"What do you think they will say about her, at the funeral? That she was steadfast, strong? But she was also unforgiving, stubborn – obstinately stubborn. If I were to speak, I would say that."

"Is that not understandable, James? At a funeral, you concentrate on the positives. You can't hold that against anybody. Your mother will not be on trial, after all: we will not be weighing her up, not judging the person she was."

"No, I don't suppose we will be. But at the very least we'll be there to remember her, good and bad at the same time: the memories will be all we have left; if we are honest, they'll be all we had in the first place. Why misappropriate them? It's like amputating one of her limbs because it's unsightly."

He conjures the image: his mother, arm severed below the elbow, contemplating the missing hand; she still senses the forearm, the fingers – the phantom hand, the phantom memories. Nothing disappears.

Mel's face is intent. For a time they stare out at the garden. "I'll make you coffee," he offers, leading her inside.

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It is Tuesday evening, more than a week since James arrived. He sits in the living room, dimly lit, and reads a novel by Gide. He tries to imagine its fragrant, exotic world, but it is one he has no relation to, which he cannot imagine before his eyes. A place he cannot grasp, from which he is separate. His mind wanders from the page, takes in the dull edges of the room, the paintings obscured as if by a fog, the flowers drained of colour. The place, the objects, come to him from memory, he recollects them: they are the same. But there is no attachment. Indeed, he may as well be in Gide's tended gardens, with their lethargic stillness.

The passageway is black; he cannot see his mother's door, but he hears it click closed and Mel's timid footsteps coming towards him. She appears from the dark, gradually and silently, with tears streaming from her eyes, with shoulders heaving rhythmically. Placing the book on a side table, he half-rises and then sinks back into his chair. She comes into the living room, seats herself opposite him, withdrawn and desolate. His mother is dead, he has no doubt. He looks towards the room where the old woman, finally, rests. No epiphany, no sadness. And yet the woman in front of him cannot hide her misery. Peculiar that she should be tearful and he not – peculiar and perhaps abominable. But what can he do? He feels nothing. When he stares into the gloom, the same emptiness is there.

2.

The funeral takes place in St. John's, a rectangular brick and mortar church with a sharply-angled roof, arched windows and a steeple which James, since childhood, has found intimidating – like a squat finger pointing at the sky, reminding him of surveillance from above. The church is set in a large property circumscribed by a palisade fence. On the one side is a residential estate, on the other open veld. The churchyard has neat lawns and gardens; at the back there are a parking lot and a smaller building for the Sunday school.

As he walks past the school, he notes the childish drawings stuck to the windows. One depicts Cain murdering Abel: Cain grimaces as his knife plunges in his brother's flesh and Abel's disproportionately large mouth screams at the sight of blood squirting from his wound. Although it is crude, it is remarkably vivid. Surely, James reflects, the young artist must have lived through violence to realise it.

Indeed, the menace of crime is evident in the changes that have occurred since James was last here: burglar-proofed windows, a garden shed that has been put up to house a security guard, and the guard himself: a surly character who keeps vigil at the gate. The wolves are at every door: the weak do not survive in this country.

A narrow cobblestone pathway leads from the parking lot to the entrance. While they are walking, a small boy appears from the veld: he stands at the fence staring at them. The others pass by without acknowledgment. But James considers him for a moment too long. "Please sir, I need money for food. I am hungry."

It is difficult to feel pity for the boy, even though he can be no older than eleven: he smells stale and his skin is dusty and dry, like the veld from which he came. The whites of his eyes are bloodshot and tinged yellow, and his manner seems cold, hard as stone. James is tempted to ask questions: where are your family? Where is your home? What brings you here? But he knows such questions are pointless. No doubt the boy is a familiar face in these parts, a beggar who circulates the neighbourhood, knocking at each door, getting to know the weak ones, the ones who will give in, who will take pity, and exploiting them for their small change. Perhaps he provides information to burglars, to criminals; more likely than not, he is a criminal himself.

James begins to make an excuse. "Sorry…," he says, but then stops. For a moment he is speechless. Not a day goes by that he is not faced with the same situation, and he – like every other South African who owns anything – has devised defences against it. After all, one would soon be bankrupt if one did not. But now, all of a sudden, he feels tired: the effort of repelling the young beggar would be too much. But what choice does he have? He must give the boy money or he must tell him off. Those are the options. And he does not feel up to either of them. Perhaps the boy should be in an orphanage, perhaps he should be taken in by some or other social institution: one way or another, he should be brought into the social system, cared for, educated. He is like a tiny fish that slips through the nets. One of so many. And at this moment, James feels he has neither the power nor the will to help them. All the while the child stares at him, perhaps not understanding why this man has nothing to say, but at least sensing his vulnerability, pressing at the weakness. And why shouldn't he?

Mel calls to James, and the security guard, who has now noticed the boy, strides across the lawn to chase him away. James feels for change inside his pocket. He cannot bring the boy from the world that is outside the fence into his own: he is impotent against greater forces. But he cannot simply stand by. So that there is nothing to be done but to pay the boy off, to exchange money for forgetfulness: once the transaction has been completed, he will get on with the day's proceedings and the boy will again disappear into the veld. The boy reaches through the gate, takes the coin. Almost simultaneously, the guard arrives to chase him off. The boy looks back at the broad-shouldered guard and, while he walks away, spits on the ground. James wonders how long the guard will last: how long before he becomes more nuisance than he is worth. How long before, like the snarling dogs in neighbourhoods, he is beaten or poisoned?

Mel has a concerned look. "You behaved strangely now," she says as they return to the path.

"The boy reminded me of something," he explains. The guard is returning to his shed, the boy is gone, and the piece of veld from which he appeared seems empty. James turns to Mel, looks her in the eye. "I can't get rid of the sense that something is lying in wait that will sooner or later spring up from its hiding place."

Mel frowns. "I'm not sure your returning here will be a bad thing in the end James," she says. "There are things your family needs to confront – that you need to confront. There has to be reconciliation. I'm sure you know that: after all, you've taken the first step."

He studies her. She has not spoken so frankly about his family before. "Do you think that is why I'm here? To reconcile?" he asks. "I agree: it would be better if we could resolve certain issues, my family and I. But there is more to consider than those things: than cancer or adoption or even alcoholism." The crunch of footsteps ahead of them is audible; their pace slows. James sighs, "If those were the only things, if it were merely a matter of differing viewpoints, of confessions, then reconciliation would surely be possible."

"If it were a matter of finding the truth, in other words."

James nods. "But then, what truth?" Now they stop: a few people walk past. He lowers his voice to a whisper. "This is what people misunderstand: they think I fled, they think I ran away from home because I reacted badly to the news that I had been adopted. But that's not the case."

"Then argue your case," she exhorts. "Truth, whatever it is, will only emerge under that kind of pressure, that kind of adversary. Fight against what other people are whispering behind your back – what your own family are saying, for heaven's sake." She goes quiet, then: "If it's not true, it is only to your detriment that you keep quiet."

What should he make of this outburst? Is it simply for James's well-being that she is concerned? Or is there a deeper motive, either sinister or magnanimous? Although he is more aware than ever that she is tied to another, he is not without hope.

"In front of whom should I argue my case?" he says. "Who will be my judge?"

"You will not be judged," she replies. "Not by me."

"My confessor, then," he mutters, shakes his head. He thinks he can see now: it is not as he had hoped. She is merely a Samaritan. To her, reaching out, giving aid to those in trouble is part of her code. She could no more allow him his suffering than she could look on a dying patient and do nothing. And he the invalid: deserving of attention only because of his vulnerable position. "What good is confession?" he continues, resigned. "It does not change the past or the way we look at it. And it will not help me forget. Besides, you have only seen things from the same vantage point as my mother – it is her interpretation you have heard – and that cannot be changed, not without regret. You are in *their* camp: predisposed to take their view. How could you expect me to challenge that?"

"I am not after your family's approval," she retorts. "You are wrong. I am not making a choice between two groups: I am on your side and I am on *theirs*. Silence is not to their benefit either, you know – even if you imagine so."

A long silence passes between them.

Then, without warning, the words find voice: "The truth is that not much has changed in my family's attitude towards me. Yes, there is resentment, even enmity, towards me now, but before that there was mere tolerance and, more often than not, indifference." He stops; her face is intent. "Either way I am on the fringes," he continues: "an outsider, the 'dark one'. And inevitably so. One can be absorbed, but only to a certain extent: there is something left over, something that sinks to the bottom. The dregs, the leftovers. That is how I have always been positioned in the family – that is how I have come to see myself. If you say that through reconciliation there is a way back then that that is it: to be re-absorbed and always marginalised; silent, my voiced drowned like little solid grains at the bottom of a glass."

She places her hand on his arm. And again he is struck by her power to heal: almost instantly the doubt passes. He can think of nothing but her. Is that what it was like for his father? His mother: a point on which his father's attention was firmly fixed, so that everything else receded and was forgotten. He thinks back to that morning, the silver-haired man stooped over a cup of coffee, the maid pouring brandy into his drink, propping him up, holding things together around him. On an impulse James catches Mel's hand. It is warm and moist; he holds it for a few moments before she pulls away. She looks at him reproachfully. But that is to be expected. Whether there is anything more than that he cannot tell. He watches her go through the doors, her legs carrying her briskly away, and thinks *What am I doing?*

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In the vestibule are a collection tray and, on either side, stained glass windows: one of the Mary and Child, one of the Ascension. Directly ahead is the door to the nave, where James is confronted by the old minister, a brooding figure in his memory, a figure entangled in the complex of images that makes up religion in his mind: an authority, an arbiter, a stoic inquisitor. He has been minister at this church for as long as James can remember, perhaps from its very foundation, and in his old age, with his deep-set brown eyes and earnest brow, wearing his black

vestments with flaring sleeves and white clerical collar, he recalls a judge from the criminal courts. They shake hands. "Good of you to be here James," the minister says, nodding stiffly.

There is another Reverend, an African man whose solemn expression does not suit him: he has a certain gleam in his eye and a springiness to his build; under other circumstances he might be – James searches for the word – *charismatic*. He greets James and hands him a programme. "You are safe in the arms of the Lord," it says on the inside cover. Is that the appeal of religion today? Safety in religion, in the confines of these walls? James recalls a passage he has read about medieval monasteries, whose bells pealed through forests as a symbol of protection, assuring travellers of safety as long as they could hear the sound; at other times calling, welcoming travellers to safety, to a place fortified and resilient. But safety from what? From his impulses James does not feel safe. Indeed, his gaze now rests on Mel who is turned away from him. Her blouse falls on slim shoulders and her skirt reveals shapely calves; he imagines the long contour of her thighs, like a sheath protecting forbidden fruit. A pulse rushes through him. It is only an instant, but he senses the minister's eye on him. He turns around suddenly but is mistaken: the minister's attention is directed elsewhere.

The nave of the church is simple, not large, but not small either; its pews are of dark pine and to one side is a small organ on which a diminutive woman plays a Bach cantata. On the back wall is a large wooden cross and draped over the pulpit a black velvet parament. At the front end of the aisle the coffin rests on a stand. A casket spray decorates it – delphiniums, poppies, daisies – and on the lid an enlarged photo portrait in a propped-up frame: all arranged by his family. The picture is reminiscent of the old family portraits James had seen earlier. In fact, there are striking similarities between this one and that of the Great Aunt: the pose, the languid gesture. He wonders to what extent it is intentional. In any event, it is not a photograph he has seen before. Which gives him pause: in all likelihood, it was taken especially for the occasion.

As people arrive and find their places, James begins to feel exposed, as if he is in the dock. Indeed, the pews resemble those of the courtroom and he imagines how he will be caged in, unable to escape the gaze of either the judge or the gallery. This sensation is oddly familiar: for as long as he can remember, he has felt guilty in churches. He does not live according to their standards, he has repudiated them, and yet they remain irrevocably part of his upbringing and culture; here he is reminded of that. But this time the incrimination is tangible. There is no trial, the corpse on display is proof against any defensive argument: he is both accused and condemned.

The reception James gets from most is cold, all have steeled themselves to meet him, all are solemn, all dignified. This is even the case with his aunts, uncles, cousins. No doubt there is a common perception about him in the hall, a whispered story that has reached every ear, even Mel's. He is grateful for her now: at least she too is an outsider, at least he has had her ear.

The ceremony begins: the organ plays out a march and the old minister appears in the doorway. Holding a candle with both hands, he proceeds slowly up the aisle, with a train following. When they near the front the music ends, its last notes lingering in the cool air. There is shuffling and clearing of throats while the minister, with practiced movements, takes the pulpit, opens his Bible and surveys the audience. Finally there is silence. For the end to whispering James is relieved.

The first item on the programme is a hymn. It is an unfamiliar tune, not only to him, he notes, but to Mel as well. As for the congregation, they sing with practised accuracy; the voice of the African minister rising above theirs, resonating, melodic. While the hymn lasts James is spellbound, by the harmony, by the accord of voices all pulling in one direction.

The hymn winds down, comes to an end.

"The Lord be with you," the minister says.

And with thy spirit.

"Let us pray."

During this moment of respite, of invisibility, he lets his gaze wander. Mel's head is bowed, her face receptive, from his angle framed by the light from an open doorway.

"... grant her entrance into the land of light and joy, in the fellowship of thy saints..."

His attention is drawn towards the font set into the dais below the cross. Without warning, as he stares into the pool, a string of faces appear to him: ghosts from the past. One by one they rise up from the bottom, each with the same high forehead, the same starved eyes. Like vagabonds they mill about the place until, with unexpected abruptness the congregation says *Amen*. They vanish. When he recalls himself, he is staring at one of his aunts. It occurs how closely she resembles the

photos he had seen earlier. Indeed, if he were inclined towards that way of thinking, he would say that the dead resided in her, that she was more than a genetic resemblance: that she was a continuation.

The thought of having entered into this fellowship, of having become another sentence in this continuing story, causes a moment of despair. And Mel? How could she ever blend with this crowd, this history? He sees an image of the minister slowly submerging her beneath the water and her rising up, suddenly inhaling as if breathing air for the first time, her pupils dilated as they take in light for the first time. And yet, to at least be part of some or other story...

He was not baptized, when he was young. He arrived too late for that. And now... So much to be cleansed, he doubts that he would emerge without taint, without the burden of his past still clinging to him. Fire: that is what he needs. Purgation. To burn with a cleansing fire. He exchanges a glance with Mel and even this is enough to burn his flesh. But for Mel? Does she burn? He is not so sure. Again he thinks *What am I doing?* Would it not be better to leave things as they are? Not to interfere?

His aunt steps up to the lectern. She reads: "The good men perish; the godly die before their time and no one seems to care or wonder why. No one seems to realise that God is taking them away from evil days ahead. For the godly who die shall rest in peace." Then she sits, her face like stone, staring at the floor in front of her. Unemotional, strong, defiant: old-fashioned qualities, qualities that will – that are already – regaining their appeal. Mel's leg brushes against James's: he trembles. Does she know, he wonders, what she is at?

The minister takes up the sermon: "Why are you here?" he begins. Indeed. There is a long pause. "I expect that for many, it is to take refuge from your grief. King David sings 'Lord thou hast been our refuge, from one generation to another'. This is a family that has resolutely stood by the Lord, with strong foundations in the church – a family united by its unwavering faith. Today, a family that support each other in grief."

There are gestures of agreement, one or two *amen*'s. James again summons up the old family photographs, the ghostly faces: what refuge for him in those countenances? Not one among them – not one among anybody here – exhibits his heavy brow, his stern features. So that he ponders the question a second time: why is he here? It is not a notion he wants to contemplate for too long. One does not miss one's mother's funeral, he tells himself, no matter what the

circumstances. But he fails to convince himself: in truth, he would rather not have come, rather not have put himself through the indignity of facing his family. Certainly, he is not here for the refuge offered them, or by the church.

"When we come to consider it, death is in actual fact neither as unfamiliar nor as daunting as we might perceive: 'As soon as thou scatterest the years they are even as asleep, and fade away suddenly like the grass,' David says in the same Psalm. What *is* daunting is the prospect of being forgotten – something which Susan had time to consider. The result was that she developed an intense connection to her past, her ancestry, her family. I ask you not to forget this. But to all of you, not only of Susan's blood, I ask the same of you: do not forget your families. I say this because in our country it is fashionable to forsake your past. To that I respond, why forget your past? Why fail to acknowledge your family? You may as well remove your liver or your kidneys."

Is this, in part, aimed at him?

"In remembering Susan," the minister continues, "we remember also what she stood for. We remember how she worked tirelessly for this church, coordinating its charity work and spreading its message" – he brings the image to mind: his mother, like the old missionaries, spreading the word to hungry beggars, exchanging allegiance for a full stomach – "we remember that she fought not only her own cancer, but the growing cancers that afflict our young society. Indeed, we may refrain, the Lord saved her from evil days ahead, evil days that will come if we do not cherish Susan's memory, if we do not uphold the bonds upon which society is formed."

Another pause. "Why remain silent when somebody else is suffering, why remain silent to your own flesh and blood?"

So this is what he is accused of: silence. He was silent and now he is tainted by guilt because of it. Because he fled, because his mother developed cancer almost immediately afterwards, because those who do not speak will be spoken for, he is guilty. And yet he reserves that right, the right not to speak. After all, he is not obliged to do so. There is no trial, in truth: before any word has been spoken, he is guilty.

The minister brings his sermon to a close: "'... we bring our years to an end, as it were a tale told.' Let us not forget Susan, and let us not forget that we are intertwined with her tale, extensions of it."

James sees his mother's hand, hears his mother's voice speaking through the minister. She will haunt him for the rest of his life, he is sure. When he fled all those years ago, he had determined to re-lay the foundations of his life, to forget all that had gone before. A clean slate, a *tabula rasa*. Nevertheless he is here. His former life: faded, in decay, but forever leaving its traces.

Behind his cupped hand, he whispers to Mel, "I shouldn't be here," stands up, makes his way briskly outside; at the threshold he stumbles with a loud noise. Some in the congregation turn, all at once, watching the pitiful sight; perhaps James is only imagining it, but the minister seems victorious, with finger pointing upward. James turns away, glimpsing as he rushes out the stained-glass image of the Mary and Child.

3.

Late Sunday afternoon, James arrives at Bentham House, his apartment building in Sea Point. Standing in front of its green gate, with the percussion of raindrops in his ears, he feels in his bag for his key. Nobody is around, not in the street, not in the lobby, not even in the guardhouse: the world casts upon his return an indifferent glare. Perhaps they are right to disregard him, whoever they are; it is not important, after all, whether his mother has died, whether or not his relationship with her has found resolution.

The key turns in the lock, the gate springs open. He walks up the spiralling staircase, past a row of identical doors and windows, making his way towards his landlady's apartment. Three years he has lived here, yet he has not acquainted himself with any of his neighbours. Of course, there are faces he recognises, voices whose rhythms he has come to know: but they are clues he has not bothered to follow up. Really, there would be no point. Nevertheless, he is on good terms with his landlady and has been from the first. He would even say they have an affinity for each other. An affinity, but they are not close; their interaction is business-like, functional, for the most part. On occasion he accepts an invitation to coffee, or to dinner. She knew about his mother's cancer, about his father's death, but he has been more reticent about the finer details. About her life, he has not asked. He gets the feeling, nonetheless, that she keeps an eye on him, as a mother would. But then, he gets the feeling she keeps an eye on everyone.

Her opinions, when she expresses them, are conservative, which hardly surprises him. She bemoans the state of the building, the new breed of tenants. Over the twenty years she has lived here, things have grown steadily worse. She fears for the future, she says. On her bookshelf he has noticed his publication, a book on South African prisons. Whether she has read it, whether she is aware that it is his work, he does not know. Certainly, she has never drawn him on the subject, a situation he is comfortable with. Currently he is conducting an investigation into street children, although progress has been slow. About this he has not informed her either. When he wrote his first volume, his ambition was much greater: he had the energy, the naivety perhaps, to go to the institutions themselves, to immerse himself in his subject; he supposes it was worth the effort, but nothing has changed as a result, or things have changed too slowly for anyone to notice. If truth be told, he might as well not have written anything at all. About his new project he knows only the following: that it will bring in a small income, that it will multiply his name. Neither is reason enough, he would say. But he holds out hope, as yet, that the book will strike a chord.

He makes his living from journalism, but the rigours of the job do not appeal to him. Unlike many of his colleagues, for whom the profession is a kind of crusade, he has never been enamoured of it; he has always felt that he could be better employed elsewhere – in a clinic, perhaps, or a lecture hall. All the same, he has sympathy for its premise – or he did – and in the beginning he pursued his stories with a certain fervour: the notion of getting to the truth of a matter he used to find enthralling. He has only ever managed to come up with *a* truth, however: usually, in one way or another, his own. Journalism: the aligning of truths – a more accurate description. Without his weekly opinion pieces, without his special reports and correspondences, nothing would be very different: about that, he has no delusions. Nevertheless, because they provide him with an income, because he is obliged to do so, he submits them, every time on deadline, every time well-polished. It is his occupation, nothing more.

In contrast, the process of writing books engages him more deeply. There were times, indeed, while he was writing his first volume, that he was immersed fully, mesmerised perhaps. A particular interview remains vivid, with a man convicted of rape and murder. That was the man's modus operandi: first rape, then murder – each time the same. For his crimes he had been sentenced to two life imprisonments. On the appointed day, James waited for him in a small, plain room, furnished only with a table and three chairs. The man was conducted in with wrists and ankles cuffed and chained: he could only move with the help of the warder, who seated him opposite James and then retired to a corner, baton in hand. Outside the door stood two armed guards, another at the end of the corridor. The man, and the attention given to him, inspired terror. All the same, his story was not unusual – in fact it was rather run-of-the-mill: an abusive father, association with dubious friends, a gradual descent into crime. The fact was, however, that none of this had been obvious before his conviction. At the time, he had been in his last year of a university degree, about to claim his inheritance from a well-off family which ran its own business – indeed, he had resembled those who would read the book; he would address them from the same level of society. His first murder? His girlfriend, caught in the act of sex with another man. He raped her and then took her life. After that, more rape, accompanied by more murder. The number of victims is a mystery: he has never confessed. Crimes forever hidden behind cold reptilian eyes. There was a particular moment when the man glanced at the warder. Then, leaning towards James, in a whisper: "I could kill you right now – before he has time to react, you'll be dead."

A long silence. "Why don't you?"

He leaned back. "They'll use it as an excuse to shoot me."

The warder leered at them, tapping his baton on his knee. "What difference would it make? You're going to spend the rest of your life here." Strange that he would argue against his own survival.

"I don't want to die."

"What about the women you murdered? Your girlfriend? Do you think they wanted to die?"

He did not answer. "Are you prepared to live here the rest of your life?"

"It is a life." What does that mean?

James pressed him: "You do not live on your own terms here: your liberty has been taken away from you. You are being punished." The man scoffed. "I do not need punishment. In my mind is my punishment. This—" he gestured at the room, the building— "is not punishment, only a place."

"What is in your mind? What do you mean by that?"

Though he said nothing, James can almost see the name playing on the man's lips. Liza. The name of his girlfriend, his first victim. *Each man kills the one he loves.*

*

Twice a year, in March and in September, James's landlady goes visiting to England. While she is away, he collects her letters, her newspapers, her pamphlets, bundling them neatly together. She does the same for him. It has developed into a ritual: whenever he returns, he goes to her first, receives her welcome and his post, as if passing through the gatekeeper. Today she is not at home, however. He listens at her door for a few moments, then, making his way along the corridors to his apartment, reflects on the eerie fact that he has not yet met with a single soul. A plague colony, a diseased town. He locks the security gate, the door behind him, a prisoner for the night.

One of the things he has in common with his landlady – and no doubt it is not the least – is this: they both return to empty rooms, to the musty air that greets those who live alone. It is not a situation he minds very much. Nobody can escape their aloneness, after all. At best, a live-in partner would distract him from the rawness of this reality, would lull him into forgetfulness; but never into escape: his father is evidence of that. Notwithstanding, he has been involved with a secretary from his office for some time. They are not close; they do not share the intimacies of their lives. Some nights they go for dinner, they drink, they make love. In the morning they go their separate ways. A relationship driven by the cycle of desire. Perhaps there is a word for it. Not love, certainly.

Walking from room to room, James pulls back the curtains, throws open the windows. He uncorks a bottle of merlot, the same vintage he had shared with Mel, takes it onto his balcony and lights a cigarette. The rain has stopped, the streets glisten under their lamps. But there is no sense of relief, no emergence from houses, no taking to the streets: the wet weather has set in. In the distance, glimpsed between two buildings, he makes out the white margin of the ocean and, further still, a freighter slipping soundlessly into the gloom, into the unknown. His gaze retreats from there to Regent Street, and he follows the line all the way back to Main Road. The world laid out before him: fresh, renewed after rain, like ripe fruit dripping dew. He has been leaning against the railing but now he takes a step back. The buildings, the ships, the ocean appear vivid enough to touch. And yet he knows he cannot: he is separate, alienated. A feeling of restlessness settles in the pit of his stomach: a sensation he is familiar with, like a haze, like a fever – a feeling, he has learnt, that cannot be cured. The longing will remain.

He telephones the secretary, drives to her apartment in Kenilworth. They make love. Usually, this is enough to empty him, to divert his attention. Tonight, however, something has changed, something has shifted: he takes no pleasure in the act. Indeed, he is hardly aware of her body, the taste of her lips, her perfume; the climax arrives slowly, like a wave swelling and subsiding. When he slides out of her, nothing is different, he is still in the grip of the same fever. Why has he been content, always, to distract himself so?

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The next afternoon he polishes off the bottle of wine. Afterwards, a little awkwardly, he digs through the travel bag dumped next to his bed, feeling for the oval face, the smooth porcelain

texture of his mother's pendant. A new chapter for the family heirloom, a new leg in its relay down the generations, this time not bequeathed, but stolen. He reads the engraving on the back: *1902, London. Bon voyage my darling* – the time and place of its manufacture, the starting point of his family's sojourn in this country. Over and over he has heard the story: a gift from his grandfather to his grandmother, who joined her only later, "in this fairest of colonies". He thinks again of Mel. Might it be passed on to her in the end? The notion of joining her to his family seems a malicious fate to bestow – such a sour family, so full of remorse. Like biting into a bitter apple. In his mind is Mel, the necklace around her neck, gradually transforming into the profile on the pendant, her features fading, the colour draining from her cheeks, her dark skin turning ghostly white. He would not have her carry that burden. Indeed, he thinks of all the ruction such a move would cause, might already be causing. And yet, how does one avoid that anguish, the severing of previous ties to form new ones, the accumulating scars of such violence? Everything comes at a price.

Squeezing the heirloom gently in the palm of his hand, letting himself fall backwards onto the bed, he drifts off into sleep.

4.

He wakes up to the sound of tapping at his front door. Opening his palm, he stares at the pendant, the lines it has made on his flesh. Acting on a whim, he fastens it round his neck. It feels foreign, out-of-place. In the bathroom, forgetting for a moment the rapping at the door, he studies himself in the mirror, his complexion dry and ruddy, his hair like straw. A man old before his time, parched and withering. The back of his skull begins to ache. He has drunk too much again: a bad habit, one he should rid himself of. Nevertheless, it is not an addiction. Or should he say "not yet an addiction"? It could be worse. The image comes to him of his father sipping brandy from a coffee mug, resigned to his fate. The same fate, passed down, despite all the effort to avoid it?

How does it happen? Is the transition slow? Or does one simply wake up one morning with empty bottles and the realization? He wonders: would there at least be somebody to love him in this condition?

The knocking continues. He expects his landlady, come to extend her welcome, to deliver his post. Instead he finds a boy, dark and taciturn – a street urchin. The boy is broad shouldered, heavy limbed: the frame of a labourer, hardened, sinewy. In one hand he clutches a plastic packet stuffed with clothing; the other is crusted with blood around the knuckles and an eyelid is swollen almost shut. With his good eye, devoid of expression, he looks James up and down.

James waits for him to speak. "Help the children, boss – clothes or money." As he is speaking, the boy cocks his head to one side, meeting James's gaze. "Help the children." His voice is gruff, quivering as if he is has been speaking too much, as if he is not used to speech. On his lips is a wry grin. The eye and the grin: discomforting, unsettling, boorishly inviting a challenge. The boy produces a piece of paper, sheathed in a grubby plastic sleeve, passes it through the gate. James cannot quite make out what it says at the top; underneath are columns for names, addresses, donations. Across the letterhead, in pale blue, is an official stamp, very faint. All in all it looks rather shabby, rather dubious. Nevertheless, a few names are penned in – the generous, the weak-willed, the ones who could not shut the door.

"Do you live at this place?" James asks, holding the paper up to his face, straining to make out the faded lettering – "This Ubuntu Institute?" The boy says nothing, his face impassive, his deadpan eye still holding James's gaze, unmoving. The other, puffy, swollen with liquid,

twitches like a restrained pupa. Somewhere down the corridor a door bangs loudly: there is no reaction from the boy.

A furrow forms on James's brow: "Do you receive anything for your efforts? Do they give you food? Money?" The boy is comfortable with silence, it appears. His body remains rigid, his expressions wooden; it takes a long time before there is any movement. Nevertheless, James can see thought churning behind the eye, slowly plunging the depths, slowly hauling up a response: "If you give something it'll be better."

"What will be better?" The boy retreats again. He is sullen, composed: he will not, James presumes, be diverted. "What kind of clothes do you want?"

"Any kind."

"Will you accept something to eat? An apple, perhaps?" The boy thinks. While he is doing so his eye catches the pendant around James's neck. He regards it cautiously, as if not sure what to make of it: who is this strange man, he must be wondering, asking these questions? "I'll bring you an apple," James says, backing into the apartment, returning, a few moments later, with an old knitted jersey, a pair of loafers, sandals and the fruit. The boy takes the clothing. Their fingertips touch: the boy's skin is coarse, thick, hardened. James is surprised by the care he takes with the items, the way he eases them into the plastic bag. He bites into the apple immediately, chewing loudly, seeming to forget James's presence altogether. James closes the door.

*

Later, he is reading Andre Gide when, after a concentrated spell, it stops raining. The silence is heavy. He places the tattered book next to him on the desk, steals out onto the balcony. A clear sky. He feels better now – the end of each spell of rain is like emerging from a bout of sickness: a new world one enters. But not like Gide's – not here. No wet gardens with alluring fragrances rising from them, nor bulbous fruit drooping from the branches. The air is, in fact, putrid – the effect of rotting seaweed and decaying fish. He looks out at one of the half-formed buildings going up nearby, a crane towering above it like a red-eyed bird feeding its young, regurgitating concrete and glass into a waiting, hungry mouth. This is his garden, these rows of concrete and brick, fenced off from each other with metal, separated, impenetrable.

He pulls on his raincoat, goes down into the streets, choosing his way by impulse. Each road he takes is lined with walls and fences. In front of one building he stops. A neatly tended garden surrounds it and there is a bench underneath a giant fig tree – an alluring place, a garden worth being sung. *We shall never see the gardens of Najpur*. This is, indeed, not the world Gide had imagined.

And yet, why not enter this garden? Why not scale the fence or break the lock? Why not reclaim this space for everyone? He is staring into the darkness, staring at the tree and the bench, when he becomes aware of a man partially hidden by the branches, gazing at him. He freezes. At first, he can make out only the man's outline, but then the reflective parts of his uniform, even the whites of his eyes. A security guard, unmoved and inactive: a deterrent, a scarecrow. James quietly resumes his walk.

In Main Road he passes a few shops, their wares displayed behind burglar-barred windows. A rancid smell assails him – dried urine and faeces. He thinks of the boy from earlier and, indeed, there are a number of homeless people nestled against the walls, with blankets pulled up over their heads, like a row of cocoons. He inspects one or two, but cannot make out any faces, and none of them has his small shape. One shuffles and murmurs. Crossing the road, making his way towards the Promenade, James looks back: he cannot rid himself of the idea that somebody is watching him, even after the vagrants are out of sight. He stops abruptly. Only the noise of waves, the wind, traffic. He is alone. Behind him Main Road glows red and the air has resumed its putrid smell, stronger now, of rank seaweed and stagnant sea water.

On the Promenade, the entire darkness of the Atlantic stretches out before him. He lights a cigarette and leans against the railing. For a long while he stares at the foam and spray below, listens to the breath-taking impact of the waves against the barrier. It begins once more to pour. Cold flurries of rain and wind lash his cheeks and forehead. Pulling up his hood, he glances at the long ribbon of concrete that winds its way along the shoreline. Not a soul. Slowly, he closes his eyes, listens, then opens them. This time, as if from nowhere somebody is coming towards him, a figure only, short, moving in a rapid, fluid motion. It is a boy, only a boy – but then even boys can be dangerous. James sets off back across the park, across Beach Road, into St John's Road. The boy changes direction. James strides up St John's, the boy follows. Each time he looks back, the boy is still there, always at a distance, but there until, with the red glow of Main Road growing large in front of him, James is suddenly alone again. He stands still. No footsteps, no

breathing except his own; rain, and the occasional car passing up ahead. Was he a trick of the senses, the boy? To be sure, the darkness, the very air, has the feel of a dream, of a nightmare.

In Main Road, a few of the vagrants have woken up and are passing around a bottle. James peers at them sidelong as he walks by. One notices him and gestures. "Hey misssster, what's you walking across my lawn for?" The others guffaw. The speaker, although he is sitting against the wall, sways and bobs. "I don'ts sstamp on your flowers while yous is sssleeping." The vagrant turns to the man next to him, old with leathery skin and yellowed eyes. They laugh together.

The one who talks is young, wearing a maroon skull cap and brown military jacket. Without warning, he urinates where he is sitting. The smell is overpowering, like damp, rotten earth. "Yess sir," he continues, "this is my gardens, these weeds." He points between the cracks. "Look how I's watered them."

He thrusts out the bottle towards James: "Do you wants ssome of my sspecial water?" James is taken by surprise. No doubt the contents are a potent mix, strong enough to ward off cold, unhappiness, memory – no doubt he should decline. But he reaches out nevertheless, takes the bottle. What does he have to lose, after all? A strange thought, in the presence of such men. He drinks.

It is not long before he feels the effects. The world comes closer, encroaches upon him: the smells, the sounds of the vagrants, everything loses it definition – the lines between things are blurred. The vagrants talk continuously, but James understands very little. Their language is, to some extent at least, all their own and he is in no state to make out what they are saying. So he listens, taking the bottle when it comes his way, saying nothing. One of them produces a loaf of bread, another offers cigarettes – vagrants, homeless, without relations, but a family nevertheless.

"Where you from?" the man asks, remembering James's presence.

It is a moment before he realizes he is being addressed. "Here – from here, Cape Town, but..." He doesn't finish. Indeed, where? He does not know, not for certain. His childhood memories are all of Johannesburg, a place of extremes, of suffocating dryness or thunderous rain, a place either choking on veldfires or cowering from lightning bolts. And he, like that city, vacillating between certainties but, ultimately, without substance. Nowhere – that is what he should say. He is from

nowhere. Instead, he is mute, unable to speak for himself. After a while the man loses interest, turns again to the circle.

In any case what interest could these men have in his circumstances? The magnitude of his problems seems insignificant in this company. What tales couldn't they relate to him in return? He can meet his expenses, he can afford to sleep in a bed. He has a career in which he has achieved some success. So how is it that, when this encounter is over, when he has returned to his comforts, and they remain here in the cold, on concrete, uncertain of their next meal, he might be the more miserable and they the happier?

The man addresses one of his friends. "He's a homeless bastard, this one," he says, pointing at James. He looks into their faces – all red with laughter. Another of the men relieves himself onto the concrete, releasing the smell of decay, of hopelessness – the smell, he cannot help thinking, of his future.

Another man, with an ostrich neck and sunken brow, stands up and walks round the corner. A few minutes later he returns, tugging at his zip. What is different? What are the rules? Is one permitted to urinate where one sits but not to defecate? What is it in us that sets up these boundaries? That formulates these conventions?

When he comes back, the man enfolds himself in his blanket, wedges between pavement and wall and goes to sleep. This begins a trend. After half and hour, the others have done the same, one after the other, until James is alone, the bottle empty, the ground tainted by dark patches, and the air by the sickening odour of their fluids. One moment these people are animated, the next they are asleep, all of them together, obeying the same imperative. Is it always like this for them – surfacing only for these brief glimpses of life and then disappearing?

When he tries, he can hardly stand up. He checks his pockets for his phone, his wallet, but remembers that he has not brought them. It is dark, chill and drizzling. Awkwardly he sets off for his building. Whether or not he follows the earlier route he is unsure. He stumbles forward. In the minutes that follow his strongest impression is of fences, walls, dogs barking at him. Their ferociousness is imprinted on his memory: their fangs bared, their eyes livid. Can they smell the vagrants on him? Or does he move like a man without property – anathema to their masters, the type they are trained to hate most. On more than one occasion, he considers sleeping where he

falls. In the back of his mind, though, is the idea that if he does not return home tonight, he will never do so. He goes on.

Nearer his building, the surroundings regain some of their familiarity. At the gate he hears footsteps on the tar: a figure, far off and coming towards him. The same pursuer as before? He cannot tell. But the silhouette, its fluid gait, its youthfulness, are familiar. Could it indeed be the boy?

He fumbles for a cigarette, lights it. It is nine-fifteen: his sojourn has lasted little more than two hours. He looks at the bright moon behind a bank of moving clouds, at a ship's lights out to sea. All of a sudden, his stomach churns. He vomits at his feet. In the bathroom, he vomits again. Panting over the bowl, he stares at the dark liquid: indeed a potent mix. Each time he retches his body convulses, as if everything is trying to get out – his very insides. Unsteadily he gets up, wipes his mouth on the back of his hand, rinses it out, brushes his teeth. A bitter taste remains, and the stench of his fluids. His body feels empty. And yet the knot in the pit of his stomach remains, like sediments at the bottom of a glass.

He changes out of his clothes, which have retained the smell of alcohol and rotten matter – of decay. Carefully, he places them at the bottom of the laundry basket. The silence of his flat draws his attention; for a moment he stops to listen: the hum of the fridge, water dripping from taps, from gutters. He watches drops forming on the edge of the bathroom window, swelling and falling.

The rooms are unlit. In the kitchen are plates on the drying rack, a kettle in one corner, a row of mugs on hooks; in his bedroom, crisp sheets, ironed flat. He has left the computer screen on. There are a few words on it, perhaps half a sentence that he had written earlier: a quote from Gide – *my idle happiness is now at length awaking*.

He thinks of Mel. He must act now – the moment is ripe, a fruit ready to be picked. But then, in his mind she appears distant, too far away to reach, forbidden. The prudent thing would be to let time do its work, to let the impulse pass. Still, there is something more at play, something larger than the mere impulse, the workings of desire. Something that might escape through the fine cracks that time opens up, slowly. He is afraid of what might happen to him if he does not pursue the matter.

He picks up his phone, scrolls down to her number, and pauses. The path he is on, the one that has led him to this point, has not been an entirely happy one, but it has been an ordered one, without surprises. Dialing her number, he risks everything. Where will it lead him, this path? To a harrowing end, perhaps?

A male voice answers, a rough voice, aggressive, cocksure. Her husband, no doubt – his rival. He saw a picture while in Johannesburg: a terse man with an angular face and round, protruding eyes. He asks for Mel. "I'm a colleague of hers, phoning from Cape Town," he lies. He does not give his name.

In the background are household sounds: something cooking in a microwave, cutlery; after that their voices – him whispering the information to her, a hushed answer. He hears the words clearly from the husband: "A man…" When she picks up the phone, she is surprised to hear him. She goes quiet. "James?" she whispers. The surrounding noises lessen. A door slams. A pause. "You're a colleague of mine?"

"I was caught off guard. I expected your voice, not his."

"Not my husband's, you mean?"

"No, not his. In any case, it makes no difference: I am speaking to you – that is what I wanted. I thought you might be asleep."

"My husband is preparing for a flight, he leaves in the morning," her voice is strained, "for work. Why are you phoning James? When you ran out of the church I assumed that was the last I would see of you. I hadn't been hoping I would hear from you again. Are you coming to Johannesburg?"

"No. I've no desire to return. Johannesburg is behind me," he says. "I want you to come here – to Cape Town."

"Cape Town," she whispers. Then: "James, I can't."

"It would just be a break, a short holiday, perhaps only a weekend," he says. "I would arrange things. I don't want to lose your—" he searches for the word— "companionship."

"I have to go, James," she says. "My husband's leaving tomorrow. We're having dinner – I can't keep him waiting: it's not right." She stops. "Bye James," she adds, the line goes dead.

5.

During the night he is woken by a full bladder. After that, as is his habit, he reads a book until he becomes drowsy. But tonight he grows more alert with each page. So that, when he finally tires of the book, he lies awake. He stares straight ahead, following a flow of murky thoughts of which there is no staunching. He is too agitated. Too much has happened. He would like to do something, to write an e-mail or make a phone call, but he knows that neither would help. He would like to go outside, to do something to fulfil his longing, but there is nothing, nothing that would help but her presence, the sight of her, the smell of her, the sound of her voice.

He cannot escape these four walls. It is like the attack of some disease. It creeps upon him, the fever – at first, resting its hands lightly on his shoulders, not heavy (not yet), merely a sense of weariness; until he recalls the day stretched out ahead, another day of pointless activity. Then it tightens its hold, clasps onto him round the neck, tighter and tighter, squeezing the spirit from his lungs.

At six o'clock his alarm goes off. He had dozed off, though it can't have been for long. He makes a cup of coffee, which he takes outside. His bed is a crumple of sheets and pillows and, on the balcony, the cigarette lies, half-burnt, in the gutter. The vomit is dry, rancid. And yet the events of the previous night hardly seem possible. A different world greets him – traffic, pedestrians, cyclists.

It is Tuesday, rubbish day. The boy – the door-to-door one – saunters up to the bins, his pants mud-caked, his jacket rumpled. He searches through a row of bins in front of the building, each one in turn. Every week they appear, the band of homeless, jobless, spreading out across the neighbourhood, collecting bits and pieces that might earn them a few cents. They are not popular: they leave behind a mess.

The boy has gathered a few items already: cardboard boxes, soft drink cans, a pair of shoes – all of which he piles up neatly behind him. He takes no notice of a passing woman who glares at him from her car window. He is accustomed to being invisible, perhaps. When he is finished, he tucks the cardboard under his arm, stuffs the cans into a shopping bag and slings the shoes over his shoulder. James watches him walk away, swaggering into the premises directly past the guardhouse, which is empty.

The boy's gait strikes James. Could it have been this same boy who had followed him home? A notion tinged with horror: that these meetings might not, after all, be random – horror and, perhaps, a measure of paranoia.

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During the week, James's thoughts return to the task of writing his book. To this end, he is renting a small office in Sea Point, on the second floor of a building overlooking Main Road. The room is plain, with wooden floors and white walls. He has brought in a desk, a computer, a printer, a bookshelf. But the walls remain blank, and he has not bothered with curtains. His only comfort is a bottle of whisky and a tumbler, which he keeps amongst the books. Although it is noisy, although the room is somewhat cramped, it offers a closer view of his subject. One of the nearby concerns is a grocer, which most days has a colony of vagrants and urchins out front. For long periods, he gazes at them, a like a biologist – taking notes on their appearance, their mannerisms, their relationships.

The building is owned by an estate agency, which works from the suite next door. Access is tightly controlled. At the downstairs gate, he keys his password into an electronic pad. The catch releases, the gate opens. A camera watches him climb the stairs, another follows him to his office door. On one side is the small kitchen he shares with the agency, on the other a rather dull seascape painted in watercolour. The security gate has two locks, and slides open concertina-like; the door he leaves unlocked. In the beginning, he received visits from the sallow, stiff man who manages the offices. "I like to know my clients," the man had explained. Since then, James has kept his door closed.

He spends a morning there, sifting through a pile of documents, records of juveniles who have been accommodated in the various shelters of Cape Town. The reasons they cite for taking to the streets are predictable – abuse by parents, death of parents, drug addiction. For the most part, they come from the rural areas. And, for the most part, they would like to go back – except that there is nothing to return to: nothing would have changed.

Afternoons he tries to add a few words to the manuscript, but more often than not finds himself staring into nothingness. He is not here, not in spirit. His mind keeps travelling back to Mel. One day, after a sojourn to the National Library, he sits outside at a café in St George's Mall, lights up a cigarette, orders a coffee. The waitress is a pretty dark-haired girl – a student, a debutante.

Placing the saucer down she smiles at him. Lively blue eyes. He could just as easily latch onto her, contrive for her to be his lover. She would not be the first. In truth, they have been a characteristic of his life, these fleeting attachments, small but enough to satisfy him. One could say they have been the foundation. They accumulate, one after the other. Inevitably though, the machinery fails. Nothing comes of it, nothing lasting. And as it splutters to a halt, as the fantasy breaks down, he is left in the fever of aloneness, exposed. Nevertheless, the greater machinery continues – the one that insists that there is a point in the end, something one is working towards. Without self-delusion there would be nothing.

Occasionally he sends Mel messages, simple, conversational. Once or twice he telephones her. But there is no movement: the passion is cooling. This, it occurs to him, is how his life has been lived, a collection of promises always leading to nothing. A fine tapestry ultimately yielding no design.

6.

A week after his first visit, the street boy arrives at his door again, this time in the early evening. The weather has turned bitterly cold, one of Cape Town's harrowing winter days, chilling James, despite all precautions, to the bone. In the doorway the boy stands sturdily, impervious to rushes of wind channeled through the corridor. How does he withstand the cold, the flurries of rain? He brings with him the sweet, ashy smell of refuse, and a stale odour like old curry. "I'm hungry, boss," he says. "My stomach is empty."

This time he carries no plastic bag, supplies no official documents. Perhaps, the second time, no excuses are necessary. To be sure, James is not surprised to see the boy – it was a matter of time before he returned. "I have some bread, another apple. If that's good enough you can have it." The boy says nothing. "If not, I'll buy some provisions at the grocer – it won't take long," he thinks for a moment: "Cheese, olives – do you like olives?" The boy's impassive eye loses its focus, stares through James; he makes no answer. James considers the weather, but only for an instant – there may not, after all, be a better opportunity to observe his subject. He fetches a coat from his wardrobe, locks up, leads the boy downstairs. At the bottom, the boy stops him: "This way's better," he says. Tney go through a broken palisade on the far corner of the property – it is barely large enough for James to squeeze through. From there they walk in silence from the building, around a block, down to Main Road. The boy watches the path ahead intently, glancing now and then behind him, or up a side street. Before they get to Main Road he stops. "Here I wait for you," he says.

There is the usual collection of vagrants at the entrance to the grocer. James buys a loaf of bread, cheese, tomatoes, lettuce, and some cold meat. He also takes a bottle of fruit juice, a can of coke, a chocolate bar. The boy is waiting further up the road than before, leaning against a wall. They take the same route back, through the hole, up the stairs. James leaves the door, the gate open, and pockets the key. While he prepares the food, the boy looks on passively. His presence is sullen and repellent; James has no appetite for the food he is preparing. When he is finished, he wraps the sandwiches in wax paper, puts them into a plastic shopping bag with the coke, the fruit juice, the chocolate bar. Again, as he hands over the package, he is struck by the roughness of the boy's skin, by the hardness, the resilience, it suggests. "Do you have clothes for me?" the boy asks. He is standing in the doorway between kitchen and entrance hall with the same steady, impassive bearing he always seems to have.

"I presumed you weren't collecting," James replies, glancing at the hand that now holds the packet of food. *Presumed*: the boy regards the word quizzically. What hope is there for James's book? When he and his subject are from different realms of existence, each with its different language, with its different urgencies?

"It's cold out there boss; in here it's warm." James nods slightly, he cannot argue, it is true. Nevertheless, he is not prepared to give more. He clasps his hands together in front of him, letting the quiet multiply between them. Eventually, the boy turns toward the door and James watches him out, locking the gate behind him, shutting the door.

*

A few days later, in the early morning, James dreams of himself in the midst of a large crowd in a dry, bitter landscape. At first, the crowd appears to be milling about, at a market perhaps, or a protest. Then he realizes that he has been caught in a fracas. Everywhere, people are scuffling, there are loud noises, screaming. But James does not seem part of the milieu: nobody pays him attention; he tries to move, but cannot. Examining himself, he discovers he has been restricted by a system of chains clasped to his wrists and ankles and neck, as if he were victim of a press gang; there is only enough slack to take a short step. He watches the crowd more closely. There are some, he notes, naked except for their military trousers and boots, whose flesh is pocked by small wounds. In the wounds and around them, squirming furiously, are dozens of white maggots eating at the flesh. The men pierce the air with their shrieks, desperately rubbing their bodies to get rid of the larvae. Their still healthy fellows turn on them, beating them away with sticks until they lie in the dust clawing for help. From the crowd his father appears, afflicted by the same disease; he comes to James; together they begin to scrape at the flesh. But the maggots cling and there are too many of them. James pulls the chain between his wrists taut and scours his father's back, aware he is making the wounds deeper, wider – but if he could only get the maggots off… His movements become frantic, the clasp around his neck seems to squeeze his throat…

He wakes up, staring at the doorway. Slowly, his breathing calms, the pressure around his throat subsides. His fingertips search his chest, his collar, his neck.

He sits on the edge of the bed, the nightmare still fresh in his mind. This is the second time he has dreamed of the maggots recently: the eve of his departure to Johannesburg was the last. Before that there were other occasions too. Indeed, it is an image that first came to him as a teenager, one

night after he had watched the news. In his sleep, he saw people dead in the streets with maggots feasting on their corpses. Now, they seem to be creeping up on him, the maggots. Each time, after he awakes, the dream stays with him – it is as if it has taken up residence inside him. If he tries, during a still moment, he can imagine the larvae somewhere below the surface – of his mind, of his flesh.

In the darkness, he goes to the brass bowl he keeps in the entrance hall. He feels around for the pendant, but cannot find it. He searches carefully. But the pendant is not there. Although he is sure of where he had left it, he checks a few other places – his travel bag, the laundry basket, his cupboards. It is not in any of them. For a long time he gazes at the odds and ends in the bowl, then he stands next to the bedroom window, looking out at the sliver of tarmac visible through the gap in his curtains. From outside, the traffic-gurgle is slowly getting louder. He lies in his bed again, trying to imagine how it might have happened, how the boy might have eluded his attention long enough, noiselessly slipped the pendant into his pocket.

Later, standing outside, James chaffs his hands together. Despite the crisp pre-dawn air the sky is clear, promising warmth. He ambles along the Promenade to clear his mind, as far as the beach in Mouille Point. There are few people out – some joggers, cyclists, people with dogs. James walks slowly. As he progresses, everything comes into being – the apartment buildings, the streets, the road signs – at first only as silhouettes, but steadily retrieved from shadows. Where the walkway turns inland, he stands behind the railing with his arms folded, with the sun warming the back of his head, his neck, his shoulders. The view out to sea is uninterrupted. There is the cry of seagulls, and he can see a clutch of them on the rocks; but they seem to add to the scene's desolation.

Somebody jogs past breathing heavily, disappearing with rhythmic footfalls; he listens until he cannot hear the sound anymore. It leaves behind a quiet filled by the rush of waves and the occasional explosion they make against the seafront. For a long while he is absorbed – where they break, he notes, they have eaten into the walls. It strikes him that, over time, the Promenade will collapse, a new seafront will develop. The waves, like time: destroying and renewing.

James leans against the railing, the rough cold surface in his palms. He cannot see how he will be able to retrieve the pendant. Indeed, the boy is unlikely to make another appearance. It is a blow, for certain – just as the boy had started to capture his imagination, just as the facts, the statistics, the case studies had begun to take form in the flesh. That, and the loss of the pendant. He replays

the scene in his mind: the boy lifting the pendant from the brass bowl, in the same movement slipping it into his pocket, while James turns slightly away – perhaps to find a knife, perhaps to slice some tomatoes. The pendant is gone. Nevertheless, James can hardly find fault with the boy: the pendant did not, after all, belong to James, not entirely. And yet, he cannot help the sense that he has lost a part of himself, as if a pitiless surgery has been performed on him, and he is the lesser for it; as if a memory has been lifted from his brain. Indeed, he is already aware of the recollections fading, his mother's face growing softer, her presence fainter, his family history blurring altogether.

A small fishing boat appears from the direction of Table Bay, its lights bobbing, its motor straining. The memories will remain, James reflects, but they are orphaned memories, wandering unaided, unguided. James might as well have thrown the pendant into the ocean.

It is a fine day – more and more people come out onto the seafront. There is an atmosphere of making the most of the good weather. He turns back towards Sea Point, continues on as far as Graaff's Pool, then crosses Beach Road and winds his way through the side streets off Oliver: even if there is little hope of finding the boy, he may as well look around.

In the alleyways between buildings, noises from the Promenade grow faint – he can no longer hear the ocean, cries of seagulls, wailing from playing children. Indeed, the air is close and damp, the tar moist, scattered with puddles left over from rains. The only sound he can hear clearly is his own footsteps reverberating off the walls.

For a long time he appears to be alone. Then, rounding a corner, a rush of voices comes to him from one of the balconies; he looks up – there is a gathering of young men and women, some leaning with their backs against the barrier, some facing the street, glasses or bottles in their hands, with bright faces. As he passes, one or two leer at him.

Further along, approaching from the opposite direction, is another group – perhaps on their way to the very same balcony. There are four young men, slick, a spring in their steps, wearing jewelry. They regard him from a long way off, their faces serious. When they go by, one of them passes comment: "Check out this loner – looks like a homeless." James's first reaction is to glance over his shoulder, tersely challenge their glares. It seems rather pointless, though, rather immature. Yet why should he be taken note of after all? Why should he be remarked upon? He walks on.

Once or twice, wandering above Main Road, he comes across street children, but none of them is familiar, none of them is the boy. While he passes, they, like the youths, ponder him. One cannot hope to be anonymous, he thinks – not unless one is part of the group.

*

He waits a long time for the landlady in front of her door, scanning the adjacent notice board. Inside, there is the sound of something scraping across the floor, then footsteps shuffling closer. He stares at the peephole. After a pause, the landlady undoes the chain, the lock and, with effort, pulls open the door. Her cheeks are flushed, her breathing laboured. She smiles up at him. "Yes, James. I've been expecting you." He follows her in, noticing the creases on the seat of her frock.

The flat is larger than his, taking up one corner of the first floor. There are five rooms: the kitchen and living room to the left, the bathroom and a small bedroom to the right. In the corner, he guesses, is the main bedroom, hers. She leads him to the living room, which is grandly decorated, with a bookshelf against one wall and paintings hung on the others – most of them small portraits, one or two grey cityscapes. Its window overlooks the guard's shed at the main gate.

They go to a table in the corner, on which a booklet and some papers lie scattered. While he lowers himself into a chair she gathers the papers, puts them in a drawer and closes the booklet. She disappears into the kitchen. Opposite, an old television set is turned on, voices coming from it in a whisper.

A short while later she returns with two cups of Rooibos tea. Leaning over, she places one in front of him; the other she puts down unsteadily on the wooden surface. From a silver bowl she takes two letters, bundled together, and hands them to James – one from his publisher, the other from a law firm in Johannesburg. "When did these come?" he asks.

"Both of them while you were away." He nods, stirring sugar into his tea; she examines him through thick glasses. "Will you be going back?"

"No," he answers, perhaps too quickly; pauses. "My mother was frail when I arrived – she died while I was there." He clears his throat. A reminder: he should learn to say that better – he should learn to say it with greater sorrow in his voice. "The funeral was the weekend before I returned."

Resting her hands on her lap, sighing, she replies, "I'm very sorry to hear that, James," her voice soft, a murmur, her eyes gazing past him, through him, settling on a withered arrangement of flowers behind his head.

An awkward silence follows. James looks outside, watches a car pull up to the gate. Although the security guard is in his shed, and the door is wide open, he does not seem to notice; eventually the driver, growing impatient, hoots. The guard emerges sullen-faced.

"He's never alert, that man," the landlady says, shaking her head. They listen to the gate sliding open, the car rumbling into the basement below. Does anything escape her attention here, in these rooms?

"There's been a beggar coming round recently," James says, "a street child, a boy." The old woman frowns. "I know the one. I found him rather arrogant. I'm sorry if he's bothering you – he shouldn't have been allowed in."

"He's paid me two visits during the past week. The last was on Saturday," James continues. The landlady sits very upright, listening. "On both occasions I offered him food. This last time, he waited inside while I made him sandwiches. The next morning I discovered something missing. I suspect the boy of taking it."

She slips her glasses off; her eyes tiny and bewildered. "I wouldn't be surprised, James. Don't you think it was careless of you to let him into your home?" James says nothing. "Even children aren't to be trusted these days." Putting the glasses on again, she adds: "What did he take?"

"A necklace."

"He must have pawned it by now. Who knows what he's done with the money? I shudder to think." Then, offering James a weak grin: "We have to be vigilant these days." She sips her tea, the cup quivering slightly in her fingers.

"I'd like to know if he returns," he says, swallowing the last of his Rooibos.

7.

During the week that follows James's life resumes its rhythm. The memory of his time in Johannesburg, of his mother, of the funeral, is slowly being ground down in the mill of work. Every morning at the same time, he walks down to his little office, spends hour after hour poring through books, documents, websites, taking notes, making phone calls. Mel's image as yet revisits him, but increasingly only in the intervals between thoughts, between actions; with it, the stabs of yearning that accompany the recollection of her. The evenings, the mornings just after he wakes up, are a different matter – her presence is still with him. Work is, essentially, a distraction.

Over time, he becomes familiar with the faces around the grocery store. One of them – an illegal immigrant – he befriends. Occasionally James crosses the street, offers him a cigarette and, together, they stand out in the cold, smoking. He is older than James, with greying hair and a beard. The vagrants, he explains, fall into three classes: illegal immigrants, the maimed, deformed or otherwise disabled, and the jobless South Africans. James surveys them - some are young, decidedly able bodied. But they seem overcome by lethargy. They look on impassively, briefly coming alive to solicit money from pedestrians, sinking again into their slumber.

For the immigrants, he continues, circumstances are simple: they would not be able to get work even if they wanted to. They are unemployable. If they receive refugee status, they are handicapped by the fact that they do not speak any South African languages, their qualifications are not recognised, and they would be taking jobs from other South Africans. And the truth is, there are not enough jobs to go around anyway.

"It is the way things work," the man says, stamping his feet against the cold, exhaling puffs of smoke. "You need money to buy food, you need work to get money. Work makes the wheels go forward. If you don't help drive the wheels, nobody wants you." James looks at the men hunched up against the wall. "These aren't the days when we can live off the land – the land belongs to someone else. But it doesn't matter" – the man raises an arm to take in the men – "Nobody's satisfied with living off the earth anymore."

So they beg and they steal. Perhaps some of them are guilty of greater crimes still; perhaps one or two know what it is to take another's life. But they are, essentially, scavengers, living off scraps. If they were wholly successful, they would not be here, they would be somewhere else, living

differently. With the money they manage to scrape together they buy alcohol, or drugs. And then they sit here, waiting – a cycle.

*

On rubbish day, the boy makes a brief appearance, rummaging quickly through the bins. But the waste management truck rounds the corner and the boy disappears. James rushes downstairs and finds the street abandoned, the bins standing empty with their lids open like chicks waiting to be fed.

On Thursday, he receives a message from Mel. *I'm thinking of coming to Cape Town*, it says. He sends a cautious reply but hears nothing more. The next morning he wakes up before dawn and drives to False Bay. He turns off the main road in Muizenberg, travelling along the deserted Baden Powell Drive, past the Misty Cliffs, to a small parking lot. From there, he walks down onto a long sliver of beach, its white sands stretching far into the distance until, converging at a point, they blend with the grey tides. Around him, there is no sign of humanity – there is the ocean, the beach, and a steep ridge of dunes over which he cannot see. He is completely alone – this his private garden, walled in by earth and water. Leaving his car a long way behind, he makes his way to a cluster of rocks. There he sits, listening to the ocean-rumble, to the seagulls. Now and then, a fishing boat, or a small patrol boat, appears on the bay, slapping the water, churning up furrows in its wake. For the most part, though, there is stillness, serenity.

Then, gradually as the sky turns from grey to sallow blue, his memory begins to tick, and he recalls, with anxiety, the parking lot and the car he has left behind, and the fact that there are shanty towns nearby. Any minute now somebody will walk past, somebody will notice the vehicle. In this country, people, with their temptations, are not to be trusted.

On his way home, driving through Plumstead, Wynberg, Kenilworth, he observes the swarming pavements, the vendors and family shops, the wriggle and squirm of daily work. He is struck that all his efforts, all the work he does, is for nobody but himself – not, like these people, for the sake of a family, a wife, children. He has nobody, he is alone.

He spends the day in his office and walks home in the afternoon, buying a bottle of wine on the way. All evening, he drinks out on the balcony until, much later, drunk, he drives to the apartment in Kenilworth. The woman is not home. He sleeps in his car in the parking lot.

On his way in the next morning the landlady corners him. She is wearing a blue frock – the same one he had seen her in before – a string of pearls, with matching earrings. "I wanted to report back to you, James," she says, "about that street child you mentioned." She scans his creased clothing, his unkempt hair. "It appears you're not the only one to have been robbed. Other residents have also found things missing – silverware, ornaments, even money. We believe the child is responsible: he and a companion, a girl." He is surprised to hear about the girl. "They've been living here unbeknown to us."

"Are you sure there was a girl?" he asks.

"Yes, they seem to have been attached, the two of them." A pause. "They'd made a nest for themselves in the garden shed. We found a few items there, but I'm afraid not your necklace James. I'm sorry." She waits for him to say something, but he is silent. "The security guards have been informed and the property is under stricter surveillance."

"Do you know where the children are now?"

"We informed the appropriate social services. As far as I know they've taken the children in." She leans closer. "I could put you in touch with the officer I spoke to. A friendly lady. Are you interested?" she asks.

"I'd be grateful for her details," he says, and the conversation is over.

He finds himself outside Bentham House on a rather fine day: a clear sky, calm air. On the street there is a great deal of activity: pedestrians, traffic. But the block of flats is quiet. There is no movement, even behind the windows. Acting on a whim, he makes his way alongside the building towards the pool shed. He passes through an alleyway between the sidewall and a row of garages, and then emerges onto a patch of lawn, green but unkempt, with two oak trees giving shade. They are perhaps older than the building. The shed is behind these, a crude face-brick block with changing rooms and a place to store equipment. Nearby there is a swimming pool, its surface strewn with leaves and other rubbish. He circles the building. There is nothing to suggest the recent presence of the street children. Their traces have been erased. Nevertheless, it is obvious where they had broken in: a rudimentary wire meshwork covers a hole in the storeroom gate. It appears to have been a small hole, but the children would have had no trouble getting

through. On the inside there is little space, however. The store is full of odds and ends – old pipes for the Kreepy Krawly, chemicals, rags, gardening tools, an old overall and sun hat. All appear to have been abandoned for a long time. It hardly seems possible for the children to have slept there.

Rounding the corner, he notices the guardhouse, a small wooden shed in the distance, and in the window, barely distinguishable behind the reflection, the security guard's face. Is this what the landlady had meant by surveillance? A face in the window?

James strolls over. The shed is mounted on a concrete slab and has an overhanging roof, supported by two beams, which forms a bare porch. As he approaches the guard turns away. He is bent over a desk, looking down at his palms. His uniform is navy, with plain red epaulettes buttoned on at the shoulders. From the corner of the shed, a radio blares an animated debate. It is louder than it needs to be.

The guard takes no notice of him. "I've heard there were children living in the pool shed," James says above the noise. "Did you see them there?"

The guard looks up at him, turns down the radio. Then he comes out, standing spread-legged in front of the doorway. At his feet lies a scattering of squashed cigarette ends. James repeats his question, a little louder, a little more forcefully. The guard smirks. "I didn't see them. Maybe my colleague was involved, not me. I was only told."

"Have you ever seen them here?"

The guard shrugs. "I don't remember every face I see."

After a long silence, James walks away. Behind him, there is a burst of excitement from the radio. But, glancing back, he sees the guard hunched over the desk again, staring at his hands, unmoved, unmoving.

*

During the course of the week, James visits the children's home, a soulless cluster of buildings on the outskirts of Diepriver. A woven-wire fence surrounds the property, which from the outside

seems abandoned. The buildings are face-brick and concrete, with rows of opaque windows facing the road. A colourful sign at the entrance says *Department of Social Development, K. Visagie Shelter*. Had it not been for this, he would have taken it for a school or, perhaps, a hospital.

A security guard in blue uniform watches him pull up. James signs in, giving the name of the social worker he had contacted. The guard does not bother to check up on the details. He parks in a gravelled culvert and then walks up to the buildings. Nearing the main entrance he sees, through a gap between two walls, a patch of rugged lawn, an empty quad, an abandoned football.

He has to push hard before the glass door budges. Inside, he finds himself in a large, high-ceilinged hall, with blue-grey walls and linoleum floor tiles. Directly in front of him is a framed print called *The Charnel House*, above it a security camera. He walks to a small waiting area on the left. There is nobody at the counter so he sits on one of the chairs and waits. All around him are A4 drawings by the children; on a coffee table are brochures and old magazines. Through an open door he can see a passageway with offices leading off it. He is the only person in the room.

A while later a woman arrives, walking in with her arms folded across her chest. The skin on her face is pallid with veins showing faintly through the surface; her hair is black, straight. "Mr Van Gogh?" she asks in a shy voice, stopping a few metres away. He follows her to an office, plainly furnished, reminding him of his own. She offers him water from a jug on her desk. On the windowsill are a small potted aloe and a row of pill containers, some of them almost empty. The window looks out onto the lawn.

"You said you were writing a book?" she begins.

"Yes."

"I have to inform you that the children you were asking after aren't here," she says, softly, in resigned tones. "The girl was signed out by a relative. The boy disappeared yesterday." Folding her arms, leaning on the desk, she studies his reaction. He says nothing. "It's not difficult for someone to escape, if they try hard enough. We don't have the resources to watch over them constantly."

"Do you know who the relative was?" James asks. "How did they know to find the girl?"

"Well, that's a good question. When children arrive they undergo a fairly detailed examination. We interview them, give them medical examinations and so on. If we get the right kind of information, we can locate their birth certificates, their places of origin, even their family members. But that is not always the case. In fact it's not usually the case. It takes time to win the children over, they don't give accurate details, and at other times they simply can't remember. Our job is not easy."

"This gentleman arrived with identification that indicated he was a family member. That may not be the case, but we have no way of checking. So we let her go. Our goal is, after all, for these children to be taken in by their families or communities."

"And the boy? What do you know about him?"

She drinks water, never taking her eyes off him. "He was a mysterious person. We'd drawn up a programme for him already. It included drug rehabilitation as well as the usual things – skills education, chores, regular examinations. But he was very attached to the girl. We suspect that's why he left." The same word again – *attached*. The ability to make attachments: an inkling, perhaps, that there is at least the wiring for social life – an apparatus that must be protected, allowed to thrive.

From the corridor a bell rings suddenly; there is a commotion somewhere behind the walls. "Did they have anything with them when they arrived? Any possessions?"

The woman frowns. "The girl had something: a necklace. It is, of course, still in her possession."

8.

The next Monday the telephone rings. For a moment, glimpsing the unfamiliar Johannesburg number on the screen, he imagines he will hear his mother's voice – the ghost evoked, perhaps, by traces of his early days in Cape Town, days he long ago discarded from memory. The line crackles when he answers and the voice that comes through is weak and distant, like a person emerging from sleep. It is Mel.

"I'm thinking of coming to Cape Town, James. There've been some developments; I'd like to get out of Johannesburg, and Cape Town is the furthest I can think of," she says without elaborating. The background is unnaturally quiet; he can hear her breathing. He tries to picture the room she is in, but his imagination fails, and he sees only a bedroom like his mother's, with the same furniture, the same bedding, the same vacuous stillness.

"Developments?"

She hesitates, the dense hush returning. He wonders whether her husband is somewhere in that silence, listening. "There's obviously been some kind of trouble," he ventures.

"It's a private matter." She pauses. "But you'll probably hear something about it sooner or later," she says. "Allegations have been made against my husband. He's facing a criminal trial—" her voice loses strength, she stops. *A private matter* – James should have no delusions: he is on the outside.

"You mean it's in the press," he guesses. "Is it that serious?" But she will say nothing more. Again, there is static; a door opens and he can hear, in the distance, a muffled chorus of dogs.

With the phone pressed to his ear, he makes his way to the kitchen, fetches a bottle of wine – a Pinotage – from his wine-rack. "It would be easy for you to come here, Mel. I have a spare bedroom – there are cupboards and a chest of drawers. I have spare keys; you could come and go as you please."

"That's not what I meant, James," she replies, her voice tired. "I wasn't phoning to ask you to take me in. I have to think about appropriateness, the way things look. I need to get away, that's all, before I get dragged into this mess, before I lose any more faith—"she cuts herself short.

He waits a moment, listening intently. Then, returning to his bedroom with the Pinotage: "Do you believe these allegations – are they true?"

"They came as a shock." She clears her throat. Someone – whether a man or woman he cannot tell – whispers in the background. There is a brief exchange. "They're certainly not consistent with the side of my husband I see and know," Mel rejoins, a little hoarse. "They can get to you, though, these allegations – they can crawl under your skin."

He glimpses his reflection in his window: a solitary figure behind a neatly-made bed, a wardrobe to one side and, on the other, his desk and bookcase. An empty room, he thinks. His imagination places Mel on the edge of the bed, her head bowed slightly towards the floor, her hair obscuring her chin and mouth, her eyes staring as if lost in memory.

"How long will you be here?" James asks, drawing the curtains.

"I don't know. The idea's simply to escape. It's something my husband and I have agreed on. He'll be away most of the time, usually abroad. Alone, I might be hounded by the press."

"I can help with arrangements, if that's what you'd like," James offers. "Have you thought of what work you'll do?" he adds.

"There's a St Luke's in Kenilworth – I've applied. But I'll come whether I get the job or not. I could always look while I'm there." She pauses; again there is movement around her. "I have to go, James. I'm sorry to involve you like this. I didn't know who to turn to."

Two days later, the article appears in the local newspaper. *Johannesburg politician accused of fraud* is the headline. The article cites a Scopa report: there have been irregularities. "The people's trust has been broken," says the reporter. The logic behind this statement is absent – it is merely an accusation. Nor does the article speculate on how the fraud might have been committed, on the mechanics of the crime. James is left with the sense that the husband might, after all, be innocent. He has learned not to trust newspapers, not to trust accusers. But the husband is a rival, and

James cannot feel anything: he is indifferent. Let him be honest: the fate of the man means nothing. It is Mel he is after, what happens to her marriage is irrelevant.

He tries to phone Mel, but her phone is off. During the week he visits his landlady, who helps arrange accommodation in a nearby flat. It is within walking distance, not very large, but suitable he is sure, and furnished. He inquires at St Luke's. The nurse at the front desk directs him to an office at the back. The matron is aware of Mel's application. There are vacancies, she assures him: Mel will get the job. He is rather pleased with the way arrangements are working out. Things are falling into place: a sign, surely, of better things to come.

He writes up a message informing Mel of the inquiries, sends it. The screen on his phone fades, goes dark. In his room there is a certain emptiness that he has begun to notice more and more. He is aware of being alone, separate. And then he thinks of Mel: where is she now? In Johannesburg? At her family home in Mpumalanga? In the quiet, in the cool air out on his balcony, it strikes him how rashly he has been acting, burning with a fever of lonely ambition. Was it fair to invite her to Cape Town? Into the viper's den? His memory brings up the husband, in the darkness of the earlier conversation, perhaps with his arm on Mel's shoulder, perhaps listening to each word that passed – the man cloaked in silence, protected by Mel. The picture blends into another one: of Mel in his bedroom, with him, and the husband forgotten, or rather only half-remembered. Would James be satisfied with that – half-loved, by a torn woman? In his mind's eye Mel looks fatigued. Indeed, he remembers from their conversation her drained, sickly tones. He is sure that she has fallen ill. He wants her here, returned to him, returned to the situation they were in before, when his mother was dying. Only this time, nursing a dying marriage, taking solace in each others' presence.

His message to Mel receives no immediate reply. Over the days, with some difficulty, he sinks back into his routine. But there are moments, when he is incapacitated by his longing, that he takes up a bottle of wine and does not stop drinking until it is finished.

*

On Saturday afternoon James's buzzer sounds. Through the intercom, he hears Mel's voice, husky and frail. It takes him a few moments to make his way down. He finds her in a pool of light at the bottom of the stairs, her face drawn, her eyes unfocussed and bleary. Feebly, she greets him and for a moment he holds her in his arms. Her body is limp, unresponsive. She is

dressed up against the cold, wearing high leather boots, a long grey coat, and woollen cap; in one hand is her luggage, a small suitcase. James invites her up. She hesitates. "Everything is ready," he reassures her. "I'll walk you to your flat a little later."

Still she does not move. She is wraith-like, inanimate, the only motion occurring deep inside – in her recollection of what has happened, what is happening. Has it affected her so badly, this disillusionment? "A dinner will do you good," he adds.

They walk up the stairs in silence, Mel trailing slowly behind. Her suitcase is not heavy: he wonders what she has brought – surely not enough for a long stay. In anticipation of her arrival – in the hope of it – he has been keeping his apartment neat, a precaution for which he is now grateful. Nevertheless, as he shows her in, she seems hardly to take notice of anything. He shows her through to the balcony, offers her a glass of white wine. She accepts without thinking and they watch the sun setting red behind a sheet of cloud. She is not here, he tells himself. My work is cut out for me.

He prepares a warm meal: roast vegetables on a bed of rice covered in a creamy white sauce. When he returns, she is on the telephone. He sits rather awkwardly while the conversation ends. "I love you," she whispers, glancing up at James with the twilight reflected momentarily in her eyes. He looks away.

The evening becomes icy, the wind gusts. Now and then Mel coughs dryly, wheezing. He stops, staring at her. "It's nothing," she says, barely able to get the words out. After the meal, they finish the bottle of wine, shrouded in darkness, silence.

James offers her the spare room. "For tonight," he explains. "You're not well – it'd be better for someone to be at hand." She shakes her head timidly.

A short while later they set out for her block of flats, an old building on Main Road. Despite the cold it is a pleasant walk. Her apartment is on the second floor, overlooking the street. He places her suitcase at the foot of her bed, wanders through the rooms. The furniture is worn, the appliances old: the place does not suit her at all.

"I'm glad you're here, in Cape Town," he says on his way out. She makes no reply.

He takes the elevator down, a stuttering machine no doubt as old as the building itself. All the facing walls are mirrors. James stares at the numbered buttons. At the bottom, the elevator pings and he is released, the steel doors rolling gradually apart. Taking the few steps down to the pedestrian gate, he feels a light rain on his cheeks and hears the wind rake leaves along the pavements. The gate shudders closed behind him. He turns towards the red glow of Main Road, silhouettes passing to and fro against its light. The pavements are still alive with activity: traffic and people walking from cafés or restaurants. It is warmer too, and the din of chatter brings relief from the bated quiet of the back streets. Going past the spot where he had a few weeks earlier seen the vagrants, he crosses Main Road and takes the gloomy St John's up the hill.

Rain falls like a mist, bringing with it the smells of salt and seaweed. He can hear dogs barking in the distance – three of them, he counts. He has a sense of being enveloped by the drizzle, shielded from the world around him. Unbidden, the image of his mother comes to him, suffering etched onto her face – lines of horror and despair. It is an expression, he suspects, which has been passed down. One that, were he able to observe his face at certain moments, he would be confronted with. He recalls the trauma of those first days after he had discovered his adoption, and his parents' long deception; how he had sat abstracted from all around him, repeating the same thoughts, arriving at the same conclusions, replaying the same remembered conversations, the same images. Names on the birth certificates, faces on the portraits. And slowly, sitting on the edge of his bed, the stupor lifting, he came back into the world, but it was with a keen sense of separation from the objects, the walls and people around him. They had to him no natural connection; to them he had no claim. They had adopted him, and they could just as easily disown him. Without blood, without a history, without a narrative, he was adrift, living not on his own terms, but on somebody else's – as a parasite. Disillusionment, then withdrawal: those were the first touches of Hades' spindly fingers, the beginnings of a disease of yearning. Once he knew that the world around him was a fabrication, he began to long for one that was not. And now it has passed to Mel. In her eyes, the feverish yearning, in her voice the languid tones of distraction, of abstraction.

*

Tuesday is Mel's first meeting at St Luke's. James arrives outside her building very early, with the streetlamps still burning, with wisps of condensation still trailing cars. Nevertheless, Mel is waiting for him at the foot of the stairs, clutching her coat to her chest, with a woollen cap pulled down over her ears. She shivers as she gets in, a few droplets clinging to her hair and shoulders.

They drive through the city, along Main Road south to Kenilworth, the heater fully turned up, the radio tuned to classical music.

Her meeting continues for an hour. A nurse offers James coffee, which he accepts. She comments on the weather while leading a man, thin and weak, through a door to an in-ward. James goes outside to smoke, watching the morning traffic grind by. Even after dawn, the sky retains a deep grey and the wind howls unceasingly. Inside, the waiting area brings no relief: there is one panel heater, small and mostly ineffective, which a woman has pulled up nearly against her legs.

On the way back, Mel relates the details of her new engagement. She has agreed to work at the Lentegeur Hospital complex, serving as a trainer for caregivers: they have a shortage of staff there, apparently. It is the place she could best serve to help, to make a difference. As she speaks, she stares at the road ahead; in the silence after she stops, she glances at James. He says nothing.

The next day her work begins. James drives her to a sister's house in Woodstock. There, they meet Sharon, a gangly, sunken-eyed woman, a nurse too, who will give Mel and another colleague a lift to the hospital. In the afternoon, James collects her there again. Each day this crossing to Cape Town's other side; each day, though he makes no mention of it, the relief of receiving her back.

They fall into the habit of going to dinner together. On one occasion James brings a pot plant, an immature Fuchsia, for her apartment. He places it on a window sill. There are other new touches: a decorative bowl filled with polished stones, a Massai statuette next to the bookshelf, a series of framed black-and-white photographs which must have been taken by Mel. They show seagulls on a beach, footprints, a sunrise over the Hottentots-Hollands. He is struck that her activities extend beyond what they do together. In any case, she is pleased with the addition of the plant, rising on her toes to kiss his cheek. The sensation of her skin – soft, luxurious – against his remains long thereafter, and recalls the longing he had felt so intensely in Johannesburg. When he parts from her later, he dares a similar closeness, leaning into their embrace, grazing her cheek with his lips. She does not react.

Every evening at dusk he waits for her in the street below the house in Woodstock. Always there are children playing games under the streetlamps, their mothers watching from porches. At the bottom of the hill is the harbour, its high cranes glimpsed between colourful houses, and beyond that the fallow waters of Table Bay.

When Sharon's pale yellow Fiat arrives, he walks up the hill, meeting Mel in the driveway. He accompanies her to his car, with the gaunt Sharon, her hair like a bell jar, staring after them. They drive back into the city, the distant Flats receding further into the background.

Over time he begins to notices the transformation that occurs in Mel from morning to evening. When he arrives at the entrance to her building, while he drives her through the city to the house in Woodstock, she gradually shrinks away, growing more and more apprehensive until, parting from James, she is mute, her thoughts directed towards somewhere else. The woman who emerges later, on the other end of her work, is brighter, at peace. What passes at night, after their dinners together, once she is enclosed in her rooms? What metamorphosis does she undergo in darkness, in solitude?

On one occasion she arrives late from work. Woodstock's children are long since locked away in their houses, and the streets are abandoned. A fine rain begins to fall. James watches the clock, the corner, waiting. He begins to worry. They arrive an hour late; night has fallen before Sharon's yellow car pulls into a pool of light at the top of the road. Sharon and the other woman – younger, a siren, with make-up pasted in a thick layer on her face – climb out first, both slamming their doors. It is clear they have had a disagreement. Mel steps out tentatively, glancing over the top of the roof at James making his way up the hill. The younger one – the siren – has the final word: *Well, he wasn't complaining*. After that, becoming aware of James, they relent. Sharon, pulling her loose, knitted jersey across her chest, smiles wanly. The siren offers a more suggestive stare. Mel whispers something and then, taking his arm, leads him away.

The journey home passes in silence. Outside her building they sit in the car, rain pattering against the roof and bonnet. "I've never understood why you do this work Mel," he says, glancing at her. Her tiny hands are clutching her bag to her lap, her straight black hair concealing her cheek. "Surely, surrounded by the misery of others, you must eventually be infected yourself."

Water runs in rivulets down the windscreen, melting the world around them. Her lips part, but she says nothing. Pale lips, growing colder. He has noticed how, since her arrival, she has spoken less and less, and that when she does, it is with a gentle, weary voice. For a long time she stares outside, at colours, at movements. Then: "How do you live knowing others are infected?"

He thinks about it, nods. The rain begins to fall more heavily; he can hardly hear her above the noise. "That's what I could never ignore," she goes on. "Perhaps it's a failing. So many others can, after all – even some of my colleagues."

"But what difference do you really make? What difference did you make to my mother, in the end? You eased her suffering, and that's all. You couldn't bring her back to life, which is surely the ultimate goal, isn't it? In your profession, the situation's always hopeless. And now..." A pause. He cannot think how to continue.

Her head leans against the pillar of the door. "There are many things that can't be healed, James." Her eyes are filled with yearning. "How do you bring back a murdered father? Or a mother who has died of AIDS? There're no substitutes for those presences in life – there can't be. These afflictions, these—" she searches for the word— "these events, have to be lived with, somehow: the best you can do is ease the pain, the difficulty of the remaining days until, at last, you pass into death." A pause. "There are many terminal people in this country. Not all of them are aware of it."

James stares at her. In her hair there are miniscule droplets of water, in her eyes the reflection of lights outside. Desire wells up in the pit of his stomach. "I'd like to take you somewhere," he says, and starts the engine. She makes no objection.

By the time they get there – a shabby establishment in Kalk Bay – night has fallen. It is a place he likes because of its cosiness, because of its proximity to the ocean. The waitress, a thickset teenager wearing a floppy cap, seats them at a trestle table near the bar. "The restaurant is full," she says, gesturing vaguely upstairs, mopping up rings of water and beer left by previous patrons. Because of the shadow the wooden flight of steps casts, there is a candle burning in a jar at the centre of the table. On the same level are the bar counter and, through a corridor, a gaming room. Their table looks, to one side, across a sunken space crowded with people, some of them standing, some sitting; to the other, an expanse of utter darkness, the ocean, separated by a wading pool, a concrete break.

They order wine and agree to share a seafood platter. When the meal arrives they eat in silence. Mel stares for long periods out the window; he finds himself unable to divert his attention from her. During the meal Mel's cell phone rings. James hears a deep voice on the other end, sees the expression on her face soften. Their eyes meet briefly, awkwardly. He averts his gaze. All around

them, there is a terrific din and swarming of bodies – young people passing between tables, carrying mugs of beer, waitresses with trays and plates of steaming food; the hall itself, exuding warmth – the warmth of exertion, of hot breath and alcohol. James notices a man, older than he is, dark with shaven hair and round, heavy-lidded eyes, staring at them from the bar. When James notices him, the man turns away.

After the dinner, James leads Mel out into the chill night, passing through the doors of the restaurant onto a patch of beach sand. Then, climbing onto the concrete break, they walk along its outstretched arm to the edge of the water. The din of the restaurant gives way to the sound of the ocean, the far-off assembly of waves, beginning like a sigh in the distance and approaching, coming nearer until, in despair they shatter, receding again. They listen to water gently lapping against the base of the wall, the creaking of boats in the harbour. In the background, the restaurant lights glow amber and figures are visible through the windows, indistinct now – silhouettes against a silk screen. Among them is a figure, standing square towards them. The sense of being watched unsettles James.

A sudden wave breaks, sending a plume of spray across them. James, reacting, takes Mel's hand in his. There is a moment during which he is not sure whether to hold on or let go. But he does not relinquish his grip. She moves closer to him, as another wave breaks, one side of her body touching his. Against the coolness of the air outside, he feels her warmth, sensual and private. Moving back from the edge, they listen to the rhythm of the waves, to their cycle. He no longer thinks about the hand he is clutching – the water, the salty taste of it, the smell of fish and seaweed, are all mixed into the heat of her hand, her body, overpowering his mind, drowning out memory.

They stay like this until the cold sinks into them, James squeezing Mel towards him, holding her closely. She is pliant. And yet, he senses, she makes no effort to return the affection. She is simply following, despite herself, in spite of what she knows is correct. Is it fair of him to continue, to press on? He looks into her eyes, gentle, aloof. Then, leaning towards her, he kisses her, feeling his lips meet hers – a reserved kiss, not entirely committed, not sure of itself: too restrained by the consequences, by the faces watching from the windows, by the eyes peering through the veil of memory. And yet, a kiss nevertheless, met perhaps not with passion, but with something else, something he might call – he hesitates to use the word – necessity.

They both draw back, a thread of saliva hanging momentarily between their lips, elongating then separating. A shimmer remains on her mouth: the moisture of James's venom. Her warmth dissipates from his lips; he becomes aware of the bitter air touching his cheeks, his neck, his hands. He can hear ripples of water lapping against the break. Mel retreats, the lustre in her eyes sinking beneath a vacant look, her arms dropping to her sides, her body slackening like a patient undergoing anaesthesis. He puts his arm around her and, pulling her towards him, guides her back to the car park, rain once again beginning to fall.

The return to Sea Point takes half an hour. James concentrates on the road, listening to the wipers moving back and forth across the windscreen – a monotonous rhythm. Next to him, Mel rests unmoving, unreceptive, staring ahead; later, she leans her head against the window, closing her eyes. When James next glances at her she is asleep, her face caught in an expression of contentment. Has his kiss found purchase after all? Has its taste, its sensation, begun to circulate in the dark pools of her imagination? She is still asleep when they arrive at her building. It would not be difficult, under the circumstances, to take her to his flat, to carry her up the stairs and lay her in the spare bed or, perhaps, even in his own. If he were lucky, if she awoke still burning with that heat they had shared – if it had spread from her lips into skin – along her neck, her chest, her limbs – it is not inconceivable that she might lean over, that she might whisper something into his ear, that they might follow their passion to its conclusion.

But that it wishful thinking. He moves towards her, brushing aside the strand of hair that has fallen across her cheek, seeing the same restful look on her face. Gently, he rouses her. She stirs and, not fully awake, shifts in the seat, nestling her head in the crook of his neck. At the same time, her fingers search up along the back of his neck and through his hair, settling near his crown. She moans softly. Then, lamb-eyed, disorientated, she raises her head, taking in the unexpected surroundings, stopping on James's face. For a few seconds she does not seem to recognise him. But she gathers herself abruptly, sitting upright, letting her hand fall. She fiddles with her handbag. Then, wanly she smiles: "Goodnight James," she says, and opens the door. Hesitating, she turns to him: "And thank you for tonight."

He watches her until she disappears into the lift. For a long while he stays outside in his car, waiting for the light to come on in her window. But it does not.

While he is lying in bed that night, his eyes closed, he hears the raindrops rapping against his window, like fingers on a piece of wood. The memory of Mel's kiss stays with him and, more than that, the warmth that for the duration of their embrace had permeated him now, again, spreads through his flesh like a disease. He imagines her lying on her bed not too far away, listening to the same noises, surrounded by a similar emptiness. The distance seems impassable. Now more than ever.

Feeling for his cigarettes on the side table and, getting up, pulling aside the curtain, he smokes out of his window. Ash blows onto him, mingled with rain. A few droplets splatter at his feet. Afterwards he settles at his desk, the lamp on. He pours a glass of red wine, brimful, and picks up *The Fruits of the Earth*, opening it at the beginning. Many times, on evenings such as this, burning with fever, he has read it straight through. Always he has emerged exhausted, in a stupour or, if he lacked endurance, woken with the book on the floor and his body slumped uncomfortably in his chair.

He begins to read: *I should like to come to you at that hour of night when you have opened, one after the other and then shut, a great many books… when the fervour is about to turn into sadness for want of sustenance*— but then stops, looking up. He sighs, closes the book. The words will find no foothold in him, not tonight: the fruit is absent, nothing will change that – he has only its taste on his lips, no more. And yet, even if she were next to him at this moment, even if he could simply reach across to touch her, to kiss her, wouldn't he need more – a new fervour. And after that? Would he ever reach the end of his desire?

He turns the lamp off, sits in the darkness. The rain has abated, left-over droplets falling from the eaves and railings. Tilting his head backwards, he gulps down the rest of the wine and, screwing up his face against the bitter taste, collapses onto his bed. His eyes closed, he listens again to the night-time sounds.

9.

In the morning he awakes as if into a different world: the events of the previous evening half-buried, half washed away, like jetsam after a storm. He drives over to Mel's and, while watching the entrance, smokes outside on the pavement. She appears unexpectedly from down the street, from the Promenade, returning from a walk. As she strolls up, with James following her approach, a jogger greets her. What else about her life in Cape Town has he missed?

She wears a long coat, above which the collar of her uniform is visible. She is out of breath, flushed, the smell of the sea on her skin.

In Woodstock they find Sharon waiting outside. She ushers Mel into the car and they drive off. The other woman – the siren – is absent.

James passes the morning in his office. The heater is not working, the air is stale: the space seems rather large, rather empty and cold. On the screen in front of him he has written, so far, only a heading: *A life without consequences*. Open on the desk is a magazine article recounting the story of a street boy, whose name is not mentioned. There is a photo of him, straight-faced with a newspaper rolled up in his back pocket and a bottle of glue at his feet. In the background an older man is hunched over, gazing at his own hands. The image comes to James of his father, slumped in an armchair, staring at a blank wall.

James reaches for the whisky bottle. He pours three fingers into a tumbler, adding ice and water in the kitchen. Then he begins to read the article, sipping his whisky, gradually finishing it, pouring another, continuing. The words become momentarily blurred, and he finds himself, a while later, staring from his window. He cannot recall what he has read or how much time has passed. A rectangle of sunlight has begun creeping onto the sill, elongating minute by minute, spreading across his desk. When it is large enough, when it touches the edge nearest him, he dips his head into it, feeling his vision fade into a white glow. In the window he can see his reflection, a resemblance of the ruddy-cheeked Van Goghs of his family portraits. He closes his eyes tightly, the shape of the window, the computer screen, burned onto his retina.

After a while a terrible hunger shakes him from his trance. He goes gingerly down the stairs onto the pavement, where everything, everybody is bathed in the same languid winter sunshine. His head is spinning, his ears ringing, his mind unable clearly to make out the different objects in

front of him. In the periphery, light glares off the white-walled buildings. He passes a woman walking a mongrel, and a street vendor – a Rastafarian – selling cigarettes, Rizlas, tobacco and whatever else that might not be on display; then an old woman, white-haired, skeletal, ambling along with a cane in one hand, a brown paper bag full of groceries in the other. The bag is heavy for her – she wheezes as she walks. The glare becomes unbearable, oppressive: James looks down, away. On the pavement there are dark liquid stains and scraps of litter; in some places the flagstones are cracked or sunken. A harsh, familiar existence; each person, each thing denuded as if on an altar; each one another sacrifice to this thirsty soil.

At the grocer's he buys tomatoes, a head of lettuce, bread and a bag of apples. He stands in the cool air by the fridges until he is able to gather his wits. On the way back, he stops at a liquor store for another bottle of whisky and some ice.

As he pushes open his office door he pauses: the computer is on, the magazine lying open next to it, scraps of paper scattered on the floor and desk. Then he glances at the wall clock: 11:00. Three hours since he dropped Mel off. In the kitchen he fills his tumbler with water, gulps it down, follows that with another, and another. Then he makes some sandwiches and takes them to his desk, leaving the unused food in the fridge.

As he sits down, a line from the interview with the street child catches his eye. *My aunt was frightening*, says the child. It did not begin that way – the aunt used to provide for him; she was, according to the boy, *very strict*, a disciplinarian, but not a tyrant, not unbearable. He was expected to look after the daily chores; in return, he was given food, a roof over his head, an education. If he did not perform, he was beaten. If he did a shoddy job, the same would result. A tough upbringing, without doubt. But one takes what one gets, under the circumstances. Over time, the beatings came more frequently, often whether he did his chores or not. Soon after, she stopped feeding him altogether. *One day she was my mother, the next day she was my enemy*, he says.

Would you go back if she asked you to, asks the interviewer. *No, I like it here*, he replies – *I like the streets because I can make money.*

James glances again at the wall clock: 12:12. For a short while longer he gazes at the screen, taking sips from the tumbler; then, resigning himself, he collects his scraps of paper into a pile, files away the magazine and turns the computer off.

In a matter of fifteen minutes he is driving along a narrow, poorly marked road towards Mitchell's Plain. His impressions are hazy. There are unpainted houses, people – men, women, children – on front porches, animals in streets. At one point he passes an open stand with a faded billboard staked near the pavement. *For development* it reads. In the middle of the property rubble has been dumped, and the previous building's foundations are still visible through clumps of veld. Further along, at an interchange, a group of men sit idly on the curb, smoking. As James passes, they leer. They do not talk to one another, they hardly move, the whites of their eyes vivid, impassive, like the famished, the destitute one sees in documentaries. They are insubstantial, fading. James: a corporeal entity passing through a land of wraiths.

He arrives at Lentegeur Hospital, his thoughts still murky, still imprecise. The taste of whisky has settled in his mouth, the smell of it on his breath. At the security boom he asks for directions to the hospice, and then follows their directions to a small, empty parking lot. In front of him is a square, white-walled building with a construction site extending from one side – a bazaar of cement, sand and piles of bricks. Already some of the extensions are complete – no doubt a haven for the swelling ranks of the dying. No work is happening today – the crane rises indolently above, its pulley dangling, swaying in drafts of air. On the walls of the hospice, and on its windows, thick layers of building dust have settled. James follows a narrow walkway up to the entrance. He pauses before going in, listening to water trickling into a drain, seeing bright colonies of algae forming on the grate.

Through the glass doors he finds a small waiting room, an old man sitting alone on one of the chairs, flipping through a magazine. He glances up at James, his eyes yellow, his lips blistered. There is nobody behind the reception desk, though he notices a coffee mug, half-empty with a lipstick stain on its edge. A delicate, crocheted jersey is draped over the back of the chair. James glances at the man, tries to think; he has begun to develop a headache. After a minute, he slips through the door next to the desk, into a long passageway. Leading off it are offices, a kitchen which he passes quickly, and at the end a door opening into the in-ward – he notices Mel through its slit window. First, he peers in: there are five or six beds, each with a patient; Mel is leaning over one of them. Then, he pushes the door open. The room, despite the people, seems empty, Mel the only moving presence. She whispers softly to the man she is attending, young, thin, bespectacled. The others appear half-dead, their clouded eyes staring beyond the blue walls, their spirits withdrawn. When she notices James, Mel again whispers something into the man's ear, strokes his head, walks over. The man's eyes follow her – clinging to life, like algae.

Wrinkles appear on Mel's forehead: "Has anything happened?" she asks tentatively. It is not the reaction he had expected. He begins to explain, but feels the weight of Mel's scrutiny. Can she smell the alcohol on him? Can she sense it?

They go to her office, a cramped room with a small conference table, a few bookshelves – mostly empty – and a desk. Her window is caked in dust. On her desk are a photo of her husband and an A5 journal, closed, with a Scales of Justice imprint on the cover. Packing it into her bag, she says: "I have nothing more to do today – we can go." On the way out she knocks on an office door; Sharon answers. Their gaze meet; they do not greet each other.

During the drive home, James's mind clears somewhat. He thinks of Mel's reaction to his visit – he has been left feeling foolish. When they arrive home, he offers to see her to her flat: he wants to apologise, to make some kind of amends. "It's a lovely afternoon," she replies. "Why don't we go for a stroll?"

They find the beach at Rocklands empty, litter and shatterings of shells and seaweed strewn across the sand. Beyond that – beyond the rocks and floating matter – the ocean lies corrugated and dull. They walk towards the lighthouse, its red-and-white tower set against a row of apartment blocks. Mel runs her hand along the railing, gazing at the water.

"Your visit today was unexpected," she says. "You gave me no warning."

James stares ahead – at the lighthouse. "I hope my appearance didn't unsettle you. I was acting on impulse."

"I'm not sure that absolves you," she replies, her tone light and playful for a moment; then she furrows her brow. "Do you think you should have been driving?"

"Why not?"

She looks at him sharply. "It was irresponsible," she snaps.

A small gathering of seagulls is disturbed by their passing. They squawk noisily, taking flight. "James," she goes on, "I'm not naive about this kind of thing. It worries me that you arrive at my work drunk." She pauses. "I know your family's history."

They walk on in heavy silence. The lighthouse, sturdy, flanked by official buildings, watches benevolently over the figures passing to and fro. And yet its very presence is an indication of violence, of tumult and wreckage. It strikes James that nothing is secure, that the whole structure, the whole fabric seems to be held together by the taciturn, muted warning that has been raised above the old grazing lands, that has become an aching node in the place's memory. The vagrants, the old people wandering around, passing their time, waiting for the relief of evenings, of sleep – all bear the same scars. The tower reminds them, but their memories sink below the surface, wrecked, forgotten.

James looks at Mel, aloof from him, facing the waves and rocks; in the back of his mind is a thought, something urgent, insistent, but which he cannot recall.

"Perhaps you and your family are more alike than you think," Mel revives the conversation.

He lets that pass.

"The fact is simple – I came to visit you, whether drunk or not. I didn't receive the welcome I expected, but that is, as you say, my own fault."

"What *did* you expect James?"

He knits his brow. "I don't know, and I'm not sure I want to know. There was something inside me that urged me to go, and I went. That's all. It's not the first time I've acted spontaneously."

They stop in the shadow of the lighthouse, leaning against the railing, gazing out to sea. James hears shallow swells slapping against the wall below, sees tentacles of seaweed swaying in quiet unison, almost touching the water's periphery. There is a dark world beneath the surface, one under which they both seem to be sinking.

When at length they stir, Mel turns to him. "Do you love me James?"

The question lingers on in silence. What should he tell her? What is the truth? The only certainty, his only conviction, is that he is no longer in control of himself.

"Yes," he says – the simplest answer. If he must call it something then let him call it love. Perhaps it is a deceit, but it is one for which he is prepared to answer later.

On the way back they detour along Main Road, where James stops for fresh food and cigarettes. Mel waits for him out on the pavement, her uniform concealed beneath her coat. Her collar is hitched up, her face half obscured by sunglasses. An image of secrecy, an Eve amongst the fig leaves. Yet that is, perhaps, a favourable omen.

"You must be hungry," he says, as they resume their walk. "I kept you from your lunch."

"I'm okay," she responds.

He allows a moment to pass before pressing on. "Nevertheless," he continues, "won't you join me for something?"

She is guarded. "It'd be better if I go home."

"Come on! I've saved you from an afternoon in your office, after all."

She offers a weak smile. "What did you have in mind?"

"Nothing very special – the usual fare. But I've learned my way around the kitchen; I'm sure it'll be passable." He shoots her a playful glance.

"I'd have to be back by evening."

They have been on their feet for almost an hour when they turn up the hill towards Bentham House. The backstreets are hushed, basking in weak afternoon sunlight. From his shed, the security guard marks their approach. Whether it is the same man as before he cannot tell – it may well be. But, as they enter, there is no flash of recognition, no exchange of greetings. Indeed, the man hardly notices James. Instead, his eyes, shining out from the shaded doorway, follow the woman at James's side. He will have to be careful, James thinks: word of this will spread. Momentarily, ushering Mel into the lobby, he looks up at the first floor window. The glass is opaque, masked inside by a curtain of lace. Even so, the landlady's presence is tangible, like a knot of tension behind the screen.

They take the elevator up to the fifth floor, follow the corridor to its end. He unlocks the security gate, unlocks his door, swings it open. Inside, the air is musty, the spaces unlit. He goes from room to room, in turn drawing apart each pair of curtains, opening the windows. His furniture, his bedding and belongings are orderly and neat. And yet, with Mel present, their appearance seems altered, their very crispness twisted into an accusation of neglect, like the down-turned corner of a woman's mouth. They are untouched, unloved.

He places the shopping bag on the kitchen counter, washes his hands in the bathroom. Returning to the kitchen, he finds Mel peering into the spare bedroom. "Do you mind?" she asks.

"Go ahead. You might find I have an interesting book collection," he replies, watching her slip through the doorway.

He prepares a simple green salad: cucumbers, tomatoes, leaves of spinach and rocket. To this he adds onions, crumbs of feta, vinaigrette. While he is slicing tomatoes, Mel comes in holding a copy of his prison book. "I haven't read this," she begins, drawing his attention to the cover. "It must have been a daunting topic to research."

"Dealing with inmates?"

She nods.

"They're brutally honest. Some know what it's like to take a life – even take pleasure in that knowledge. It shimmers in their eyes: that they are privy to something you are not, as if they're taunting you." Mel leans against the doorframe, scanning the opening pages. "You're welcome to borrow that, if you like," he adds.

On the balcony, he sets up a small table, placing the salad bowl at its centre, a plate on either side; knives, forks. Their main course is a winter vegetable soup, which they soak up with thick slices of French bread. While they are eating, the sun slants in pleasantly from the west. A breeze rises gently from the seafront.

After the meal James opens a bottle of Chardonnay: a good drinking wine, faintly acidic, a fruity aftertaste. He places a glass on Mel's side of the table; she puts up a hand. She is thinking, perhaps, of the morning.

"You don't want me to drink alone, do you?"

"I don't want you to drink at all."

He leans over, touches her hand, looks into her dark eyes. "Why does it bother you? Why do you show such concern for me?"

She is silent. He can see he is tormenting her.

"I'm curious about the same thing you asked me earlier," he begins, then pauses, unsure whether to continue. His fingers tighten around hers and a tremor runs through her skin; he is aware of her breathing, her stillness. She averts her gaze. "Do you love me?"

Love – he has set the word loose: he might as well persist with it. And yet, as soon as he finishes the question he knows he has played his cards too soon. Not a moment later, her hand slips out from under his, picks up the glass, swirls the greenish liquid against the light. He watches her, but she has withdrawn.

They take their first sips simultaneously: cool, refreshing. James rests back in his chair, the flavours lingering on his palate. The city below is no longer quiet: the noises of homecoming are gathering, gaining in intensity. Like the tip of a cigarette, their afternoon is being consumed.

He contemplates walking her back, even makes a pile of the plates and bowls, the used cutlery, and carries them to the kitchen, dutifully running water over them and leaving them in the sink. But when he returns Mel has her feet up on the chair, legs curled up against her chest. In one hand is the wine; in the other she has taken up his book once more.

Seeing his work stirs up the memory of that time in his life, of the misery-filled institutions through which he had roamed, with their capacious hallways and reverberating corridors. An underworld, a purgatory: a place between life and death, with little hope of respite from either. A place he has never, in truth, left.

To his mind, most of the people there were, despite their crimes, distinctly human. Most, for instance, had a discernible reason for their offences – an internal mechanism at work in their depths, turning the cogs, working their fists, their fingers. Some he could even feel sympathy for.

Only in the one instance – during his interview with the serial killer – was he unnerved, fearful for his well-being in spite of the presence of warders. The apparatus churning within others had become unhinged in this man. And yet it was obvious what had been driving him. He had raped and then stabbed his girlfriend; she had betrayed him, and he had wreaked his vengeance. His victims after that had resembled the first, but only for a time. It was clear to James, sitting in the presence of the man, that he had killed many more people than those he had been accused of, that he had left behind him a trail of unanswered deaths. Without doubt, he had no apprehension about ending a life. His impulse was not restrained by emotion: he was cold, utterly dispassionate. He was certainly not kept in check by conscience, by convention.

James refills their glasses. The sun is low on the horizon now, glaring off nearby buildings, swallowed irrevocably by burgeoning shadows.

"Shall we go inside?" he offers when Mel has closed the book. This is her opportunity to cut the visit short, to make her excuses, put on her coat, and return to her rooms. But she does not. Instead, they go into his bedroom, closing the balcony door behind them. Everything is suddenly hushed, sealed off from the sounds around it. He takes up a position at the foot of the bed; she wanders around the room, first to the window, then to the pile of books on his desk.

"*Fruits of the Earth*," she whispers. "I read this once." Her voice trails off. The picture comes to him of Mel, during the long hours passed at the side of some or other deathbed, leafing through the book, engrossed but not, he would imagine, convinced. "Did you like it? Did Gide's ideas strike you?"

"The title's all I remember. Perhaps I should look at it again."

"Perhaps."

He is silently drunk with the sight of her. As she reclines against the edge of the desk, the hem of her uniform rising above her knees, tightening in folds around her slender waist, he stares, overwhelmed, all the while sipping his wine.

"He had just come out of a long illness – Gide I mean." James rest his elbows on his knees, and his chin on the back of his hands. "Which, to him, must've been a kind of imprisonment. So it's not surprising, I guess, that he explored the world of senses in this book. He realised that his urges had been left to wither in his soul. Nothing unusual, really."

"Do you really believe that? That the majority of us are unfulfilled?"

He shrugs. "I wouldn't say I've answered all my desires." Their gazes meet: there is a passing glimmer in her eyes, a fibril of thought being consumed. On the desk, near her hand, the wine bottle stands empty, its last drops in the glass next to it. Rising from the bed, James moves cautiously towards her. Retreating slightly, she knocks over her glass, the liquid spreading over the wooden surface. They pause in mid-motion, watching the mess. Then James presses himself against her, touching her cheek with his lips, enclosing her in his arms. Her body remains rigid and yet she does not push him aside, does not reject him outright; he takes that as his cue, and she lets him guide her to the bed, lay her down.

Silently, dusk settling on the world outside, they begin to commit adultery. In the middle of their love-making he spreads her out on the ruffled covers, reclining to one side and examining the undulations of her body: the tapering of her calves, the parenthetical shape of her hips, the roundness of her breasts. He runs his palm over her skin, feeling her buttocks, her shoulders. With his tongue he tastes the exposed area of her neck, feels the hard tendons beneath the surface.

At the height of her climax, he pins her arms above her head, gripping her wrists as she squirms underneath him in a fit that subsides gradually, like a lowering flood. And then, in turn, his release arrives. They look at each other, afterwards: a brief expression of complicity. After which she slips inside the covers, turning from him, avoiding his eyes – a movement that he hardly notices. Indeed, a gentle fatigue has descended upon him, a welcome emptiness: he closes his eyes, and is gone.

When he comes to, she is no longer next to him. The sheets are crumpled, the pillow bears the impression of her head, but she is not in the room. Outside is dark, the glow from streetlamps visible against a bank of cloud. He listens: from the bathroom there comes the sound of metal against porcelain, of shuffling across tiles. After a time, she emerges, hair dishevelled, eyes puffed-up, in full dress – shoes, uniform, jacket.

"I had hoped you would stay a little longer," he says.

"Things have gone too far, James. I need to go." Her voice is strained; she is clearly upset. He had expected that she would spend the night. But that pleasure, it seems, will have to wait for another occasion. Then again, this could be a blessing in disguise. He has not thought about that, not considered the aftermath. With Mel waiting in the corridor, he dresses – picking up the clothes he had, in the heat of passion, tossed in a crumpled pile at the foot of his bed. He switches on the outside lights, locks the door, locks the gate, and joins her outside.

They exchange no words as they walk, making their way steadily down to Main Road and then across to her avenue. At the last moment, however, he grabs her arm. "You shouldn't feel guilty, Mel. If anybody's to blame for this, I am." That is the truth – that is the way he feels. It is no use, though – words are of no use anymore, not under the circumstances – and without saying anything in reply she disappears inside. His heart goes out to her: whatever follows from this, it will not be easy. Not for her and not for him either; but that is beside the point. He is, after all, tied to nothing, nobody, and under no obligations.

Instead of taking his car back, he decides to walk: the car he can fetch some other time. It is a cool evening: a front has begun to roll in, bringing icy gusts of wind. By the time he arrives at his flat, the chill has settled into the air. His fingers are rigid, his cheeks and ears are burning. Nevertheless, it does not take him long to fall asleep; he wraps himself in his bedding, the fragrance of Mel's body, the warmth of it, lingering in his nostrils, on his skin, in his memory. For now, despite everything, he is utterly satisfied.

10.

The sense of elation remains with him for the weekend. On a few occasions he dials her number; she does not answer, but he is not bothered by the fact. If anything, it is to be expected.

On Monday morning he sets off earlier than usual, retracing the path to her building. On the pavements there are vagrants gathering their blankets, their plastic packets, scurrying away like insects in face of dawn. Others emerge: newspaper sellers, shopkeepers, security guards. Some glare at James in passing, red-eyed, inane; some take no notice, going about their business lifelessly, like mechanisms set in motion by the wind. While he is walking, rain falls on-and-off, and in Mel's avenue the wind blasts strongly, churning up litter and dust. Through the tunnel of overhanging branches, he can see swells breaking over the seafront, disintegrating in huge plumes of spray over the walkway.

He stands on the pavement, next to his car. When the customary time arrives, Mel does not appear, however. Most days, she is early; today, he waits fifteen minutes, twenty minutes, half-an-hour – clearly, she does not intend to go to work. Or she has found some other means, another person, perhaps, to take her in. He tries her number: it rings, but still there is no answer. Staring at the green gate opposite, he wonders how to proceed. Her building seems withdrawn, remote – each pane of glass curtained, each balcony empty.

Without warning, rain begins to fall heavily. James retreats into his car, slumping into the seat. Would it matter, really, if he were to spend the evening, the week, in Mel's company or spend it alone? In the end, it would amount to the same thing. But then, in the end, it all amounts to the same thing.

For a long time, he gazes at the key in his hand, at the runlets, like prison bars down the surface of his windscreen. Then he sits motionless, waiting. He hears an electronic buzz: the green gate clicks open and a man holding an umbrella steps out onto the pavement, moves off quickly towards Main Road. As he does so, James slips adroitly out of his car, across the road and into the property. Behind him, the gate snaps shut.

He takes the stairs to the second floor, walks along the corridor to Mel's door. Pinned to it is a note addressed to her. James looks up and down the corridor before unfolding it. It reads: *I didn't see you this morning. Hope you'll be back next week. If you need to talk about your problem in the*

meantime, don't hesitate to call. It is dated Sunday, signed *Vernon.* While he is folding the piece of paper, slipping it into his coat, he listens carefully. No sounds emerge from inside; he presses his ear against the wood. There is only the wind pushing through cracks, channelled between the narrow walls – its voice like distorted, elongated moans from prison cells. Again he dials her number, again it rings. But the tone does not come from the apartment; she is somewhere else.

He spends the morning in his office. After lunch he tries to phone again. On the desk in front of him are his whisky tumbler, the bottle, a blank computer screen. This time the line connects. "Mel?" he asks. No response. There are noises in the background: clanking as if from a train moving over railway seams and a crowd of inaudibly distant voices. Also a suspiration – like a punctured windbag. Is it her? Is she staring, even now, at the familiar name on her screen, listening for the particular timbre of his voice? There is a long silence. After that, the line goes dead. He redials, but it goes directly to voicemail.

When the afternoon rush has subsided, he walks back to her building. From the street he can see that her window is dark, that she is not home. Nevertheless, he buzzes the caretaker, a middle-aged, pale and cantankerous man – a curmudgeon. The kind of man – it strikes James – who would know his tenants' movements. He might even have heard from her – she might have told him something. They conduct their conversation through the palisades of the gate; he eyes James suspiciously. "I've not seen her since Saturday," is all he will offer.

The next morning, James phones her work. A woman's voice answers: young, taut, but disinterested. It must be the pretty one, the siren. Mel has not been in, she says. "It's a pity we don't see you anymore," she adds, as the call ends. There can no longer be any doubt, James thinks, putting down the receiver. Mel has left – she has returned to Johannesburg.

*

The remainder of the week James spends in a stupor. He resumes his old rhythms – waking late, passing mornings in his office, wandering the streets after lunch – but finds them flat, wearisome, drained of vigour. In his office, he sits for long periods, tumbler held in both hands, watching the passage of shadows across his desk. No doubt he has begun to wear his father's venous cheeks, his glassy eyes. More and more, as he wanders the late afternoon pavements, the maelstrom of furtive glances passes over him, ignores him. He is becoming a creature of the streets.

On Thursday he has dinner with the secretary from the newspaper. They go to a quiet restaurant in Kenilworth, near her apartment. In the candle-glow he can see the care with which she has prepared herself – her fringe is neatly clipped back, her cheeks swept with wisps of blush, her lips glossed. Dangling from her ears are large tortoiseshell loops. On her wrist a beaded bracelet that matches the green of her skirt.

She speaks about work, her family, the most recent events in her life. But he hardly attends – indeed, he struggles to gather her words, to string them together in his mind, to hold onto their meaning. Instead, he sips from his glass of wine absent-mindedly, a golem adhering to the old instructions whispered beyond memory into his ear. That is how the evening goes. And when it is over he walks her to her building. Despite everything, she invites him in. His head is swimming – it is difficult enough to stand on his feet.

"Wouldn't you like a cup of coffee?" she inquires.

"No," he replies. There is a look in her eyes: he is sure, after this, that he will not see her again.

*

Suddenly the next morning, he is jerked into motion once more. He is lying awake in bed, listless after the previous night. Around him the air is damp and static: his curtains are drawn closed, his windows shut. Although the sun has risen, little light filters in, except for the feeble shaft that, through a gap in his curtains, projects a long rectangle onto the ceiling. A dark room with a narrow view of the world: indeed an oubliette, a place to forget and be forgotten.

He is stirred by the noise of somebody at the rubbish bins. And from his window he sees the figure, undoubtedly the boy returned, scavenging through the leavings. He throws open a window: unseen, somewhere in-between the houses, the rubbish collections truck rumbles and dogs bark fitfully. There are others with the boy, rummaging, but each goes about his business separately, feverishly. The security guard is nowhere to be seen.

By the time James rushes out onto the street, the boy has already gathered his scraps, slipped them neatly into plastic packets, and begun to scurry down the hill. Behind him, he has left a mess of litter – plastic, tins, spoiled food, all scattered on the pavement. At the bottom of the hill James catches up with him. "You are quick," he says, labouring slightly. The boy stops,

impassively turns his one-eyed gaze on James, his features stony, inexpressive – no inkling of recognition. Nevertheless, his red eye flickers from side to side, up the street, towards the alleyways. James examines his neckline – there is nothing.

"Where is your friend?" James asks. "Your companion – the girl. Is she still with you?" A group of men, dressed in overalls, calling and whistling, precede the rubbish truck from the top of the street. The boy does not answer.

"Where can she be found?" James persists. "Can you take me to her?" But he may as well address the walls, the security gates – he will get nothing from the boy. Frisking his jacket, he finds his wallet, rifles through it, pulls out a fifty-rand note. "I'm willing to pay for your help. If you take me to the girl I will give you this."

The boy squints at the wallet, looks around. "She is not here."

"Where is she?"

Loudly, the rubbish collectors approach, the truck grinding along behind them, stopping, gorging on waste, grinding along further. The air is full with its low vibration, its high-pitched siren.

"Where is she?" James repeats, stepping towards the boy. Almost he grabs him by the shoulders – almost he is tempted to shake words from the child. For a while yet, the boy remains as he is, still, unresponsive. Then, abruptly, as if set in motion by a sudden coming together of internal forces: "Come with me. Follow me," he says. And walks off.

Along narrow walkways, up a flight of stairs, they make their way to High Level Road, follow the contour of the Lion's Rump, into Strand Street and the city centre. Here is swarming – cars, motorcycles, pedestrians, all feverish, all frenetic. Below overhangs, in recesses in walls are knots of shabby men. When James goes by, they stare: a strange sight, this man, this foreigner of the streets, led by this boy, this street urchin. Not for the last time, James ponders the wisdom of this expedition. Nevertheless, he keeps the boy in sight, follows him through side streets into the heart of the city. There they find her, asleep at the entrance to the Company Gardens, head cushioned by an outstretched arm, knees curled up against her abdomen. From the corner of her mouth a thread of spittle hangs towards the ground. Her expression is peaceful, serene. Nobody

who passes spares her a glance – she is a blind spot, as inanimate, as forgotten as the nearby statues.

James kneels over her. What are her memories? What are her dreams? What does she see passing before her closed eyes? Are there horrors? Or are there the ordinary dreams of children? He cannot help but wonder if at some time, long put out of her mind, there had not been a home for her, a place where she could rest alone on soft pillows. Surely she has known some tenderness in her life. He stands up, his shadow lengthening across her body. Does she sense him, on her skin? Does the subtle change in light, in temperature, recall to her a father checking on his daughter's rest? Or, perhaps, an intruder?

With the tips of his fingers, he touches the exposed skin of her neck, sliding them underneath her collar. She stirs a little, opens her eyes. Retracting his hand, he holds it in the air between them. No doubt she is startled to find his stranger standing over her, staring at her, the sensation of his chill fingers on her skin. But she does not react. Her own tiny, rapid hand feels for the necklace, closes around the pendant – he wonders how long she would be able to keep it on her person, why she risks wearing it in the first place. She looks up, simply waiting, holding his gaze, impassive, inactive, waiting for him to say something, to do something. He wants to ask her about the necklace – not only where she got it from, but why it is so important to her. And then he wants to claim it, to demand it back. But will she understand? Will he retrieve it by any means other than force? Perhaps not. And yet, he feels in his body no tautness, no readiness to use his strength over her. This is a different world from his, and there are different laws at work. The necklace is hers now, because she holds it, because it is on her person. Ownership means nothing to those who drift with the wind.

Before he turns away, before he walks off towards his flat, he hands the boy the fifty-rand note. After a few steps he glances over his shoulder – the children are gone.

*

Without Mel's presence, the days take on a limp, lifeless aspect; the nights offer only fitful reprieve. At moments he awakes, with sheets clenched tightly in his fist, with the smell of Mel in his nostrils, the residual memory of their love-making in his flesh. By no means was she the first to have passed a night here, yet her memory, it seems, has been absorbed into every thing she

touched – this not his bed alone, not anymore. She has rippled the stillness of his life. For now at least.

During his daily wanderings he now and then detours past Mel's building. Each time he is confronted by the same glass façade, with its closed windows and its unchanging curtain-folds: a partition from another realm – one he was, briefly, privy to. On one of these occasions, he is halted by the landlord. The man, wearing a floppy, full-brimmed hat, shorts and scuffed leather sandals, has been in the garden. He peers at James through the palisades.

"Have you heard from your lady friend?" he asks.

"No, nothing," James replies. Then: "Presumably, you've had no news either?"

The landlord shakes his head. In one hand he holds a pair of trimming shears. Behind him, large outgrowths of hedge lie severed on the grass. "She's been a good tenant – no trouble," he continues. "The end of the month's coming up. I hope she'll be back by then, or make some kind of arrangement." He frowns. "It would be a pity if she turned out to be unreliable."

From James's balcony, if he looks carefully, the top level of Mel's building is visible, pressing up like a tumour above the surrounding roofs. Before, it had been his point of reference, the familiar spot on which to rest his eye; now, it is a ceaseless monument to the connection which has been cut. A blemish, a scar. It is difficult to accept that she has chosen to ignore him, that, although their relationship was illicit, it has been so easy to cleave.

He dials her house in Johannesburg, but the phone rings indefinitely. What he would do if she answers he does not know. But for some time he lets the ringing go on, imagining the sound of it reproduced in all the quiet chambers of her abode, a lonely music. If she is there, how can she ignore it?

*

A few days later, on a Thursday morning, things take an unexpected turn. He is in his office reading when his cell phone rings. Marking his place in the journal, he squints at the screen: the number is not one he knows. For the briefest of moments he thinks of Mel, but when the voice

comes through it is a man's, masculine, sonorous, familiar. "Hey bra, excuse me. I'm looking for James – that's you?"

It takes James a moment to place the voice, but no doubt about it – it is Mel's husband. He sits back in his chair, swivels to face the door. "Yes. You are speaking to James."

"Mel – my wife… She's a friend of yours right?"

It takes a moment to compose himself. "A friend – yes."

"Do me a favour bra. Her work says you'll know how I can get hold of her. I need the contact number at her flat?"

So: the husband is coming to him for help – it is a strange web the Fates weave. "I'm not sure I understand," James says. "Wouldn't you know that better than I do?"

"Maybe…" the husband falters, stops. "But she's not answering." He, the lover, and he, the husband, reduced to the same root, to the same unanswered yearning.

"Is that unusual?" James asks.

There is silence. "Yes."

A hush falls. James presses his ear to the receiver, listening – for what? The noises of that other place, that other world to which Mel belongs? He can hear nothing, however – the husband's breathing fills the void.

"I haven't been in contact with her, I'm afraid," James says, rudely hangs up. He reaches for the whisky bottle, pouring the last of it into his tumbler. Then he makes his way to the kitchen, adds ice and water. The last development he had expected was this. And yet it offers a glimmer of hope – all is not yet lost. He tries to recall the night on which Mel had phoned him with the news of her sojourn to Cape Town. Where was she then? Is that where she has returned? Perhaps, and yet a feeling of unease remains.

After the lunchtime rush, James goes to the Police Station in Sea Point – a squat, face-brick and concrete building at the edge of the common. The Client Service Centre is stark: pine counter-tops, a row of desks, metal-frame chairs. On the walls are informational posters, on the counter a stack of police magazines. A camera watches the entrance. The officer who receives him is rough-hewn, taciturn, wearing a cap, his skin dry, smelling of sandalwood.

"I'm here to report someone missing," he says.

"Who is it?" the officer asks, his gaze deadpan, unwavering.

"A friend."

"Male or female?"

"Female." A policewoman at the back – dark-haired with a down-turned mouth – glances up.

The officer ushers him to one of the low booths alongside the counter. He gathers forms from a cabinet, and settles uncomfortably into his seat: a man made for the streets, not for the office. Line by line, they go through the Missing Persons booklet, the officer writing slowly, taking care with each pen stroke. Outside, gentle rain begins to patter against the windows, the paving. When James describes Mel the officer looks up, leering. "She's a friend?" he asks. James nods. In the background, the policewoman leans from a window, smoking, now and then glancing in their direction.

"Do you suspect criminal activity?"

"I don't rule it out."

By the time James leaves, the afternoon rush has started. In Main Road, he is walking when the heavens open up, sheets of water plummeting onto cars, the streets, buildings. He takes cover underneath an overhang. Suddenly the walkways are empty; indeed, it does not take long for a throng to collect around him, all pondering the rain, waiting. James lights a cigarette, the earthy smell of water mingling with that of the smoke. From the eaves, strings of droplets form, briefly mirroring the assembled faces, then, descending quickly, spattering on the floor.

Cars pass tentatively, their taillights glowing red through the mist. Just as abruptly, however, the droplets wane, the clouds unravel, and late afternoon light filters through. At the first opportunity, those around him disperse, swarming the walkways, dashing to their cars. He is left alone, with only the vagrants for company. Not two weeks ago, these were the streets he walked with Mel at his side, passing the same buildings, the same shop fronts. And yet somehow everything is changed, renewed, the skeletons of that past trodden underfoot, sinking irrevocably into the muddy soil.

*

The phone call comes early on Saturday, sooner than anticipated. A gravelly, tired voice speaks to him from the other end: they have found a body – they want James to identify it. Without delay he drives to Wynberg, to the State Mortuary. There he is met by the investigator, bald, the skin around his eyes shadowed, swollen. When he sees James, he flicks his cigarette aside, shaking his hand firmly, calmly. He leads the way to the entrance, accompanied by a security guard who carries a bunch of keys strung through a piece of wire. Inside, the air is stale, suffocating and cool. For the most part, the building is empty: the reception counter is clear, the office doors closed, locked. They pass along a series of corridors, their footsteps echoing after them. The cold chambers are at the back of the building, behind a heavy door. Before these there is an antechamber, windowless, with dun-coloured walls and floors, both concrete. Turning to him, the investigator looks him up and down: "Are you ready?"

James nods. The chamber they enter is brightly lit, rows of cabinets lining the walls. Bodies are everywhere, stored like an overflow of books in corners, against walls, all wrapped in white body bags. Strange to walk among them, strange to think that Mel, too, might be in their midst. The security guard wears a look of bemusement. He knows, perhaps, how often Death makes his visits. They pick their way to a drawer halfway through the room. It is slid open, the bag is unzipped, peeled back. Mel's peaceful face emerges, her skin ashen, her hair neat but, at the back, matted with blood. Her eyes are closed, her lips thin and bloodless. A doll, he tells himself, nothing more than a doll. But it is true – Mel is dead.

11.

Before James leaves there are formalities to be concluded. The security guard, dangling a set of keys from a finger, conducts them to a small office, which despite its size seems bare – a table, flanked on either side by wooden chairs, a few folders and forms on the table. In the distance, vibrating through the air, through the walls, is an electric hum – an undertone of refrigerators. The cold from the chamber has settled into James's flesh, deeply, like a worry pounding at the back of his mind. He is thirsty, weak. Indeed, when he looks down at the backs of his hands they are pale, a paleness that he senses on every inch of his skin, leaving him withered, a wraith.

In the room, he is seated against a wall, facing the investigator, whose rough, pocked cheeks fall under the light. The man's coat smells of cigarette smoke. With short, squat fingers he gathers his forms, straightens them, staring at James with stolid, unemotional eyes. Then, taking up a pen, he begins to write.

"What do you know about this woman?" he asks. His fingers quiver, the nib hovering above the page. James gives those details that occur to him – her occupation, her home addresses, her husband's details. All of this the investigator takes down in laboured print.

"And what is your relation to her?" he asks.

"Friend." The investigator pauses, staring at the page, clicking his pen. Then: "Was there to your knowledge anybody who might have wanted her dead?"

James sighs at the bluntness of the question, frowns. "Not that I know of," he replies, listening to the far-off hum, the clicking of the pen. "Am I to assume that her death was violent?" he asks, then hesitates. "That she was murdered?"

The investigator nods, casting his stoic gaze at James. "Her body was found in a piece of veld yesterday. She had a bul"— he stops, clears his throat. "Yes, your assumption is correct – it was a homicide. That's what we're investigating."

"Was there more?"

"We have not determined that yet," he answers coldly. James bows his head, stares at the floor.

In Elsies River: that is where a pedestrian spotted her body. "We found no belongings – only the clothes on her back," the investigator continues, not meeting his eyes.

In his car, with the windows misted over, James slouches into the seat, his mouth dry, his hands chilled to the bone, replaying over and over the two final images he has of Mel: the naked woman beside him in his bed, with the covers only half-obscuring her figure, and her skin still warm to the touch, still aglow after their love-making; the other, the lump of flesh in the cold chamber. Sooner or later he will have to move on, return to his neighbourhood and his flat and his office. The mill of existence will have to continue grinding away the minutes, the days. But how will life be the same after this? Impossible that the streets, with their pedestrians and vagrants and car watchers, will not be poisoned by the corpse James has seen, and by the fact that it met its end in them.

From the corner of his eye he notices in the side mirror the security guard approaching, heels clip-clopping on the concrete path. Soon his face appears at James's window, peering in. He taps on it, indicating it is time to go.

Through the glass comes his muffled voice: "You must move on now." Indeed, what is so special about a single death, when each day, each minute of each day, terrible violence takes place in this land? Certainly, there is no cause to sulk. So, with a quiet effort, James turns the key in the ignition, shifts into gear, releases the handbrake, begins to roll off.

Instead of driving to the city, he rejoins the highway towards Muizenberg, turning off at the end of it to False Bay. Drifts of white sand have been blown onto the coastal road and, he discovers, onto the parking lot overlooking his stretch of beach. The lot itself is empty except for a battered sedan which is facing the ocean. Inside are three men, their faces turned away from him. The whole car vibrates with music, each beat like a jolt of electric current. He stops a little way from them, locks his doors, activates the alarm.

He makes his way down to the rocky outcrop, and climbs barefoot to its edge where, each time a wave comes in, he can feel the water's spray. To one side, along the banks of the nearby stream, there is a ribbon of litter from the townships. And at its mouth is a sickly green foam. The smell is faintly putrid. Further along, towards the military base, the white sand is dotted with debris of leaves and stems from seaweed, scatterings of shells, jetsam from the ocean.

Occasionally the wind carries to James a blast of music from the lot. Are they watching him now, those three?

He looks out to sea and lets his mind wander back to Mel. Where did it happen, her murder? In Sea Point? Elsies River? Had she to endure the journey there too? Were her last moments spent in the terror and darkness of night-time streets or, perhaps, looking towards the sky from the floor of a veld? Whatever the case, when it had happened, he had been sleeping fulfilled, satiated, while violence was being done to her – murder and who knows what else. It is not a comforting thought. He had invited her here, to Cape Town – it was to his light that she came, and from within its halo that she was plucked.

That evening, Mel's husband phones: he has heard the news. This time his voice is less cocksure, wavering at times, at times breaking.

"You saw her?" he asks.

"Yes… She's dead." There is a long pause.

"I don't understand it bra – this whole thing," he says. "She should never have gone there, it was all a mistake. I should never have let her go." The last thing James wants is a conversation with this man. He should hang up and let it be at that – there is no reason now to speak, to make the occasion palatable for him. What difference would it make, after all, if James were thought unhelpful, unsympathetic?

"You can't predict these things," James says. He is tired, not in the mood for delicacy. "It was her decision to take. She wouldn't have come if she hadn't been following some pressing need. The rest is unfortunate."

"What need bra? That's what I can't get my head round. She could have gone to her mother's, to hundreds of other people. In Cape Town there is nothing, no one." Is he, in his own veiled way, pointing the finger at James? Challenging him to declare his guilt?

"Perhaps that was the point," James returns. It is a dangerous game he is playing at. Indeed, the temptation to confess is almost overpowering. The thing he most longs for now is for this man to

be his confessor. *I have slept with your wife*, he would say. *I was the last to feel, to taste her flesh, to coax her to ecstasy. Therefore, I am the one entitled to remember her with the most propriety. She is mine.* Instead, he goes out onto his balcony, a wine glass in hand, and sits on a chair listening to the husband's questions.

When eventually he hangs up, he is struck by the night-time noises – the yapping of dogs, lashing of rain and wind, the low snarling of traffic: the violence of the night.

In the early hours of the morning James lies awake, his body tense, re-creating images from the day before – Mel's spiritless corpse laid out in the mortuary drawer, the mysterious finger poised on the trigger, her life's blood seeping into dry soil, her eyes drawn skywards by long blades of grass. What happened before that is dark to him – the murderer's face, the time of day, the place of her abduction.

On and off, interspersed with uneasy sleep, this reel replays itself. Each time he awakes, the same pictures confront him, the same speculations try his mind. Midway through the morning, he wanders down to his office. The wind is blustery, the air cool. He closes his door behind him, muffling the chatty noise from the estate agents' offices. From the pavements below, too, a din rises. In his office, however, stillness: on his desk an open file thick with documents – interviews with street urchins conducted at children's homes –, next to that a notepad with his messy scrawl covering the first few lines, a pen, a glass of whisky. The computer rests dormant to one side.

After lunchtime there is a lull; he has read through the interviews, taken up another set of papers. His mind wanders to the familiar afternoon shadows creeping across his desk, his hands; and to the wrinkled book-spines on the shelf. In his bedroom as an adolescent he used to sit like this, idly watching the days progress, watching the arc of tree-shadows, of telephone poles and wires. Then too, he would devote hours to reading, devouring literature on adoption, on being an orphan, interrogating it, driven by an empty will to know. There were never answers. Who were his biological mother and father? How did they die? Why would his adopted parents tell him nothing? The beginning of his isolation, of his relationship with words and books and silence.

There was a moment when, confronting his mother, he glimpsed the deep-down truth, the secret, swimming darkly below the surface and then darting away, taking up residence inside her. And at that moment too, her presence in his life snapped: the common thread of memories, of shared history and blood.

A sudden image of Mel's flashes before his eyes once again – her body amid the veldgrass. Slumped over the desk, whisky glass in hand, he strains to reconstruct the events – when was she abducted? Where? Who was the person standing over her those last minutes, watching life ebb from her, slowly? These recollections: like structures erected on the landscape of his mind, their shadows passing but, in time, always returning, taller, more imposing. The circumstances might have changed, the questions might be different, but the violence with which they were wrought is not. And now, as then, he is alone, in his own space, performing the same action – reconstructing memories from thin air, like a prisoner sentenced for a crime he did not commit. But then, what does it matter, whether he passes his days in one way or another? In the core of him a steady indifference is taking root, growing outwards, spreading through his chest, his limbs.

*

After the swarm of pedestrians and rush-hour traffic, after the last of the sun has sunk below the horizon, James returns to Mel's avenue. In front of the gate he stops. Many of the surrounding windows are lit; there are cars lining the street. From somewhere he can hear voices, human voices carried and warped by the wind. He begins to walk down to the Promenade, his attention intently focussed, as if listening for something, for someone. He explores each alleyway, each cul-de-sac, until eventually he emerges onto the lush lawns of the seafront. There he sits on a bench, taking in the cry of seagulls, the distemper of the ocean. This is the time of day, more or less, that he last saw Mel. Did she wander the streets that night, and come to rest here on the Promenade, on a bench? Did she pay attention to the dissonance of this place? Was it in this darkness that she was stolen away? Perhaps. And yet this moment seems utterly different, the convergence of forces not the same. How does one recapture an instant that has flown? How retrieve memories that are not recorded in the pavements and streets and buildings? This pursuit is going nowhere: he has only his imagination with which to weave a memory. A story with no substance – an orphan story. It is not enough to summon back her presence.

By the time he sets off for home, the darkness has settled heavily over the city. The wind gusts through the avenues. Now and then a movement catches his eye. He stops. Leaves rattle and dance overhead, their skeletal outlines projected onto the pavement by high streetlamps; or they scrape across the ground, animated by the wind. There are shadows into which he cannot see,

scuffling footsteps to which he cannot attach any corporeal shape. He resumes his walk – if he is to meet the same fate as Mel, then let it happen. For his part, he will not resist.

That night he sleeps poorly, waking just after dawn when the Rump's languid shadow still stretches over the suburb. He stands on the balcony, smoking, drinking coffee, noticing vaguely the points of light floating as if on a dim shore below. Somewhere among them is the boy – James's connection to the streets. Somewhere, surely, there is a spot to which he returns daily to beg for money.

Flicking the cigarette butt over the railing, gulping down the last sediments of coffee, James goes inside, pulls on an overcoat, hitching up the collar, and slips a hundred rand note into a pocket. On the road, while he is walking, cool air burns his lungs, his eyes water, he exhales each time a warm fog. He walks in the pools of light cast by streetlamps, and in Main Road stops at the entrance to a clothing shop, where a bright red neon sign lights up the little portico into with the front doors are set. And here, on the two narrow steps, a group of vagrants lies huddled against the cold, the red light bathing them, and – he can see by his reflection – bathing him too. They look at him, silently with bleary eyes, as he walks away.

For a time he wanders through Sea Point. As the sun waxes, he follows Somerset Road into the city. He walks the length of Long Street, then further down to the Company Gardens, which, at this dead time of the morning, after the rush has given way to a sedate calm, is visited only by the idle, the lonely. The sun sheds a warm, pleasant light. James chooses a place on the lawn, lies down. The bright warmth spreads through his skin, seeps into his eyes, his mind, bathing him in a blankness white as beach sand, pure. He loses track of time, of space. But somewhere in that immense whiteness appears a tiny black dot, growing, coming nearer, until, with sudden clarity, he sees Mel's body, her eyes staring vacantly upwards.

Each day he repeats this routine. On Thursday, at last, he comes across the boy standing at an intersection soliciting money from the morning traffic. The girl is with him, wearing the same clothes as before, her hair in the same knotty chaos, her expression unchanging. They do not notice him until he is already upon them. A murmur is exchanged. The boy steps forward, the girl withdraws.

"I need your help," James says, waits. He knows better than to expect a response, however. "I'll pay you money for it," he adds. The boy's eye surveys James. There is a scaly, white blemish on his cheek that James has not seen before.

James looks at the pedestrians, the cars around them. "Could we go somewhere quieter? This is not the place for meetings." Whispered words pass between the children. The girl stays behind, the boy follows. They slip into a quiet side-street, stop among some rubbish bins.

"I want information," he begins. "About a woman who was murdered two weeks ago, in Sea Point." The boy is unmoved. But it is becoming easier to deal with his aloofness, with the dull stare from his eye.

"Someone might know something, might've seen or heard something," he continues. The boy is growing fidgety. James pauses. "The police are not involved – this is my own inquiry."

The boy frowns, the workings of his mind clearly visible. "Why do you come to me?" he asks.

"You are a—," James's voice trails off. What would he say? That street urchins must surely have contact with criminals? That the boy is a criminal himself? Instead, he produces the hundred rand note, holds it out to the boy, who is tapping his foot on the ground, leering left and right, scratching his ear. But he does not immediately take the offering.

"I am asking only for information. There is nothing more – no strings, all I want is to know." Almost he clasps the boy by the shoulders. "Do you understand?" Again he offers the money. This time, with a tentative glance left and right, the boy accepts it. He will not get away with this, James thinks. He is using money to oil the wheels – he is making things worse.

*

He is sitting outside a tiny coffee shop in Regent Road, chatting to a waitress – petite with gaunt cheeks onto which make-up is thickly plastered. She is an ingénue, reticent. Yet it is her shyness that amuses him, the prospect of trawling up evasive details, the anticipation at what will emerge. He has been badgering her with questions.

While she is talking, the boy appears on the pavement, separated from them by a railing, a row of pot plants. It is hard not to notice him: he stands immobile, his unflinching eye trained on James, his mildewy smell drifting over them. The waitress is at a loss; she stutters a few more words and then, awkwardly, stops.

James grimaces. "I'll see you again," he remarks, getting up. He leaves some money on the table.

"This is not a place I frequent," he comments, walking gingerly up to the boy. "I'm surprised you were able to find me here."

The boy responds with an inert pause; his head is bowed, his cheeks puffy; he is reluctant to make eye contact. "More money," he mumbles. "You must give me more money."

From the corner of his eye, James notes the waitress, bent over his table, rag in hand, wiping absent-mindedly the surface. He takes the boy aside, lowers. "I've had no return on the money I gave before. I can't give and give endlessly without result. There're two sides to this agreement – fulfil your end of the bargain and then you can make demands."

"First you must give money," the boy returns blandly. "Then I can tell you information." Opportunism – a dictate of the streets. But then, he has opened himself up to this; if he were more principled, he would abandon the whole pursuit, let the boy fathom another way to raise money. But he is not. Instead, he searches his wallet for another hundred rand note, hands it to the boy. There are few people around them to see the transaction; few people would care even if they did.

The boy slips on the hood of his sweater, rests his fists in the front pouch. James watches him walk off, his gait no longer brisk or buoyant. One way or another, the money will not long be in his possession. What he will use it for James can only guess – meths, glue, tik? Both he and the boy, using money to pay for their most abysmal desires – a hundred rand for remembrance, a hundred rand for forgetfulness. They are not very different, after all.

Later, a man – tall and slick, with an athletic frame – intercepts him while he is leaving his office. The trousers and shirt he is wearing are too short, his shoes scuffed and his sun hat frayed at the edges. He reaches out a hand with long, delicate fingers in greeting. James shakes it, hesitantly.

"I'm the guy what you been looking for – the information guy," he says, still holding onto James's hand. "Let's keep walkin'," he suggests, smiling broadly. James nods. It is rather disturbing the way these street people know his movements.

He waits a long time for the man to speak again. In rigorous silence they traverse the bustling pavements, pass in front of late-afternoon cafes and coffee shops, pass the turnoff to his street, and take the split uphill along Kloof Road, then double back down to Regent, and circle once again to Main. While they are walking, James studies his companion's carriage and the shadows and side paths through which he is lead. Why this ramble? Why this ploy?

"Your chick," the man says, as they at last come to a halt at the top of Mel's avenue. "What's she to you? Your wife? Girlfriend? Lover?" Evidently there will be questions.

"We were involved, yes."

The man's orbs glint slyly, then wane just as suddenly to indifference: "So what's the deal? You meet the killer and then what?"

"I'm not sure," James answers. The man smirks. "But I assure you I don't intend to go to the police. This is a private matter."

That elicits a scoff. "You want me to find out who popped her just so's you can check the guy's face?" Momentarily he halts. "What's wrong wi' you man? Not even break some bones or something?"

Something – James does not like the sound of that. "I'm not after revenge," he replies tersely. "It's an intuition – I know I'll have no peace until I see for myself who pulled the trigger. Justice and the rest of it are not mine to dish out."

The man's torpid gaze settles on James. He shrugs. "Suit you'self. I'm not doin' you any favours. Gimme enough money and I can do whatever. Justice, whatever." He prolongs the stare. Around them, there are few people, little traffic. With his chattels in his pockets, James is at this man's mercy, vulnerable: why not take whatever money he can find now, after all – the credit cards, the licenses? Even those fetch a price with the right people.

The man's expression turns abruptly earnest, businesslike. "Have a thousand bucks ready by next week. I'll have something for you then," the man concludes; he looks up and down the street, then walks off.

So: a more subtle game perhaps? To lure the unwary into his den? A thousand rand – not bad pickings. Even so, James cannot be sure, and he cannot pull out now, not with the promise of success dangling ahead of him. Let this man lead him where he may – as long as it is towards the memory of Mel, he will follow.

He looks down the avenue, studies its gnarled trunks and contorted branches, the cars parked beneath its canopy of shadows, the pavements cracked and raised by roots, the walls and fences, the repetitive facades. Not long ago, all of these held a significance beyond themselves, attached as they were to the presence throbbing behind that first floor window – a presence which gave them their weight, their life. Now, however, they are merely what they are – trees, cars, pavements, walls, buildings: their meaning has bled away. What remains is a cicatrix, a reminder of the living, beating significance that has gone dry. His memory: a series of places which, like this one, have betrayed the significance he has fixed to them. A collection of scars on the landscape.

While he is walking home, he is struck by a sense of acquaintance with his environs. Bentham House, despite the three years he has spent there, with its gardens, its surrounding streets and alleys, has remained a labyrinth to him, a place he traverses or examines from the safety of his rooms, his balcony. Now, at last, he is in the midst of this world, beginning to understand the way it is put together, how its walls and fences divide up the spaces, how people and animals and all manner of life manoeuvre and jostle and clash, how the friction of these interactions sets in motion the severe logic of existence. Indeed, there is a kind of excitement in his dealings with this world. In the same way he once lost his trepidation for exploring the prisons around Cape Town, in the same way he was eventually able to face with steady nerve the interviews with inmates, or observe them at their daily tasks, or meals, or even sample their fare – in the same way he is now losing his dread of stepping out the door, of exposing himself to the dangers lurking in shadows and dark passageways. In his own manner, he has at long last found his way inside the game, he is finally learning to play by its rules.

As he skirts a narrow park set between two blocks of flats, a vagrant – who he had seen moments before reclining in a patch of shade – springs up and badgers him for money, for cigarettes, for

something to eat. The man is intoxicated, slurring. James brushes him off, marches determinedly ahead. The vagrant, too light-headed to bother, watches after him for a long time. An admonition: James is not the sort of person who can pass through this terrain unseen, who can come and go anonymously. There will always be vigil.

*

It is a week before the boy appears again. At first James, carrying shopping up the hill towards his building, takes him for one of the usual urchins cajoling for money, but the boy's sternness eventually attracts his attention. The boy indicates a battered car idling at the end of the street. James nods.

"You must not tell the police," he mumbles, leading James towards the vehicle. Then, glancing up the street: "You must promise." They stop, looking at each other.

"I have no intention of telling the police," James says. The boy's brow wrinkles. "I promise."

The car is a Corolla, rust-eaten, made up of variously-coloured body panels gleaned no doubt from scrap yards; it has a sticker next to the boot lock (a caduceus below a faded company name) and a pair of dice hanging from the rearview mirror. The information man, sporting a leather jacket and sunglasses steps out to meet them. The boy drops back, averting his gaze; James shakes the spindly hand. On the man's arms are a multitude of tattoos – symbols of his allegiances. With an expansive smile, he motions James toward the passenger door, which closes with a tinny clang.

Inside, the upholstery is infused with a sweet, sickly odour, the dashboard is cracked, the foot wells are littered with odds and ends. "You got the moola?" the man asks, climbing into the driver's seat.

"I don't walk around with it – I'll have to collect it from my flat."

Soon they are rambling into the Cape Flats. James tries to keep track of the street names, the landmarks, but these are more often than not either absent or faded. The roads, the houses, assume the same remiss quality he had witnessed on his jaunt to Lentegeur. He is struck by the

lack of trees, the lack of greenery, the way the grass straggles, clinging in hoary tufts to soil, harried by the wind, pale and thirsty. Drifts of fine sand stretch across the crumbling tarmac.

The man has a taste for loud music – he has been playing a compilation of R&B, kwaito, rap. With each beat, the dashboard shivers. At times, he sings along, at others he sways his head in sympathy with the rhythm, or taps his fingers on the top of the steering wheel. "Where are you taking me?" James asks above the noise. The man glances at him, bemused.

"Relax bru, you'll see soon," comes the answer. What must James seem to this man? An amateur, a dabbler – like one of his debutantes, stumbling bewildered from one half-understood desire to the next? Easily led astray, easily fooled?

"Nevertheless, how do you know that this is the person I'm after? I'm entitled to that, at the very least, don't you think? Are you sources reliable?"

The man has gone back to rapping the beat on the steering wheel; he seems surprised to hear James's voice again. His fingers stop. "We don't speak about sources bru – it's like a rule. My info's solid. That's all I can say. You take it or you leave it." It's no use; James drops his questions. In truth, the man has a point – everything hangs on anonymity, on stealth, on concealment: of identities, of motives, of intentions. And yet, how far should he put his faith in this man? What are promises worth in this subterranean sphere? Have the old ideas of honour ever found traction here, where the very sound of them must ring hollow?

The rest of the drive they pass in silence. Lentegeur Hospital appears in the distance, looming ahead at an intersection, then sliding past – in James's mind a shucked husk from an earlier time, eviscerated, lifeless. Off to the right, the run-down buildings begin to cluster around the centre of Mitchell's Plain; in the streets, in the alleyways and on the pavements, there is less activity than one would expect. Indeed, there is a brittle hush – pedestrians, gangs of slick, idle youths on street corners, dogs meandering listlessly. Most remarkable are the people, their movements languorous, their expressions harried. On the facades of old warehouses and outlets the signs are faded, their letters ground over time to fine particles, swept away by the wind: unseen names for unseen people – the land of the unseen.

They stop at an intersection. The man leans out his window, shouts something to a group of youths. What they say in return James cannot make out, but they have noticed the stranger in their midst. *My laanie*, they call out as they drive off; the man nods and smiles.

Soon they pass into the quieter streets of a residential pocket – a place of council flats and humble, porch-fronted houses, with woven-wire fences, with withering flowerbeds. They snake between the houses, slowly, the man turning down the volume, examining facades. Eventually, deep into the suburb, he pulls over onto the gravelly shoulder next to a prefabricated concrete wall. The car idles uncertainly.

The man's eyes shift in their sockets. "Well, this is it bru," he says. "Your moment of truth. 'Bout five houses down, low fence, red roof. Your guy lives there."

For a long while James stares ahead. "Is he there now?" his voice is feeble, shaky. The man shrugs.

They sit in silence; James cannot seem to will his flesh to follow the course of his mind. He tries to imagine himself walking along the street, stopping in front of the house, but in his mind his footsteps reverberate loudly, echo between the walls, announce his presence. And when he stops he is aware of all the eyes peering from behind curtains, from the windows above sinks, from porches. In this place he is alien, an intruder – he cannot hope to pass unseen. "So what now?" he whispers.

Next to him the man sniggers. "Not so keen no more hey? You want to check the guys face – so now's your chance. Go check him. I'm sure he'll answer if you ring the bell."

The sarcasm is not lost of James. But what option is there? What else should he do? Breathing rapidly, he steps out of the car, shuts the door behind him. A round of barking erupts from somewhere nearby – he listens. Is it he they are announcing? Do they smell the foreign body in their midst? In the immediate surrounds there is no person, no car, no movement. Faraway behind, the roofs of the Lentegeur Hospital complex rise up; in the other direction, beyond a thick belt of grassland, Khayelitsha's grim flank is distantly visible, with its shanties huddled together.

James walks tentatively up the road, flurries of wind carrying off the sound of his progress, flicking at the edges of his jacket. His gaze is fixed on the low garden wall ahead. Without

warning, the small gate swings open and a man steps out onto the pavement, slim, with a gaunt face and sunken eyes, his hair shaven in a step, his ears pierced, his arms decorated with tattoos. Immediately, the Corolla begins to move, does a u-turn and disappears round the corner. James is dumbstruck. For a few moments, he strains to pick up the engine-rumble. But his guide is gone; he has been abandoned. A myriad of questions tumble through his mind – was this orchestrated? What is about to play out at his expense? Should he run? Should he try to escape?

It is too late, however. And he could do worse than meet the same fate as Mel. So he carries on – towards the house, towards the man standing outside it, the man who, quite possibly, ended Mel's life. They walk towards each other, he and the murderer and for the briefest of moments their eyes meet, and part; they go on. That is all – that is the sum of their coming together.

Outside the gate, James collapses. On his knees, he looks after the figure now rounding the corner and moving beyond sight. He has got what he came for, he has seen the face and eyes that were the last human image to appear to Mel. He has got what he came for – and yet how unsatisfying! How cruel that the man who took Mel's life can walk down a street without consequence, can stroll past the life that he has shattered and offer it barely a passing glance, barely an acknowledgement. Unconsciously clutching at the soil around his knees, feeling on his palms the rough, familiar texture, letting it pass through the spaces between his fingers, he is filled with dry, impotent rage. His hand closes around a jagged stone – he holds it for a few seconds and then, without forethought, pivots and launches it towards the house. A windowpane shatters, the high-pitched ring of glass hanging tensely in the after-hush.

James's squats wide-eyed against the wall, listening, waiting. But all is still, unnaturally still. The facing windows are resolutely oblivious, the porches abandoned, the doors shut. Not even the dogs have signalled the disturbance. If there are witnesses they are indifferent.

He stands uncertainly, turning to face the red-roofed house. He remarks the casement window he has broken: it is to one side of the façade, belonging perhaps to a bedroom. The hole, small with radial cracks, looks like a bullet wound. The house itself is dilapidated: the walls are coated in dust, the roof tiles chipped and discoloured, a long section of gutter hangs loose. From the sashes, swaths of white paint are peeling away and in the front door there is a bulge where the wood has warped and swollen.

He fiddles with the latch to the garden gate, swings it open with a tinny creak. Surely, if somebody were inside, they would have reacted by now. The front yard has been left to its own devices: there are no gardens, no beds to break the monotony of struggling lawn, no touches of colour amid the grey-green tufts. In one corner is a hoard of rusting scrap metal, portions of it blanketed by canvas and, next to that, a pile of bricks. On the porch is a stack of plastic garden chairs, some empty quarts of beer, cigarette butts; a swirl of wind wafts up the smell of ash. James's hand trembles on the door knob; he wavers; and wavers again as the door swings open. On the far wall is a mirror from which his reflection stares back at him. Never before has he been so aware of himself: an intruder, extraneous to this place.

He wanders from room to room. Most of them are scantly furnished, without wall paintings, without decorations or flower pots. One of the bedrooms is abandoned entirely, glass and rubble lying scattered across a bare concrete floor. The kitchen is filthy, the lounge furniture chipped and frayed, little mushrooms of sponge sprouting from holes. This is a man for whom nothing has value. There are no photographs, no ornaments, no touches which reveal the inner life of the inhabitant (unless one counts the flat screen television and the colony of gadgets wired to it). In the bedroom, there are a bed, a wardrobe, a cabinet and birdcage, and table with chairs around it. The birdcage is in a corner just next to the table; there is something dead inside it. The smell is sickening. James stands still a moment listening to the house, gathering a sense for it, allowing an impression to settle in his mind. In his apartment, the walls, the ceiling and doors organise themselves into a prison, an oubliette – hard, cold, impenetrable; here, it is as if he is in the core of a rotten fruit, worm-eaten and putrid.

On the table, overflowing onto the chairs and floor, are scraps of paper, boxes, odds and ends – presumably the unwanted jetsam of his crimes. Among them is Mel's diary, the scales of justice showing in bright gold relief against the blue leather. With quivering hands he picks it up: there can be no doubt then – this is the culprit, this man is her killer. The thought sends a chill down his spine. He looks out at the gate, the street; the spot at which the man might return at any minute. Now that he is here, now that he is sure, and he has found the treasure of Mel's diary, there does not seem much point in putting himself at risk anymore. Nevertheless, he rummages through the drifts of paper, hoping to find another link to Mel, another trigger for her memory. He finds nothing. Clutching the diary he departs, walking out onto a street as obstinately vacant as before; he strolls to the far end and sits on a curb, where he carefully pages through the diary, listening to Mel's voice in the writing. Soon he is overwhelmed, shivering. It is like resurrecting

her. And towards the end, on the last pages, he sees his name – his name written in her hand! It is too much to take in. He slams the covers to.

Although it must be around midday, the sky has begun to darken, the wind to bluster, sweeping scraps of litter along the street. There is the smell of rain on the air. From around the corner, an agitated round of barking erupts and, further away, a squeal of tyres. His grip on the book tightens. One way or another, he will have to get out of this place.

Without a cell phone or money, there is little option: he has to walk. Slowly, warily, he rises. The dogs are silent again. As best he can, he tries to retrace the route his guide had taken before. But, without name boards or distinctive markings, he strays from street to street. In many of them, small children play while their guardians, wiry old men and women, watch over them from pools of shade, from porches. They leer: he is foreign to them, an aberration; there is nothing he can do to hide himself, to pass by anonymously.

He finds a small, trodden pathway through a piece of veld, beyond which is a low wire fence and the suburb's main artery, busy with pedestrians and cyclists and busses – dark figurines moving in a procession against the dull sky. Despite the cold and wind, he feels droplets of sweat crawling down his back, dampening his underarms and the fringes of his hair. The sounds ahead of him disperse in the wind; he can hear his breathing. One part of the veld has been turned into a rubbish dump, with refuse bags and old furniture and rubble piled onto one another. Amid the waste is the body of a dog, bloated, its tongue dangling through its teeth.

Before he has reached the road, people begin to stare, one or two stopping, watching after him. As he approaches the intersection in front of Lentegeur Hospital, he is accosted, cajoled by a group of youths. But they are wary: the hospital's entrance with its security booth is within sight. Nevertheless, one of them, the leader presumably, short and surly with a heavy brow, tugs at his jacket. "It's cold at night – come on *my laanie*," he intones. James shakes his head, walks on, briskly now. But the youth is insistent – he pulls hard, stretching a seam, tearing it. With a swing of his arm, James breaks his grip on the jacket, but in an instant is surrounded by the group. There is an awkward pause. Why not simply give them the jacket? Do they not need it more than he does? Indeed, why not give them everything – his shoes, his belt, his jersey? And give it freely. These things can be replaced, after all. But perhaps there is an altogether different desire lurking behind the gazes of these juveniles, something that covets more than clothing or cellphones or money. Something rooted in history, in the surroundings, in the very soil they stand on. What do

they see when they look at him? Does he stand for more than mere opportunity? The leader, the one that ripped his jacket, steps back and reaches into a pocket – there is a certain malignancy in the way he looks at James. But already the guards are moving towards them, crossing the street; the youths back away, scatter, blending away into the crowd.

12.

At the hospice, they have heard the news. Sharon emerges from her office, asking timid questions. Soon a group has formed around him. More than one notices the diary in his hand: no doubt they recognise it, no doubt they wonder why he has it. But they do not ask. And after a few minutes they begin to peel off, returning to their tasks. He is left facing the reception desk, behind which the young secretary is attending a phone call. She is dolled-up, wearing a pert v-neck top, a tight-fitting jacket; her hair is pinned back neatly, her face coated with make-up. Slung over the back of her chair is a blue shawl, which matches the blue of her earrings and necklace. Not a sophisticated ensemble to be sure, not even to his tastes, but not an altogether unattractive one. As she puts down the phone he searches for her eyes; she glances up, winks.

While he waits for a taxi, they smoke together outside. He invites her to dinner; they exchange numbers. What would Mel think if she could see this? What diminishment would he suffer in her eyes?

On his balcony that evening, he pages through Mel's diary. He opens a bottle of wine, pours it out steadily, glass after glass. In the darkness later, while he is lying in bed, he still hears the rhythms of her voice, still sees the small, neat pen strokes covering page after page. And the next morning he resumes, with the early shadows withdrawing; then, after the sun has begun to swing to the west, its warmth crawls up his feet, his legs. He has had nothing to eat, he is exhausted. Two bottles of wine stand empty at the foot of the chair.

Even after the flow of ink dries up, Mel's voice continues to resound in James's mind. Her last words stay with him: *James's love is like the hands of a prisoner reaching out through his metal bars, feeling for the soft flesh of liberty, hoping for release, or distraction.* He thinks of the room he withdrew into at his parents' house, after his adoption had become known; of his days in Cape Town, spent in his flat or in his office. Among the places he has roamed, only the prisons appear as exceptions, only those and the streets. He thinks, too, of Mel's angular little body, recalls the smoothness of her skin, the curvature of her midriff, the delicate line of her collarbone. Soft flesh indeed.

For a long while he stares out but takes in nothing of the towering blocks of flats, the ships anchored out to sea, the lowering sun; he is caught up in the world of Mel's words, of the remembered world they evoke, one which now, reduced to memory, has the feeling of a fiction.

He closes the diary, places it at his feet, next to the bottles; at the very least he has managed to salvage this aspect of her – at least some of her deepest thoughts are not lost.

The next day, he takes the diary with him to his office. Slowly the seasons are turning – it is a warm day, cloudless, windless: he is in a sweat by the time he has climbed to the top of the stairs He goes to the kitchen, fills a cup with water. One of the estate agents, thickset with his shirt creased and pools of sweat staining his underarms, comes in, hurriedly makes a cup of coffee, but takes no notice of James – who rests against the edge of the counter, gazing at him. Does he exist for this man, does he enter into the man's field of consciousness? He is becoming like the waifs on the streets: silent, anonymous, unseen. James shuffles out, the tinkle of teaspoon against porcelain ringing in the background.

Dust has settled in his office: it has the sombreness of a place that has been abandoned for a long time. The air has not been circulating – it is close, musty, full of stale smoke. In the ashtray on his desk are the butts of cigarettes from the week before. His whisky tumbler is next to that, an amber-coloured film on the bottom. He takes up the diary again, this time reading backwards, from the turbulent last days towards the sparse, tranquil entries before any of those troubles had been forced on Mel. Reading carefully, slowly, he tries to pick out the rhythms of her voice, to imagine the delicate assertiveness with which she would have said the words. In his inner ear he hears her speak, a pure speech, cutting directly towards its point, untainted by hesitations or interruptions. Again, when he closes the covers of the book, he basks in the memories it evokes – of her speech, of her presence. It is as if she resided now in the memoir she has left behind, as if she had spread herself, her thoughts, her feelings, onto its thin pages, which he has retrieved, which he has salvaged. And yet, when he reads, the words stay the same, they do not change, they are fixed. If he hears Mel whisper in his ear then she will whisper the same thing forever, always chained to the script of her diary. Indeed, with each approach, the words will be worn down – they are already losing their immediacy, losing their vigour. Soon they will not be able to conjure their author, she will fade into the background: the words will stand only for themselves. He leans across his desk, unfastens a sash, pushes it open and looks out onto the pavement, the whitewashed facades through the burglar-barred window.

*

The white sand of James's False Bay beach glows in the late afternoon dimness. The sun has dropped behind the Peninsula: a shade hangs over everything. He has come to escape the city, its

people, its heat. He settles down on the rocky outcrop; at his back, not too far inland, the rows of shanties begin, flanked by threadbare Flats communities – Tafelsig, Mitchell's Plain, Lentegeur – a place which still houses Mel's murderer, in which he still walks the streets freely, still sleeps behind unprotected windows at night. James grips the edge of the rock, pressing the jags deep into his palm. Should he not wreak revenge? Should he not return, silently one morning, to the narrow, crumbling streets, to the neglected house with the piles of metal in the yard?

The thought takes shape in his imagination. He would do it with a pistol, he would not take chances. But he would not be merciful, not allow the moment to pass too quickly, not so fast that the gravity of it would be lost – the significance of the avenger standing over the murderer while he, now the victim, lies terrified, staring at his death down the barrel of the weapon.

But does he have the taste for vengeance? Does he have the courage for it? In any event, he would not go unseen – he is not like the murderer, who can pass through the streets unmarked, who can slink back into a nameless world when the crime is done. The false identity documents, the unregistered addresses – a thousand tiny illegalities he does not have access to. A wave crashes at James feet. The tide is coming in.

With his stomach churning from anger, James drives back to Bentham House. He dials the police's anonymous hotline; a woman's voice answers, brusque, heavy. But there is nothing, in the end, to say; he holds the line silently, while the woman repeats her greeting – *Who is this? How can we help?* All is mere speculation, all based on the information of street people. *This line is anonymous.* A pause. *Nobody will know who you are.* There is no evidence for arrest; only fodder for hatred, for retaliation. He hangs up, tosses his phone onto the bed.

Instead, he visits a private investigator. The office is on the third floor of a block in the city bowl. It has a waiting room – cushioned chairs, a low coffee table with magazines strewn over its surface, a water tank, a wall clock. It is a long wait, the seats are fully occupied. He flips through a magazine, then goes outside for a cigarette. Cars grumble past, the pavements are full of pedestrians – any pair of those eyes could be watching him, any crack between buildings, or shadowed corner, could conceal the boy, or perhaps the guide, the one who abandoned him. Who knows how they get their information, who knows what they would think of this? It is a bad idea, in any case – he is wasting his time.

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In the weeks that follow, he throws himself into his work. On one day he interviews a psychologist, who works at a community clinic in the Northern suburbs; on another a priest from an inner-city Presbyterian church, which runs programmes for street children. All the while he is weary, all the while he has the recollection of Mel in his mind – he is always aware of her absence.

At other times he tramps the streets in Sea Point. Each morning he stops at the small coffee shop in Regent Street: they bring him his strong black brew and a newspaper; the waitress greets him, and they converse. She is elusive, but there is a certain charm and curiosity in her shyness, in her smile, at once bashful and coquettish. He would like to get to see more of her.

One evening, in a small, back-garden restaurant in Claremont, he meets up with the Hospice secretary. She wears an evening dress, and her shoulders are draped in a long, elegant shawl. Her perfume smells of cinnamon, she wears glossy lipstick. During the meal he finds his gaze wandering over her figure, her lips. He has no interest in her, to be sure, other than what her body can offer him. She gives him a coy smirk – he will try his luck. The wine he orders is a simple one, fruity, boisterous. They enjoy it with their meal. He orders a second bottle, but they do not get through it. He drives her to Bentham House, they walk silently up the stairs, and in his rooms he undresses her. Her scent makes him light-headed, reckless. She guides him onto the bed, her body moving fluidly, her dark hair hanging loose over her shoulders. Even in the semi-darkness, as she unbuttons his shirt, runs a hand down his chest, her eyes flicker. He takes in her little pert round breasts, her compact body. He is intoxicated by it, by the way it is formed, by the way it moves. All memory evaporates, all consciousness becomes pure action.

In the darkness afterward, the image of Mel comes to him. It is only a matter of weeks since it was she who lay next to him. Should there not be a passing of time before one indulges in intimacies? A period of celibacy? The woman next to him, asleep, turns moaning towards him. It is a passing thought. The truth is, Mel is not here; there is only darkness, and this woman. *The dead know nothing, they do not even have their memories.*

13.

James sits on the edge of his bed, the bedside lamp casting a sallow light across his cheek. The rest of the room is dark. He is ready for bed: he has, for the first time in weeks, resumed his nightly ritual. A hurried shower, afterwards the rumpled towel tossed over the shower wall, the floor splattered, the mirror fogged up. He smokes a final cigarette outside, drinks a last glass of wine. Then he flicks the butt into the night, intent on its tumbling arc until it is a mere dying glow on the tarmac; sometimes his mind wanders while he is staring - perhaps it is the diffuseness that stimulates the lull - and finds himself reflecting on details from the past. The vision of Mel comes to him: the Mel from his mother's house, at the deathbed where from his corner he remarked her leaning over her patient, the gaunt, delirious old lady scowling in bewilderment, protesting the damp cloth laid across her brow; her gentle smile in response. His mother had always been unapproachable, derisive; she had become more so towards her death. But there was, in fact, something more tender inside, something that had in the end lured James to her side; but one had to be patient to observe it. It was the same smile, he recalls, that at times played on Mel's lips while she was with James - patient, perceptive.

Tonight, the ritual is a reminder of recent events, a marker highlighting the interval between this moment of custom and the last. On the bedside table is his Gide, which he has not read for more than a month, and on his desk the pile of yellowing volumes, filmed in dust. The facing cover shows the bust of a girl, drawn in bold, childish lines - a cover he has always liked. Her features are simplified to the point of abstraction, filled with dark but striking colours - yellow, brown, blue. She is wistful, as if mourning a loss. Or, perhaps, self-aware of her incompleteness, the crudeness with which she has been drawn, mourning what she has never been.

In the bare window in front of him, his face appears half-shadowed, the visible part looking haggard. It suggests a person at once alive and dead, at once fully-formed and deficient; a person, he thinks, both aware of himself and not. He stretches across the table, switches off the lamp. As his reflection withdraws, the city lights appear behind the glass, like cat-eyes peering from the dark. He spreads himself out on the duvet, resting his head on his hands. Even at this time of night, sounds give evidence of human activity: grumbling engines, barking dogs, doors closing, keys jangling in locks. For some reason, he cannot seem to filter them out; they grate on his ear.

He closes all the windows in the room, hoping for silence. Again he reclines on the bedcovers, eyes shut, the night-time noises reduced to a muffle. But his ear, attuned to the surroundings,

amplifies even the most distant clamour. What is more, without the night breeze stirring the air in the room, he picks up the secretary's faint cinnamon perfume in his covers. He stretches an arm across the empty bed, feeling the cool smooth linen on his skin. Is it something he desires, in the end, to fill that space up permanently?

During the course of the night, he drifts in and out of sleep, waking up cold at one point, shivering; at another dreaming of an intruder in his rooms. He hears, in the dream, the outside lock softy clicking, the door creaking open; he watches a figure approach, sees with horror the face of Mel's killer. After that he cannot rest – the nightmare has sent ripples through his composure. He waits for dawn, listens to the first birds' chirping – a sparse choir perched on railings and ledges. From above he surveys the streets, seemingly empty. Yet he knows now, he senses, that there are people skulking in alleyways, in the interstices between things, in the same way one knows there are insects within the walls, in the cracks, in the ceiling beams.

A short time after that, the security guard marks him as he passes through the illuminated patch around the gate. He stands on the pavement with the wooden pillbox at his back, wringing his hands, cupping them and blowing warm breath onto his palms. A blue tint hangs over everything: the first rays have not yet breached the overlooking hill. It will not be long, however: higher up, the cliffs of Lion's Head are dappled pink and orange and blue. He is wearing a polyester jacket, old jeans, a pair of beaten running shoes; his fringe falls in tousled clumps over his forehead. And yet he would, no doubt, be taken rather as a foreign tourist on an early-morning stroll than a vagrant – he lacks the concentrated look of desperation, the threadbare appearance of one of them. It is something that has frustrated him from the first, that the barrier between author and subject is impregnable, even to the sensitive imagination. From High Level Road, he looks back towards the old Breakwater Prison – one of the historical underpinnings in the text of his first book. The place made a deep impression on him – the vision of inmates running the treadmill, of chain gangs trudging out before dawn, breaking rocks from the quarry, their bodies hunched and weary. But even these daydreams are merely sympathetic – they lack the sting of urgency, the harshness of reality. He is indeed a foreigner in this landscape, in his books at most a translator, an interpreter of other worlds.

He goes past the quarry, cut from the smooth slope like a pound of flesh, overgrown now with veld grass, dotted with anthills. The tallest buildings are tipped by the sun's first rays now, their shadows rising with them, stretching out behind. Workers trickle along Strand Street from the station, moving without speech in the early morning. And in Greenmarket Square a handful of

stallholders are already setting up for the day; the surrounding coffee shops and restaurants present a façade of rolling doors and grates.

He walks a winding path towards St George's Cathedral, behind which there is a soup kitchen. Over the last few months he has noticed that, despite their essential itinerancy, street people follow a rough routine – they have a territory in which they roam, in which they sleep, in which they find ways to survive. They gravitate towards soup kitchens in the mornings after the rush, and also in the evenings, when the city has emptied, when it has poured out its occupants. As James meanders the narrow city roads he stops to watch a group of listless vagrants stirring in an alcove, groggily collecting their blankets, stuffing them into plastic shopping bags. Their eviction is overseen by a pair of security guards standing nearby, one of whom bends over to help a woman to her feet. She hardly seems able to get up, but she does so without protest, her face carrying a bland expression that suggests the regularity of this occurrence. Indeed, none of the squatters complain. Their decamping is accomplished silently, without commotion, an event as mundane as the sound of traffic swelling nearby. Eventually, the group traipses away, but the woman, in particular, looks weary of the routine: her appearance brings to James's mind the character of the Highveld's dry winters, when grasses and trees and flowers wither and harden, withholding the last of their moisture in a defiant shell. Every aspect of her exterior conveys this retraction of humour – her patchy skin, her short, brittle spikes of hair, her arthritic movements. She cannot be more than thirty years old, but those have apparently been unforgiving years. How many more will her stiffening body endure? But more than that, how does one who has insulated the vital part of herself so tightly – the part that might at least have protested her expulsion – ever open out again? He thinks of the girl, the one who still wears his family pendant around her neck. How long before this same straightening sets in? How long before she, too, becomes irretrievable?

The alcove is backed by a grille which, when lifted, opens up a corridor of cheap shops and restaurants. He hears the guards pulling it up as he walks away, a sound telling of a city that itself withdraws from the world outside, that retreats from darkness.

At the soup kitchen, he stands in the adjacent lot, hands buried in his pockets, while food is served: this morning a steaming broth with thick slices of bread. Now and then, somebody drifts in from the street and accepts their portion. They find a seat on a low wall or on the ground, eating with a disinterested look. No doubt food is something they have learned not to desire, not

to relish: it is solely a chore. The way they look at him is similarly devoid of opinion, as if he is one of those statues of long-forgotten men that dot the city.

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It is not long thereafter that, roaming again through the streets, James comes across the girl. She stumbles from a side-alley half a block ahead, the pendant dangling as she steadies herself with one hand on the pavement. Others notice her sudden appearance too. A thread of spittle, which she awkwardly mops up with the cuff of her shirt as she straightens, droops from the corner of her mouth. For a moment she gathers herself – despite her shakiness, she seems embarrassed by the attention she has drawn. Her eyes look forward from her bowed head while she scuttles away. James follows, glancing up the side-alley as he goes by, empty but for a cluster of rubbish bins and, leaning against the wall next to them, a Rastafarian lighting a cigarette. The girl makes unsteady progress, her hips swaying uncomfortably this way and that, her knees half-buckling each time pressure is placed on them, like a string puppet getting entangled in the complexities of movement. Again she stumbles, and again she gathers herself, darting away from onlookers into a nearby alleyway. After a few moments James cautiously rounds the corner. He is presented with the sight of her sliding onto her haunches against a wall, then limply curling up on the concrete. A dazed eye glimpses him before it closes: there is a momentary glimmer, as of fear or recognition, or both. It is a flicker that, like a fading ember, still suggests the presence of warmth, an awareness of her relation to others that has not yet been extinguished.

In the alleyway, one or two people are smoking outside back doors, and at the far end a parking attendant has set up a crate as a chair, with bread and a bottle of milk for amenities. There are people in the street behind James, too. Nevertheless, he kneels over her, disregarding the presence of other eyes. He is seething with anger, though the reason for it, the object at which it is directed, seems obscure. She is not asleep: she moans and squirms. At moments she is caught in agony, her jaw clenching and then relaxing; again a dribble of spit runs down her chin, elongating into a string before it touches the floor. He feels her burning forehead, lifts an eyelid – her pupils are dilated. How often does she do this? Is it already part of her habit?

The way her head is turned to one side reveals her slim, tidy neck – a bud of elegance on a creature that has been reduced to grovelling. Around it is the pendant, still hanging from its chain necklace, though now the delicately intertwined fringe has been chipped, the surface relief

scratched. And yet the essential fact remains: it is intact, still in her possession, a fact made all the more significant by the precarious state she is now in.

He rushes out into the street and hails a cab. The driver, a man with a covetous, sarcastic manner, waits idling for James, who reappears with the girl in his arms. Pedestrian stare, but do not intervene – he is taken, perhaps, for a naïve tourist. While James deposits her on the back seat, the driver unabashedly leers, a contemptuous smile playing on his lips, his searching eyes running over her figure. "Where you are taking her?" he asks as they climb into the car, the driver putting on a pair of slick sunglasses. James tells him the address. "It's your home?" James does not respond.

On the road, he has a chance to think. He is overcome by misgivings: he will not be able to take her in and then turn her out once she has recovered: there is the chance – the probability – that she would relapse, that this effort would have been a mere show, symbolic and insubstantial. So, unwittingly once again, he has been forced into a commitment not of his choosing, one which started to take shape the moment he first opened his door to her friend, the boy.

At Bentham House, he pays no attention to the security guard, whose eyes he senses on him constantly. The girl is difficult to manage as he carries her up the stairs – she writhes and her head lolls. His arms burn, his legs ache. It would be easier to make a nest for her outside, to return her to the pool shed, a place she is more familiar with, to where he could bring down food and drink, like a little boy smuggling sustenance to a stray dog. But this is altogether a more serious matter. As he carries her through his doorway, he is aware that he is taking her across the threshold to the other world, the one from which she has been barred, the one which rejected her in the first place.

14.

James's spare bedroom is rather neglected, a room into which he seldom goes. For the most part, the door to it remains closed, a place consigned to semi-darkness, to semi-existence. Since the day on which Mel looked into it, the entrance has remained sealed, so that it seems to hold that memory within it still, like a crystal droplet yet to be seared by daylight. He had laid out a cot there during his initial months in Cape Town: a sponge mattress on a metal-frame bed, though he has never had much cause to use it. Next to him is a chest of drawers, against the far wall is a long bookshelf, lined with volumes, a collection which has begun to spill over into heaps on the floor. A few boxes are stacked in a corner, and there is a low table with empty photo frames, a vase, some stationery, at the window. A thick curtain dims the room – even in the mid-morning sun, it lies in a blue shade. He lays the girl on the bed, where she curls up, a patina of sweat lining her face, making her forehead glisten. He does not bother to let light in, but throws the window sashes open as far as possible. The curtains billow, air begins to circulate.

He looks at her on the bed, a small child, now briefly tranquil; she is dreaming, he fancies, of a soft, quiet room that once belonged to her. Almost instinctually, he runs a hand over her forehead, brushing back the course strands of her fringe. While he does so her eyes open, regarding the man standing over her, surveying the room, but holding onto nothing. Eventually, her heavy eyelids droop and close. Silently he leaves the room, closing the door behind him. In the kitchen he makes a sandwich and pours a glass of milk, both of which he deposits – softly opening the door and crossing the room – on the table near her. Next he brings a bucket, a roll of toilet paper, for her ablutions. Going out, he turns the key in the lock, which jangles and then crisply catches, a noise that, like a set of bones reverberating for an instant, announces once and for all the girl's fate.

It is only in the late afternoon that he finds her fully awake – upright and collected in a tight bundle with her knees drawn up to her chest, her head peering restlessly out above. Set against her surroundings – the thumbed volumes, the sparse, muted furnishings – she appears incongruous. It is a scene that would be equally at home in the early days of the colony.

With the windows open, the air in the room is cool, wintry, bringing in the cheerless day outside. He places a chair next to the cot, sits down meaningfully, facing squarely towards her. She does not look at him, but is fixated on the respiring curtains. Everything seems burdened by the

weight of her presence, as if, with her roving eyes piercing the musty veil of the room, the layers of dust, the unswept floors, the cobwebs and the tangles of lint and mote in corners, all become apparent. And the same drifting gaze, when it rests on him, seeks for the reasons she is there, rummages for intentions.

He pulls up a chair and sits across from her, elbows resting on his knees, hands clenched together as if in prayer. The girl's face is turned from him, the fine muscles in her neck and jaw tensed, the flesh around them hardened, chiselled. The ear is tiny, the mouth slightly hooked at the corner. She waits for him to speak. He looks down at his hands and sighs: he cannot find the words – he is empty, dry. Leaving the chair where it is, he walks out, securing the door again behind him.

Not long thereafter, while he is busy in the kitchen, the landlady knocks at the door. Her hair is neatly made up in large curls, her cheeks daubed with blush. As James lets her in, she smiles warmly, her eyes surveying the flat. After a few exchanges, she enquires after the girl. James shows her into the spare room. "I found her like this," he says, indicating the girl, who is again lying on the bed. A sweaty sheen has formed at her temples and on her forehead, and with closed eyes she is rocking back and forth.

The landlady holds herself stiffly, a statuesque figure, aloof. She surprises James, however, by the concern she shows for the girl: she presses a palm against the child's forehead, taking her temperature; after that, taking her pulse, lifting her eyelids. "This is the girl who was living in the garden shed," she says, drawing herself upright. "What has become of the boy?" she asks, turning to James.

"He is on the streets again." He pauses, unsure of how much to add. "I've seen him once or twice."

"Well," she says, "What do plan to do with her now you've rescued her? No doubt you'll take her to a children's home."

She senses James's hesitation. "There's nothing heroic about this, you know," she continues, her eyes narrowed behind her thick lenses. "This girl should go through rehabilitation, James, overseen by professionals. I dearly hope you'll leave it up to them." When she is gone, he lingers behind his door, listening to her footsteps clip-clop on the tiled corridor – each beat falling at a regular interval, each striking the same banal note, never a moment of hesitation, never a

moment when the foot falls uncertainly or with indecision about the course it is taking. She is no doubt right – he should take the girl back to a clinic or home. Under the care of professionals the girl would recover. Under their steady, trained hands her body would soon be conditioned out of her habitual affliction. And yet he cannot imagine the doctors' precise movements excising all the tumorous habits and traumas that have found root in the girl. Her affliction is part of her now, ingrained. A vision comes to him, of the girl's young face crisscrossed with fine surgical scars, a meshwork of thin, pink ridges on her cheeks, her jaw, her neck; she stands mortified in the light of his gaze, a grotesque creature. It would be just as well to accommodate her symptoms, to let her wander through the world, tainting it, infecting it, making it more like herself.

He hears her vomiting into the bucket he had placed next to her bed. Standing over her, he watches helplessly. There is the heavy fall of liquids against the plastic bottom, preceded by a guttural release of air. Over and over he listens to this succession of sounds. The mixture expelled from her stomach is fluid, mostly. She stares at him indolently, her forehead once more filmed in a feverish sweat. It is dusk, about ten hours since he carried her in. She has not eaten the sandwich he had put out; the glass of water is almost empty. In the bathroom he finds an old facecloth, which he takes to the basin and, after dampening it with warm water, lays across her forehead. His touch, as he dabs the droplets of perspiration running down her cheeks, seems to calm her – her eyes close, as if indicating compliance, acceptance. While she rests, he fills her glass, covers the plate of food with a lace net, empties the bucket. The door is open now – his intentions must be clearer to the child. Nevertheless, he keeps the keys to the security gate, the front door, in his pocket.

As the night deepens, the wind dies down, leaving the city quiet, hushed. He sits on a barstool in a corner of the kitchen, leaning over a tepid bowl of noodles and stir-fry – leftovers from a previous dinner. The curtains and windows are open, and in contrast to the room's fluorescent light, the world outside is an impenetrable sheet of black. From the outside it would be possible to look in on the scene and remark upon every detail, but from the inside, he can see nothing beyond the window, a fact which gives him an eerie sense of exposure. Here he is, consigned to the furthest corner of his flat, eating morsels of old food, uncovered to the glare of night-enveloped eyes. A shift, fundamentally: this place is no longer his exclusively – his habits, his peculiarities, will have to withstand scrutiny, to become more public.

For a second time, the girl begins to moan, the bed and mattress creaking loudly underneath her. This time she is worse, with rivulets of sweat running from her hairline down to her nose and

cheeks, with her arms wrapped around her midriff, her eyes rolling in their sockets. Already, he has forced her to swallow aspirin, has mixed electrolytes into her water. There is little more he can do. And yet her distress is acute – that much is clear. In a moment of respite she concentrates on him with an expression of suffering and incomprehension: her cheeks lifted, her brow furrowed, her orbs narrowed to slits. If he had the inclination or the courage, he would take her hand. Instead, he watches over her, detached: an observer.

Whenever she has the strength to accept it, he holds the glass of water to her lips. When she needs the toilet, she uses the bucket, when she is wracked by pain he doses her with pain tablets. Each time she opens her eyes he is nearby, slumped in the wooden chair at the table, or standing over her with hands in the pockets of his coat, watching. Something – an image of this stranger – must be solidifying in her mind: an image that will rise from the throes of her ordeal and take shape in her psyche. How will she look at him after this?

Switching off the light, he settles in his chair next to the table, fixated on the dark lumpish form visible on the bed, silently in agony. Resting his head on his forearms, he dozes. He finds himself back in the room in his mother's house – the one where she died – huddled in his corner, wrapped in a blanket. Nearby, Mel sits with her back to him, erect but stiff, lifeless. In fact, the room itself, arranged in the way it was for as long as he had known it, seems inert and unchanging – there is no dust, no mustiness, and yet the furniture, the ornaments and trinkets have no freshness either, no sheen. As he approaches Mel from behind, the staring, ghostly old woman lying face up on the mattress catches his eye – his mother, the blood drained from her face, dead. At this moment Mel glances at him over her shoulder, her skin as pallid as his mother's, her eyes as vacantly limpid. He walks up to her, brushing her frozen cheek. There is no sign that she feels his touch, or even truly sees him. And then, as his gaze begins to wander, he notices beyond the old woman another figure, smaller, completely covered by the bedding; he skirts the bed, reaches to pull back the sheets.

With a jolt, he awakes. A cool breeze, tinged with the freshness of early morning, breaks over his right shoulder, his neck, his cheek. His throat is dry, his jaw slack. He has been drooling. As he comes to, he is struck by the quietness of the room, the streets outside, the city. For a while he listens. Then, tentatively opening the curtains, letting in the weak pre-dawn light, he sees the girl still there, still curled up on the cot, knotted in the sheets, but utterly motionless now. Kneeling at her side, he watches the weak rise and fall of her chest, presses a finger to her pulse. When she

moans it emerges thinly, like a pillow-muffled scream. Once more he tries to coerce her into drinking water, but it is becoming more difficult - she is almost too weak to shallow.

At six o'clock he is outside at the bins, waiting. A bank of them is lined up near him, alongside the road; the cleaners, who he had seen wheeling them out, have returned to the building, hands in pockets, moving stiffly in the cold. The sun has not fully risen yet, the street is quiet. All but a few of Bentham House's windows are as yet dark, and the guard shed, with its back wall visible, is a lonely sentry at the edge of the road. Further away there is an indistinct hum, rising from the faceless buildings, the office blocks, the schools and houses: a subterranean vibration of human life. The sky is violet overhead, with bands of grey and pink streaked across the horizon. Already, from the gloomy street, are emerging the rugged silhouettes of wanderers, waifs, homeless. From where he stands he watches them rummage through his neighbours' leavings, spilling leftovers and food boxes and other rubbish onto the pavement, not bothering to pick it up afterward, moving on, just as silently as they had come. For a time he marks the comings and goings of these scavengers, remarking on how haphazardly they seem to operate. One of the bins has not been touched, the others searched at random. Sure enough the boy is among them, one of the last to come before the collection truck. James sees him round the corner at the bottom of the street, his gait no longer as athletic as it once was: his shoulders are slumped, his face concentrated and surly. Until James is almost upon him, the boy does not notice him. The swollen eye is still completely shut, a hardened amber puss visible between the lids, the appearance scaly, protrusive, like that of a chameleon. On his forehead too, and the side of his neck, the dry, white patches on his skin have spread, firming like scabs.

In the far background, the rubbish truck grumbles through the suburb's narrow side roads, making its way towards them one house, one building at a time. The boy resumes his foraging. He begins with the unopened bin, releasing a miasma as he lifts the lid. His hands work deftly, parting first the loose matter at the top, digging out a refuse bag, then, resting it at the top of the bin, eyeing it curiously, he examines its bulges, poking at the plastic. Making up his mind, he tears open a side, digs through the contents. With each bag he follows the same procedure, each time scattering garbage at his feet. The objects he wishes to keep he puts aside - he has found, so far, only a few pieces of cardboard, a few bottles. Now and then he glances over his shoulder - at the noise of the truck, at the figures whistling and shouting in one of the nearby streets, at the guard shed.

"I want to talk to you about the girl, your friend," James says. There is a slight jerk, an indication of interest, but the boy does not stop rummaging. "I have her - she is with me. I mean to take care of her, to take her off the streets." He falters. In front of the boy, his declaration sounds ridiculous, pathetic. Pathetic and premature. Is he truly prepared to take care of the girl for years, for tens of years?

"I need your help... again," James says, in a lower voice. The boy, holding a plastic shopping packet he has found in one of the bins, pauses for a moment, turning his eye on James, not moving, not speaking. For an interval they both listen to the burgeoning grumble of the truck, the rowdy sounds of the collectors. James produces a stack of fifty-rand notes from his pocket, with the boy tracking his movements carefully. He takes the boy's hand - rough, dry, fleshy, but quiescent - and, surveying the road, presses a few notes it into his palm. Again he scans the area, but he is sure that no attention is being paid.

"When I found her," he continues, "she was drugged up. She is not doing well - I'm not sure she has the strength to survive the withdrawal." He searches the boy's expression, but there is no sign of emotion, of comprehension. "Do you understand what I'm saying?" The boy ignores him, continues to gaze. "She's addicted to whatever you two have been taking; her body's not coping. She needs more. She needs time." There he stops - he has said enough. Without another word, the boy begins to walk off, a lonely, dark figure gradually fading into the early morning glare. As the rubbish truck arrives, its jaws slowly crushing waste within its carriage, the collectors shouting and whistling ahead of it, he slips noiselessly into a side street.

Returning to his flat, James finds the girl asleep, feverish, her blanket cast off in a crumpled heap at her feet. Again he tends to her with a damp cloth, brings the water to her lips. She drinks, but without relish, without desire - her legs, her arms, her neck are limp. When he lowers her, she sinks heavily into the pillow.

Late in the afternoon the boy arrives, knocking softly on the door - he has, no doubt, found a new way past the guards. For some length of time he simply stares, waiting perhaps for James to speak. But he does not. After a period the boy's eye wanders towards the spare bedroom, where the girl is faintly moaning in her sleep. He looks James in the eye: "I want to see her." Then bows his head.

James examines him, the dusty clothing, the patchy skin. The irony of the situation does not escape him – it was not very long ago that the boy first entered his rooms, first set events in motion. Nevertheless, he lets the urchin in, eyes him as he goes past into the spare room, trailing a dry, salty odour. He does not stay long: for a few moments he gazes at the girl, his expression revealing nothing. Then he turns towards James. And stops. Each time he is brought into contact with this boy, James thinks, the occasion has the awkwardness of a standoff. The boy has his arms at his sides, his hands curled into half-fists, his legs planted slightly apart. Despite his stillness, his inexpressive face, he seems volatile, at each moment holding back a great churning within. Gradually he starts to move, feeling in his pockets for a small makeshift vial, a syringe. He offers them to James with a hand that trembles slightly. Inside the vial – an old miniature tot bottle – is a murky liquid; the markings on the syringe have been scratched off. "This way is best," the boy says, looking at the needle. The goods are not worth the money James gave – of that he is certain. Again he looks at the boy, his swollen eye, his stooping shoulders. How much has James contributed to his deterioration? How responsible is he? Whatever he is doing for the girl, he is no Samaritan, no rescuer. Let him not have any illusions about that.

He drives to a pharmacy in Main Road. The afternoon rush has begun: the aisles are clogged with shoppers. Among them he cuts a rather ungainly figure, conscious of the vial in his pocket, of the fact that he is gravely out of his depth; he does not know what he is doing. He rummages through a box of syringes, fumbles with a neatly arranged row of needles: a number of them fall to the floor. As he leans over to pick them up a woman bumps into him. They exchange irritated glances. After his purchase, he drives away in sombre mood, his mind bringing up the image of the girl as he left her – a sliver, groaning, sickly. A light rain begins to fall on his windscreen, the tiny droplets alighting distinctly, separately, filling with grains of dirt from the glass, rolling down.

He has left the curtains and windows in his flat open. Small splatters of rain, blown in by gusts of wind, dot the sills, the floors. Going from room to room, he closes them, draws the curtains, until everything is dim, shadowed. The girl, awake, clutching the blanket to her chest, watches him move through the spare room, her eyes bright, agitated. On the floor near her bed is the glass, its contents spilled on the floor, a dark stain on the carpet. He picks it up, refills it, holds it to her mouth. She slurps loudly, her eyes fixed on him above the rim – she is wary still, but too weak to put up defences. Then she collapses once more, calmly falling into a slumber. James retreats into his room, flicks on his desk lamp, placing the medical implements, the old tot bottle, in a line under the vivid light.

Soon after night has fallen, her groaning resumes. This time there is a new strain, a new desperation to her voice. He turns on the light in the spare bedroom, sits on the edge of the mattress. Her eyes are sunken, circled by dark rings; her body appears to have withered into the bedding; her fever is high. He fetches the crude vial, the syringe and needles. Then sits, staring. Perhaps this is how it should be, this suffering, this clear transition into the world of order, of brightness – a clean amputation of her former life. In the morning she will awake, suddenly, drawing in air, emerging like Gide from severe illness with senses rejuvenated, hungry for the fruits of the world. He lifts the bottle to the light – against it the substance appears cloudy, murky, the very distillation of the life of anguish, of decay from which he carried her. He sighs: it will be a slow transition. With the girl moaning next to him, her voice no more than an undertone, he draws a dose from the small bottle – 5mg. She offers no resistance, the needle goes in smoothly. As the liquid drains into her vein, it strikes him that his actions are irretrievable. For better or worse, this girl is under his care.

15.

During the next weeks a routine develops between them. Much of his time is spent at his desk, where he takes up the labours of writing his book. It has begun to engage him, to work on his mind. Indeed, with the girl under his roof, he has an angle from which to approach the subject matter, from which to contextualize it. In his previous study, the life of the serial murderer formed the backbone of his text; in this case it will, it seems, be the girl's. On occasion he sits at her bedside, asks her questions, coaxing responses. She is reticent, unresponsive. But he is patient. A few details emerge – she is from the townships, her parents are dead, she once lived with her grandmother. More than that she will not offer. Not yet.

He does not go to his office very often. When he requires documents or files, he walks there, carries back what he needs. Nor does he wander the streets as he used to – they stay indoors, he and the girl, shy of crowds, reclusive. Their only visitors are the landlady and the boy, who delivers the makeshift vials, and is compensated. On one occasion the girl is awake when he arrives, dressed in new clothes, freshly washed, clean. He stands over her, gazing silently, his face cast in shadow. She cowers in a corner of the cot, her head bent forward, her arms hugging her knees to her chest. After a time he mutters something. The girl is ruffled – afterwards she will not eat or talk.

Her recovery progresses slowly. At first she is sickly, bedridden. A few hours after each new injection she begins to moan, to vomit and burn with fever. But he has developed a sense for when to re-dose her, a margin he pushes further each instance. On these occasions he thinks of Mel, the way she nursed his mother, her patience, her solicitude.

The vials, the syringes, he locks away in a cabinet, amongst bottles of whisky and red wine. As the days, the weeks pass she begins to roam her cage, perhaps searching for the miniature bottles, perhaps weary of her fetters, her restrictions. In any case, she grows more and more restless. He begins to drive her out to the beach in False Bay, early, before sunrise. He likes the symbolism of her sitting beside him, or wandering the beach in the background, as the sun rises above the Kogelberg.

*

It is October, a crisp spring day, windless before dawn, a month after he took her in. They drive in silence, watching dark outlines ahead of them rise from grey air – road signs, flyover bridges, distant mountains. The white tips of waves shimmer alongside the road, and now and then the silhouettes of workers, walking briskly towards stations, factories. On the sand, the girl walks closely by his side, her tiny feet leaving bare footprints in their wake. She falls behind, suddenly fascinated by a shell, or snail, or washed-up sea plant; but he does not stop. He finds a spot on the rocks, near the river mouth, as the sun begins to rise. He looks back. On the white strip of sand they are the only figures, as if this were an extremity, the outer rim of South African soil. The girl is kneeling over a rock pool, a dead branch in her hand, absorbed by something in the water. For a week, he has not dosed her. Now, watching as she pokes the stick into the pool, suddenly jumping back, releasing a shrill little scream, he is struck by the ordinariness of the scene: a child exploring her surroundings. She glances at him, then turns away, crossing the rocks back up to the beach.

When they arrive home, the boy is waiting at James's door. From the top of the stairwell they see him, a quiet creature with hands in pockets, his head and body, still, unmoving. As they approach he glares at them, saying nothing. He is dishevelled, the collar of his jacket torn, his knuckles once again grazed, bloody. There is a sweet, fusty stench on his clothes, his skin. He looks up at James. "I want to speak to her," he mumbles.

The girl sits in her room, legs thrown over the side of the bed, hands resting on her lap. The boy has his back slightly towards her, holding James's offering of coffee, slurping it. The air is heavy between the two children. When the boy is finished, he places the mug on the table next to him; without turning, he mutters to the girl in their language. She does not answer. Resting his tattered fist on the table, he looks over his shoulder, speaks again. This time, her response is sharp, brisk. And a moment later she says more, the boy replying rapidly, his voice rising. The girl bows her head – a timid, frail creature. The boy stares down at his fist, clenching it, unclenching. In a flash he stands, pushing back the chair, rushing at the girl. She winces, throwing her arms out in front of her, letting out a squeal. Again they raise their voices, their words hurled out in harsh, pounding syllables. First the boy leans over her, beads of spittle flung with each word, then grabs her wrist, shaking her arm. Within moments, James has pulled him away, dragged him wriggling out onto the corridor. They face each other, James in the doorway, the boy outside, his nostrils flaring, his jaw tensed. And yet, as his breathing slows, the outer shell begins to harden once again, the fierceness dissipates, his shoulders slump. Without looking at James, he walks away, disappearing into the stairwell.

*

The next morning when James awakes, the girl is gone. On her bed, the blankets are flung aside, the sheets and pillow crinkled. The front door is closed, the gate locked - there is no sign of forced entry. But in the bathroom, one of the windows is off its catch - she is slim enough to fit through the iron bars outside. He goes to her bed again, presses his palm against the sheet. Cold - she has long since gone. For a few moments he is at a loss. He unlocks his cabinet, reaches for a bottle of whisky. Still on the shelf is a vial, unused, half-filled with murky opiate. Has it all been for nothing, James wonders? It is difficult to imagine that it has. Sitting at the table in the spare room, he slowly drains the whisky, pours another, and another. The boy is responsible, of that he has no doubt.

There is a strange sense of quiet, a hush, a hollowness. He has no presence here. The volumes, the paperbacks, are his, but the room, its genius, has become hers. There are various of her things scattered about the place: a frayed jersey, a hairbrush - her one luxury - a puzzle. Evidence of her entanglement in this chamber, evidence - he would like to think - that her intention was to return. But the thought offers little comfort - she is accustomed to the streets, a wanderer, without possessions, without allegiances.

Where is she now? Returned to her old haunts, curled into a ball in a side alley? He cannot bear the thought. And yet, he can muster nothing to contradict that image, no deep-seated faith in the urchin, no sense that she has taken to the life he has offered. Nothing, indeed, but a handful of words, teased from her in her weakest moments, that intimate her past. Were they the truth? He has not thought to ask himself that. Nor do those moments of childishness on the beach, or the flickers of joy when she could lose herself in play, appear to be anything more than that: moments - experienced perhaps in the way of a prisoner gleaning happiness from brief distractions.

His mind returns to the vision of the girl on her haunches, or lying with her back pressed against a wall, utterly abandoning the world around her for sleep, alone, stared at by passers-by. A flash of anger rushes through him; he flings the tumbler against the far wall, the glass shatters. As its shards pour onto the floor, scattering, he recalls the house in Lentegeur, the window breaking, glass tinkling in the room behind. He sighs. Raising himself a little unsteadily, he starts to clean the mess he has made. With a cloth he wipes up the whisky, sweeps the fragments of glass into a

dustpan. Afterwards, he makes the bed, arranges the girl's things neatly on the table. Then he leaves, closing the door behind him.

All morning he writes. He is unsettled, aware of the empty space behind the nearby door. And yet, his disappointment is deepest where it concerns his book, his regrets are all in that direction – he did not gather enough information while she was under his roof, he did not pay due attention to her past, did not push her to speak enough. He is struck by his indifference – his old numbness has returned.

*

In the evening he finds himself slumped over his desk, a whisky tumbler held slackly in hand, the bottle next to it. The room is dim, the air heavy. Somewhere outside there is the sound of scratching. With an effort he raises his head, blinks, focussing his eyes: the computer has turned itself off, there is a file open alongside the keyboard, his Gide spread open on top of it. He attends to the scratching, the shifting, apparently outside his door. Turning on the light to the corridor, he peers out of the kitchen. It is the girl – she is at the bathroom window, trying to force her way in. But her movements are sluggish – she cannot seem to gather the strength to climb through the bars, to pry open the sash. He fumbles to open the gate, the door, helps her in, seats her in the kitchen. Her eyes are bleary, glazed over; she can hardly keep them open. The pendant is no longer around her neck. But she is here, she is safe – and that is a relief. Taking her by the arm, he leads her slowly into her room, pulls back the blankets, guides her in. Her jacket and trousers are scuffed, and she carries a damp, earthy odour, one that brings up a vision of moist woodlands, or the musty shadowed alleyways in the heart of the city. He gives her water, watches her drift into sleep.

In the darkness, he sits at her bedside. There is, James reflects, a bond that develops in this blackness, one that sweeps over the individuals subtly, as nearly unnoticed as the night breeze that sways the curtains. While one is watching or being watched, succouring or being succoured, an understanding develops, penetrates one's defences. Perhaps it is a matter of gratitude for the girl – perhaps that is why she has returned. But she has returned nevertheless, as one does to one's home. And that is a good thing.

By mid-morning her withdrawal has begun. She moans, the bed creaks with her tossing and turning; he hears, once or twice while he is busy at his computer, the fall of vomit in the pail. Now and then he checks on her, holding a cloth to her forehead, giving her water.

In the late afternoon, he is slumped over his whisky glass again. Glancing up, he sees the girl staring at him from the doorway. As soon as their eyes meet she averts her gaze, retracting slightly, holding herself back.

"It's alright," James says, groggily. "You can come in." She does not move. Her face is still pale, her eyes sickly. "Were you with the boy?" he asks. Her eyes shift.

There is a long pause. "We went to the beach – your beach, the one you take me to." She stops, steadies herself before continuing. "There was a meeting for him. He has very bad friends." She looks up. "That is all."

"How did you get there?"

"The train... And we walked."

James's gaze falls towards her collar, her décolleté. She winces, turns back towards her room. Before she enters, she looks over her shoulder. "I'm sorry," she says, and disappears.

Later, James goes to her. "There is something I want to tell you," he begins. She is only half-awake, but she looks at him curiously. "You should know that you are not a prisoner here," he says, sitting in a chair next to her bed with elbows resting on thighs, hands clasped in front. Her eyes look beyond him, at the gate, the door. "I keep you here to help you," he continues. "But I cannot force you – eventually you'll be faced with the decision." For a moment he stares into space. "What I offer you is a measure of normalcy – a normal life..." his voice trails off. She is not paying attention, her lids are shut, her breathing rhythmic and shallow.

16.

One morning the boy arrives. It is not unexpected – it was only a matter of time. And yet, his timing is jarring: the third day since the children's disappearance – enough time to recover from their jaunt, enough time for anger to subside. James has just sat down to write, a tumbler waiting for him on the desk, a stack of documents resting neatly alongside the keyboard. Whether or not the girl has a hand in this, James cannot help but wonder. He ignores the knocking, going about his tasks: laying a blank A4 sheet in front of him, opening the top file, reading carefully, line by line, taking notes. With one ear he listens for the girl's reaction, listens for the creak of the bed, the patter of footsteps. And then the knocking stops. All is hushed. Only James's noises continue – the nervous click of his pen, whisky sipped into his mouth, a page turning. After a moment the knocking resumes, this time loudly. The girl emerges from her bedroom, taking up position in the entrance hall, a deadpan stare directed at him. James sighs, gets up from his desk.

The first thing he notices when he opens the door is the necklace. The boy is wearing it clumsily around his neck, the pendant falling to one side like a skew painting. It is as James suspected – the girl has given it to him, or more likely perhaps, he has taken it by force. Is there is some arrangement between these two, some pact? If so, he has unwittingly taken in the both of them.

The boy stares doggedly, his brow furrowed, his teeth gritted, and yet his eyes have lost their resolve – they are vague, yellowish. Through the white patches on his face, his neck, tiny flecks of red are beginning to seep onto the skin. There is blood, too, on his hands: fresh grazes on his knuckles, a gash on his left wrist. He reeks of the waste he rummages in.

Through the bars of the security gate, they consider each other, he and the boy. It strikes James that he is caught up in a struggle with this urchin, that they are grappling for the affections of the girl. She comes out timidly, stands a little way behind James, fiddling with the zipper on her jacket. The boy's eyes shift to her. But it is James who breaks the silence. "Whatever you have to say, you'll have to do so through the gate." He pauses to let the words sink in. The boy does not flinch - his eye remains on the girl. "You are no longer trusted here."

The girl comes forward shyly, taking James's hand. It is the first show of affection from her, the first indication that his efforts have been appreciated. A wave of feeling washes over him – at that moment he is certain that, despite everything, it has been worthwhile. She whispers something to the boy. The exchange is brief: he answers, they are silent, he says something more, and finally

the girl turns away, returning to her room. Once again, he and James are left face to face, contemplating one another.

"Wait here," James says, going towards the kitchen. He makes a sandwich for the boy, who accepts it through the metal bars of the security gate. Hunching down against the wall, the boy wolfs down the offering, smacking his lips loudly, crumbs littering the tiles at his feet. James closes the door, returns inside.

The girl is seated on her bed, legs hanging loosely over the edge, hands clasped on her lap. Her face looks toward the weak light pouring in through the window. It is a scene of youthful melancholy, a teenager's reverie on the sad, unanswered desires inside her. And yet there is a far more serious undertone to the girl's expression, a sense conveyed by the lines that have formed too early on her forehead, by the downturn of her mouth. There is love between these children, James thinks – or at least a kind of love, contorted and stunted by the pressures of life on the streets, like a tree leaning with the wind.

When he steps nearer, she rotates slightly, looking up. In the background, the boy can still be heard, smacking his lips, breathing heavily, more a creature every day. James kneels in front of her. "How did the boy get the necklace?" he asks. "Did he take it from you? Did you give it to him?"

She answers, first, with an impassive stare – her usual façade. For a while he waits, earnestly holding the girl's gaze. But no answer comes. He stands up, begins to leave. "It is because…" she pauses. He stops, his back still turned towards her. "Because I don't want him to forget about me."

*

It is early, before dawn. James and the girl walk downstairs to the car. At the bottom of the stairs, at the threshold of the door to the basement, is a bright fluorescent light. Its whiteness, intensified by the unadorned concrete of the stairwell. Their footsteps resound between the columns and walls, James's keys jangling as he unlocks the passenger door, lets the girl in. Just then, however, he becomes aware of the figure next to him, leaning against the wall. It is the boy, bleary-eyed, the patches on his skin hardened, forming encrusted scabs, beginning to fester. Without warning he rushes towards James, pushes him aside, trying to grab the girl. But his movements are

imprecise, his hands struggle to grip the door handle, making grubby streaks against the metal, the glass. James grips both his arms, pins them behind his back, pushes him up against the door. The boy shouts something at the girl. "You are pushing the boundaries," James warns, heaving. He shoves the struggling boy towards the entrance, towards the entrance. He stumbles, then, scrambling to his feet, walks briskly away, disappearing through a side door.

During their drive, the girl is shaky, ill at ease. Nor does she lose herself in the details of the beach as usual, exploring the rock pools, collecting shells. Instead, she perches on a small rock set slightly back from the water's edge, sullen, drawing lines in the sand with a dead branch. Now and then she surveys the area, looking up towards the ridge behind, anxious. Already, her associations of the place are becoming divided, James notes. He will no longer bring her here – they shall have to find a new place, not tainted by memory, not reminiscent of the boy.

*

On the notice board outside the landlady's flat, there is an advertisement for a vacancy in Mel's old building. James cannot take his eyes off it, off the name of the place, off the memories and emotions its letters retrieve from his depths. How long has it been? Weeks, months? He no longer makes the effort to recall. From within, he hears the shuffle of footsteps near the door. The chain slides from its catch, the key turns in the lock. The landlady is in her nightgown, wearing slippers and curlers. Outside, the early morning air has a chill: the residues of winter. She flinches, hugs the gown closer to her chest. "I want to speak about the matter of the street children," James says. Her mouth tightens. "Come in," she offers, opening the gate.

Inside, the air is unmoving, dense – as if all the room's years have been accumulating, gathering into a heaviness. Already, at this hour, she is busy at her papers, which are strewn across the table near the window: bills, receipts, documents. After a few minutes she carries in a tray of coffee, the same china cups as before. Her hand is steady as she pours, the brown stream falling in an arc, swirling in the cup, steaming. On a small plate are an array of biscuits, one of which she puts on James's saucer. "Take more if you like," she offers, handing it to him. Then, ironing her gown down with one hand, she seats herself on the sofa, a stern expression settling on her face. "I've noticed the other child – the boy – recently," she says. "He comes because of the girl, I'm sure."

James nods. "He's a negative influence on her."

"What do you mean by that? Has she relapsed?"

It is not a question he wants to answer. He looks into his coffee, at the steam twirling upward in tortile clouds, at the reddish brown liquid. For a minute they sit in silence, the wall clock ticking away the seconds.

"He looks rather sickly – the boy," the landlady says at last.

"He's deteriorating very quickly," James begins. Placing the cup and saucer down on a side table, he looks into at his palms. "I would like him to be under supervision again." He hesitates a moment. "*His* health is one reason. But the girl's is another. I don't know how I'll explain it to her, but some action is necessary."

"I agree with you James – he needs to return to the children's home. I think he should have done so a long time ago, mind you." She sips her coffee, setting the cup down neatly in the saucer afterwards. "The girl will be able to visit him there."

James says nothing.

"What about her? Is she coping?"

"The girl's fine. She's emerging from her shell, slowly. I have hopes for her recovery."

"You should be careful James. She's been on the streets a long time – she's different from you or I."

"I'm not so sure," James retorts. "In any case, I'm prepared to accept the consequences of that. My only concern is for the boy. Would your contacts at the home be prepared to take him in? He comes Tuesdays to the bins. That'd be a good time to apprehend him. He'll see my hand in it, but there's no other option I suppose."

"That'll be fine, James. I'll let them know about Tuesday. I hope you understand, they are already aware of the situation." She pauses. "Of the girl and her visitor I mean. You can imagine – I had to inform them. They've been looking for the boy already."

James glances at her, their eyes meet. There is a flash of anger, he is sure, in his eyes. But there is embarrassment, too – he should have guessed, he should have taken precautions. He picks up the coffee again, drinks it up. The biscuit he leaves in the saucer, untouched. As he raises himself, the landlady puts a hand on his shoulder. "What you're doing is illegal James. The authorities have turned a blind eye so far – they trust your intentions, or they're too little concerned. But it cannot go on forever." He walks toward the door. "That's not a warning, James," she adds. "I admire what you're doing. The question is whether our society's rules permit it. You shall have to abide by them eventually."

*

In the days leading up to Tuesday, a sense of foreboding simmers beneath James's consciousness. All morning as he writes he sips whisky; at times he dozes off, his head murky, his thoughts dull. The girl has taken to standing in the doorway, watching him. When he awakes, more often than not she is there. Does the irony strike her, he wonders? Does she see herself in him? Whatever the case, he is a poor example – he would make a poor father. Better to let her loose again on the streets, let her roam a harsh world than give her a taste of sweeter fruits – a taste that will, inevitably, turn bitter, poisonous.

At other times she stands out on the balcony, leaning against the railing, looking out over the city. In her expression he remarks the same longing he has always felt while taking in the view: that happiness is nearby, but just beyond reach. How long can he keep her closeted? How long before boredom overwhelms her sense of security? While she is sleeping, he empties out the last of the vials, tosses the bottle into the dustbin. He decides to leave the bedroom doors open at night, and during the day to let the girl walk the grounds. He speaks to the security guards, to the landlady: there is always an eye on her. With her new freedom, he sees her only at mealtimes, in the evenings. She comes back with trousers rolled up, feet muddy, clothes untidy. And yet, as ever, she returns, a fact that, each time, he is grateful for.

On Sunday the landlady comes to his door, confirms the arrangements. Everything is ready, the authorities will be waiting. That afternoon, dozing off at his desk, he has a dream. In it he is walking along a road, derelict, crumbling at its edges, lined by shabby, deteriorating houses. The shoulder of the road is white sand, here and there blown across the tarmac in streaks. He becomes aware of somebody next to him, holding his hand; he tries to turn his head, to see the

face, but he cannot – his gaze is fixed on the curve of the road. Nevertheless, he is certain it is Mel or the girl. Around them are other people, all walking in the same direction, all silently gazing at the person next to him. A little way ahead there is a minibus taxi, red with tinted windows, a garish sticker across the back window – what it says he cannot make out. All of a sudden, a man climbs out, masked, his identity obscured. Before James can react, the man has grabbed the woman from his side, and is rushing her towards the taxi. She resists but the man is too powerful. They jump in, and the vehicle begins to move. In one motion everybody chases after it, reaching out their hands as if, by a force of collective strength, willing it to stop. It is too late, the taxi speeds off, leaving a cloud of white dust in its wake. He is surrounded by particles of dust, a brilliant whiteness, suffocating him, filling his eyes, his ears.

*

On Thursday morning the girl is gone. This time she has left nothing behind – the bed is made, the blankets folded neatly at the foot of the mattress, the pillows and sheets patted smoothly down. Her possessions too are missing. Indeed, there is no trace of her: the room is as if it were never occupied. Her presence: light, fleeting, without roots. How will she remember this place? Perhaps, James thinks, as one does a hospital room, a place of recovery – tinged with bitterness, sadness. That is, if she will remember it at all.

So, he is once again alone. And yet, as he enters his bedroom again, the sense of emptiness is greater than it once was: greater for the phantoms that haunt the vacant spaces. Would it not be easier to pack everything up, or better still to sell it all off, to find new rooms, ones with no connection to the past?

He goes out onto the balcony, lights a cigarette. The weather is still cold – a last burst of winter. With tired eyes he looks out onto the buildings, the beach front in the distance. All around there is evidence of construction – cranes, stacks of bricks, fenced off areas. He recalls the scene when he first arrived here. There has been progress – or, rather, accumulation. He looks beyond the buildings, into the shadows – the streets, the alleyways. There, too, there has been accretion. Each advance counter-balanced, each happiness accompanied by a loss. Better to have nothing, he thinks – better to live without affections, without ties.

*

The next morning, wearily, he gathers his coat, his cigarettes and car keys, noticing the wine bottles on the floor beside his bed – one drained, the other with only a glass-full remaining.

Downstairs, the bins are being wheeled out, the homeless are emerging from their heavy sleep, beginning their weekly rounds. In a few minutes the landlady will appear. Already there is movement in the guard shed: the light is on, there is a faint voice coming from the radio.

His car churns before it starts. He listens carefully to the noise, tempted to leave the vehicle, to retire back to his rooms, to crawl into bed. And yet, what would be the point? He would not find sleep. Instead, he turns the key again, hearing the starter coils grind, the sound echoing through the basement. He tries again, and again. Finally, the spark catches, the engine starts.

*

It is the cusp of dawn, he is still shaky from last night's wine. He hitches his collar up against the cold. Behind him is his car, a dark sullen shape, its windows reflecting the far-off mountains of the Kogelberg. Ahead is the stretch of white sand, tossed up by gusts of wind, stinging his face, his neck, his calves. There are scatterings of sea bamboo, fragments of shells, pieces of wood and small stones, spat out by the force of the waves, destroyed.

On the rock he watches the waves breaking further and further away, withdrawing, leaving foam in the outcrop's crevices. In time, the waves will return, calmer, gentler, and they will sweep away the debris now littering the sand. Or, perhaps, the wind will slowly accumulate, patiently covering up the dried out rubbish. Nothing will be left – only the whiteness of the sand, the relentless bawl of waves. *In time, this too shall pass.*

The dawn breaks wanly, muted by a thin veil of cloud. Soon however, the veil lifts, the wind begins to lull. Looking up he sees the brilliant sand stretching out before him; and there, at the edge of sight, only a lump at the water's margin, he notes a more defined shape being rocked by the motion of the surf. As he walks towards it, it takes shape – first an arm, then a leg. It is naked, bloated. Gulls scatter at his approach, squawking loudly, alighting a few feet away. The stench is sickening – it will be worse in the heat. Just then, a wave turns the face towards him, revealing the profile. His heart sinks: it is the boy.

Pulling his jacket up over his mouth, James steps up to him, turns him over, his gaze met by the open, lifeless eye. Salt clings to the patches on his skin, giving him a scaly, fish-like appearance. The necklace is not there. He runs a finger over the collar, feeling for the impression left by it. There are tiny indentations still on the skin. He combs the surrounding area, each time scattering the gulls around him. But the heirloom is nowhere.

Far in the background is his car. It is still there, safe. But sooner or later it will be noticed. Lingering is not wise. Nevertheless, he drags the boy up the ridge, to the compact soil beyond its crest. He cannot leave the boy. He begins to dig a grave, using his hands at first, then fetching a piece of wood from the beach. It is an arduous task, made worse by the sand whipped up from behind, collecting on his moist skin, in his ears, his mouth. The boy watches him while he digs, his dead eye staring. When James is finished, he rolls the boy into the hole, burying him with white soil.

He looks at the grave – it is not much, but it will do. No headstone, no flowers. Far out in front, Khayelitsha is swarming with people, little dots among the sheet iron houses. Is the girl among them, he wonders? Is there still hope for her? As he turns again toward the beach, a sudden flurry kicks up the fine sand, swirling it around him; for a moment he can see nothing but its whiteness, he can taste nothing but its saltiness, hear only is whirr. As it subsides he is confronted by the long walk back to the parking lot. He is tired, ever so tired. In the end, it would not matter if he were to fall, were to be covered by the same soil, to let the abrasion of wind and sand slowly pick the flesh from his bones, bleaching them, dissolving them into sand.

Steadily, he makes his way back to the car, still compressing, every now and then, the eyeball that aches because of last night's wine. Drawing nearer, he passes two men, poor and weather-beaten. They hardly notice him. He feels for his keys, unlocks his door, deactivates the alarm; he turns the key, lets the engine idle, then drives towards the city, towards Cape Town.