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# The Avocado Pear Tree

Bonita Case

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Bonita Case

## Synopsis

For twenty years Elsie September has refused to visit her uncle, Hannie, a state patient at Valkenberg mental hospital. At her grandmother's insistence, she almost goes to see him one day, but she only gets as far as the building and cannot bring herself to go inside. Instead, she meets Shaun and, as a relationship develops, Elsie begins to tell him the stories of her childhood. But Elsie's relationship with Shaun is troubled and unbalanced. Before Elsie reaches the point in her narrative where she will explain why she refuses to see her uncle, she and Shaun part acrimoniously and he disappears. Elsie has, by now, become so caught up in the telling of her story that not even Shaun's disappearance can stop her from going back to the day her world changed beneath the sheltering arms of the avocado pear tree.

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## Chapter 1

The shrill, insistent telephone wakes me. My throbbing head and mouth that feels like it was scoured by sandpaper make me curse all those bottles of wine I drank last night and vow never to touch the stuff again. “Hello,” I mumble into the mouthpiece.

“Elsie?”

“Yes, Gran?” I reply, squinting at the digits on the alarm clock.

“Elsie, I’m ready. You are still going to take me, aren’t you.”

“Oh ... sure Gran,” I say, trying to figure out where exactly it is that I’m supposed to take her. “I’ll be there as soon as I can. I just need to get showered and dressed.”

“Thanks, Elsie,” she says, “Uncle Hannie will be so glad to see you.”

Oh, shit. I forgot about that, now I’ll have to go. Unless, unless ... “I’ll see you in an hour, then,” says Gran, very optimistically.

“Okay, Gran.”

“And don’t be late.” she adds, before saying goodbye. *Why* do I get myself into these situations? I gaze longingly at my bed. Before I can indulge in anymore self-pity, I run into the bathroom and throw up the remains of last night’s wine.

So an hour and a couple of Panados later I park outside Granny’s house. The bright yellow daisies and sickly sweet jasmine spilling wildly over the fence contrast sharply with the dark, sulky house. Granny’s garden has always been her pride, but now I see that weeds are trying to displace her neat rows of dahlias and roses. I turn the door handle and the door opens. I wish that she would learn to lock the front door, it’s bad enough that she refuses to have burglar bars or an alarm system installed. Granny stands at the sink, washing the dishes and humming to herself. ‘Where the boys are’, it’s a song she’d always sing when she was in a good mood.

“Hello Gran.” I say, and she turns around and wipes her hands on a dishcloth.

“Elsie, you’ve made it.” Granny says brightly. “Well, we still have a little time left. Do you want a cup of tea before we go?”

“Coffee please. I’ll make it.”

“No, no: you sit down.” Granny puts the kettle on and takes the faded, rose patterned cups from the dresser. The kitchen looks gloomy today, the damp marks stare accusingly from the wall. The linoleum was once yellow but now it is brown and worn in places.

Granny places a cup of coffee before me, sits down in her 'chair, at the head of the table, and lights a cigarette. She inhales and the smoke brings on a fit of coughing. "You should try to stop smoking," I say.

"You're a fine one to talk!" she says, holding the packet out towards me hoping that I will take one to confirm her point, but I shake my head in refusal. "And anyway, why should I stop smoking at my age and with one foot already in the grave? Don't worry about me, you should worry about yourself, my girl. Why are you getting so thin? You should eat more and drink less coffee."

Outside the kitchen door, a fat, ginger cat lies curled into a tight ball in the fading afternoon sun. "New cat, Gran?"

"No, not really," she replies. "Whenever I feed the dogs, all these stray cats come and eat as well. You should see how many cats there are in the yard now, there's that ginger, a black tom, one black and white and two black and greys ... I saw your article in the paper about the gangs," says Granny, changing the subject. "You must be careful, my girl. I worry about you. Going into dangerous areas like Manenberg and writing about gangsters is asking for trouble, especially for such a pretty girl like you."

"Oh, Gran," I reply, "Those guys don't hassle me. I never go alone; I always have a photographer with me. And in any case, I'm no Cindy Crawford."

“Nonsense!” snorts Granny. “If you would just take a little care with your appearance. Wear some make-up, have contact lenses instead of those dreadful spectacles. Buy some nice clothes, have a good haircut. You will soon have plenty of men knocking at your door.”

When I still lived with Granny, she found fault with every single guy who made the trek from the front door to settle in front of the television in the back room, squashed between the two of us. But things have changed now. I’m approaching thirty and she worries that I’m still on the shelf. I’m almost past my sell-by date.

“You should try to get out of newspaper reporting. It is too dangerous, look at what happened to that journalist in that township up in KwaZulu. You know what you should rather do? You should write a book about our family history. I am getting old and I won’t be around for much longer, so you should do it while I can still help you, tell you all the stories. People should know about what those damned Nats did to us, how they destroyed my family. I can’t believe that they think that they can just turn around, put a new guy in charge and add “new” to their name: A New National Party for the New South Africa. And people fall for that? I just hope that they don’t win in the Western Cape again. And if you write about what they did to people like us, it will help all those idiots voting for them to remember that they destroyed their lives as well.”

This is Gran’s favourite tirade – what the Nats did to her family. Gran is one of six children, three brothers and three sisters. The three eldest children were very fair, the

three youngest very dark. When the apartheid government started making all their laws, bringing in the Group Areas, Bantu Education, Job Reservation and all the rest, Granny's siblings realised that they had to act quickly. So the three fair-skinned ones had themselves reclassified and the two darker ones emigrated. Granny's the only one who stayed behind as a coloured person and had to put up with all the bullshit and second class citizen stuff. When exactly did Gran's siblings desert her? Late sixties, early seventies – I'm not sure. But one thing I can be sure of is this – my grandmother certainly knows how to bear a grudge. Not that she blames her brothers and sisters entirely though, it's always the Nats. Nelson Mandela was locked away for twenty-seven years and even he's tried to get over it. But not Gran, she treasures her wounds from the past. Instead of letting them heal, she worries away at them until they become infected and full of pus. And now she wants to proudly display her stinking, festering wounds to the world – as if anyone else will find it all as fascinating as she does. Like anyone else wants to know about how she had to see her sister at Plumstead station every morning and every afternoon and watch the conductor tip his hat to Lizzie. “Good morning, Miss September,” she'd illustrate with a tip of her imaginary hat. How she had to walk past her sister, sitting on the whites only bench, right down to the bottom of the station where there were no benches for her to sit on. And when she walked by, both her sister and the conductor would look the other way, so that they would not have to deal with the fact that Gran was just a darker impression of Lizzie. How she couldn't drink water from the tap or use the toilet on the station, but Lizzie could. On and on she'd go, so many times she would tell me those stories that I know them all by heart.

“People don’t want to know about that kind of thing, Gran. They want to forget about the past and pretend that we are all in one of those Rainbow Nation Castle Lager adverts. And anyway, this is something you want, they’re your stories, so why don’t you write a book?”

Granny looks forlornly down into her teacup and I flush with shame. “Look,” I say in a softer voice, “You’ve been talking about this for ages. Why don’t you write your stories down and I will type them for you? I’ll even find out about publishers we can send them to.”

“You know how bad my handwriting is,” replies Granny sullenly. “That reminds me, I have a birthday card that I want to send to Uncle Danny. You must write it out for me, but you can do that when we get back. We mustn’t keep Hannie waiting. He will be so happy to see you again, after all this time.”

Sighing, I rise and put my coffee cup in the sink. “Sure, Gran,” I say, reluctantly. “Let’s go.”

Granny chatters non-stop in the car. I listen to her voice and barely hear what she is saying. “I don’t know what I’ll do if they close that hospital. I am getting old; I won’t manage to look after Hannie by myself. Anyway, that place has become his home. I mean he’s lived there for what? Twenty years? And he’s happy there. I don’t think he’d be able to cope if they close the place down. Well, it seems as though we have found a way to

keep it open in the meantime, but I don't know for how much longer. We still need a lot more money. I don't know what is wrong with people these days. They will get all fired up about saving the elephants and saving the seals, but when it comes to helping other people, helping their own kind, they are not interested. Ag, well, that's people for you ... Anyway, I am so glad that you've finally agreed to visit your uncle. You haven't seen him in all these years. I suppose I should have just made you to visit when you were still a child. Then maybe you would have forgiven him by now. You know what I always say, you can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family. And blood is thicker than water. When I am gone, Hannie will be the only family that you have left, so you have to at least try to make peace with him."

It's only when we pass the Liesbeek River and I see the dirty yellow buildings beyond it that I begin to feel ill. The guard at the gate barely notices us as we drive through. He looks up from his newspaper and waves lethargically, as though he's waving away an irritating fly. No wonder they have so many people escaping. Although, I suppose, its logical that the guard would be more concerned about people leaving than people coming in. The different wards are divided into separate houses. If I didn't know any better, I'd say that this was one of those new security complexes that are sprouting everywhere. Except that these houses are obviously not new and are spaced quite far apart. Granny directs me to Ward G, a worn looking building leaning against an incline. I park the car and Granny winds up her window and swipes bright pink lipstick across her lips. The colour does not suit her at all. "Well, come along then," she says brightly.

“You go ahead, Gran. I’m not feeling so good. I’ll just sit here for a bit.” Granny looks disappointed, but she shrugs, slams the door and heads up the steps. The car quickly becomes too hot, so I migrate to the shade of a palm tree and light a cigarette.

The first thing I notice is the pair of boots that have innocently appeared before me. A pair of scuffed, brown hiking boots with brown and black laces threaded through them. Sensible shoes for going on a hike, but not the kind of shoes you want to be wearing on a warm November day. But they are interesting shoes, about a size ten, I’d say, and not the kind of shoes you see people wearing in these days of Reeboks, Nikes, Adidas and Cats. Fraying denim surrounds the boots. The jeans look like they are the wearer’s favourite pair, the kind of jeans that you can’t buy in a shop. The kind that you have to wear for months and wash over and over again until they grow on you. Until they feel just right.

Then the voice speaks, “Do you mind if I join you?” I squint up into the sun and see that the jeans go up quite a long way, and then there’s a white and black shirt untidily hanging out and a white coat, the kind doctors wear, over it. I can’t see the face clearly because I am staring into the sun. All I can make out are the longish brown curls, (Gran would say they need to be cut) brown eyes and white teeth that either genuinely dazzle or more likely appear to dazzle because of the sun. He doesn’t wait for me to answer: he simply sits down and leans back into the trunk of my tree, claiming half of it for himself.

I am mildly outraged at the invasion of my privacy, but yet, I am somewhat impressed by his audacity. In spite of what I do for a living, when I am not working, I would never

have the nerve to approach total strangers. I am one of those people who could be stuck in a lift or something with one other person and would only just nod when the other person remarked on what a fuck up it was. Not that I have ever been stuck in a lift though. I don't even know anyone who has been stuck in a lift. I guess that kind of thing only happens on TV. What I do see are children getting stuck in washing machines, old, abandoned fridges and usually those stories don't end up very happily. That's why I could never see myself having children – you'd have to watch them all the time so that someone doesn't try to harm them, and then you'd also have to watch that they don't harm themselves. But why am I thinking of this now when there's a wearer of interesting hiking boots sitting next to me, smelling of just soap and nothing else?

“Can I have one of your cigarettes?” I shake one loose and offer him the packet. I notice that his fingernails are short. Granny always says that when you meet anyone, look at their fingernails and you can tell whether they are the kind of person you want to know or not. This is a very bad theory of course. Most of the low-lives I have come across also have clean, neat fingernails. But these nails are too short and look like they have been bitten. “Can I have a light?” he asks, holding his cigarette in his mouth with one nail-bitten hand, and cupping the other around the flame I'm holding as if there were any wind at the moment that would threaten to blow it out. He exhales a stream of smoke and leans back again.

“I'm Shaun,” he says.

“Elsie,” I say reluctantly.

“Come here much?” he asks, as if we were meeting in a bar or a club instead of at Valkenberg, home to the mildly disturbed, the seriously disturbed, even the criminally disturbed and, of course, my Uncle Hannie.

“No.”

“Inmate or visitor?” he laughs at his own stupid joke. “Ah, I take it visitor. If you were an inmate I would have met you before.”

“And you?”

“Inmate.”

“Really?” I say, briefly letting the alarm register on my face before forcing it away.

“No, no, I’m only joking,” he says. “I work here, I’m a psychiatric nurse.”

“You look too young to be working here.” He does look very young, his skin is clear and unlined and he doesn’t look as exhausted or troubled as you would expect someone to look in a place like this. A place that is threatened with closure all the time, a place that never has enough money to maintain its shabby operation, never mind even thinking

about improving it. If I worked here, I would certainly not look so relaxed and unconcerned.

“Ah, I take that as a compliment,” he says, although it wasn’t intended as one.

I just give him a look and say nothing. We sit in silence for a while and I notice that I no longer have a headache. It is an impossibly beautiful day, and quite hot even though it’s only November. This place looks so sleepy and peaceful that you would never guess that it’s a state-run mental hospital. All the other hospitals run by the state are gloomy and depressing. Every time I have to go to Groote Schuur or Victoria Hospital, I thank God for Medical Aid.

“So who are you visiting ... your husband, boyfriend?”

So he’s trying to pick me up in a place like this? And he can be what, twenty-two or twenty-three at most? He’s certainly not my type anyway. The guys I get involved with are mostly quite a bit older than me and the more sadistic the better. I can safely say that I have not been involved with anyone who hasn’t turned out to be a complete bastard.

“No, my uncle,” I say.

“So what do you do?”

“I write for a newspaper.”

“That sounds interesting. What are you going to do after this? Would you like to go for a cup of coffee or a drink?”

“No thanks,” I say and before he can say anything else, Granny emerges from the building behind us. She looms over us and glares at me with her arms crossed over her breasts. “Elsie, Hannie is waiting to see you,” she says. “He’s very excited. Come on!” I look around me, desperate for a way out. Not finding one, I have to turn around and see her anger changing to disappointment.

“I’m just not up to it right now,” I plead.

“Oh, well,” she says, shrugging her shoulders. “You obviously have better things to do,” she can’t resist adding, before stomping off back inside.

“Looks like you’re in trouble,” says Shaun. “Don’t you think you’d better go inside and say hello?”

“Excuse me? I’ve only just met you and already you’re telling me what I should do?”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that I see these guys every day. I know how excited they get on the rare occasion that someone comes to see them. Their families put them in here so that they can forget about them.”

“I wish that it were that easy. I haven’t seen my uncle since I was a child, but I haven’t forgotten a thing.”

## Forceps

“All of us have angels, Elsie,” says Mother. “They are always watching over you to make sure that nothing ever harms you. That is why you never have to be afraid because you know that they are always there. I saw your angels just after you were born. I was in labour for three whole days,” she carefully emphasises each word. “For three whole days I was in agony. And the doctor said, ‘Look, I don’t think that this baby wants to come out on its own, we are going to have to give it some help with these.’ He held up two giant steel spoons and clanked them together. ‘Don’t worry, I am just going to pull the baby out with these forceps. You both won’t feel a thing.’ *Clank, clank*. I was terrified. I heard a loud squelch as he inserted them, but I never felt any pain, probably because of all the drugs they had given me. But I was a bit worried that those horrible steel forceps would crush your head. When he pulled you out I heard a loud scream. I thought, what a pair of lungs you must have to make such a commotion. But then I realised it was me. You never made much noise, you were always a peaceful baby. One of the nurses put you on my breast while the doctor was cutting the cord and you were not even crying. You just stared at me, blinking your eyes. I can’t even begin to explain what I felt then, but one day, when you have children of your own, you will understand what I mean.”

“Gross! I don’t ever want to have babies.”

Mother laughs ominously. “That’s what you say now, my girl. That’s what you say now. So that very night I was lying in the maternity ward, and I was completely alone. There

was only one other woman who had been in the ward with me earlier, but they sent her home. We were both sleeping, me in the bed and you in a cot next to me. Every now and then I would wake up to check if you were okay and then drift back off to sleep. But you were a peaceful baby, you just slept quietly, even when you woke up and needed a feed, you didn't cry. You would just lie there in your cot, blinking in the dark. Anyway, we were both sleeping, but I woke up suddenly because I heard someone laughing. I opened my eyes and there on the window ledge, this little boy was sitting, swinging his legs and laughing. 'What are you doing here?' I asked. 'Who are you? How did you get in here?' But he just laughed and laughed."

"He was a pretty boy, I thought that such a pretty face should have belonged to a girl. But he had naughty eyes. 'I am going to call the sister for you.' I said to him. 'Where is your mother? Do you know it's the middle of the night? You should be in bed.' He was really making me cross, not answering me and just laughing and laughing. 'You are going to wake my baby up!' I said. He was really annoying me and I didn't want him to disturb you. And then he started singing and swinging his feet against the wall. '*Neh-neh-nehneh-na*. Your baby has poison. Your baby is yellow! Yellow like a Chinaman!' Now I was really getting cross. 'There is nothing wrong with my baby! Nothing! I just fed her and put her to sleep and she is happy and perfectly healthy. Anyway, what do you know about babies? You are just a little boy. And I am going to call the sister now because you should not be here at this time of the night.' So I rang the bell and the sister came. 'Sister, what is this little boy doing here? It's the middle of the night and I don't know where he came from.' "

“Are you feeling okay, my dear?” the sister asked. “There is no little boy here, you must have been dreaming. Go back to sleep now.”

“I looked back at the window ledge and there was no one. Then I realised what I had seen – I had seen your angel.”

“And then, Mother? What happened then?” I demand. Although I have heard this story so many times before, I love to hear Mother tell it. “Then I woke up the next morning,” she continues. “And you were very sick. You had yellow jaundice and they had to put you under a light. I was very upset because angels are supposed to look after babies and not cause trouble. And I was cross because I wanted to go home – you know how much I hate hospitals – but I didn’t want to go home without you. So we both had to stay in hospital. After a few days, you were not doing any better and I was really worried. The worst thing that can happen to a new mother is her baby getting sick. I felt so scared and so helpless. The doctor was also beginning to worry because babies are supposed to recover from jaundice quite quickly. So one night I was lying in bed, visiting hour was just over and the nurse came to tell your granny it was time to go. She kissed us both goodbye and I was lying there with you in my arms, waiting for the nurse to come and take you because the jaundice meant that you had to sleep in the nursery instead of next to me. This woman entered the ward and she sat next to me on the bed. I didn’t know who she was. She was very old, her face was lined and she had a long, thick black dress on. Her hair was grey and scraped back in a bun. ‘How are you feeling, my dear?’ she asked me. She seemed to know me so I thought she must be one of my mother’s cousins

or something, but I didn't want to be rude and ask. 'I am fine,' I said, 'But I can't leave the hospital yet because my baby is sick.' ”

“ ‘Can I hold her?’ she asked, and I was a bit worried about letting her hold you because I didn't recognise her, but she seemed so sweet and kindly, so I gave you to her. ‘She is beautiful,’ said the lady. ‘Don't worry about the jaundice, my dear. She will be better by tomorrow.’ Then she kissed you on your forehead and handed you back to me. She stood up and came to stand next to me. ‘You try to get some rest now, my dear. This little girl will give you enough sleepless nights, so you rest while you can.’ She leaned over and stroked my hair back. Her hands were wrinkled and cold, but comforting. Then she leaned over and kissed me on the forehead like she had kissed you and she said goodbye. Just as she walked out the door, the nurse walked in. ‘Nurse,’ I said, ‘Did you pass an old lady on your way in here?’ ‘No,’ said the nurse, ‘There were no old ladies here tonight.’ So later that evening I got out of bed to phone and ask your granny if she knew of an old lady with a grey bun and a black dress who may be related to us. Do you know what she said?”

I shake my head even though I know exactly what Granny said. “Your grandmother said that there are no old ladies like that in our family now, but the woman I described sounds just like her grandmother. I never knew Granny's grandmother; she died long before I was born. There are no photographs of her, so how could I have known what she would look like? And then the next day you were better and the doctors said that we could go home. So Granny's grandmother is your guardian angel. She will always be watching

over you to make sure that the little boy, the naughty angel, doesn't cause too much trouble."

Not just anybody can see angels. Only Mother and Granny can see them. Once I thought I could see them too. I closed my eyes very tight and concentrated hard. When I opened them I saw these floating circles that looked like small rainbows. I thought that they were angels and I ran to ask Mother about them, but she said that they were not.

"Angels look like people," was all that she said.

## Chookoo Train

Mother sits in front of her mirror, carefully applying lipstick. I wish that I had her smooth, delicate skin and her shock of thick black hair. I wish that I was pretty like her and that I was old enough to wear lipstick and perfume. Mother tells me that she is going to look for a job and I have to go to stay with Granny for a few days. She packs some clothes in a big bag for me. "You know how cross Granny gets if you stay over and you don't have enough clothes." she says.

"Why can't you come fetch me in the evenings?" I ask. "Like when you used to work at the factory?"

"Oh, my sweetie." says Mother. "It's just easier this way. But don't worry, I'll come and fetch you on Friday evening. It will only be for a week. And you like going to your granny's place, don't you?"

Granny lives in a big house with creaky floorboards. It's right across the railway station, so you can hear the trains when they go past. When I sleep over at Granny's house, I always wake up early because I can hear the click click of the ladies in their high heels, as they rush to catch the train to take them to work. Granny often tells me about how she used to look after me when I was a baby and Mother was at work. When I was smaller, I was terrified of the chookoo train. A chookoo train is louder than normal trains and they carry coal instead of people. And there is a long, piercing wail that announces the coming

of the chookoo train. Whenever I would hear this wail, I'd run inside crying, "Granny, Granny it's the chookoo train. The chookoo train is coming!" Then Granny would pick me up and wrap me in her pink dressing gown that always smells of Moon Drops and the powder she dabs on her neck and breasts with the soft powder puff. She would hold me tight and rock me and tell me stories until I fall asleep.

When we get to Granny's house, she makes a pot of tea, but I have to drink Oros. Mother lets me drink tea, but Granny says that it is bad for children. They sit on opposite sides of the kitchen table, slowly sipping their tea. Mother tells me to go and play outside, so I take my book, *The Ugly Duckling*, onto the stoep and listlessly turn the pages.

My grandfather bought me this book, he used to sit with me right here on the stoep and help me to read it. But he's dead now. I remember when he died, Mother cried and cried and that was the first and only time I saw her so upset. Sometimes she would lie curled up in bed and the tears would not stop flowing down her face, making me wonder where all that water came from. And then other times she would get angry. "How could you do this to me?" she would scream. "How could you? When I asked you not to; I asked you to promise me!"

A long time afterwards, Mother explained to me about what happened when my grandfather died and then I understood what all that screaming was about. Mother told me that she and her father were sitting up together, like they always did when we slept over at Granny and Grandpa's house. And even though I don't remember much about

Grandpa, I can picture the two of them sitting there together. They would sit in the kitchen, grandfather at the bottom end of the table, his sore, swollen feet, wrapped in the thick grey socks he always wore, propped up on another chair with a pillow underneath them. He would be wearing his black cardigan, the one with the two side pockets that always had sweets or five-cent coins in them. His glasses with the thick black rims would be perched slightly below his eyes, and his face would be prickly because that's how it always was. He has that grandfather smell of Rum and Maple Tobacco and Wilson's Peppermints. Mother sits on the other side of the table, with her back to the kitchen door and Grandfather listens carefully to what she is saying. When Grandfather says something, he says it slowly, like he is taking a long time to think about what he is saying. And if you came in for a glass of water or to go to the toilet, you would feel like you were interrupting something important. But you wouldn't take your time so that you could hear what they were saying, because just the way they talk makes you feel like you'd rather go back to bed where you will warm your feet against Gran's bad legs and listen to her voice until it puts you to sleep.

"We were talking about Grandpa's two friends who had died in that week. Both still in their fifties, both of a heart attack," Mother said. "Suddenly, your grandfather went very quiet. He just stared at me, but I can't explain to you the way he looked, or how quiet it suddenly was that night. He looked sad and sorry and ... I don't know, it's hard to describe. 'Daddy, why are you looking at me like that?' I asked him. But then I got this terrible feeling, like very cold hands with long, hard fingers wrapping themselves around my throat and squeezing until I couldn't breathe. And I just knew why he was looking at

me like that, but I could not believe it, would not accept it. 'You're not going to die, are you, Daddy?' But still he didn't say anything. 'Daddy please, please promise me that you are not going to die. Please promise you won't leave me, Daddy. Please just promise me you are not going to die.' "

"He just looked at me, so sadly like his heart was breaking. And then he said, very quietly, 'How can anyone make a promise like that?' But he must have known that his time was coming; that's why he wouldn't promise at first. I made him promise me, though. I begged and pleaded until finally he said, 'Okay my girl, I promise you that I won't die anytime soon'."

"You know, they say that all living things know when it is their time to go. And just like dogs go off to die alone, my daddy went off to die by himself. That was last time I saw him alive. The next morning he had already left for work by the time I woke up and then we went back to our house. Two days later they phoned your grandmother to tell her that they found your grandfather dead on the bathroom floor at work. People also say that death comes in threes. First Mr Abrahams and Mr Davids, then your grandfather, all of them died of a heart attack and all in the same week. But I really miss my father. He was the best man you could ever meet – caring, generous, patient and understanding – and he simply adored you."

"When I was pregnant with you, your grandmother wanted me to give you up, have you adopted because I was not married, and who would support the baby? Your grandmother

was so cross that I wouldn't do it, she didn't speak to me throughout the pregnancy and of course, I had to move out of the house because what would the neighbours say? But your grandfather came and visited me every week. He always brought me something when he came, fat, juicy mangoes, just ripe avocado pears, salted cashew nuts or sour figs. All the things I craved for when I was pregnant with you. And he said to me, 'Don't worry about your mother. When that baby arrives, she will come around, you'll see. Your mother is a very hard woman, but she has a good heart. And what woman will look at her own grandchild and not love it?' And you know what? He was right. But then, he was always right about things."

I don't remember all that much about my grandfather. Most of what I know about him comes from the things Mother and Granny say. Granny likes to tell me about how pathetic Grandpa was when it came to looking after me when I was a baby. How she would leave me with him and come home to find both of us sitting on the stoep in our vests, me without a nappy because he didn't know how to put another one on after he had taken the dirty one off. And Grandpa and I would be finishing off a whole bunch of bananas because he was too useless to make a bottle and he didn't know what else to feed me.

Uncle Hannie emerges from the house, dragging a chair behind him. Mother says that since they were children, Gran always spoiled Uncle Hannie and that he was her favourite. She says that is why she was her father's favourite. I think Mother is right

about Uncle Hannie and Gran, because Uncle Hannie never gets on Gran's nerves the way I do, even when he does something really stupid.

"Hello, Uncle Hannie," I say. "You know Granny will be cross with you for rocking on that chair. You how she says don't ride on the chair, you will break it."

"Hey you! You speak the language?" he replies.

"What do you mean?"

"You speak the language? You speak the language?" The chair creaks and Uncle Hannie matches its tune. "You speak the language you speak the language you speak the language." He is growing louder and louder. "You speak the language!" He shouts and suddenly his rocking ceases. He looks at me from the corner of his eyes; then he leans over and whispers in my ear. "Put your fingers in your mouth, like this," he demonstrates, putting a finger on either side of his mouth and stretching his lips. I imitate the gesture.

"Now say pocket," he commands. I try to say "pocket", but it comes out as "fuck it".

Uncle Hannie laughs like it is the funniest joke in the world. He continues rocking on the chair even though Granny will be cross and then he begins to hit himself in the face. I am cross with him for tricking me, so I go back inside and sit on the step between the sitting room and the kitchen.

Mother and Granny sound like they are very cross with each other again. “You are so irresponsible!” Granny slaps the table with her hand. “Every time you come to me with your problems and expect me to sort them out. Think about what you are doing to that child! She is the one who will suffer the most!”

“What do you expect me to do?” pleads Mother. “I’ve tried my best but there’s no work for me here.”

“There’s plenty of work here,” says Granny. “Just not the kind of work that will suit your ladyship. You just want to sit around all day and look glamorous.”

“Look, I am trying my best,” says Mother softly. “That’s all I can do.” Then she turns and sees me on the step and I wish that I had stayed outside even if Uncle Hannie is full of nonsense. Mother crouches in front of me and I see that there are tears in her eyes, but before they can fall, she brushes them away with the back of her hand and smiles brightly at me. “Now you be a good girl and behave yourself,” she says. “And help Granny with the housework. I’ll come and fetch you on Friday.” She gets up, takes her bag and walks out of the house, and I follow her down the pathway. She pauses at the gate to turn and wave goodbye. I watch her walk down the road; then she turns the corner and disappears.

Every evening I sit on the stoep while Granny reads *The Argus* and Hannie lies slumped on the couch in his vest and shorts, throwing peanuts up into the air and catching them in his mouth. An ashtray overflows with red peanut shells on the floor next to him. I sit on

the stoep waiting for Mother to come and fetch me, but I know its not Friday yet. Then it is Friday and still she does not come. On Saturday she doesn't come either, nor on Sunday. The days pass and still no sign of my mother. "Granny, when is my mommy coming?" I ask.

"Look," says Granny, "your mother has found a job in Johannesburg. She will come back when she can take some time off."

"But I want my mommy," I cry. The tears stream down my face and I can't make them stop. "Why did my mommy go away and leave me here? I want my mommy!"

"Crying is not going to bring your mother back," says Granny. "Now go and have your bath and then it's off to bed. I'll come and tell you a story if you're a good girl and stop crying."

I lie between the cool sheets and there's still a lump in my throat. The tears fall silently onto my pillow. Granny comes and lies down next to me.

"You know, my mother was a very beautiful woman. In some ways, your mother reminds me a lot of her. My mother also loved being the centre of attention, she loved wearing beautiful clothes and looking glamorous. But you know, she had a hard life, especially with my father. Don't get me wrong, I loved my father very much. But he had a terrible drinking problem and the drinking drove him crazy. You know that we are six children.

The eldest is Uncle Arthur, then Uncle Martin, then Auntie Lizzie, then Auntie Gladdie, then me, and the youngest is Uncle Danny who sends us Christmas cards from England.”

“Now things were never easy for us children because my father couldn’t keep a steady job. And with so many mouths to feed, we were always hungry. We would wait for my father to come home from work in the evenings so that he could give us some money to go to the shop for my mother. She’d send us for a loaf of bread or, if he had worked a full week, some meat and potatoes maybe. But if it started getting dark and my father wasn’t back yet, we all knew that he was out drinking again and then my mother would go to her mother’s house. She was probably also hungry and went there to get something to eat. And then we would sit and wait for my father to come home, and my older brothers would make a fire to keep warm and make us some tea if there was any around.”

“But why didn’t your mother take you and your brothers and sisters with her?”

“Ag, you know, things were different in those days. Her parents would probably have been cross with her for turning up with all of us, they were not very fond of us, you know, I suppose because they didn’t like my father. And anyway, we didn’t blame her because we knew what she was in for if my father came home drunk and she was around.”

“What do you mean? What would happen, Gran?”

“Ag, well, like I said. The drinking would make him crazy and my mother, even though she knew it was better to keep quiet, she would shout at him about wasting the money on liquor while we were starving and then he’d get mad and bugger her up. And then one day, I suppose she got tired of living that kind of life and when it was got dark and my father wasn’t home yet, she left and she never came back. My father went to look for her at her parents’ house, but she wasn’t there. Later on, we heard people *skinnering* about how she had met another man, a white man, a foreigner from where exactly, I’m not sure. Some people said it was Sweden, some said Holland, others even said Belgium, so I don’t know. Apparently he was much older than she was and very rich. He took her back to his country. I don’t think that he wanted to know about her children, you know most men find it hard to accept another man’s children. We were never sure though, if it was true or if it was just what people said. Of course, no one – not my grandparents or my mother’s sisters – would tell us where she was. They probably thought that we would tell our father. But I hope that she had a better life with that man than she did with my father, she certainly deserved it.”

“And what about your father? What did he do? Why didn’t he go and find her?”

“You know, my mother really broke my father’s heart. After she left, he just drank more and more. And when he was drunk he used to cry for her. I would feel so sorry for him then, but I was the only one of all my brothers and sisters who had any time for him. The rest of them just kept out of his way. It didn’t take long after my mother left for him to drink himself to death.”

“So my grandmother and grandfather came and they sent Uncle Arthur, Uncle Martin and Auntie Lizzie to work, even though they were still young, I think Auntie Lizzie was fourteen when she had to go and work. The rest of us they sent to live with family. I went to live in Stellenbosch with my crazy aunties Stella and Magdelene. They were my father’s second cousins and they lived by themselves in this spooky house that their parents had left them. When their mother died, they had to look after their youngest sister, who they called Baby. Anyway, when Auntie Baby was about eight years old, she also died. But my two mad aunties acted like Auntie Baby was still alive. They kept her room so neat and tidy, they even dished up her meals every day and no one could sit in her chair. I was just a child myself, and I hated it. I had to do most of the housework. At first, they wouldn’t let me into Auntie Baby’s room, but after a while it became my job to clean it. The first few times I was scared, but afterwards I didn’t really mind because it didn’t really get dirty – there was no one to dirty it – so it was better than the other jobs I had to do. I only stayed there for a few years, but it nearly drove me crazy. As soon as I was old enough, I got a job cleaning the rooms at St James Hotel in Kalk Bay and they took care of me, gave me a roof over my head and three meals a day.”

“You see,” says Granny. “What I am trying to say is that life is never easy. Everyone has their load to carry. But no matter what happens to you, remember that there are always children who have less than you do.”

## **Bell Bottoms**

After a while, I stopped asking Granny when Mother was coming to fetch me. Whenever I lay in my bed at night, thinking about her and feeling sad, I would tiptoe into Granny's room, in the dark and slip into her bed. And then she would tell me stories until I fell asleep. In the day, I never missed my mother, it was only at night that I pictured her face in my mind and tried to remember how she'd tell jokes and make me laugh, or how she'd play music on her radio and dance across the room. Then one day, Granny said to me, "School is starting soon and I won't be able to take you to your old school in Woodstock every day. So I have given your name in at St Anne's and we can go and buy you a new school uniform at School and Leisure later on."

"But what about when Mother comes back? And what about my friends? I don't want to go to a new school, I like my old one."

"It's just for the time being," says Granny impatiently. "And anyway, you can't just stay out of school until your mother comes back. Besides, you will make new friends and St Anne's is the school your mother went to. I am sure that you will like it there."

When the day finally arrives for me to go to school, I can't help but be excited. I leap out of bed and take my school uniform out of the cupboard. Slowly, savouring the brand new smell of every garment, I dress. I am ready to go to school and Granny is not even up yet.

I creep into her room and shake her lightly on the shoulder. “Granny, Granny, wake up. It’s time to take me to school.”

“Hhmm?” comes the muffled reply. “My God, Elsie,” she says, squinting at her watch. Granny’s watch is not like normal watches that you tie on your arm. Her watch is silver and it hangs from a long chain. It was a present from my grandfather, she told me once.

“You’re a bit early for school,” Granny says. “Give me my gown over there,” she instructs, while taking her false teeth from the glass on the table beside her bed and slipping them into her mouth. “And find my slippers under the bed,” she adds. I follow her as she shuffles to the kitchen, where she stands yawning and rubbing her eyes while she stirs the pot of porridge. Setting the steaming bowl before me, Granny disappears into the bathroom. I sit staring at my Jungle Oats, listening to her splashing, gargling and spitting.

“Come, come, eat up.” Granny says, reappearing at the bathroom door. “You are going to need a lot of energy for school,” she says brusquely as she walks past me and back into her room. I try to force the lumpy porridge down my throat, but my stomach is too jittery for food. Furtively, I slink out by the back door and deposit the stiff porridge into the cat’s bowl. “Shwi-shwi-shwi,” I call the cat, but she stares at the porridge distastefully and walks away haughtily, her tail erect in the air. If Granny sees my porridge here, I am going to be in big trouble. So I pick the bowl up and run over to the wall that separates the house from the field behind it. I clamber to the top of the fence carefully, with the

bowl in one hand, and fling its contents into the tall grass below. Racing back to the kitchen I rinse my porridge bowl carefully and wipe my hands.

“Elsie!” Granny calls out and I almost jump with fright. Has she seen anything? “Come here quickly.” Granny is holding up two outfits, one on either side of her. “Which one do you think I should wear?” They are both pants suits with wide legs, and floppy collars. One is in bright yellow and the other a dark, bottle green.

“The yellow one,” I say. “I like the colour more.” Granny dresses quickly and then stands before the mirror, powdering her cheeks, applying lipstick and eyeliner. Then she tugs at my hair with a brush and ties it first with a bobble and then with the maroon ribbon she bought to match my uniform.

“Let’s go,” she says. “Did you put your lunchbox into your case?” I hurry to fetch it and then we are out of the door, and on our way to school.

I walk carefully across the field, with my eyes glued to the ground because I don’t want to step in mud or anything and mess up my new shoes. As we approach the corner shop, I see Mr Abu standing outside. “Hey Elsie,” he says. “First day of school! You look very nice in your uniform. Wait, I’ve got something for you.” He returns with a shiny red apple. I look up at Granny because I don’t know if she will allow me accept it or not. But she smiles and says, “Say thank you.”

“Thank you Mr Abu!” And we are off again.

We walk through the tall gates, up the steps and in through thick, heavy double doors to find ourselves in a long corridor, flooded with children in maroon. A woman in long, flowing white robes glides up to us and says to Granny, “Hello Mrs September, so nice to see you again. Hello my child,” she says to me, stooping to grasp my hand. “I am Sister Theresa, and who might you be?” Her hand is cool and firm.

“Elsie,” I mumble, trying to hide behind Granny.

“The standard ones are in the hall – through those doors on your right,” Sister Theresa says to Granny. “You can go in with her until they are divided into classes.”

“Thank you, Sister,” says Granny, leading the way to the hall. “Granny,” I whisper, tugging at her arm. “Why did that lady talk so funny?” Granny glares at me and does not answer. I know that the white people speak funny. When Mrs Jones and Mrs Kray come to Granny for a new dress, they sound all squeaky, as though they are talking through their noses. But Sister Theresa’s voice does not sound funny; she sounds like she’s singing instead of speaking.

“But why did she sound like that Granny?”

“She’s not from here, Elsie,” Granny says irritably. “It sounds like she’s from Ireland.”

“Island? What island?”

“Ireland is a country,” says Granny, opening the door and pushing me inside. “Now you better be quiet and behave yourself.”

The hall is full of crying children, clinging to their mothers and begging them not to leave. Must be Sub A’s. I am glad to be older than them and glad that I know what this is all about, so I won’t cry like I did when Mother left me at school for the first time.

Another lady in white stands on a stage, calling out names. As a child’s name is called, he or she has to come forward and join the group standing around in front of the lady.

Finally, my name is called and Granny pushes me forward. “The Sister is going to take you to your class now,” she says. “I’ll come back for you at two o’ clock.” She kisses me goodbye and walks slowly out of the hall.

“Why is your mother so old?” asks a girl with long black plaits and a shiny gold chain with a cross. “Yes,” hisses another girl, “And doesn’t she know that bell bottoms went out of fashion years ago?” she rolls her eyes and shakes her head.

For the first time I see Granny the way other people see her. I cringe at her bad legs that make her walk too slowly, her unfashionable clothes, her red lips and dangling earrings. Looking about the hall, I see some of the other mothers, wearing sensible dresses and neatly tied back hair. “That was not my mother,” I say. “My mother couldn’t bring me because she is too busy with her job. That was the servant who looks after me.”

## Peagats

The school bell rings and after we stand and say, "Good afternoon, Sister Theresa," we file out of the classroom. The corridors inside the school are so cool and dark that I have to blink my eyes when I walk into the sunshine. And then I see Uncle Hannie leaning against the school gate. Oh no. The blood rushes to my cheeks. Usually Granny comes to fetch me but once before when she was too busy to come, she sent Uncle Hannie instead. It was terrible because the next day, all the children in my class made fun of me. "Was that your father who came to fetch you yesterday?" sneered Mary-Agnes. "He looks like he belongs in Valkenberg. My mother said that he is an idiot. It's the drinking, she said, it's eaten away his brain."

"He is not my father, he is my uncle," I said quietly, my head hanging in shame. "And he is not an idiot." But Mary-Agnes's words were like bee stings, and what really hurt me was that I so badly wanted her to be my friend.

Mary-Agnes is perfect; even if you never saw her, you could tell by her name that she is special. Mary-Agnes, Mary-Agnes Michaels, dramatic and sophisticated, not plain like Elsie September. Just Elsie, it's not even short for something. Mary-Agnes Michaels sits next to me in class, glossy black hair shining, skin pale and luminous. A dainty gold cross hangs around her neck and ever since I saw it on the first day of school I have wished and wished for one just like that, but I know that it is completely and utterly out of my reach. During intervals, the other girls crowd around her but when I tried to join in, they ignored

me. So I began to play with some boys in my class, André, Wayne and Luke. We played Peagats, where the girls must chase after the boys and if you catch one of them, and shout “Peagats!” then he is supposed to help you catch the rest. It did not take me long to realise how unfair this game was, for I was the only girl playing and it seemed like all the boys in my class had joined in the game. And then, when it seems like the boy I am after is getting tired and I feel like soon I will be able to reach out and grab his shirt, he darts into the boys’ toilets and there is nothing I can do about. Still, I play Peagats every interval because at least it gives me something to do instead of hanging around Mary-Agnes and wishing that she would ask me to join her and the girls. After interval, grubby and sweaty with scabs on my knees from all the falls I have had, I go and sit next to cool and neat Mary-Agnes. “Yuck,” she says scornfully, pulling up her delicate nose. “How can you play with *boys*?”

Uncle Hannie looks so stupid standing there, wearing that dark blue shiny suit he wears whenever he goes out, even if it stinks like sweat, with a white shirt underneath and buttoned up to his throat. I know that even though it is really warm today, he will have a vest on underneath that shirt and jacket. Uncle Hannie’s hair is parted in that silly side path, combed down flat on his head and kept in place with a good measure of his pungent hair oil. I can see his black comb sticking out of his shirt pocket so that he can take it out wherever he is and comb his hair whenever he feels like it – whether there are other people around or not. The flat hairstyle makes his large ears stand out even more. Uncle Hannie smiles at me widely revealing deep lines on the sides of his mouth. He waves his hand at me and shouts excitedly, “Elsie, over here!”

I rush up to him and say, "Come on Uncle Hannie, let's go." Uncle Hannie picks up my school case and carries it in one hand. Smiling, he takes my hand with his free one and although I squirm because of the many pairs of eyes on me, I do not remove it from his sweaty palm. We walk through the school gates and start up the road. I can hear the whispers of the other children. "There goes Elsie with that mad man," they say to one another and to their normal mothers and older brothers and sisters who have come to fetch them.

Hannie suddenly lets go of my hand and turns around. Flinging my school case to the ground, he unzips his pants and takes out his privates, which he points at the children in my class and aims a long jet of pee, which sprays some of them. "Uncle Hannie, what are you doing? Stop it! Stop it!" I shout, but he does not stop, he begins to laugh. Some girls manage to scream and run away, but other children are less lucky. Colin and Marissa have moved away too late and have been splattered with Uncle Hannie's strong-smelling pee. Marissa can't stop screaming, "Aaah, aaah, he peed on me!" Colin just looks stunned, standing there and staring at Hannie with complete incomprehension. At last the arc of golden pee trickles to a stop and Uncle Hannie shakes his privates to get rid of the last drops. One of the mothers who had been walking behind us rushes up to Uncle Hannie and begins to hit him on the head with her handbag. Uncle Hannie tries to cover his head with his arms, but he does not stop laughing.

"Disgusting, drunken retard!" the woman shouts furiously. "Have you got nothing better to do than frighten little girls? They must lock you up and throw away the key!"

I wish that God would strike me dead, because I would rather die than live with the shame. Hot tears begin to fall down my face and I run and run until I turn the corner into my road. Only now, when I start walking so that the fire in my chest begins to subside, do I realise that I have left my school case behind. I can't believe that Hannie could do such a shameful and disgusting thing. In my mind's eye, I see him again, his privates dark and purple-black, his hand around it, the spray of golden pee. I had not realised that boy privates are so different from girl privates. What he did is a great sin, I know, because your privates are sinful and must always be hidden away.

Flinging open the front door, I stalk angrily into the kitchen. Granny, busy wiping the kitchen table, looks up in surprise. "Uncle Hannie is a damn retard!" Before I can say any more, Granny has flashed over to me and slapped the dishcloth across my mouth. I stare at her angrily, my chest still heaving, my nostrils flaring. I was not quick enough to close my mouth and now I taste the dirty dishwater.

"I don't ever want to hear you talking about your uncle like that. Do you understand me? There is nothing wrong with him! Nothing!"

I stare at the dirty dishcloth, quivering in Granny's hand. My mouth burns but even though I feel the pinpricks behind my eyes I will not cry. "I hate you and I hate your retarded son!" I hiss. "You don't even know what he did. He took his privates out and peed on the children in my class!" Before she can say any more, I race out of the back

door, to the mulberry tree. If I climb up far enough, both Granny and Hannie won't be able to find me.

Now the tears fall freely down my face. I have never been so humiliated in my entire life. I will never go back to school again. How can I? I wish my mother would come and take me back home where I belong. I want a normal family like all the other children at school.

Granny comes and stands underneath the mulberry tree. She squints up, but I do not think that she can see me. I keep very still. "Elsie," she calls. "Elsie, please come down. I am sorry that I smacked you. I didn't realise what Hannie did. I promise I will never send him to fetch you from school again. Elsie, come down so that we can talk about it." A gust of wind whistles through the leaves and sends fat black mulberries flurrying down to the ground below.

## Chapter 2

I close the door behind me, deactivate the alarm and sink down to the floor. The beige carpet has some ugly stains I had not noticed before and I make a mental note to hire one of those carpet shampooers, but not soon for I don't have the energy. Maybe I'll get around to it some time this weekend. The silence of the flat weighs down on me, and for a moment, I regret having moved out of the house I shared with the kleptomaniac and the pervert who always found some excuse to be outside the bathroom window whenever I was taking a bath. But hey, at least they were company.

I open one of the envelopes that I brought in from the letterbox. Another reminder for another account that is way overdue. I won't even bother to open the rest. My life really sucks. I work my arse off just so that I can hand my money over to anonymous women with impeccable makeup and impatient attitudes who can barely manage to say, "Thank you and have a nice day". And even still, I never have enough money to pay everything that has to be paid. Every month I have to work out which bills to pay and which to skip. Cape Town is really an ugly, crappy place. My face feels sticky from all the pollution – every time I do my cleanser, toner, moisturiser routine, you wouldn't believe the black grime that comes off onto the cotton wool. And after all those burglaries and the mugging, I think I need to go somewhere where I won't feel like bashing in the skull of the next person who approaches me in the street. I really should join the hordes of people rushing to leave the country. Maybe go and visit Alison, Uncle Danny's granddaughter. Alison came over last year because she needed to "see where she comes from". She was

quite fun to have around and I didn't even mind sharing my place with her. She said that she'd love a chance to return the favour and I could earn some pounds. Who knows? Maybe I'll even get lucky. God, I don't remember when last I had a good fuck! Every now and then, I have to slide my finger up and down my vagina just to remind myself of what it feels like to be touched there.

It is only the overwhelming desire for a drink that makes me drag myself up from the floor. I pour myself a vodka and orange juice and worry that my job is turning me into an alcoholic. Drinking alone is surely a sign, isn't it? Well, it's cheaper than therapy. Most of my friends at work are in therapy – because of all the shit we see, management strongly encourages it. Sue has been hassling me to find a shrink of my own ever since I started at the paper. Just my luck to be placed opposite her and just my luck too that in spite of the incredibly high staff turnover, the two of us are still sitting opposite each other after five long years. Sue has been seeing shrinks all her life, even when she was a child. Can you imagine that? Going every single week without fail to talk to some asshole who couldn't care less. I can just imagine her sitting in the comfortable, low chair, working herself up over her silly problems while the asshole wonders why there are so many fuck-ups about and whether or not a new driver will improve his golf game.

I don't know anyone more self-involved than Sue. I mean, the problems that she has are not that great or even that interesting. She had a stable, comfortable life with her rich parents in Houghton. Then, bored or in a rebellious mood, she became involved with

Scorpio (obviously a name he's given himself), a Rastafarian, musician and serious drug addict. Needless to say, Sue's parents were decidedly unimpressed.

"You see," Sue would explain over and over again when we first started working together, "they had only dealt with people like *him* as their hired help, so they certainly could not deal with the concept of him sleeping with their daughter." By people like him, Sue means people like me and this is something that has always made me uneasy about our friendship. She expects me to be sympathetic to Scorpio and outraged by her parents' racism whereas I have heard enough about Scorpio and spent enough time with him to understand why her parents reacted in the way that they did.

Sue's parents tried to keep her from seeing Scorpio, so she packed her bags and followed him down to Cape Town, where she realised that she was pregnant (Rastas don't believe in contraception). Having heard the happy news, Scorpio promptly disappeared, leaving Sue alone in a strange place with no money and no one to turn to. She called her parents and they refused to help, even worse, they refused to even see their grandchild for the first three years of Skye's life. (Yes, Sue's child is called Skye Blue and with a name like that, she'll need a shrink of her own one day. The poor child will be starting school next year where her classmates will no doubt tease her mercilessly.)

Anyway, everything worked out fine for Sue. Skye is the kind of little girl that most people adore – quiet, pretty, no trouble at all – she now has Sue's parents wrapped around her little finger. And Sue has a career, a comfortable home and whenever Scorpio pops

up in her life again she must see how much better off she is without him, so why she needs the shrinks, the psychics and the *sangomas* I don't know.

It is not as if I have never given therapy a chance, even if it was just to get Sue off my back for a while. I have had a first consultation with no less than four different shrinks. The first time was when Gran made me go when I was still a child. It was just after what happened. I guess she was really worried that I'd lose it or something. Or maybe she really believed that it would help. That shrink was a joke though – a fat woman with short, blonde hair, loose sweater, baggy pants and working in an office with toys scattered all over the place. She tried everything she could to make me say something, but I wouldn't say a word – would not even open my mouth. I was very proud of that, I remember. I have never felt as powerful in all my life as I did that day, sitting there on that brown leather couch, all of ten years old and making a grown woman get red in the face, her voice going higher and higher and tears forming in her eyes just because I would not speak.

The other three I saw because of Sue's badgering were no better than the first. They were all so similar, with their rooms carefully decorated to convey a sense of safety, the quietly tasteful pictures, the low chairs, the strategically but discreetly placed box of tissues on a small coffee table with the little bin next to it. Each time I would glance at the tissues and the bin and think, *ja* right – like I am going to need that!

What I cannot figure out about those shrinks though is why they became therapists in the first place. I mean, they looked like nervous wrecks. I am serious – with their barely contained nervous energy, their shifty eyes and their furiously scribbling hands – they were entirely disturbing. The older guy wasn't too bad though – Larry Goldberg – he just looked impatient and kept sneaking glances at the clock. But the other two, Tracey Foyle and Janet Darcy – they looked so distressed that I felt as if I should pat them on the shoulder and say that everything was going to be okay.

All of them wanted to know about my childhood and that is the part that I disagree with entirely. It is absolute bullshit, the theory that you need to dredge up the past to explain why the present is fucked up. Yes, it is very seductive and convenient idea – I am not responsible for the way I am, it is my mother's fault, Uncle Hannie's fault and whoever else did me wrong when I was a child. But I would rather believe that apart from the biological stuff, I am entirely my own creation. And obsessing about the past means that you do not have to deal with the immediate problems. I'd rather not be trapped in the spider webs of the past. As Granny always says, it's better to let sleeping dogs lie and it's no use crying over spilt milk.

I swallow the last of my drink and pour myself another. I hear a knock at the door, but I try to ignore it – I'm not expecting anyone so it can only be *bergies* looking for food or money or both. It's so irritating – as soon as I get home they start. “*Fyfrant merrem? Stukkie brood merrem?*” And even if you do give them something – which I try not to do because it means they'll keep coming back – they're never satisfied. I wish that our

useless body corporate would go ahead and have a security system installed. At least that would keep the *bergies* from my door. But no, they have to call endless meetings to discuss it. The knocking persists so I go to the front door and peer through the peephole.

You could say that Shaun, the guy I met that day I almost visited Uncle Hannie, would be the very last person I would have expected to see on my doorstep. And you would be right. I had not seen or thought about him since that day, yet there he is, carefully and casually posed with one foot against the wall (which will no doubt leave a dirty mark). I open the door and he looks at me expectantly, exhaling a stream of smoke and thoughtlessly flicking the cigarette butt away. He stares at me, but he doesn't say a word. This is all so over the top, it could be a scene in a really cheesy movie. "What are you doing here?"

"Is this how you always greet your visitors? Aren't you going to invite me inside?"

"No, this is the way I greet uninvited and unannounced strangers who just turn up and then expect me to invite them in."

"So that's how it is now? You are willing to bare your soul to me, but not to let me into your home? Now you want to call me a stranger?"

"How did you find out where I live?"

“Invite me in and I’ll tell you all about it.”

“No way! For all I know, you could be a serial killer.”

“Does this look like the face of a serial killer?” he asks, batting his eyelids and trying to look the picture of innocence.

“Does anyone look like a serial killer?” This guy is obviously a maniacal stalker and I definitely should send him away, but I find myself unlocking the security gate and letting him in. I lead him into the lounge and he sits awkwardly on the couch, like he is afraid that if he relaxes, it will give way underneath him.

“So, how did you find out where I live?”

“I am really thirsty. Aren’t you going to offer me something to drink first?”

“What would you like?”

“You have any beer?”

Rummaging in my fridge for the one beer that’s been there for a good few months gives me the chance to have second thoughts about how insane this is, letting a stranger/stalker/murderer into my house. I know nothing about this guy – I mean, I met

him in a mental hospital for heaven`s sake! But I banish these thoughts from my mind, gulp down my vodka and pour myself another before I open the beer and go back into the lounge. He looks less awkward now that he has something to do with his hands.

“So Shaun, what are you doing here? What have you come here for?”

“I came to give you something,” he says softly.

“What?”

“This.”

He eases himself off the couch and kneels before me and before I can take it all in, he has pushed my skirt up, removed my panties and buried his head between my legs. It`s such a shock and it`s been such a long, long time, that it takes a few moments for me to even think about the fact that this is probably not such a good idea. I think about telling him to stop, really I do, but then maybe I`ll just wait and see if he going to get to my breasts because there`s no way I`ll come without him squeezing my nipples. Or maybe I will come anyway because it feels like with every flicker of his tongue, he is bringing life back into my dead body. It takes him a few moments, but then there`s his hand reaching up into my shirt, underneath my bra. First the one hand and then the other. I know that it`s probably not a good idea to let a relative stranger into your home and then let him give you a blow job, but it`s too late to object because now I can only watch what he is

doing and wait just a little bit longer, just a little bit, because I know that soon it's going to get to that point where I will stop thinking at all and if the phone rang or there was a knock at the door or even if the roof fell on my head or if a fire started burning the place down, its flames licking my curtains, climbing up my walls, becoming so hot that it's unbearable. I would do absolutely nothing, nothing at all, except lie back and watch.

Afterwards, Shaun gets up and rummages in his jeans pocket for a packet of cigarettes. He removes a very thick joint from his packet and lights it without bothering to ask me if it's okay. I try not to think about the smell that will linger in my place for a while or about what's just happened. Instead, when he holds the smouldering joint before my mouth I carefully put my lips to it, inhale deeply and exhale with my eyes closed.

"So," Shaun says, pulling my head back onto his chest, "You never finished telling me why you won't go and see your uncle."

"It seems to me that I've told you enough already," I say. "Who knows what you will think you're entitled to if I tell you anything else." He looks a bit offended at this, so I try to make amends by adding, "Anyway, it's a long story and I don't really feel like talking about it."

"Tell me something else, then," he says. "Tell me whatever you want."

## **Dirty Washing**

When I lived with my mother, she never made me do any work. All I had to do was put my dirty clothing in the washing basket and not on the floor. But Granny makes me work like a slave and she does not even give me pocket money for doing all my jobs. Today is Saturday so we have to do the week's washing. Granny fills the bathtub with dirty clothes, water and soapsuds and it is my job to get into the bath and tramp the washing. This is my favourite job, squelching dirty washing underneath my feet and watching the water change from clear to grey and then if I do the job really well, to a dark, inky black.

After a while, Granny comes and kneels by the bathtub. She takes Uncle Hannie's denims and rubs them with Sunlight soap and then she scrubs the dirty marks vigorously. Satisfied, she puts it back into the bath and repeats the same process with a shirt. Outside, I can hear children playing in the road and for a moment I consider asking Granny if I can go and play with them. But Granny does not allow me to play with the children in the road. "Why would you want to play in the road when you have a big, beautiful garden to play in?" she always says. "And anyway, it's not safe to play in the road. I can't understand why those children's parents allow it. What if a car were to come and knock them over?"

"Look at these socks, Elsie," says Granny, holding up a particularly dirty pair of my school socks. "How many times have I told you not to walk on the floor in your socks? Here, you scrub them," she says holding them out to me. I start to scrub them the way

Granny scrubs the washing but she takes them away from me again. “Not like that,” she says. “Look, if you put your hand inside the sock like this, it makes it much easier. You do the other one.”

Uncle Hannie sits idly at the kitchen table, noisily slurping his tea and talking to himself. “How you feeling? Fine fine okay fine. Taking your tablets? No, don’t need the tablets. Don’t need the tablets. You take your tablets? We here to talk about you. Why don’t you take the tablets? You know they make you feel better. I know it’s poison. You trying to kill me? I already said fine and okay. Rat poison. Had any trouble lately? Want to tell me about it? Want to talk about it? You speak the language? No no trouble. No trouble at all.”

“Granny,” I venture, trying to think of the best way to put the question to her without making her angry. And then, not knowing how to ask it, I ask her another question. “How come we have to do all the work and Uncle Hannie doesn’t even help?”

“Ag, Elsie,” says Granny irritably. “Do you really think that Uncle Hannie will be much help?”

I know that I can ask Granny any question except the one thing that bothers me the most, the one thing that I really want to know. “You know, Mary-Agnes’s father is the principal of the high school. And Paula’s father is a plumber.”

“Hmm,” mumbles Granny in reply. She pulls out the plug and begins to plunge the washing with the black plunger as the water drains from the bathtub. I start tramping harder and faster, competing with the plunger. When all the water is trampled out of the washing, Granny opens the cold tap so that we can rinse the clothes. I put my foot under the tap and shiver as the cold water washes over it. This is the last round of tramping and then I have to help Granny wring the water out of the clothes and place them in the bucket for when we hang them on the line.

“This is a good day for the washing,” says Granny as we approach the line. “With this wind, the clothes will get dry quickly.” The wind is not really strong but it is warm. The air feels thick and it burns the inside of my nose.

“You know, when I was a girl, I had to work really hard,” begins Granny, as she clips pegs to her blouse so that she can reach them easier when she needs them. “There were no taps and you had to have a well to get water. Our family didn’t have a well; we had to buy water for a penny a tin. So on Saturday mornings, my mother would take me and Auntie Lizzie to my grandmother’s house to do the washing. There were no buses and trains in those days, only the odd horse and cart. Auntie Lizzie and I had to help our mother carry all that washing from where we lived, which was near to where the SPCA is now, to my grandmother’s house which was where that shop is now, you know the one just as you come into Grassy Park – I think it is called the Key or something. Of course in those days, Grassy Park was mostly bush. But my grandmother had a very beautiful home and it was always in immaculate order. It was an old fashioned house, they do not build

houses like that today, but if it were still standing, I'm sure they would have turned it into a monument. It had a thatched roof and the windows were shuttered. The floor was made from dung, so at the beginning of every month, Lizzie and I had to collect the cow's manure for my grandmother. Then she would mix it with water, into a paste and coat the floor with the mixture."

"You mean she put cow manure on the floor, Granny?" I interrupt. "Didn't it stink?"

"No," replies Granny. "The dung had no smell and it was better than the wooden floors or carpets of today. It kept the house cool in the summer and warm in the winter. Anyway, the most impressive room in my grandmother's house was the sitting room. We children were never allowed into the sitting room, it was only for adults and even then, only for Sunday visitors. So because we weren't allowed into it, it was the one room that we were fascinated with. I used to stand in the doorway and stare in, but I would never cross the threshold. I was too scared of my grandmother; she had a terrible temper. And I had already seen what happened to the person who made her angry. One day my father was drunk and he asked my mother for some food. There wasn't much food around, so my mother made him some bread and jam. When she gave it to him, he flung it to the ground and he hit her in the face with his fist. She had a big bruise that swelled up almost immediately and of course, she ran off to my grandmother's house. We children were playing outside when my grandmother came storming up the pathway. She got hold of my father and she gave him the beating of his life. From that day on, my father never hit

my mother where people would be able to see the marks. But my grandmother, she had a temper alright.”

Granny shakes her head and laughs softly. “Anyway, I was telling you about how we used to do the washing. When we got to my grandmother’s house, my mother would go and draw some water from the well and pour it into this big tin bath. Then she would have a wash right there in the yard. When she was finished, she would wash Auntie Lizzie and myself and then with that same water, she would do the week’s washing. And when the washing was finished and my mother was hanging it out to dry, Auntie Lizzie and I had to water my grandmother’s vegetable garden with the washing water. You see, in the old days, people didn’t waste a thing.”

Granny likes to talk about the old days and I usually love to listen to her stories about when she was a girl, but today I have something else on my mind. “So is that why you make me water the garden with my bath-water?” I ask Granny, realising that I will never have the courage to utter the words that flit in the corners of my mind: “Granny, why don’t I have a father?”

## Bread

Granny is busy baking bread because it is Sunday and on Sundays you can't buy bread at the shop. She stands at the table in her green and white checked overall and her house slippers. Flour covers her hands that are slender with long fingers, just like my mother's hands. The yeast is rising on the stove and it smells sharp and strange, almost like Uncle Hannie's old beer bottles. Uncle Hannie is sitting outside in his chair, muttering to himself, but I am not going to play with him. I am still ignoring him because of what he did that day. It's very warm in the kitchen and I long to go outside and sit next to Hannie in the shade of the avocado pear tree, but I won't. I'll never ever forgive him.

My thoughts are interrupted by Granny who says, "Elsie, take this margarine paper and grease the bread tins for me please." She pours the yeast and some warm water into the bowl with the flour and she begins to knead it into dough. I listen to her voice as she sings along with the radio: "Then sings my soul," she drags the word "soul" out longer and higher-pitched than the singer. "My saviour God to Thee. How great Thou art. How great Thou art." Granny has a beautiful voice and I wish that I knew the words of the song so that I could sing with her.

"You can have the leftover dough to make some rolls," says Granny, shaping the dough into two rough loaves. She places the tins into the oven and I begin to shape my rolls. "Now I am going to have a break before I start with the lunch," Granny says. She puts some water on the stove and takes her teacup from the dresser. Granny is so funny. She

has a special cup and she will not drink her tea from another cup unless she is having tea at someone else's house. And she has a special chair at the top of the table and no one else can sit in it.

The pot begins to rattle which means that the water has reached boiling point, so Granny switches the stove off and begins to make herself a cup of tea in her special cup with the pink roses. Sitting down with a sigh, Granny says "There is a baking sheet for you in the drawer of the oven. Use that same paper to grease it, then I will put your rolls in as soon as the bread is done." Carefully I rub the margarine paper across the baking sheet but there is very little grease left on it. I continue to work in silence for a while and Granny sips her tea.

"You know," says Granny, lighting the customary after-tea cigarette. "Your grandfather used to love my baked bread. Every Monday evening he used to come home from work and tell me how his friends at work begged him to swap some of his home-made bread for their lunch, but no matter what they tried to tempt him with, he would never part with the bread I baked."

I think that this is very odd, but maybe my grandfather said that just to make Granny happy. I much prefer the shop bread to her bread because the shop bread is softer and thinner. I feel so embarrassed taking the thick Monday sandwiches out at school because everyone looks at them. And Mary-Agnes has such dainty sandwiches, cut into four triangles with the crusts removed. When I asked Granny to cut the crusts off my school

sandwiches, she looked at me like I had suddenly lost my mind. “And waste the crust?” she said incredulously. “The crust is the best part of the bread!”

“Granny, what was my grandfather like?” I ask her. “I think that I am forgetting about him, even the little bits of things that I used to remember.”

“Well, I am not surprised,” answers Granny. “You were what, four years old when he passed away? Your grandfather was the kindest, most gentle and quiet man you could ever meet,” she says softly. “And he completely adored you. He would spoil you so, taking you to the shops and buying whatever you asked for. And he really loved walking around with you and getting attention from all the people who stopped to say what a cute baby you were. I think that he was so taken up with you because he never really saw much of your mother and Hannie when they were children. He worked away then, on the ships. It was only after your mother was in high school that he got a job in town.”

“When I first met your grandfather, I was not really interested in men and getting married and all that. You see, I was not really much of a catch as far as a husband was concerned because of my bad legs. And in those days, men did not want to marry sickly women. I was twenty five years old already, and at that time, women married much younger than they do today. So my family probably thought that I would never get married. But anyway, I had a good friend, Madge. She lives in England now with her husband. Madge was my best friend and on a Saturday night we would take a walk to the Tafelberg Hotel at the top of town. You see, in those days you could walk around at night because it was

safe, even for two young ladies alone. Even the skollies in those days were different to the way they are today. They were real gentlemen, you know, they had principles and they didn't carry guns like the skollies do today, and they would never harm a woman or a child. All they wanted to do was watch those American gangster movies and copy the way those actors used to dress with their smart suits and two-tone shoes. Anyway, the Tafelberg Hotel was the place to be and Madge and I would go there for a few drinks and Madge would dance with the young men, but I would just watch because I wasn't much of a dancer. With my legs, I couldn't really dance you know."

"Madge was a very beautiful woman and she was always well dressed. She had thick, wavy black hair, clear fair skin and green eyes. The men were all crazy about her, especially about the green eyes and while she was on the dance floor, different men would come and sit at our table and talk to me, but all they wanted to know about was Madge. So I was not really surprised when this tall, good-looking man came to our table and asked if he could join me. He sat down and ordered another rum and coke for me, you know how I like it, with lots of ice and a slice of lemon. So I sipped my drink and waited for him to begin to ask me about Madge. But I could immediately see that he was not like the other young men. Firstly, he was not from Cape Town, he was from Durban. He was down in Cape Town so that he could earn more money than he did there. So we were talking and talking, he was asking me about my job and my family and so on, and after a while I was not even really paying attention to what he was saying, I was just listening to the sound of his voice."

“Madge came back to our table and I introduced the two of them, but he hardly paid any attention to her. A slow waltz was playing, and he asked me if I wanted to dance, and I said that I didn’t dance much because my legs are bad. He said that my legs looked perfectly good to him – the cheeky bugger – and he wasn’t much of a dancer anyway, but he would regret it for the rest of his life if he did not have just one dance with me. That was when I realised that I was falling in love with him. We danced three waltzes that night and I didn’t care about my legs or how I looked to the other people. Your grandfather and I were married three months later and my brothers and sisters were so surprised because they thought that I would never get a man to marry me. But I was very happy.”

“We looked around for a house and eventually we came to see this one. I walked into the yard, and it looked nothing like it looks today, it was just a wild, overgrown mess, but I could picture how it would look with a little bit of elbow grease. And of course there were all those beautiful trees: the mulberry, the apricot, the apple, the three fig trees and all the loquat trees. The avocado pear tree looked so pretty, it was laden with those yellow blossoms. The yard reminded me of when I was happiest as a child, when we lived on a farm. It had a wonderful apple orchard that I used to play in. I was so sad to leave that place, after my father had a fight with the farmer. Anyway, I fell in love with this house and I told your grandfather so. He tried to talk me out of it, saying that the house was in a bad way, and he would have preferred something newer, with those new indoor toilets that they were building, but I would not budge.”

“We moved in and began fixing it ourselves. Your grandfather got some of his friends to help him paint and I was busy in the garden from morning till evening. Everything was just wonderful and we were very happy in our new home. But then your grandfather lost his job just after your mother was born. The only job he could get was at sea and I was sad to be alone with a new baby, but what could we do? We needed money to pay for the roof over our heads and to put food on the table every day.”

“I was so miserable that Christmas because your grandfather was still at sea and he was not going to be home until after New Year. So, to cheer myself up, I invited my brother Danny, his wife and their children and Madge and the young man she was seeing at the time for Christmas lunch. Of course that was before Danny took his family to England. It was late on Christmas Eve and I was still busy in the kitchen, preparing for my first Christmas lunch in my new home. Your mother was asleep in my bed and I was washing the dishes. The leg of lamb was roasting in the oven and I still wanted to make the puddings so that I would not have too much to do the next morning. Anyway, I was standing at the sink, washing the dishes when I felt someone standing next to me. I slowly turned my head around, but I couldn't see anything, so I thought I must have been imagining things. A shiver went down my spine, but I thought that it was late and I had all this work to do still, so I should just finish it and stop letting my mind play tricks with me. So I continued washing the dishes, when I felt that someone was staring at me from behind. You know that feeling you get when someone is watching you and you can't see them but you can feel their eyes on your skin. Ever so slowly I turned around and do you know what a fright I got when I saw this old woman standing across the kitchen table?”

She was looking right at me, into my eyes, this old woman in a long, thick black dress with a long white apron and a white bonnet. I ran into the bedroom, not even thinking that I can't run with my bad legs and I locked the door. I was so scared that I lit a cigarette and I picked your mother up to make sure that she was okay. And you know, while I was sitting there in my bedroom, I could hear this old woman lifting the lids off the pots in this kitchen. And then I got so angry, I thought what a cheek this old woman has to scratch in my pots and to scare me like this in my own house. And I thought about how I had to finish my work and I made up my mind. I put your mother back in the bed, I stubbed out my cigarette and I plucked up all the courage that I had."

"When I walked into the kitchen, I couldn't see the old woman anymore, but I could feel her standing there, like it was *her* kitchen and I was the one who was intruding. 'Look,' I said. 'I don't know who you are or what business you have here, but this is my house and my kitchen and I want you to get out. I have a lot of work to do and you have no right to come here and disturb me and give me the fright of my life. But I am not scared of you and I want you out of my house and out of my kitchen. So get out of here right now! Get out!' "

"You know how hot it was that night, it was so hot that I left the windows open and there was not even a gentle summer's breeze. But right at that moment an ice-cold wind swept through the kitchen, rattling the lids of the pots on the stove and blowing the curtains around. Then it was over and everything was quiet. That old lady was gone and she never bothered me again."

“So you never ever saw her again, Granny?”

“No, I didn’t. But when your mother got a little bit older and started talking, she started playing by herself. She would always be talking to herself and she would talk about her friend, the lady. At first I thought that it was one of those things that small children do, you know to make up a friend. But then one day I asked her to tell me what the lady looked like. Do you know what she said? She is an old lady and she wears a long black dress and a white cap.”

“Do you think the old lady is still here, Granny?”

“No, I don’t think so. If she is she has been very quiet.” Granny opens the oven door and removes two steaming hot loaves of bread. “Now put those rolls in,” she says, turning the loaf tins upside down on the cooling rack. “Then come and help me peel these potatoes so that I can roast them with the chicken.”

## **When God Listens**

“Elsie, wake up,” calls Granny from the kitchen. “You are going to be late for school.” I crawl further under the blankets. It’s too cold to get up and I don’t even like school.

“Here are your stockings,” says Granny, slipping the thick black woollen pair under the blankets. “And here is your spencer. Put them on while you are in bed and then you won’t get cold. “I don’t want to go to school,” I mumble from under the blankets. “Elsie, I am not going to talk again. If you don’t get up now, you are going to be late for school and then you are going to be in trouble with Sister Theresa.”

By the time I step out of the front door, I see that Granny was right. The road is empty; there are no other children in their Saint Anne’s uniforms, on their way to school. There aren’t even any grownups on their way to the station to catch the train to Cape Town.

Granny was right, I am late for school and now I am going to be in trouble with Sister Theresa. Why didn’t I listen to her? I start to run and hot tears start to fall from my eyes.

I stop running before I enter the school gates, because we are not supposed to run in the corridors. Now I see that I am really very late, there are no classes lined up and saying the morning prayer. They are already sitting at their tables, learning their sums. More tears spring from my eyes and I quickly brush them away, trying to pluck up the courage to face Sister Theresa.

“Good morning, Sister,” I sniff. “I am sorry that I am late.” “Elsie, what is the matter with you? Why have you been crying?” How stupid I will seem if I say that I was crying because I was late. “It’s my grandfather,” I whisper tearfully. “He died.”

“Oh, my dear child, I am so sorry,” says Sister Theresa, crossing herself before she puts her arms around me and pats my back. “It is okay,” she says quietly. “It’s okay. He is in heaven now. Are you going to be okay? Do you rather want to go back home?”

“No, my Granny said that I had to come to school.”

“Fine, then go and take your seat. Now class, take out your Arithmetic books.” I sit down next to Mary-Agnes and she squeezes my hand and smiles sympathetically.

When the bell rings for interval, Mary-Agnes puts her arm around my shoulder and leads me to her spot, underneath the towering oak tree. The other girls sit around us. “What did he die of?” asks Marissa.

“A heart attack.”

“How old was he?” asks Beth.

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” I say, because I don’t trust my mouth anymore and who knows what it will say next?

Mary-Agnes nods, “Yes, don’t ask her any more questions.”

After second interval, Sister Theresa tells us that we have to line up and go to the hall. When we get to the hall, a most fearful sight greets us. There are lines and lines of children and at the top of the lines is a row of tables, with big, enamel basins on them. Doctors and nurses in white coats stand at the tables and one by one each child goes up, holds out his or her arm, and the doctor or the nurse plunges a needle into it. I feel very hot and a hard lump forms in my throat.

“Take off your jerseys,” says Sister Theresa. “And boys, if you are wearing a long sleeve shirt, please roll your right hand sleeve up.”

I don’t want an injection. Needles terrify me. A child goes up, hold out her arm stiffly and looks away so that she does not see the needle that the fat nurse jabs maliciously into her arm. Then the nurse presses a wad of cotton wool onto the spot and tells the girl to keep the cotton wool there till the sting is gone. The girl walks out of the hall in tears and will join the rest of the children who have already been through this torture in the classroom. Several more children leave the hall in tears.

“Oh, please God, do something,” I beg. “I don’t want an injection. I’m not even sick.” I am getting very close to the front of the row. Suddenly I realise what I have to do. I raise my hand and Sister Theresa comes to see what I want. “Sister, I need to use the bathroom,” I say.

“Okay, go quickly,” she smiles.

Relieved, I slowly walk to the bathroom. When I get there, it is empty, so I walk up and down, looking into each toilet. Finally I decide on the one in the corner. I lock the door and sit down. Safe. The minutes pass and I hear someone else coming inside and opening a toilet door. I’ll have to go back to the hall sooner or later because Sister Theresa will notice that I am taking a long time and she will send someone to look for me. And it’s boring sitting in a toilet with nothing to do, not even a book to read. I pull some toilet paper off the roll and flush the toilet, so that the girl in the next toilet will not be suspicious. Then I wash my hands slowly and take the long way back to the hall.

Instead of taking my place behind Mary-Agnes, I join the back of the line. Soon it’s Mary-Agnes’ turn. Calmly she stretches her arm out and I watch the needle go in. I wince for her and look away. Its almost my turn, I count the heads in front of me, only five more to go. What am I going to do? Only two more girls in front of me, Claudia and Veronique. “Oh please God, do something.” I whisper desperately. God must have been listening to my prayers because just then the bell rings and it is time for us to go home.

“Children,” says Sister Theresa. “You may go back to your classes now, if you have not yet had your injection, don’t worry, you will get it tomorrow.” Saved by they bell. Or by the hand of God. I will not be in school tomorrow.

There is only one way that Granny will let me stay out of school, I will have to be sick. “Dear God, thank you for listening to me before and making the bell ring. Now if you can just do one more thing for me, I promise I will be a good girl. I will listen to my Granny and to Sister Theresa and I won’t tell any more lies. But please God, let me be sick so that I won’t have to go to school tomorrow and get an injection.”

I open the front door and see that Granny is sitting smoking in the lounge, which is strange because she usually sits in the kitchen. “Elsie,” she says gravely, “Can you explain this?” She waves her hand, the one still holding a smoking cigarette, at a basket of flowers and then she picks up a card that was lying next to it. “Dear Mrs September and family,” she reads. “All the pupils and staff at St Anne’s want you to know that you are with us in our thoughts and in our prayers. Our deepest sympathy for your sad loss. May the Lord grant you strength in your hour of need.”

“I don’t know what is wrong with Sister Theresa,” I say with a shrug. “I told her that Grandpa died, but I didn’t say *when* he died. Maybe she thought that he died recently.” Granny shakes her head sadly. “You already lied to your entire school, Elsie. Don’t try to lie to me as well. Tomorrow you are going to school and you are going to take these flowers and this card back and you are going to apologise to Sister Theresa and the rest of your class. Do you understand? Now go and change your clothes and then I will give you something to eat.”

I run into my room, relieved that I do not have to stand in front of Granny and feel like the devil's child. What I did was worse because I lied to a nun. Sister Theresa is pure and holy – if she finds out what I did, she will give me that sad, Jesus on the cross look. I can't go and tell her, I'd rather die.

I sit at the kitchen table and listlessly pick at my toasted cheese sandwich. "What's the matter with you?" Granny asks, and I can tell from her voice that she is still cross with me.

"I don't feel well," I reply.

Granny puts her cool hand onto my forehead, then she looks carefully at my face and feels the glands on the sides of my throat. "You are running a temperature," she says. "Go and lie down. If you are not feeling better later on, then I will phone and see if Doctor Grey will come around."

I lie on top of the blankets and Granny comes into the room and draws the curtains. The curtains are thick and dark green, so when they are drawn in the day the room has a strange green glow. I stare at the inter-twined flowers on the bedspread and wait for my eyes to grow heavy. But my mind is not tired so sleep does not come. I hope that Granny will not phone Doctor Grey because then he will tell her that I am not sick and she will send me to school and I will stand in line, trembling and the fat nurse will hold up the long needle with the very sharp point and she will grasp my arm tightly and stab that

needle so hard into my arm that the blood will gush out. I will scream in terror and Mary-Agnes will turn her nose up and say, “How can you be so scared of a needle? Didn’t you see how brave I was when I had my injection? There wasn’t even a tear in my eye.” And if that’s not bad enough, I will have to tell Sister Theresa that I lied to her and apologise to the whole class!

But I love Doctor Grey, so I won’t mind seeing him again. He is so handsome and clever and his hands are so soft and kind. Also, he always gives me a lollipop that he takes out of his bag when he is finished examining me. The lollipops are my favourite kind and you can only get them from Doctor Grey – you can’t even buy them at Mr Abu’s. The lollipop is black with a nose, eyes and a u-shaped mouth in white. The plastic is clear in front so that you can see the face and at the back there is always a picture of a particular animal and in red lettering is its name and where it comes from and what it likes to eat. I will break the plastic carefully so that I don’t tear the picture and I will put it with my other wrappings in the cigar box that Grandpa gave me when I was small. I keep all my important things in the cigar box. Then I will put the lollipop in my mouth and slowly suck it and watch as the face disappears.

Sometimes I think that Doctor Grey is really my father. Before Mother left, she took me with her to a braai. The men stand outside around the fire, each with a beer in his hand, laughing about their wives and girlfriends. The wives and girlfriends are in the kitchen, marinating the meat, making salad and sipping wine. And complaining about their husbands and boyfriends. I am supposed to play with the other children in Douglas’

room, but Douglas and the other boys are always teasing me. So I sneak out into the yard and sit on the grass, hoping that Mother won't notice me and send me back inside.

Mother is the only lady outside and she stands with her back to me, facing the fire. A group of men stand around her, one lights her cigarette, another brings her a drink – not wine like the other ladies – Mother drinks gin and tonic which she sometimes lets me pour for her when we are alone at home. The night is clear and pretty Christmas lights hang from the trees in the yard. Doctor Grey sneaks up behind Mother and slips his arms around her waist. Mother does not turn around to see who it is; she leans her head back onto his chest. Carefully removing her glass of gin from her red-tipped fingers and placing it on the table, Doctor Grey leads Mother to the middle of the yard where other couples are swaying to a slow song. Mother puts a hand around his waist and the other hand rests in his hand, she leans her head on his shoulder. She closes her eyes and smiles – it is such a beautiful, peaceful smile that I wonder what she is thinking. Doctor Grey's free hand plays with Mother's long black hair and I think about how perfect they look together, how well Doctor Grey's strong, lean frame matches Mother's slim figure, how they have the same flashing black eyes, the same shiny dark hair and the same smooth skin. And if Doctor Grey is my father, when the other children talk about how their father is a teacher, a lawyer, a fireman or a carpenter, I will at least have something to say.

Doctor Grey's wife comes outside and her face is red. She grabs Dr Grey's arm and pulls him away from Mother, who is left in the middle of the yard with many pairs of eyes on her. Doctor Grey and his wife are having a whispered argument in the doorway and

Mother sees me and tells me that it is time to go home. "But we didn't even eat yet!" I protest. "I am hungry. We never had any supper."

"Don't worry," hisses Mother. "I'll make you something when we get home."

I open my eyes and see Granny sitting on my bed, and there is a lump in my throat because I was expecting to see Mother. "How are you feeling now?" asks Granny with a frown. I don't say anything and again she feels my forehead to check my temperature. "You are burning up, my girl. I better get you to a doctor." And I notice how sweaty and sticky I feel even though I am only lying under Granny's TV blanket. "Hannie! Come here!" she shouts. Uncle Hannie appears in the doorway. "Pick Elsie up and wrap her in those blankets. We have to take her to hospital because Doctor Grey has gone home already."

Hannie follows Granny's instructions and I am bundled into the back seat of the green Volksie. From my position, all I can see are the streetlights and the moon that follows our car. I try to figure out where we are going just from the stops and turns that Granny makes. Lifting my head up, I see that I don't know where we are. We are pulled into a long driveway. "Red Cross Children's Hospital" I read from a big sign. The car stops and Uncle Hannie picks me up again and carries me inside the building. He puts me down on a hard bench and sits down next to me. Granny is standing at the counter, speaking to a nurse and filling out forms. I hold Uncle Hannie's hand because I am beginning to feel afraid. I don't like this place; it has a horrible smell. The door opens and a lady comes in carrying a little boy who has blood pouring from a gaping hole in his forehead. The little

boy is kicking and screaming. I look away and hold Uncle Hannie's hand tighter. "Don't worry," he says. "They'll fix you up. They'll sort you out. This won't hurt a bit and open your mouth it will make you feel better. It's good for you, very good. Make you feel all better. Try it. You'll see."

The nurse leads me to a room and tells me to lie down on the bed. Granny is with me, but Hannie is waiting outside. The doctor frowns at me and tells me to undress. He puts the cold stethoscope onto my chest. Then he tries to put the big sucker stick in my mouth but I won't let him. "I don't want the sucker stick," I moan. "Doctor Grey doesn't use the sucker stick because I can open my mouth very wide."

This doctor is much older than Doctor Grey and he has a beard and he frowns all the time. He doesn't talk a lot like Doctor Grey does. Frowning at the thermometer he turns to Granny "She has tonsillitis," he says. "And a very high temperature. I am going to give her an injection to bring the temperature down. She'll be fine, just give her these tablets and keep her in bed for a few days."

He fetches a very big syringe with a very long needle and I clutch Granny's hand in terror. "Turn around," he says. "This will only sting for a little while." The needle comes down hard into my bum and I want to scream. It seems to last forever and I am holding Granny's hand so hard that I can feel her bones. "There, all over," says the doctor. "You are a brave girl." And he does not even give me a black lollipop with a white face even though I have been through all that pain. How could I have been so stupid to ask God to

make me sick so that I won't have to get an injection? It just goes to show – you've got to be careful what you ask God for because you just might get it.

## Chapter 3

Mary-Agnes and I have been inseparable since our days at St Anne's. When we went to high school, we'd always talk about what we would do after we matriculated. We would go to university together, get part time jobs so that we could share a flat. Then we'd graduate, earn piles of money and travel the world. We had it all worked out. Mary fell pregnant in standard eight though, so she hasn't even matriculated. Things have not been the same since then – we don't see each other every day as we used to and I am not as fascinated by child bearing as she is, but she is still my best friend. She is the only person I can say anything to – I don't have to be careful around her. So I go to see her to tell her about Shaun – my other friends wouldn't understand, they'd probably think that I'm insane or perverted or something.

As I step through Mary's door, I nearly gag on the overpowering smell of urine. The smell clings to Mary's children and I have to force myself to smile at the two little girls clinging to my leg and resist the urge to push them away. "Mary, you look terrible!" The words fall from my treacherous lips before I can even think of the right thing to say. She blushes and for a brief second, she is Mary-Agnes again, that delicate luminous girl with the dainty gold cross around her neck.

"I wasn't expecting anyone," she says, and tucks a strand of greasy hair behind her ear. God but she does look terrible, sitting at the kitchen table with piles of dirty plates around her, a dark purple mark around her left eye and a baby sucking greedily from her breast. I

avert my eyes quickly. "Pass me my cigarettes please." Mary lights a cigarette and exhales a cloud of blue smoke. "Should you be doing that around the baby?" I ask and even though she does not say it with her mouth, her eyes say, "What do *you* know about babies?"

"I smoked when he was in my womb," she says quietly. "He's used to it by now."

To fill the silence that descends upon us, I take the dirty plates to the sink and begin washing them. "You don't have to do that," Mary says. "Candice will come home from school soon and she always cleans up."

"I don't mind." I reply. Well, maybe I can't say anything to Mary-Agnes. The whole thing about Shaun seems silly when you're faced with all of this. And guilt weighs down heavily on me, like it always does these days whenever I am around Mary. I feel guilty because Mary-Agnes is sitting in a messy kitchen with dirty, snotty-nosed children and a fat baby boy with scarlet cheeks sucking on her breast and absorbing Chesterfield Lights along with his mother's milk.

I know it's not my fault or anything even though I did say that Sharky was sexy, all those years ago when they met at high school, and then to make matters worse I said that sex was fantastic and she should go for it. Three months later she was pregnant and had to leave school. Her parents were devastated; even now her father barely manages to talk to her.

I can't say that I blame him though. Sharky is absolutely the worst thing that could have happened to Mary-Agnes. But I must say that he's helped my career quite a bit. He's the reason my by-line's been on the front page so often lately, him and his connections. Sharky likes to call himself an importer-exporter, but all he really does is wear expensive suits, drive his BMW about and talk on his cell phone. He thinks he's got it going on, but at least he's not as obvious as some of his other seedy friends, at least he tries to pass himself off as a businessman. I just don't know how Mary can stand it, the school principal's daughter, the girl from the Catholic convent school, having children, (but no, no sex lately, he must be saving it for those teenagers in the short, tight dresses) with a gangster.

It's not just what Sharky does for a living. I've had to listen over and over to these guys justifying what they do – if they didn't sell the drugs there would always be other people selling them – and all the other excuses. But he's such a mean bastard. I've seen him in action. He throws money about, lavishing it on his young things, buying them expensive clothing and jewellery, but Mary has to beg him for money to buy food and things for the children.

I try hard to resist giving her a lecture again, because I know that I have no right to and I will sound patronising no matter how hard I try to choose the right words. Anyway, it is not like I can say anything to Mary-Agnes that she doesn't know already. But as soon as I sit back down next to her, I can't stop myself. "Mary, how can you carry on like this?"

Why don't you leave him? Come and stay with me for a while till you get a job and a place of your own. You don't need this. Why do you let him do this to you?"

Mary nods in silence and I know that it is useless. I know why she lets him do this to her. How many times didn't I come home from work and find her sitting on the steps outside my flat, her children running around? (And then the neighbours will complain again about my visitor's children destroying the place.) Mary with eyes red and swollen from crying, bruise marks peppering her body. "I've left him. I never want to see that son of a bitch again." Mary-Agnes you once were perfect. What happened to you?

"Come inside, I'll pour us a drink." And then Mary-Agnes will sleep next to me in my bed with her baby and I will cringe when she changes the shit nappies on my cream duvet cover. The children will make a noise and the neighbours will give me sidelong glances that say they want to know what's going on. The children will sleep like refugees in my lounge and I will have to get up extra early to drop Candice off at school. And Candice with eyes older than any thirteen-year-old's eyes should ever be. Candice will have that frown that hardly ever goes away and she will say, "Do you think she will take him back again?" And I will have to say "I don't know." but that will be a lie because I do know.

The only time that I was surprised was the first time it happened. We'd spend nights sitting up talking, me telling her everything's going to be okay, talking about what she can do, talking late into the night like when we were younger. And slowly I'd begin to forget about the smell of pee and the nappies lying fermenting in the hand-basin in my

bathroom and the refugees in the lounge and how I can't do my own thing anymore like veg out and spend the evening watching television or reading a book by myself.

Then there will be that knock at the door. Mary and I will look at each other, but we will not move. "Mary I know that you're in there. I just want to talk to you. Please just give me a chance to say what I have to say. Mary! Open up, let me in!"

"Sharky if you don't go away now I'm calling the police!"

"Hey Elsie, you bitch, open this door. I want to see my wife!"

And then Mary gives me that look I saw for the first time one Saturday night when Granny and I were watching *A Streetcar Named Desire* on TV. It was the one in black and white with Marlon Brando as Stanley and Vivien Leigh as Blanche. I don't remember the name of the actress who played Stella, but I do remember that scene where Stanley acts like the bastard he really is and Stella runs to Eunice, her neighbour upstairs. Stanley stands in the courtyard at the bottom and calls out her name. Eventually, Stella appears on the balcony and looks down at him, with that same look that Mary-Agnes will give the door at this point. Then Mary-Agnes will look at me in that same way that Stella looked at Eunice, and she will say with her eyes, "I'm sorry but I can't help myself." And Mary-Agnes will get up slowly, but purposefully to open the door. For she is not as passionate as Stella who ran down the steps to Stanley who picked her up and held her in

his muscular arms. (Did it rain then, or was it raining already?) Stanley carries Stella to their bed and the next morning Stella has the most beautiful and serene look on her face.

Mary lets Sharky inside, they gather up their children and as they all pile into their car, I feel more than a bit relieved that the pee smell will evaporate and I will no longer have to look away whenever I see my neighbours. I doubt that Sharky will carry Mary to bed and I can't say if she will have a beautiful, serene look on her face the next day, but I do know that in a few weeks time the process will be repeated again and I know the reason she lets it happen has something to do with the look on that actress's face, late on a Saturday night when Granny and I were watching TV.

"Here," says Mary-Agnes, placing her baby in my arms. "Hold him while I get the supper on. Sharky can come home any time now and this place is still in a mess." She hands me the fat baby boy and he begins to scream immediately. I try to quiet him down, but I have never been able to do the baby talk that they seem to like. I don't know, maybe when you have a child, some inexplicable thing happens and you suddenly know what to do with them. "Rub his bottom," says Mary. "He likes it when you do that. You want to stay for supper?"

"No, thanks. I've still got work to do. I just came to see how things are going. And to tell you that I've met someone."

"Really? Who? Anyone I know?"

“No, I just picked him up at Valkenberg.”

“Oh, Elsie, I thought that you were being serious.”

“No, I am serious. He came over to my place to give me a blow job. We didn’t fuck though.”

“Must you always be so vulgar? Why can’t you say make love?”

You see Mary-Agnes, your head’s still up there in the clouds. Your prick of a husband is fucking everything that moves when he’s not beating you up and you can still talk about making love.

“So what’s his name? When can I meet him?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if I want to see him again.”

“What? You don’t know his name?”

“Oh, come on, I’m not that bad. I did find out his name first – it’s Shaun. At least I know that much about him.”

## The Parade

I hear her while I'm still in that strange place of not quite asleep, but not yet awake. First I hear her voice, then Granny's voice, it sounds like their whispered conversations when they don't want me to hear what they are saying, but I hear anyway because their voices grow louder and louder. Then a door opens and there's footsteps that make the wooden floorboards creak. The sound of Hannie's voice, I can't make out what he is saying, but it must have been a joke. Because then there's that unmistakable laugh, the deep rumbling laughter like piano keys – not the high-pitched tinkling keys of other women's laughter, but the deep throaty ones at the bottom end of the keyboard. I sit upright and open my eyes, and when I see that I am still in bed, the disappointment pricks the back of my eyes: it was so real this time. But there is the rumbling throaty laughter again. "Mother!" I fly into the kitchen and there she is, sitting at the table sipping tea with Granny, like she had never been away.

"Elsie, my big girl!" she stands up and squeezes me so hard that I can hardly breathe. Then she looks me up and down. "Just look at you, how much you've grown in the last few months, and you've put some meat on those skinny bones. It must be Granny's cooking."

"Why didn't you come and wake me up?" I ask, climbing on her lap, not because I'm a baby – because I'm not – but because I don't want her to look at me like that anymore.

She's been away for so long, I feel like I don't know how to be with her anymore or what to say.

"Don't worry my darling, there's plenty of time for us to be together ... Elsie?" she says in a different voice, it's a serious, careful voice and one that I hardly ever hear. She turns me around to face her and stares into my eyes like she can see right through them, into my brain. Softly, she touches my face and pushes my hair back, tucking the strands behind my ears, which I hate because it makes me look funny. "I have some important news to tell you. When I was up in Jo'burg, I met a man and I fell in love with him. We were married last month. He's a good man; you will meet him soon and then you will see that for yourself. He's just sorting out his business in Jo'burg and then he is going to come down to Cape Town. We are going to find a place again and we'll all live happily together, you, me and your new daddy. Would you like that?"

I don't know what to say, so I nod my head. "Good," says Mother, "I knew that you would." She gives Granny a funny look, but Granny turns back to the stove to flip the French toast she'd been frying. My mouth waters at the smell of the sizzling bacon. Everything is perfect. Mother is back and we're having French toast and bacon for breakfast, not the usual Saturday breakfast of bread and jam or the fish fingers Granny makes with toast and fish paste. And Mother's married and I have a new daddy. I hope that he's handsome and clever and that he doesn't drink too much like Uncle Ray, mother's last boyfriend or that he doesn't have a bad temper and likes to take off his belt for us like Uncle Sollie, the one she had before Uncle Ray.

“Now,” says mother, pushing me off her lap so that she can pile our plates with French toast and bacon. “Granny tells me that you’ve been such a good girl, helping her and everything, I’ve decided to give you a special treat. I thought we’d take the train into Town. Remember when we lived in Woodstock how we’d take the bus into Town on a Saturday morning? When I was in Jo’burg I really missed our outings together. It will be fun – I’ll see for some nice new clothes for you seeing that you’ve grown so big. And then I’ll buy you a milkshake and we can take a walk in the Gardens. How would you like that?”

“It sounds nice.”

“Good, so eat up,” says Mother. “Then get yourself dressed and we’ll go.”

We leave Granny’s house, with Hannie still complaining about not getting to come with us. Across the road, Miss Marsh is sweeping her stoep. “Hello, Miss Marsh!” I call out and wave.

“Hello, my lovie,” she calls back and then she notices Mother. “My goodness, Lillian, is that you? When did you get back?” she asks.

“Hello Miss Marsh,” says Mother. “I got back last night.”

“And you are going to stay here now or are you going to run off to Jo’burg again?”

“No, I’ll be staying Miss Marsh. I got married when I was up there and my husband and I are going to live here because I missed my Elsie too much.”

“Oh, lovie, that’s very good. It’s better to stay here, amongst your own people. You know those people up in Jo’burg they’re not the same like us. They look different, they talk different, you know, just not our types.”

“Really? When were you in Jo’burg Miss Marsh?” asks Mother.

“Oh, lovie, I’ve never been to that place, oh no, that’s not my cup of tea. I’ll rather stay here with decent people like your mother. She’s such a good neighbour and a good friend to me, you know, whenever she goes to the shops she always comes to ask if I need anything. No, lovie, I wouldn’t trust those Jo’burgers as far as I could throw them.”

“Well, see you Miss Marsh,” says Mother.

“Where are you going then, lovie?” asks Miss Marsh.

“Elsie and I are going to Town,” Mother explains. “Anyway, we’ll see you, we have a train to catch.” Mother grabs my hand and walks away quickly.

“That woman,” says Mother under her breath and shaking her head. “She’s always sticking her nose in other people’s business.”

“Maybe you should have asked her if she wanted anything from Town,” I say.

“What that woman needs, you don’t get in Town.” Mother says, and I don’t know why, but this makes her laugh.

“What do you mean? What can’t you get in Town?”

“Never mind.” Mother says, still chuckling to herself. Sometimes she makes me so cross when she acts like this, just like Uncle Hannie, and she won’t say why she’s laughing.

When we pass Mr Abu’s shop, he sees mother from behind the counter and rushes out to say hello. “Lilly? My goodness, you’ve come back at last. I missed you, you know. You are my favourite customer. With such a pretty face, whenever you come into the shop it makes my day.”

“Oh, Mr Abu, you are such a smooth talker. Does your wife know how you carry on with the ladies?”

We say goodbye to Mr Abu and start walking again. I am proud to walk with Mother because of the way people look at her and take notice of her. Some men in brown overalls with CCC on the back whistle through their teeth and wave. Mother just smiles and swings her hips even more than she usually does. They act like Mother is famous, like she had been away for years instead of months. Like she had gone to another country and

not just to Jo`burg, which I can find on the map by myself and you don`t have to cross any seas to get to. Even the man at the ticket office is different. He winks at me and smiles at Mother, calling her ma`am, which he doesn`t call Granny when I take a train with her.

The train carriage is full, but a young man gets up so that Mother can sit down. There is no seat for me and I don`t want to sit on her lap as she suggests. Instead, I hold on to the steel pole opposite her with women with big, round bums pushing up against me and the smell of sweat making me want to choke. A man jumps up and down in the tiny, tiny space he has created for himself, thumping on his bible and talking breathlessly about “*Oo Here Jesus*”. Spit flies from his mouth and his voice sounds more and more hoarse as he works himself up into a frenzy because of our sins.

Mother sits on her hard, plastic seat and barely seems to notice how crowded the train is or how bad it smells. She turns her head to look out of the window, a faint smile on her lips. Eventually, she gets tired of straining her neck at that awkward angle, and faces forward again; her thin, pale hands with the blue, bumpy veins sticking out, folded neatly into her lap. She closes her eyes and leans her head back against the window. Mother is thinner than I remembered, her skin is stretched tightly over her face and you can even see the bones of her hips jutting out through her dress. There are fine lines around her eyes that I didn`t notice before and the skin underneath her eyes are a lot darker than it used to be. Although she looks very relaxed as the train lulls her to sleep, she also looks tired, but that is probably from her long trip. Mother opens her eyes and sees me staring

at her. She smiles faintly, but I look away and concentrate instead on pushing the large, sweaty bodies that are trying to suffocate me out of the way with my elbow.

At last the train pulls into Cape Town station and I push my way forward to the doors. The doors open and I am carried out of the train, along with the human tide forcing itself through the too-narrow-for-it doorway. On a clear, sunny Saturday morning, the Parade is bustling with people looking for bargains at the stalls. Long trestle tables are laden with goods and the people behind the tables are kept busy – bargaining with customers, explaining what a good deal they are getting or finding just the right thing for the fussy ones. The Parade is noisy too, with some of the hawkers not trusting people's eyes to see what they have to offer, so they shout out what they have and for how much.

A scruffy looking man approaches Mother and removes some jewellery from his jacket pocket. "My lady, a smart gold chain for you? A bracelet? A beautiful ring for a beautiful lady? Anything you want, only two rand."

Mother shakes her head. "No thanks," she says and walks away.

"Why didn't you buy something? It seems quite cheap for gold."

"That's not gold, Elsie. That's *blik*, rolled gold and glass."

Either Mother really missed me when she was in Jo'burg or she feels really bad about the way she lied to me when she left. She buys me whatever I want. I see a pair of glass heeled sandals with laces that go all the way up your leg. Granny would never have let me have these sandals. She would say that they are silly and impractical and tell me how I wouldn't be able to walk on those heels, how I would look like a fool and fall flat on my face. "Mother, just look at these sandals! They are so pretty– don't you think? Can I try them on?" I say, not really expecting her to agree, but hoping for the best anyway.

"Yes, of course," says Mother. "Try them on."

The lady at the stall finds my size and I try them on. Mother helps me to lace them up. I stand up and it feels very funny being a bit taller. "They look nice," says Mother.

"I love them," I say, taking a few wobbly steps. "Can I have them?"

"How much?" Mother asks the woman.

"Ten rand," the woman replies.

"Wrap them up," says Mother, taking a ten rand note from her purse and giving it to the woman.

"Can't I wear them now, Mother?"

“Fine.” Mother says, giving the woman my worn, scruffy and flat brown leather sandals to put into the packet instead. I feel very tall and very glamorous, but it is not very easy walking in these new sandals. And Mother is really in the mood for walking today. We walk up Adderley Street and through Government Lane into the Company Gardens. Slowly, we walk around the Gardens, with Mother stopping every now and then to admire a rose or to point out squirrels to me. We walk past the fishpond with the huge, slow fish floating about in the murky water. We even walk all the way up to the museum at the top of the Gardens. “Want to go inside?” asks mother. And thinking of the long, hot walk back to the station with my new sandals already pinching my feet, I say yes very eagerly.

I follow Mother inside and the cool air of the darkened room is such a relief after that long, hot walk. We walk past a display of Bushmen cave paintings and the knives and tools that they used. There’s a lot of writing on each thing, but I am too tired to read everything.

Then we come to something that makes me gasp, a big display that looks like a couple of Bushmen standing or sitting, frozen behind the glass. It takes me a few moments to realise that they are not actually people, they look so real, so lifelike. There is a group of Bushmen outside a grass hut. The men and women are wrinkled and small. One man stands and points out into the distance, his eyes vacant and staring and the other man stands next to him with his bow and arrow poised and ready. A woman reclines casually on her back in front of the house, her flabby breasts almost falling off her body. Next to

her, a baby suckles at another woman's wrinkled, sagging breast, her other breast hanging almost flat on her stomach with the nipple pointing downward. Everyone is naked, except for little leather aprons covering their privates. I am shocked and disgusted at all the nakedness, and at all the ugly wrinkled skin. At all the lines in these people's crumpled faces and their little beady eyes, stupid and vacant. I have never seen naked breasts on display for all the world to see. Even in the *Scope* magazines that Uncle Hannie keeps underneath his bed, the women's nipples are covered with a star or a stripe. I want to turn away from this appalling scene, but their little beady eyes will not let go of mine.

Mother comes and stands before the glass next to me. "Ah, the Bushman Diorama," she reads from the sign. "Do you know that these are your forefathers, your ancestors?" Finally the spell is broken and I can turn away from the hideous, ugly wrinkled people, the small, stupid eyes and thick, ugly lips, the flabby breasts, the women sitting in the dirt and the men wearing obscene little leather cloths.

"They may be your ancestors," I say. "But they are nothing of mine."

Mother gives one of her I-know-better laughs. "Do you want to go and see the butterfly display?" she asks.

"No," I reply, suddenly tired of my too tight shoes and the small people with the beady eyes boring into my back. "Let's go home."

## **A Chinese bangle**

Granny and I are busy making supper when I hear the front door opening. Granny is peeling potatoes and carrots and I am busy taking her “just picked from my very own garden” peas out of their pods. There is quite a large pile of peas in a bowl in front of me and I know that when Granny is finished with the potatoes, I’ll still be busy. My fingers are beginning to get sore, and I am glad when the door opens because I know it is Mother coming inside and she will help me. Mother’s quick and sure fingers will have all these peas done in no time at all.

But when Mother comes inside, we see that she is not alone. She has a man with her and she is holding his hand, so he must be the one – the new husband from Jo’burg. “Mother, Elsie,” say my mother, “I would like you to meet Greg Petersen. Greg, this is my mother and my daughter.” Greg holds out his hand to shake Granny’s hand, but Granny just says “Hmmp” and carries on peeling a potato in one paper thin, long strip. Granny won’t ever let me peel the potatoes because she says that I peel them too thick and that’s a waste.

I wonder if Mother knows that Granny’s “Hmmp” means that she thinks that Uncle Greg is not exactly what she would call “our type”. Usually, Granny is very polite to visitors, even if she doesn’t like the visitor all that much, but doesn’t exactly dislike him or her either, she always, but always says, “Pleased to meet you and how do you do?” Granny usually also makes me say, “Pleased to meet you and how do you do?” which I

find a real pain because no one else talks like that and when I said it when I first went to St Anne's, all the children made fun of me. But when she just says "Hmmp" and then pretends that he's not there, it means trouble.

Granny always gives me these lectures about prejudice and discrimination. Prejudice, she explained to me, is when you don't like someone or think that someone is going to act in a certain way just because of the way he looks on the outside. Then you discriminate against the person, without even bothering to know him, just because of the way he looks. I may not know as much as Granny does, or as many big words, but I know that she is prejudiced against Uncle Greg. Granny thinks that she is not like other people who are prejudiced and who discriminate against others, but I know that she likes or doesn't like a person depending on how good looking he or she is.

Uncle Greg is not exactly handsome. He is big and greasy, his face is full of pimple scars, his hair is too curly to be kept in place by the thick layer of Brylcreem, his eyes are set too wide apart and his thick flabby lips and wide nose makes him look like a baboon. This is why Granny doesn't like him. But she liked Uncle Sollie, who treated Mother very badly but at least he was tall and thin; he had good clear skin, a pleasant smile and nice, sleek hair.

"Sit, down, sit down, Greg," Mother says, clearing the newspapers off the table in front of him. He sits down opposite me and smiles.

I have never seen a man wearing so much jewellery. He has left the top buttons of his shirt undone, to reveal a big gold medallion nestling in a thick patch of curly, black hair. He also has two large rings, one on each thick, stubby middle finger and his gold wedding band, which is much broader than Mother's one. Uncle Greg catches me staring at him and he winks which makes the blood run to my face and I quickly look away.

"I've got a present for you, Elsie," he says. "Do you want it now?"

"What is it?" I ask, excited.

"Come here and I'll give it to you," he says.

So I dry my hands on a dishcloth and go around the table to where he is sitting. "Hold out your arm," he instructs and I stretch my arm out, expecting him to take a pretty, gift-wrapped package out of his pocket and put it into my hand. Instead, he lightly runs his fingers along my arm so that the hairs stand on end and goose bumps break the surface of my skin. "It's a Chinese bangle," he says. "Do you like it?" And he and Mother laugh and laugh like he said the funniest thing you ever heard.

"Mother, can I make you a cup of tea?" Mother asks Granny.

"No thanks," Granny says. "I don't have time for tea. I have to hurry up with supper or we will eat late."

“Would you like some tea, Greg?” asks Mother and he says, “Yes, that would be nice.” Mother is acting like that bird that flew into the kitchen through the small top window one day, but then couldn’t find its way out. It flew around nervously, getting more and more agitated until Granny grabbed hold of it and let it out by the door. Mother puts the kettle on, gets cups and saucers down from the dresser, the milk out of the fridge, the tea and sugar out of the cupboard. “Are you sure you don’t want any tea, Mother?” she asks Granny again. “I can make a pot?”

“What, are you deaf?” asks Granny sulkily. “I said that I don’t want any!”

I don’t know why Granny is being so horrible to my poor bird of a mother. I feel quite sorry for her now and wish that I could grab her and show her the door. “This is quite a nice house you have here, Mrs September,” says Uncle Greg.

“Hmmp!” replies Granny.

“Greg and I are busy looking for a place to stay,” says Mother. “Do you mind if he stays with us in the meantime? It will only be for a day or so.”

“Hmmp!” says Granny, giving Mother a dirty look.

“No, no. Don’t worry about it,” says Uncle Greg. “I don’t want to put anyone out. I’ll stay with friends until we find something.”

“Where are you looking?” asks Granny.

“In Woodstock,” says Mother. “I hoped to get my old place back, but other people are living there now.”

“Why don’t you look for something around here?” asks Granny. “You know that Elsie is settled in her school. You can’t take her out of St Anne’s now. And you can’t keep moving her from pillar to post!”

“I’m not moving her from pillar to post,” says Mother and she flaps her wings and circles the kitchen, desperate for a way out. “And I am not planning on taking her out of St Anne’s. She can take the train from Woodstock to Wynberg. She’s big enough now.”

“Hmmp,” says Granny. “Why don’t you let her stay here then? The school year is almost finished. I’m not happy about her travelling by herself on the trains with all those skollies around.”

“You know how much I missed my girl,” says Mother. “I want her with me and she’ll be fine on the trains. Won’t you Elsie?”

I hate it when Mother does this to me; makes me say something that will make Granny even more upset. So I just shrug my shoulders and continue removing the peas from the pods.

Uncle Hannie comes into the kitchen in his vest and underpants. “Hannie,” says Mother. “Why don’t you get dressed? Don’t you see we have a visitor?”

But Hannie ignores her. He looks at Greg and frowns. “You speak the language?” he asks and Mother rolls her eyes, Greg looks confused and Granny mercilessly chop-chops the carrots.

When the food is ready, Uncle Greg is still around, so it looks like he will stay for supper even though Granny never asked him to. I set the table and put an extra plate, knife and fork down for him. Mother sits next to me and Uncle Greg sits opposite us, Granny is in her chair at the head of the table and Uncle Hannie is at the foot. After Granny has said grace, Mother gets up to dish Uncle Greg’s food up for him. She spends most of the meal on her feet, fluttering about him, dishing him more food, giving him more salt and more pepper, keeping his glass filled with ginger beer.

Granny just “Hmmphs” under her breath all the time and Uncle Hannie just drinks beer after beer and plays with his food. He won’t eat anything Granny cooks lately because he says that she is trying to poison him. After supper, I help Mother to clean the kitchen while Granny has her tea and her smoke. Mother chatters non-stop to Uncle Greg, which is really irritating because it means that she washes up a lot slower and I have to wait for her to give me plates and things to dry. When we’re done, Uncle Greg says, “Thank you, Mrs September. I haven’t had a meal like that in a long time.” Granny says “Hmmpf” again and Uncle Greg looks at Mother and raises his eyebrows.

“I’m just going somewhere with Uncle Greg, quickly,” Mother tells me. “I won’t be away too long.”

Uncle Greg says goodbye, but Granny doesn’t even look up from her paper. I go with them to the front door and watch them getting into Uncle Greg’s orange-yellow Datsun. Mother waves at me and they drive away.

I don’t know what to do with myself now. I haven’t been to the library so I don’t have a book to read. Granny and Hannie are no fun. I wish that Mother didn’t have to go off like that with Uncle Greg. I sit down on the step of the stoep and pick the cat up. The cat quickly curls itself into a comfortable position in my lap, its soft, furry body warming my thighs. Soon I hear the muezzin crackling up over the crick-cricking of the crickets to summon the Muslim people to prayer. For the first time I realise that the scratching, crackling bit at the beginning must mean that it is a record being played – I had always thought that someone has to go and sing every morning and every night. The voice is loud and clear and I wish that I knew what the words meant and not just the tune. Slowly the men and boys emerge from their houses, all dressed in white, and like moths, they go floating past me without even noticing that someone is sitting here in the fading evening light, watching them on their way towards the mosque.

It begins to get dark and there is still no sign of Mother. I don’t know what to think about Uncle Greg or why Granny doesn’t like him. I don’t like that Chinese bangle he gave me; I didn’t expect it from him. That’s the kind of thing I’d expect of Uncle Hannie, who is

always trying to trick me and tease me. And it felt so weird. I put my arm out and try to give myself a Chinese bangle, but it doesn't work.

"Elsie," Granny calls out from inside the house. "Elsie, come inside now, it's getting dark already."

## **The Change of Life**

Granny wakes me up early, even though it's Saturday and she usually lets me sleep a bit later on weekends. But today is no ordinary Saturday. Today is the day that Mother is coming to fetch me so that we can move into our new house, me and her and Uncle Greg, just like she said. Granny is helping me to pack up my clothes and things, even though I don't have much to pack. But I do have more to pack than when Mother left me here because in the time that I have been here, Granny bought me quite a few new dresses, tracksuits, socks and underwear and things.

Even though Granny's back is turned towards me, I can tell that she is upset. She is busy folding and packing my clothes into her own suitcase. It's her special suitcase, the one that has been with her all the way to England and back, that time when she went to visit Uncle Danny. Granny has not yet taken off the sticker with her name and her address written on it, but the ink has faded quite a bit. She works very quickly and she doesn't say anything at all.

"Granny, are you worried about how you are going to do all the work without me?" I ask, but she doesn't reply. "Don't worry, Granny. I can always come after school to help you."

Still, Granny doesn't say anything. But she does turn around and she comes to me and puts her arms around me and squeezes me hard. "Oh, Elsie," says Granny and then she

sighs. “Don’t you worry about me, my girl. I’m just being a silly old woman. Maybe I’m going through the change of life,” she says.

“What’s that Granny? What do you mean?”

Granny gives a small dry laugh and says, “Oh, you know, when women get older, like in their fifties as I am now, they go a little crazy – hot one minute and cold the next. That’s what they call the change of life.”

“That’s a strange thing to call it though, don’t you think? Why is it called that?”

“Well,” says Granny. “I suppose your body changes and that causes your life to change too. I don’t know; it’s just what people call it. The proper word for it is menopause.”

“Men-o-pause. That’s a strange word. Not men-o-stop, just men-o-pause.”

Granny laughs, but only slightly. “You are so fascinated with words,” she says. “To other people, words are only what you call things. I would not be surprised if you grow up to be an English teacher. You know, I always wanted to be a teacher, but with my illness and everything, I had to leave school after standard five.”

“Right,” says Granny, closing the suitcase and snapping the lock shut. “You’re all packed. I am going to work in the garden for a bit until your mother comes to fetch you.”

I follow Granny into the kitchen and she doesn't even seem to notice that Uncle Hannie is eating straight from the fridge. She doesn't say, "Only horses stand and eat." She just walks straight past him, puts her sun-hat on her head, picks up her garden cutters and goes out the back door. Hannie turns around, "Auntie Elsie," he says. "Do you want some boerewors?" He holds out a raw piece of sausage.

"Yuck, that's disgusting!"

"Oh, well, if you don't want it, I'll have it," says Hannie, popping the raw boerewors into his mouth. Even though I've seen Hannie eating some really strange things, raw cauliflower and apple or orange with salt on it, this is really the limit.

"So you know my mother's coming to get me and I'm going to go and live with her again?" I ask Hannie, who is still chewing away happily on that raw meat. Hannie doesn't say anything; he just nods his head and breaks off another piece of boerewors.

"Are you going to miss me, Uncle Hannie?" He nods again and pops another disgusting piece of boerewors into his mouth. "Well, I'll miss you and Gran too. But I'll come and visit a lot." Hannie's too busy eating to even take notice of what I am saying, so I go outside and sit on the step of the stoep and wait for Mother and Uncle Greg to arrive.

After a while, I see the Datsun taking the corner at the bottom of the road. The car stops and I can hear the sound the handbrake makes when it is pulled up hard. Mother rushes

out of the car, but Uncle Greg does not get out. He just waves at me and sits back in his seat, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel.

“You ready?” Mother asks and when I say that I am, she says, “Well, then, let’s go.”

Granny comes in through the back door, checking her shoulders for bugs and insects that always cling to her clothing whenever she works in the garden. “Hello, Mother,” my mother says brightly, but Granny is still in a bad mood.

“Hello Lilly,” she says. “So, where is that husband of yours?”

“He’s in the car,” says Mother. “He’s in a bit of a rush.”

“Hmmp,” says Granny.

I run into my room and return dragging Granny’s suitcase. Mother takes it from me and Granny and Hannie follow us to the door. “Hello Mrs September, Hello Hannie,” Uncle Greg calls out from the car and waves at them, but both of them ignore him.

“Well, thank you for looking after Elsie for all this time,” Mother says to Granny.

But Granny ignores this too. She just puts her hand on my shoulder and says, “Take care of yourself, my girl.”

Uncle Greg finally gets out of the car to unlock the boot and Mother dumps Granny's suitcase into it. Then Mother goes around to the passenger side and lifts the seat forward so that I can get onto the back seat. Uncle Greg shuts his door and starts the car up and then we are driving away from Hannie and Granny who are still at the gate, waving at us.

## **The House in Gympie Street**

Uncle Greg pulls up outside a very sad-looking semi-detached house. The white paint has greyed and is peeling off the walls. The roof is made of corrugated iron, with some red sheets and some dirty grey sheets. It's not just the house that looks sad and forlorn, but the street as well. There are nappies hanging on lines that have been strung across people's front stoeps. I wonder what Granny would have to say about that. In Wynberg, you never see washing hanging on a front stoep. Cars are parked on both sides of the road and most of the houses have their front doors open. Some men are crowding around a car that has its door open and music blaring from its radio. Children are playing in the middle of the road – where the cars are meant to drive – and the pavements are clogged with litter.

“Well, this is it.” Mother says brightly. “I know it doesn't look as nice as our old house, but don't worry, we'll get it fixed up in no time.”

Uncle Greg unlocks the boot and takes Granny's special suitcase out. “So what do you have in this bag, Elsie? It feels like a ton of bricks.” Mother unlocks the door and Uncle Greg follows her into the dim passageway. Two girls and a boy who were playing in the road have now come to stand at the gateway and they stare at me curiously. One of the little girls is quite pretty; she looks like she's about four years old. She has long dark black hair and big, interested eyes. But she doesn't have shoes on and her hair is stringy

and full of knots. She has a runny nose that has not been wiped and when she smiles at me she reveals a big gap where her front teeth used to be.

“Hello,” she says boldly. “*My naam is Mona. Wat is jou naam?*”

“Elsie,” I say, and abruptly turn around from these dirty children and run into the house before they can say any more. I know that Granny would definitely not want me to play with them. “They probably have lice,” she would say. “Or heaven knows what other germs.”

Inside the house is just as bad as out on the street. The house looks really old, but not like Granny’s house, which is very old too. This house is old in a bad way. The paint inside is damp, it is bubbling and peeling off the walls and there are huge stains, probably from the rain. The wooden floors are creaky and really filthy and some of the floorboards are missing. The place smells terrible too – musky and dank. How can Mother want us to live in a dump like this?

“Elsie,” Mother calls from somewhere further inside the house, “Come and see your new room.” Trying not to breathe in the horrible smell I walk down the passage, past a big room that will probably be mother’s room or the lounge. In the next room off the passage, mother is pulling rotting curtains from the wall and I nearly gasp when I see that there is no window behind them. There is no window in this room for me to look out of. With no light coming in, I’ll have to keep the electric light on all the time.

“Don’t worry, love,” mother says softly. “We’ll fix it up, you’ll see. We’ll get this place sorted out in no time. Uncle Greg is going to go and fetch our furniture, the landlord of our house in Balfour Road said that he kept it in his own garage for us. Isn’t that nice of him? Anyway, once we get the place cleaned up and all the furniture is here, you’ll see, it will look a whole lot better.”

Mother goes to speak to Uncle Greg about giving her some money for some sandpaper and paint and things and who they can ask to help them with a bakkie so that they can get the furniture. I think about the other rooms I used to have, the one in the house in Balfour Road, which is right at the top of Woodstock. If you went and stood outside that house, or looked out of the lounge window, you could see all the way down to the harbour. Mother painted my room in that house a pale pink and she had special pink ballerina curtains made for me.

My room at Granny’s house wasn’t as pretty as that room, but it was nice too. It was my mother’s room when she was a child and Mother told me that Granny has not changed it much since then. That room is bigger than my room in Balfour Road and it is bigger than this room. It has green curtains and all the furniture that Mother used to have when she was my age, the single brass bed, the bookcases and the heavy, dark wood dressing table with three mirrors. I liked the dressing table the most, because if you angled the mirrors in one way, you could see the back of you, and if you angled them in another way, there would be ten or more of you staring back.

“Elsie,” says Mother, who has suddenly reappeared in the doorway. “Uncle Greg is going to organise our furniture. I want to go to the hardware shop in the meantime. We’ll get some paint and then we can start on your room, okay? Do you want to come along with me?”

I know that Mother is trying really hard to make me think that this place is okay. But nothing can take away this feeling that I have. It is the same feeling in my chest and my throat like I had that time our class went on an outing to the Castle when they took us down into the dungeon. They closed the door and it was so dark and so black, you couldn’t see anything in front of you. I desperately wanted to get out, to not feel like the darkness was smothering me like a thick blanket and to go back into the sunshine where I could see everything and not think what it was like for the people who were locked up in here all those many years ago. I could not breathe properly and I felt dizzy, like I was going to faint. The bodies in the darkness seemed to be moving round and round me, slowly at first and then faster, and all I could think of was I have to get out – I have to get out – until they unlocked the door. I raced out of that dungeon so fast, ignoring my teacher and the tour guide who were both calling after me. I just ran until I reached a doorway to the outside and in the open, I could breathe again.

So of course I leap at the chance to go with Mother to the hardware shop. I nod my head and follow her down the dim passage and breathe a sigh of relief when we are back outside and in the sunshine. We walk past the group of children still playing in the road. The little girl, Mona, waves at us and smiles widely without her front teeth. I follow

Mother up the road and notice the sign on the corner with the name of our new street.

“Gympie Street,” I read aloud. “That’s a funny name, don’t you think?”

But Mother just nods and says, “At least it’s close to the shops and to the station.” It may be close to the shops and to the station, but it is quite a far walk to the hardware shop and our trip there is not made any easier by all the people crowding the pavements of the Main Road because it is a Saturday morning.

When we get to the hardware shop at last, Mother goes straight to the display of paints.

“So,” she says, “what colour do you want for your new room?”

I shrug my shoulders. “I don’t care.”

“Do you want pink again?”

“No.”

“Well, if you don’t choose a colour, I am going to paint it the same colour as the rest of the house,” she says. I shrug my shoulders again because I really don’t care. No colour is going to make me like that house any better. But I do notice that she takes a big can of a creamy colour and a smaller one of bright yellow. She also gets a big broom, a dustpan, a scrubbing brush, a bucket and two bottles of Handy Andy. How are we going to carry all of these things?

But I needn't have worried, because when Mother pays at the till, the man asks her if she is here with a car. Mother says that she does not have a car, she doesn't even know how to drive. She also adds that she hopes that the things won't be too heavy. Then the man asks Mother if she lives nearby and when she replies that she does, he says, "Just wait a minute and I'll get the boy to help you carry." My mother is like that; she can get people to do anything she wants.

Mother says, "Thanks. I'd really appreciate that." And a few seconds later, the man returns with a sullen looking boy who is not much taller than I am, so he can only be about two or three years older. The boy is wearing a paint-splattered red overall and he doesn't say hello. He just puts the Handy Andy, the scrubbing brush and the dustpan in the bucket. Then he stacks the smaller paint tin on top of the bigger one, puts his arm through the bucket handle and picks up the paint tins with a grunt.

"Merrem," he says to Mother. "Can Merrem take the broom please Merrem?" Mother picks the broom up, turns around to say thank you once more to the man behind the counter and then walks out of the shop with the boy following her and me following the boy.

No one says anything all the way to our new house. When we get there, the boy simply dumps everything on the stoep. Mother says, "Thank you very much," and she takes a big, shiny twenty-cent coin from her purse and gives it to him. The boy grabs the money quickly and turns around and walks away without even saying thank you or goodbye.

Uncle Greg's car is no longer parked in front of the house, so he must have gone to fetch our furniture already. I help Mother to take all the things inside. Mother puts on an old tracksuit and ties a scarf around her head. Then she sets to work, in my room first, sweeping and scrubbing the floor and the walls, then scouring the floor with sandpaper. I try to help her, but I am not as fast as she is and my arms get tired very quickly. We work all morning and by afternoon, there is still no sign of Uncle Greg or of the furniture.

“Well,” says Mother, “I think it's time for a break and I am starving. Let's go and see if we can find some food.”

Mother takes off her scarf, but she doesn't change out of her old tracksuit, which I think is quite strange because she always makes sure that she looks nice whenever she goes outside, even if it is only to go to the shop. We go to the fish and chips shop that we passed earlier and my stomach rumbles at the smell of frying fish and chips. Mother orders a large parcel of fish and chips, two small bottles of coke, some rolls and some pickled onions. When we get back to the house, she finds two plates and dishes some fish and chips and onions into the one and then closes it with the other. “This is for Uncle Greg,” she says. There are no other plates around, so Mother and I sit on the floor and eat fish and chips from the paper it was wrapped in. When we're finished eating, Mother lights herself a cigarette. “I wonder what's taking him so long,” she says. She finishes her cigarette quickly, a lot quicker than she normally does and then lets it sizzle out in the now empty coke bottle. “Well,” she says, getting up from the floor, “it's back to work for us.”

By evening, Mother and I have swept all the floors, cleaned all the windows, dusted and wiped everywhere and Mother has applied a first coat of bright yellow paint to my new room. I must admit that it does look a bit better, but I still don't like this place. "Well we've cleaned the place up a bit, but we are certainly a mess," says Mother. I look at her and then I look at myself. Mother is right, her face is streaked with dirt and sweat and her clothes and arms have speckles of bright yellow paint on them. My arms ache and my hands are red.

"I can't make supper without the stove," Mother says. "I don't know when Uncle Greg is going to come back with our things. Maybe he's having problems getting a bakkie or maybe our old landlord doesn't want to give him our furniture. I don't know. But I'll go and get us something to eat in the meantime and you can go and have a bath." Mother must have noticed my grimace because she adds, "Don't worry, it's clean. I scoured it with Handy Andy and some bleach."

Mother has cleaned up the bathroom quite well and she's put a new cake of soap in the soap-dish and bath-towels hang from the railing. I am still in the bath when I hear men's voices inside. It must be Uncle Greg and there's another man with him. They are talking and laughing quite loudly, but they must be near the front of the house because I can't make out what they are saying. I pull the plug and get out of the bath quickly. Then I dry myself and get into my pyjamas. Before I reach my new room, the front door opens and Mother comes in, her arms piled with takeaways.

I rush to help her carry the things to the kitchen. Then we go back into the lounge where Uncle Greg is sitting on the floor with a man and drinking beer from those extra big bottles – Long Toms, they call them.

“I see you’ve found a bakkie,” Mother says to Uncle Greg. “But where are all our things?”

“Woman, have you no manners?” says Uncle Greg. “Can’t you see we have a visitor? Smithy, I’d like you to meet Lilly, my lovely wife and Elsie, our daughter.” Uncle Greg’s eyes are red and when he speaks spit flies out of his mouth. He is obviously drunk already and so is his friend.

“Pleased to meet you,” slurs Smithy, reaching out to take Mother’s hand and planting a sloppy, drunk kiss on it.

“But Greg, you were supposed to get the furniture,” Mother says, her voice going up a little. “What are we supposed to sleep on tonight?”

“Why don’t you go and get us all some of that food and then I’ll tell you what happened. Come on, a man is hungry,” he says, rubbing his paunch and then pinching Mother on the bum.

Mother turns around and I follow her into the kitchen. She dumps Uncle Greg's cold fish and chips into a piece of newspaper. Then she rinses the plates and dries them with some toilet paper. She unwraps the cardboard boxes with hamburgers in them and throws some chips out onto each plate. Her face is red and I can see that she is angry. "Here," she says, giving me the two plates, "go and take this to them."

I go back into the lounge and give the men their food. Mother is in my room now, laying a blanket out on the floor. "It looks like we have to camp out tonight," she says. "I'll go and fetch your food and another blanket for you."

She returns with the remaining food. Mother has broken a hamburger box into two halves to act as our plates and each contains half a hamburger and some chips. "I didn't expect company, so I only bought three burgers," she explains. Then she sits down on the blanket with me and we eat in silence, listening to the men talking and laughing. When we're done, mother picks up the mess. "You must be tired," she says. "We've had quite a day. Go to sleep now." She puts the other blanket over me and gives me one of her jerseys to use as a pillow. Then she turns off the light and closes the door.

I lie on the floor looking at the empty room. The men are making such a noise and the paint fumes are giving me a headache. I count sheep but it doesn't work. I wish that Mother never moved to Johannesburg and never came back with an Uncle Greg. Then everything would still be like it used to be, just me and her in our house in Balfour Road. I'd rather be at Granny's house even. At least when I couldn't fall asleep at Granny's

house, I could get into her bed and she would tell me stories and stroke my hair until I fell asleep next to her. But even if Mother had a bed for me to get into, I can't curl up next to her because Uncle Greg will be there. I wish I had someone to talk to, anyone, even Uncle Hannie. For a moment I think about getting up and telling Mother that I can't fall asleep, but I know that it's not such a good idea. Mother will probably be cross with me and besides, it would mean going back into the lounge again and I don't feel like Uncle Greg and his friend.

## Chapter 4

When he comes this time, I am ready for him. I am not at all surprised when I answer the knock at the door and he's standing there. I don't say anything, just smile and let him in. I am still trying to lock the security door and he is all over me, kissing the back of my neck, putting his hands underneath my clothes, groping my breasts and pressing his erection against my back.

I turn around and he pushes me against the security gate and kisses me for so long that my jaw begins to ache. Eventually I push him away. "I didn't know if you were going to come again," I say. "Would you like something to drink?"

"No thanks," he says, and pulls my sweater up over my head.

"Wait, the neighbours ..." I say, turning around to close the front door. He follows me into my bedroom and I am astonished at how quickly I am lying naked on the bed and amazed at how extra large his penis is. He has a beautiful, boyish body. He is thin and not muscular, but his stomach is flat and smooth. I am pleased that he doesn't have any hair on his chest. I sit on the edge of my bed and try to get as much of his penis as I can into my mouth. He grabs a breast in each hand and roughly fondles, squeezes and nibbles at my nipples. Then he pushes me back on the bed and trails his tongue over my torso – from my neck to my pubic area. Suddenly he turns me over onto my belly and starts kissing and squeezing the round mounds of my bum. Thwack – he slaps me, hard and

loud. I am shocked, but I don't turn around or say anything as his fingers find their way to my moist vagina. Thwack, he slaps me again and again. I am stunned and not sure what to do, but I don't want him to stop. Instead, I try to concentrate on anticipating precisely when the next slap will come. Thwack thwack thwack – loud and hard and I gasp as his huge penis penetrates me from behind. He holds me by the waist and rams into me again and again and again – hard and harder, fast and faster until I feel like I can't stand it anymore. Thwack thwack thwack as his penis throbs and thrusts inside of me. Thwack – and I feel myself climaxing and his warm semen inside of me and then I collapse onto the bed, pulling a pillow underneath my chin. He lies on his back, staring up at the ceiling and I watch his chest rise and fall, rise and fall as I wait for the burning and throbbing skin on my bum to calm down. We lie in silence for a while – I don't know what to say and I can't even bring my eyes to meet his. This has never happened to me before.

“Do you mind if I have a smoke?” he asks eventually. He doesn't wait for me to answer, just tosses a Camel straight from the packet to his mouth and flourishes his Zippo lighter underneath. It must have taken him months of practice to perfect a move like that. I never allow people to smoke in my bedroom – not even Mary Agnes gets that right and she ignores me most of the time when it comes to my smoking rules, particularly when she's in my car, but she knows I draw the line at my bedroom door. I don't have the energy to say anything about it though. I just watch him lying on his back, smoking in the dark, with tiny beads of sweat trickling down his forehead.

It has been a hot, uncomfortable day with a berg wind blowing. But now, through my window, I see that the weather is changing. The sky is getting dark and everything is quiet and still. My wind chimes tinkle softly and calmly outside. Berg winds, which are known to depress people, even to drive them to suicide, are always followed by rain. I try not to think about how I shouldn't have let Shaun do that to me and I definitely should not have enjoyed it, but I won't go there now. Instead I concentrate on the way his chest rises and falls as he inhales and exhales. The cigarette is just a little stub now, so I get up to fetch an ashtray from the kitchen. "You want anything?" I call out to him. "You hungry?"

"No," he says, appearing in the doorway. "Just come back to bed." He doesn't take the ashtray I hold out. Instead, he carefully pours the ash he had collected in one hand into the ashtray and then grinds the cigarette out. I empty the contents into the bin and put the ashtray into the sink. Then I open the fridge and take out a Castle Lite. "Want one?"

"Okay," he says and I take out another and open both bottles. I can't help but notice that he goes straight back to the bedroom – doesn't stop by the bathroom to wash his hands even though he has used one of them as an ashtray. Shaun flops back onto the bed and drinks the beer lying down in large gulps, like a greedy baby drinking a bottle. "Look, there's lightning," he says. "There's going to be a storm."

I pull back the duvet and get underneath even though it's still quite hot. Shaun puts his empty bottle on my pedestal, lifts himself up and gets in underneath as well. He puts a

hand, cold from the beer bottle, over my breast and rubs my nipple. But I push his hand away, turn him around and curl up behind him, moulding my stomach around his bum. Suddenly I feel very tired. Too tired to listen to what he is saying, too tired to even think of saying something back. I fall into a deep sleep without being able to stop myself or to even consider how impolite it is.

I wake up before the alarm. It is still dark outside but I am wide awake. Quietly turning off the alarm so that it won't wake Shaun, I get up and stumble to the bathroom in the dark. As I sit down on the toilet for my early morning pee, I nearly gasp out loud with pain. My bum feels so tender. Sleep may have made me forget, but now that I am awake I don't know if I'll be able to think of anything else – least of all while I am sitting. I get up slowly and then flush. As much as I'd love a bath right now, showering will be a less painful option. I turn on the taps so that the water can warm up while I floss, brush and gargle with mouthwash. The bathroom is filled with steam by the time I get into the shower. The hot water stings my bum and I twist myself around to see if there are any marks. I can't see properly, but I do make out a few red marks – about the size of fingerprints – on my bum. It doesn't look too bad though, not as bad as it feels. Just how hard did I let that maniac slap me? I don't know what to make of last night. I have had sex with many men in my life. I mean, I didn't earn the name Eveready Elsie in high school by being a Girl Guide. Strange that I remember that name now, though. I haven't let myself think about it in years. But now I clearly remember how outraged I was about the whole sordid affair – after all I was given that name because of the one rare occasion that I didn't have sex and not because of the innumerable times that I did.

David Jackson – now that’s a name I am not likely to forget. I don’t even know why I didn’t fuck him. I mean, I liked him – thought that he was cute. In any case, I had done a lot worse than him. And I thought that I *was* going to do him. I thought so when he started smiling at me, I thought so when he started talking to me at break times, I thought so when we jumped over the school fence together and ran away to his house. I definitely thought so when I saw that there was no one else at his place. I didn’t even need him to make me lunch like he did, I would have done it with him anyway. Toast, fried eggs and atchaar – I ate it all even though I absolutely loathe eggs. It wasn’t even bad and I remember thinking that maybe I would eat eggs again in the future. But when David Jackson tried to kiss me with his eggy breath, he looked so comical with his eyes snapped shut and his lips all puckered, a look of intense concentration on his face. I just had to laugh out loud. His eyes flew open and he looked confused and concerned. “I’m sorry,” I said, trying very hard to stop myself. “I’m sorry,” as I grabbed my schoolbag and raced out of the door.

I ran and ran and didn’t stop running until I got to Joe’s Pool Bar. That was where Mary Agnes and I would hang out every afternoon, hustling the guys for beers or money. We would get a big kick out of beating them, especially those cocky, self-assured ones who would be so humiliated about being beaten by a girl that they would hastily retreat from the club, their egos deflated. Joe’s was very empty that day and I had to wait forever for Mary-Agnes to arrive. She never was much into running away from school. Not like me – I was quite the expert at that point. After a long and boring wait, Mary did turn up and we both had a good laugh when I related the David Jackson debacle.

But, as I was soon to find out, that was not going to be the end of it. When Mary-Agnes and I walked into our first period class the next morning, the first thing we saw was that new graffiti had been added to the wall. In huge, sloping, but careful black lettering: **Eveready Elsie – fucks like no ordinary slut does and lasts longer.** Taken from that advert for Eveready batteries, I wasn't only insulted by the content, but also by the lack of originality.

We didn't say a word, Mary and I, just went over to our desks and sat down. "David Jackson ... it has to be him," I whispered to Mary-Agnes. "This is it, this is war."

And what a war it was. David Jackson was in the same standard as us, but he was in the Afrikaans class. So we went into all the classrooms that his class used and fired off our own missiles. We spent hours planning – our response was going to be original, witty and far, far more damaging. Mary and I decided that each one would be different and for some reason we wanted ours to rhyme. I don't remember most of them, but I do remember the first one. On David Jackson's first period classroom wall, I wrote in big, bold, red letters:

**You'll never get any satisfaction**

**From David Jackson**

**His little dick, he can't raise up**

**So you'll wait forever for a fuck**

**That's why you're better off wanking**

**Than expecting a stiffie from David Jackson's little thing!**

After this first message, we decided to compose shorter ones – not only does your arm begin to ache when you write long verses on classroom walls, but the longer you take to write, the greater your chances are of getting caught. Not that the teachers at that crummy school ever bothered us. Anyway, the thing that stuck to David came from this:

**David Jackson**

**Put your dick in traction.**

I don't know why that caught on, but for weeks people followed that stupid sod around, chanting, "David Jackson, dick in traction". Mary and I certainly didn't consider it to be one of our best – I mean, we had some little rhymes that were absolutely brilliant. In fact, Mary fully expected the general school population to have no idea of what the word traction meant, and who knows – perhaps she was right.

Eventually David Jackson and I were called into the principal's office. He came off worse than I did. I don't know if Mr Hendricks liked me or if it was because I was a girl, but it was David who had to paint the classroom walls in addition to the cuts that he received. I just had to apologise to him and promise Mr Hendricks that I wouldn't write on the walls again, that's all.

Anyway, my point is that David Jackson wasn't far off – when I was in high school I did fuck anything that moved. And it's not just that – I have had my share of perversion too. I mean, I once did three guys at the same time. I wasn't drunk, I wasn't drugged. I was fifteen. It took a good few years before I realised it was not my life's work to fuck

everything that came with a penis (ha-ha). And then I went to the other extreme and seemed to make up for all that sex I had as a teenager by having very little of it in recent years. But this thing with Shaun, this is something else. Now he's lying there in my bed and I'm not sure if I want him there. I don't even know if I can bear to look at him and I didn't think of bringing my clothes into the bathroom, so I'll have to go back inside. But maybe I am making too much of this – a couple of slaps doesn't mean that tonight I'll be handcuffed to the bed with Shaun dressed in leather, brandishing a whip. I enjoyed it, didn't I? And like Sheryl Crow says, if it makes you happy it can't be that bad.

As I turn on the bedroom light and open my wardrobe, Shaun groans. He tugs on my towel, trying to pull me back into bed. "You're not going to work, are you? Do you have to go?" he asks. "Can't you call in sick? I think that's what we should do. We can both call in sick and spend the whole day together."

And that is all it takes. All of my angst evaporates just like the steam did a few moments ago when I opened the bathroom window. And while calling in sick when I'm not is something that I've never done before, I find myself doing it this time. For five nights and four days we stay in bed. I don't bother answering the phone, letting the machine take messages instead. I don't call anyone back, not even Gran. I don't know what is happening outside. I don't even know what day it is anymore. Morning melts into afternoon, into night while we fuck, talk, eat and sleep.

"I have never done anything like this before," I say.

“Everything we need we have right here,” Shaun says. “Outside there is nothing.”

## **The Moneybox**

“Oh, Mother but you look beautiful,” I gasp. It is not that she doesn’t often look beautiful, what has really surprised me is that Mother spent the last few hours – since we came home from the station where she met me after my first solo trip to Wynberg and back – fighting with Uncle Greg. She cried quite a lot too, but now there is no trace of the tears, no red, puffy eyes, no look of misery etched onto her face. Mother is wearing a black mini skirt, high heeled, strappy silver sandals and a halter-necked, cropped-above-the-navel top of red, black and silver stripes. She has painted her mouth a bright shade of red and with her pale skin, the black shock of hair and black eye-pencilled eyes, the effect is quite dramatic. When she stopped fighting with Uncle Greg, she locked herself up in the bathroom and I was afraid of what she would be like when she came out. But here she is, looking stunning, and smelling that clean smell of just out of the bath. Mother smells of Johnson’s Baby Powder, Oil of Olay, Soft ’n Lovely hair spray and the Jontue she likes to dab generously behind her ears whenever she goes out.

“Where are you going Mother?”

“Elsie, my girl, I have good news. I have found a job as a waitress at a nice restaurant in Town, and I am going to work now. Don’t worry about a thing, Uncle Greg is here to look after you. I’ve told him to go out and get you something to eat, but if you are hungry in the meantime, you can make yourself a sandwich. Just be sure to tidy up after you, okay?”

“But why were you and Uncle Greg fighting? Is everything okay?”

“Oh, Elsie, don’t you worry about that,” she says. “We just had a little disagreement. Everything is fine now. You just be a good girl and listen to Uncle Greg. Don’t stay up too late – you have school tomorrow so I want you in bed before nine.”

“Can I have some perfume and some lipstick too?” I ask and Mother quickly paints my mouth red and dabs some Charlie behind my ears.

“There,” she says with a smile. “You look lovely.” Then she bends down and gives me a lipstick kiss on my cheek and walks briskly out of the door. I follow her and watch her walk up our street, the men all shouting after her and whistling. Mother just ignores them and walks with her back straight and her head held high, like she’s a model walking down the ramp in a fashion show on TV. At the top of the street she turns to the right, she doesn’t even look back or wave goodbye.

I turn around and go back inside. Uncle Greg is in Mother’s room, so I move quietly about the house in case he is sleeping. The bathroom still smells like Mother, but she has left it in a mess. I pick up Mother’s clip-on gold earrings and clip them to my ears. The lipstick and the earrings make me look different, but not beautiful like Mother.

I nearly jump with fright at Uncle Greg's voice. "Elsie, you are growing up to be a very pretty girl." I had not seen him standing there in the doorway. My face goes red and I pull Mother's earrings off my ears and wipe the lipstick off my mouth with toilet paper.

"Don't worry," says Uncle Greg. "I won't tell her that you were messing with her things. Your secret is safe with me."

"She knows," I mumble. "She put the lipstick on for me herself."

"So why did you take it off then? It makes you look so pretty, so grown up."

I busy myself with picking up Mother's things – her dirty cotton wool balls, her spilled face powder, her clothes on the bathroom floor. But Uncle Greg does not go away.

"Leave that alone," he says. "Come and see, I have a present for you."

I hope it's not a Chinese bangle again or something silly like that. But I don't say anything; I just follow him out of the bathroom and into his and Mother's bedroom. He rummages about in the top shelf of the cupboard and then removes a big cardboard box. The springs of Mother's old bed creak as he sits down heavily. He pats the pink duvet next to him so I sit down.

"I was keeping this for a special occasion," he says. "But I suppose that now is as good a time as any. Go ahead, open it."

I open it very carefully. After that Chinese bangle, I expect the worst, like some weird creature to jump out of the box and bite me in the face. But I needn't have worried. Carefully wrapped in tissue paper inside the box is the most exquisitely carved little wooden house that I have ever seen. "It's beautiful, Uncle Greg. Did you make it yourself?"

"Oh, no," he chuckles. "I am not that good with my hands. It's a moneybox. Look, you put the money in through the windows and if you want to take it out again, you can get to it through the door."

The wood is dark and it still smells of varnish. The house is a slim double story with a tiny little knob on the door and real glass panes in the windows. What steady, precise hands must have made a thing like this! Carefully, I open and close all the windows and the door as if I might disturb someone living in the house.

"Do you want some money to put in your house?" Uncle Greg asks me and I nod my head eagerly. "I'll give you some money to put in your house. But first, you must give me something." I look at him blankly – I can't think of anything to give him. He lifts me up and puts me on his lap. "I will give you twenty cents, but you must first give me a kiss."

Quickly, I turn around and give him a peck on the lips. Uncle Greg takes his wallet out of his shirt pocket and removes a twenty-cent coin from it. He presses the coin down into

the palm of my hand and I hastily deposit it through the window. The coin drops into the bottom of the house with a hollow clunk.

“Do you want some more money for your money box?” asks Uncle Greg.

“Yes please,” I reply.

“Okay,” he says. “I’ll give you fifty cents, but then you must give me a better kiss.”

I turn around again and press my lips to his, this time counting in my head, one two three four five six, before taking my lips away again. Uncle Greg scratches about in his wallet – he has a lot of coins in it – but, not finding a fifty-cent coin, he counts out two twenties and a ten.

“Look at this,” says Uncle Greg, removing a crisp new two rand note from his wallet.

“Do you want this two rand note for your moneybox?”

I nod my head uncertainly. No one has ever offered me this much money in my entire life and I’m not sure that Uncle Greg will actually give it to me.

“I am going to give you this two rand note,” he says softly as though he is telling me a secret and is afraid that someone might hear. “But before I give you this two rand note, I

am going to teach you something very special. I am going to teach you how grown-ups kiss.”

He lifts me around to face him and then leans down and puts his mouth closer to mine. I can hear his breathing and I watch his nostrils expanding and contracting. His nostril hairs are long and dark and there is a fair sized bogey sticking out of the right hand nostril. There is a faint smell of beer on his breath and the smell of cigarettes and chewing gum. Then he puts his lips to mine, so close that his moustache tickles my nose. His lips feel harder than they did before. Unexpectedly, he pushes his tongue through my lips and rubs it about in my mouth. His tongue feels strange and weird. Like soft and hard at the same time and slippery. This grown-ups kissing causes a funny feeling in my chest and down my back, almost like the Chinese bangle except that I know I don't have hair there. I don't think I like the way that grown-ups kiss, but I wait until he's done.

“Did you like that?” he asks me.

I don't know what to say, so I shrug my shoulders.

“Here,” he says. “This is for you.” He folds the two rand note in half and then into a quarter and places it in the palm of my hand. I look at the blue note carefully placed like that in the middle of my palm but now trying to open itself up. “Take it,” says Uncle Greg, firmly closing my hand around it. “It's for you. You've earned it. Put it in your moneybox.”

I open the door and shove the two rand note inside. I get up from Uncle Greg's lap and he grabs my wrist and says, "Elsie, don't worry. I won't tell your Mother that I gave you money so she can't take it away from you. What she doesn't know won't bother her. Now go and make us something to eat, and give Uncle Greg another kiss before you go."

This time he hasn't offered any money. I kiss him quickly on the cheek and walk out the room, feeling his eyes on my back with every step I take.

## Mona's Smile

“Hello Elsie!” calls a voice and I look across the road. Mona is standing at her gate, waving her little arm vigorously. She is so much younger than I am, but she is not shy to talk to people she barely knows. “*Wil jy saam't my kom speel?*” she shouts across the road. I had decided that I would not make friends with any of the children in my road. But I have grown used to having Hannie to play with and Mother and Uncle Greg are lying on the bed together and I have nothing else to do with myself, so I cross the road.

“*Kom,*” Mona says, taking my hand in hers. “*Ons kan binne speel.*” I don't speak much Afrikaans, so I don't say anything, I just follow her inside. I am quite surprised at the way their house looks inside. On the outside it is not much different from all the other houses in the road with the same grimy, grubby once was white but now is grey and peeling off the walls paint. But inside it is spotlessly neat. There is not a thing that looks like it is not in exactly the right place, unlike at our house where things lie around all over the place. This is not the kind of house I expected Mona to live in because she looks so untidy in comparison.

“What do you want to do?” I ask Mona.

“Sssh!” she says, putting her finger on her lips. She takes my hand again and tiptoes past an open doorway, where two women lie sleeping on a bed and another one is sprawled on the floor beside them. Like the rest of the house, this room also looks very neat, except

for the untidy way that the women are lying around and the empty bottles, glasses and overflowing ashtrays on the floor. Mona leads me straight down the passage and into the kitchen, which is where the passage ends.

*“Ons speel huise-huise,”* she says to me. *“Ek is die ma en jy is my dogter.”*

*“Nee, dit maak nie sense nie,”* I say. *“Kan jy Engels praat? My Afrikaans is nie goed nie.”*

“Yis, I can also speak English,” Mona says, rolling her eyes as if to suggest that I am really stupid or something.

“Well, it doesn’t make sense that you should be the mother and I should be the child because I am older than you.”

“No, I am the mummy,” Mona says indignantly. “You jus’ wait here and keep quiet.”

She turns around and stalks out of the room in a huff, leaving me standing in a spotlessly clean kitchen and wondering what to do next. Before I can think of anything, Mona returns, precariously balancing all the empty bottles, glasses and ashtrays in her little arms.

“Here my child,” she says. “Wash these things for mummy like a good girl.” She puts the bottles and glasses on the table and empties the ashtrays in the bin. Then she pushes a chair to the kitchen sink, climbs on top and runs water and dishwashing liquid into the sink. She climbs off the chair again and takes the glasses and the bottles and puts them into the sink.

“Come on, you must wash the things, you are the child and I spoke to you.”

“I don’t like this game. This is no fun. I am going home.”

“No,” Mona says. “You listen to me or I take my shoe off for you!”

She is quite bossy for her size, but I am really not in the mood for this. “No, I don’t want to play like this. You said we were going to play, this isn’t playing, this is work.”

“What you think? You think you can chat me back? I told you to wash up and you better listen or I am going to give you a good hiding. I am not talking again!”

“Mona, I am not going to wash those things and I don’t like this game, okay?”

“Okay,” she says with a sigh. “I’ll be the child and you can be the mummy. Now you sit there and I will make Mummy a cup of tea.” She pushes her chair to a tall cupboard, opens the door and climbs up again. When she comes back to the table, she is carrying a

plastic tea set. She sets out all the cups and saucers, then goes back to the sink, climbs onto the chair and pours water into the teapot. She pours me tea and tells me to drink it while she washes the dishes for mummy. Playing with Mona is like playing with Hannie, except that she is bossier. I wish that I had a friend my age to play with. I wish that Mary-Agnes lived across the road from me instead of Mona.

Mona looks so awkward, balancing on her chair to wash those things, with water splashing down her dress that I begin to feel sorry for her and a bit guilty too. "It's okay," I tell her. "You have some tea and Mummy will finish the dishes." Eagerly, she climbs down from the chair at the sink and busies herself with her tea set. I wash the rest of the things very quickly.

"Mona, why do you even wash the wine bottles?" I ask her.

"My mummy and them sell it at the bottle store when they are finished," she replies absently, without even looking up from her tea party.

"Let's go to my house," I say when I am done. "We can play better over there."

"But my mummy doesn't want me to play by other people's houses," she says. "I can only play here or outside our house."

"But your mother is sleeping, isn't she? Come on, we won't be long."

We tiptoe out of Mona's house and cross the street. Our house is quiet too, so Mother and Greg must still be lying down. "I have lots of nice dresses of my granny's. She gave them to me to play with. We can put them on and pretend that we are going to a dance." I tell Mona. "I even have some make-up, some of my mother's old make-up that she gave me and some Tinkerbell too. I tell you what, I'll wash your hair for you and make you look very pretty."

I have never washed anyone else's hair before, but when I look at Mona, I just want to clean her up. I lead her to the bathroom and I run the bath full of warm water with some of Mother's bubble bath. "Come on, get in," I tell Mona. I expected more resistance from her, but she takes her clothes off very quickly and gets into the bath.

"You wash yourself," I say, giving her a facecloth and the soap. "I'll start on your hair while you are busy with that." First I take the jug and pour water over Mona's hair, keeping one hand over her eyes so that water doesn't get into them, just like Mother used to do with me before I could wash my hair myself. Then I massage conditioner in and comb out Mona's hair, section by section, with Mother's wide-toothed comb. This isn't a very easy job because Mona's hair is very tangled, but she sits quietly and doesn't complain even though it must hurt.

When I have finally taken care of all the knots and tangles, I rinse Mona's hair with clean water and then massage shampoo into her hair and scalp. Then I rinse the shampoo out carefully, making sure that none of it gets into her eyes. "There, all done," I say. "Now

did you wash yourself properly? Did you wash behind your ears and underneath your arms? Okay, then get up and I'll take you out of the bath."

She stands up in the water and I wrap a towel around her hair and one around her body. Then I lift her over my shoulder like Mother used to do when she used to bath me. I carry Mona to my bedroom and put her down on my bed. All the beautiful dress-up clothes that Granny gave me hang in my cupboard, but none of them look like they will fit Mona. Some of them are too long, even for me, and they drag on the ground. But Mona would drown in even the shortest of Granny's dresses. So I rummage in my cupboard and eventually find one of my dresses, a brightly coloured mini dress of yellows, purples and reds that is too small for me now. This dress was my favourite once but I haven't worn it since before Mother left for Jo'burg.

"Here Mona, you can wear this dress, but you will have to put on your own vest and panties." She struggles into the dress, getting tangled in its arms and I have to help her. "Ooh, it looks very pretty on you," I say and she twirls around, letting the dress flare up around her.

Mona sits patiently while I carefully comb out her wet hair and struggle to set it in Mother's rollers. I have never rolled anyone's hair before, but I have often watched Mother doing it. You work in sections, starting from the front and then going to the back. You comb some setting lotion into the section of hair, then you roll it tightly around the roller. You set the roller in place with a large clip. All too soon I find out that this

business of rolling hair is not as simple as Mother made it look. But Mona doesn't say a word when I get a roller stuck in her hair and have to untangle it and start again. When I have finally set the last roller and put the hairnet over all the rollers, I get Mother's large, upright hairdryer out and get Mona to sit underneath. Mona looks so comical, a little girl with a large head. Even though I would usually squirm and do not last very long underneath that hairdryer, Mona sits there looking very pleased with herself, like a real lady at a hair salon.

"Mona, you have to sit here until your hair gets dry, okay? Here, you can read these books and I will go and make us something to eat quickly, okay? You hungry? You want me to make you a sandwich?" Mona nods her head eagerly and then busies herself with the books that I have given her.

Mother's door is still closed when I pass her room on the way to the kitchen. It is quiet inside so they still must be sleeping. I can't believe how much Mother sleeps these days. She goes out to work at night and I don't know what time she gets home because I am already asleep. The next day she is still sleeping when I get ready for school. She doesn't even wake me up or walk me to the station anymore. But that's okay because I wake up by myself and I know the way to the station. I just wish that he would get a job so that Mother wouldn't have to work at night and leave me alone with him.

When I return to my bedroom with a plate of toasted cheese sandwiches, Mona is still sitting patiently under the hairdryer even though her scalp must be baked by now. I would

have complained if I was under the hairdryer for so long, but I suppose that she is willing to suffer for beauty. Very quickly she devours the cheese sandwiches, making sure that she doesn't mess a crumb on herself.

"Let me see if your hair is dry yet," I say, lifting the hood of the hairdryer up and pulling out one of the rollers. "No, you must sit for another ten minutes. I'll do your make up in the meantime."

I take out my bag of make-up and sit on a chair in front of Mona. Her cheeks are red because of the heat of the hairdryer so I won't need to apply any blusher. "Now you must sit very still," I instruct Mona, "and stare straight in front of you." Very carefully I outline Mona's eyes with eye-pencil. Then I colour Mona's lips with some Fire Engine Red lipstick. "Close your eyes," I say to Mona, before I can put some silvery-blue eye shadow on her eyelids. "There, you look beautiful." I hold my small hand mirror in front of her and she stares at her reflection intently.

"Okay, I think that we can take the rollers out now," I say, switching the hairdryer off. Mona sits in front of my dressing table, staring intently into the mirror and looking very pleased with herself as I release each curl. "Do you want me to comb the curls out or should I leave them in?"

"*Nee, moenie* ... don't take the curls out!" Mona says indignantly.

Mona stands before my mirror, staring at her reflection. Her eyes are shiny with pride and she can't stop smiling at herself. I feel very proud of myself, like I have created a work of art. I wish I had a camera. I would have taken those before and after pictures like they do for the women in Mother's magazines when they have make-overs. "You look very pretty, Mona. Just like a princess."

It is only the sound of her name being screamed in the road outside that makes Mona tear her eyes away from her reflection. "Monnaah!" A look of pure terror appears on her face and for a moment she is frozen. Then she quickly rips off my dress and jumps into her own one. "*My ma gaan my vrek maak!*" she whispers. And I feel that hot, guilty feeling inside because this is all my fault.

I follow Mona outside where her mother is standing in the middle of the road and looking furious in her pink and white checked overcoat, a menacing belt in her hand. Her eyes fix on Mona with a look of utter satisfaction.

"*Ma, dit was nie my skuld nie ...*" Mona begins, but her mother doesn't give her half a chance.

"*Jou fokken bitch.*" she says, pulling her by the ear and slapping her tiny buttocks with the belt. How horribly humiliating, being hit like that in the middle of the road, with all the other children watching. It is terrible. I can't even bear to look at Mona's stricken face but I can't tear my eyes away from her either.

“*Wat maak jy in daai fokken jintoe se huis?*” Mona’s mother demands, slapping her again and pulling her into their own house. “*Nou lyk jy ook soos 'n jintoe jou fokken bitch!*”

*Jintoe* is another one of those words that Uncle Hannie tricked me into saying once. “If I have one bottle of gin,” he said, “I call it gin one. Now what do I say if I have two bottles of gin?”

“Gin two,” I said and he laughed like crazy. After that I didn’t need anyone to explain to me that it is a very, very bad word.

I know that none of this is Mona’s fault but I hate her anyway. Her and her stupid bitch of a mother. “Go ahead,” I tell Mona’s bitch mother in my mind. “Give her a good hiding. Make sure that she’ll never dare smile her stupid smile at me again.”

## Mr Smith's Combi

“But why do you have to work tonight Mommy? Why can't you stay at home with me? Why can't Uncle Greg go and work instead?”

“Sweetie, I have to go and work. Someone has to pay for the food that you eat.”

“But I don't like to stay at home by myself.”

“But you're not alone, Uncle Greg is here, he'll take care of you.”

“I don't like Uncle Greg. I don't like the way he plays with me. He asks me for a kiss and then he puts money in my moneybox.”

“Elsie, he is just trying to be a father to you. Please don't be difficult. Just give him a chance.”

So we play Uncle Greg's game every night. I try and I try, but I can't avoid it. I sit at the table, pushing my food around my plate for the longest time, waiting him out, hoping he'll give up and go away. But then he begins to take out all the coins in his pockets, piling them on the table in a little heap. “Elsie, go and fetch your moneybox.”

“Now give your daddy a kiss.” Ten cents. “Come on, you can do better than that, give daddy a nice kiss.” Twenty cents. “Have you been a good girl today or have you been naughty? I bet you’ve been naughty. You are such a naughty girl. Such a bad, bad girl. Daddy should put you over his knee and give you a hiding. You know what your daddy has for you? Your daddy has a cock. Do you want to see your daddy’s cock?”

But no one can fool me anymore, and since Granny has a few hens and a cock at home, I knew right from the first time he spoke about it, that he doesn’t have a real one. Cock is what he calls his privates. And it doesn’t matter what I do, if I say yes, if I say no, if I don’t say anything at all, he takes my hand and rubs it over the hard bulge in his trousers anyway.

Even though I didn’t want to be, I was curious the first time he took his privates out of his pants. The bulge felt so hard and so flat. I really got a fright when he pulled down his underpants and the privates leaped out like that.

“I know you want to play with daddy’s cock. You are such a naughty girl; you just want to touch it, don’t you? It’s okay, you can touch it. Don’t worry I won’t tell mommy about all the naughty things you get up to when she’s not around. Your secret is safe with me.”

And all I do is stare at the thick, fleshy, veiny thing that bears absolutely no resemblance to Granny’s speckled grey and white cock that walks around her yard like it belongs to him. Granny’s cock is beautiful, but he is really bad-tempered and vicious. When I was

staying with Granny, it was my job to feed the chickens in the mornings. That cock was so greedy, he wouldn't let any of the others get near his mealies. If any of them came near him, he'd flutter up quite high, almost flying at the intruder, and would bite the poor thing in the neck. I'd feel so sorry for those timid, sweet-natured hens for having to put up with such a vicious, bad-mannered creature. That horrible thing even bit my big toe once when I was feeding them. He probably thought it was a mealie. My toe was bleeding and Uncle Hannie thought it was a big joke to get bitten by a cock.

“Do you want to kiss daddy's cock? I know you do. You want to put it in your mouth and suck it. Don't you? Come on, suck daddy's cock.”

The neighbours are always complaining about Granny's chickens though, especially that cock. He crows early in the morning, before the sun comes up and wakes all the neighbours, even on weekends. The neighbours say that chickens shouldn't be allowed in a residential area, but Granny doesn't care. She says she loves all her animals – her dog, her cat and her chickens. The chickens remind her of when she was a little girl growing up on the farm, she says. “And anyway, what I do on my own property is my own business,” she always says. “Maybe I'll buy a goat and a few pigs too.”

It's over when he groans and that hot, strange-tasting milky liquid squirts from his privates. Fifty cents. One rand. Two rand. My moneybox is nearly full.

My food will be cold on my plate. He will zip up his pants, get a beer out of the fridge and collapse in front of the TV. Or he will go out in search of his friends. Maybe he will find one or two of them and bring them back home or maybe he will stay out. I will clear the dishes from the table and clean the kitchen. Then I will lock myself in the bathroom and brush my teeth until my gums bleed. I will run the water into the bath. It will be steaming hot and I will scrub myself clean. Then I will get into bed with my book. I keep the light on and read because I don't want to fall asleep until Mother gets home. I read in bed until my eyes burn and I can't keep them open any more. I read a whole Nancy Drew adventure in one night. Every week I have to go back to the library for more books. I have to struggle to find a Nancy Drew or a Hardy Boys book that I haven't read yet.

Sometimes I do fall asleep though. And sometimes it's okay and I don't dream anything. But sometimes I have my bad dream about Mr Smith and his old combi. I have the same bad dream all the time, it never changes. That bad dream even came to me once when I was awake. I was sitting on a chair in the lounge, but suddenly I couldn't move. Even though my eyes were open, I was in my dream.

I am on my way to Sunday School. I know this because I am dressed the way Mother used to dress me for Sunday School. I haven't been to Sunday School for a long time though, not since that time when Brother Mark said that we are all sinners because we are born with original sin. I didn't like the idea of being a sinner without doing anything, I mean, I already had my own real sins to deal with. When I told Mother what Brother Mark said, she said it was okay if I didn't want to go to Sunday School anymore. But

when I did go to Sunday School, Mother used to dress me in one of my pretty dresses, long white frilly socks, red shoes and my red bag or blue shoes and my blue bag, depending on what matched the dress.

I will be walking on this dusty road with my blue or red bag hanging from my arm. It is not a road that I have ever seen before and it is certainly not the road to Sunday School. The road is not tarred – it looks almost like the dust roads that they have in those Westerns I used to watch with Granny late on a Friday night. The road stretches out far ahead and even though it looks straight, it isn't flat. It climbs up steep hills – it dips and falls. In the distance, coming down a hill, I see Mr Smith's combi.

Mr Smith is Granny's bridge partner and he comes to pick her up in this very combi every Wednesday night to take her to the bridge club. But when he sees me on that road, he doesn't have bridge on his mind. He drives his combi straight at me, even though I scream and I wave my arms about frantically, it is almost as though he sees right through me, like I am invisible to him. For a moment I stare at him. He looks so calm and there is no expression on his face with its strange skin. Mr Smith's face reminds me of a boiled egg that wasn't peeled properly. There are patches that look like the shell and patches that look like the soft, smooth egg white underneath. Then there's also a patch of pink skin around his left eye. Mr Smith even has the speckles that some eggs have on them. Where his skin is whiter, the speckles look darkest. I don't know why Mr Smith's skin looks like that – I haven't dared to ask Granny about it yet.

Mr Smith looks directly into my eyes and I know that now he can see me, but he stops his combi too late. I am trapped underneath the combi, lying flat on my back in the dusty road with Mr Smith's back wheel resting on my chest. Mr Smith realises that he has knocked me down, and he wants to help, but he doesn't realise that I am under the wheel and I can't scream out to him. He begins to reverse and the back wheel is going to drive all over me, squeezing the life out of me. This is when I realise that it is the dream again and I know that I just have to move my body, just an arm or my head and I will be able to wake myself up. But I am paralysed. For the longest, longest time, all I can do is struggle to move, but it is impossible. I can't move and I can't scream.

One time when I was about to be crushed underneath Mr Smith's back wheel and I couldn't get out of the dream, my angel came and saved me. It was my good angel, the old lady, not that naughty boy who gave me the sickness when I was a baby. Even though I never saw her before, I knew who she was. She looked just as Mother had explained, an old woman, but tall and strong. She was wearing a thick, heavy black dress and had her hair scraped back in a neat bun. She didn't wear a trace of make-up. Instead, she looked like you'd expect a grandmother to look – serious and respectable, not wearing bright yellow bell bottoms, dangly earrings and lurid purple lipstick.

My angel pulled me out of my nightmare just like that – she pulled me out from under Mr Smith's back wheel and she held me in her strong arms. She smelled very clean, just like strong soap. We were back in our house and she sat down on the couch, still holding me tight in her arms. She held me just like Granny used to hold me when I was little and

scared of the Chookoo Train, except she didn't wrap me in a silly pink night-gown.

"Don't worry," she said. "Don't worry. You are safe. Everything will be fine."

She rocked me back to sleep and she was right. I didn't dream about Mr Smith and his combi. I didn't dream about anything. Mother woke me up and said that I had been walking in my sleep. She said she had come home from work and was about to get into bed when she heard my door open. When she didn't hear me go back into my room, she came out to see what I was up to. I know that I was not sleepwalking though, I know that I was with my angel, but I don't tell her this. I know now that there are some things you can't even tell your own mother about.

## Chapter 5

A soccer game is blaring on the television. “*Ladu-u-u-ma!*” shouts the voiceover and the crowd roars. I unzip my bag and fumble for my front door keys with one hand while trying to balance the groceries against the security gate with the other hand. Stun gun, wallet, lip balm, speeding fines, but no keys. I put the grocery bags on the ground so that I can conduct a more thorough search. Bits of paper – old till slips, electricity, rates and telephone bills, tatty tissues, still no keys. I could knock and Shaun will let me in, but why should I have to do that? Why doesn’t he have the TV turned down to a reasonable level so that he will be able to hear that I am home and he can open the door and help me with these damned parcels? After all, it is his fault that I can’t find my keys. I never had this problem when my front door keys were on the same bunch as my car keys. But then Shaun had to remove them to make a duplicate for himself. Instead of replacing them on my bunch when he was done, he put them on a separate key ring, one that looks like a bronze medal and has an etching of a cock on both sides, with the words “The Crowning Cock Tavern” above it. That’s just great – I’m doing free advertising for a bar I’ve never heard of it before. And the damned key ring is not as big as the one on my bunch, so it keeps getting lost in my bag. I am about to bang loudly on the door when my hand goes to the bulge in my jeans pocket and I pull the front door keys out.

I unlock the security gate and the front door, pick the parcels up and carry them inside, put them down again and turn to lock both doors. Still Shaun doesn’t come to help me, so I pick the parcels up again and go into the lounge. Shaun lies sprawled on the couch in

front of the television, an ashtray full of cigarette butts on the carpet in front of him, along with three empty beer cans and a half empty packet of Flings. I'll bet he has not moved from the spot since he got back from work. That is, of course, if he's managed to get to work today.

"Hey," says Shaun, briefly tearing his eyes away from the game. "Home so soon?"

"Do you mind turning that down?" I say frostily before turning around abruptly and going to the kitchen. I put the parcels down on the counter and want to scream out loud when I see that the sink is piled with last night's dirty supper dishes. When Shaun decides to cook, he has to use every single pot and pan I own. Why he can't use one or two is beyond me. And I was about to wash up last night when he insisted that he would do it. How did it come to this? I let him sleep over a few nights and then it becomes every night. Before I know it, he seems to have moved in and we have been reduced to these terrible stereotypes – him on the couch watching sport and drinking beer, me in the kitchen with a sink full of dirty dishes. And if I should remind him that he promised to do the dishes I will sound like a nag. So I put my yellow rubber gloves on and fill the sink with hot water and dishwashing liquid. I specifically went to the shops after work because I had planned to cook, but there's no way that I am going to do that now. I turn the kitchen radio on to drown out that irritating soccer commentary and pour all that is left of last night's Merlot into a glass. I take a large sip of the wine and put the bottle in the bin. But the music and the Merlot cannot quell the resentment that burns inside of me.

I am scrubbing a very dirty pot when Shaun comes into the kitchen and takes another beer out of the fridge. The game must either be in half-time or perhaps its over. “What do you want to do about supper?” he asks, looking at me as if he expects me to volunteer to make some.

“I don’t know,” I shrug. “I’m not very hungry.”

“Do you want me to make something? I haven’t made my special Tandoori chicken for you yet.”

I look at all the dishes I washed and stacked neatly on the drying rack and say, quickly, “No, you did enough cooking last night. I’ve bought some fresh bread and there’s cheese and ham in the fridge. Why don’t you just make yourself a sandwich if you’re hungry?”

The phone starts to ring and he looks at me without making a move to answer it. So I take my rubber gloves off and walk past him to the phone. “Hi,” says Mary Agnes. “How’s it? Are you doing anything tonight?”

“No, I don’t have any plans. Why? What are you up to?”

“I feel like going out. Let’s go and play pool.”

“Uh ... I don't know, I have to work the early shift tomorrow, so I shouldn't have a late night.”

“Oh, come on. You never want to go out anymore. My mom's here and she offered to look after the children and you know how often that happens,” she says pointedly, so her mother must be within earshot.

“Alright,” I say, thinking that I have been neglecting my friends and if I am around Shaun for the rest of the night I just might explode. I rarely get angry and even when I do I tend to simmer in silence – until I am pushed too far. And then I really lose it. “I'll be at your place in half an hour,” I tell Mary.

“See you then,” she says.

“Okay, see you.” I replace the receiver and when I turn around, I see that Shaun has been standing behind me, listening to my conversation.

“Well, where are we going?” he asks.

“That was Mary. She wants to go and play pool.”

“Oh great,” he says, walking past me, towards the lounge. “I want to see if the two of you are really as good as you claim to be.”

He goes back into the lounge and I hear the couch sigh as he flops back onto it. Through the doorway, I watch the lime green broken line that appears on the television when the volume is being turned up. “Well, who the fuck invited you?” I say to Shaun in my head, but not aloud.

“Well,” I say, following him into the lounge. “I thought it would just be the two of us. I mean, Mary isn’t bringing Sharky and we want to catch up ...”

“So you don’t want me to go out with you? Is that it?” he demands sulkily.

“No, it’s not that I don’t want you to come along with us, it’s just that I don’t think you will have such a good time with just the two of us ...”

“No, you don’t want me with because you think that I will get in the way. You never want me around when you are with your friends!”

“Oh, for God’s sake, come along then, if it means so much to you. I am not going to argue with you about this, it’s ridiculous!” I snap. Shaun doesn’t say anything; he simply turns his attention back to the television screen. “Well, I’m leaving now. Are you coming or are you staying?”

I thought that I had made it perfectly clear to Shaun that I want him to stay, but no, he flicks the TV off with the remote and gets up. He stands there waiting as I get my bag, my cue and my jacket. Then he follows me out of the house without saying a word.

I manage to calm down in the silent drive to Mary's house. When Mary sees Shaun, she looks at me and raises her eyebrows. It's her "what the hell did you bring him for?" look. I turn the car radio on so that we won't have to drive all the way to Stix in this strained silence.

Mary and I have been regulars at Stix ever since it opened, but we have not played pool in a long time and I am surprised to see how seedy the place has become. The tiled floor is filthy and a thick fog of smoke hangs in the air. The crowd has changed too. Stix used to be a hangout for students and trendy yuppies, but now it is filled with derelict drunks and Main Road prostitutes. A karaoke area has been added and a man in an ill-fitting suit is pushed onto the little stage. He takes the microphone in his hand and smiles broadly as the artificial sounding background music starts up. "If I had to live my life without you near me, the days would all be empty, the nights would seem so long," he croons off key. But the crowd goes wild and some of them even begin to dance in the tiny space that was not designed for dancing. We thread our way through packed karaoke bar, slowly making our way to the pool room at the back.

The pool room is not too crowded, but all the tables are busy, except for the one that has an out of order sign on it. “We will have to challenge,” I say to Mary. “I’m going to the bar. What are you having?”

“I don’t know, what are you having?”

“Vodka and orange,” I say and then, after briefly glancing at the still sullen Shaun, I add: “Make that a double vodka.”

Mary nods her head, “I’ll have the same,” she says.

Shaun is standing a few feet away from us, his arms folded in front of him. He is pretending to be intently absorbed in the game he is watching. “You want anything from the bar?” I ask, trying to make my voice as neutral as possible. He glowers at me, and refuses to answer. “Look,” I say quietly. “Did you insist on coming with us just so that you can sulk all evening and make sure that no one has a good time?”

“I’ll have a whiskey,” he says. “And if you really didn’t want me to come, you should have just said so.”

I can’t think of a response that will not launch us in to an argument, so I just go to the bar and order the drinks. I order a round of tequilas as well – getting drunk is the only way to

get through this evening. I have to make two trips because I can't carry all the drinks at the same time.

"Oh, look, there's Tony and Gareth," says Mary, pointing at a table in the middle of the room. "Let's go and challenge them."

Tony and Gareth are also regulars, but they take pool far more seriously than we do, they play in the men's league and in all the big competitions. I don't really like to play with them because they can become incredibly patronising, especially when they decide to "teach" us a new shot. But it would be great to beat them.

We make our way over to their table, but Shaun doesn't follow us – he appears to be rooted to his spot. The guys are in the middle of their game, so I sit on a barstool near to the table, sipping my drink and waiting for our turn. Mary stands at the table and flirts with them, particularly with Gareth – she's always liked him. Shaun glares at me from the other side of the room. With all the people and the smoke, I can feel his eyes boring into me. I glare back. He stands there with his shoulders hunched up, his hands in his pockets, eyes narrowed to slits with barely contained rage. This is why I hate getting involved with someone. No matter how good it is in the beginning, or how fantastic the sex is, it always comes to this. And I hate this part because no matter how I try to handle it, the endings are always messy and protracted. Shaun gives in first – he turns around and heads for the bar. I always win when it comes to staring people down.

“The guys want to play doubles,” says Mary-Agnes, sitting down on the barstool next to me. “I said that it was okay.” She lights up a cigarette and offers me one from her pack. Gareth drops the black but the white kisses a stripe into the pocket, so he loses the game. “We’re on,” says Mary. She eases herself off the barstool and slips the coin into the slot.

Gareth racks the balls and Mary breaks. It is a timid, closed break and we are lucky that four balls touch the cushions or we would have given two shots away. These guys are excellent potters so if the break is open and you don’t drop anything, it’s game over.

Tony approaches the table and lines up his shot. He whacks the pack – if we were guys or if he thought that we were good, he would never play a shot like that, it is far too risky.

Tony’s shot does not work out for him and nothing drops. It is my turn and the balls are spread out across the table. I look at the way the balls are lying and decide that it is possible to go for a finish – it will not be an easy one, but it is not impossible.

Pool is a very tricky game and you can win or lose because of one lucky shot. But sometimes – and this happens very rarely – you can assess the way the balls are lying on the table and just know what to do. You don’t even have to think too long and hard about it. You just go down and bam! The two drops in the corner pocket and my white is in a good position for the six. I drop the six in the centre and then the ten in the opposite centre pocket. Next I play a canon – the four onto the twelve and both balls drop. I didn’t mean to drop both of them – that may look effective but it is not a good shot. Luckily I am still in a good position to play the sixteen for the corner pocket. It is a long, difficult pot, but bam! The ball drops. I am perfectly lined up for the fourteen; I just have to roll it

with a little top spin so that the white follows. The ball drops and the white follows a bit too fast and with too much momentum – it threatens to follow the fourteen into the pocket, but then it stops just short. The black is resting against the cushion, so I have to nurse it gently to the pocket – not too hard or it will rattle in the pocket and stay there. I play the black with just the right pace and it drops. Whitewash!

“Shot it!” says Mary, patting me on the shoulder.

Tony and Gareth shake my hand sheepishly and I have to make a conscious effort not to smirk. I just love annihilating guys like them, guys who think that they are invincible.

“We’ll let’s see if you can do that again,” says Tony, putting a coin into the slot and racking the balls.

“I’m going to get more drinks,” Mary says to me. “Do you want the same?”

I nod my head and light a cigarette. My hands are trembling slightly – I must have been more nervous with that finish than I thought I was. My eyes follow Mary to the bar. She goes to stand next to Shaun, who is sitting and talking animatedly to a woman with bleached, curly-permed hair and a thick layer of makeup. They each have a drink in their hands so I am very annoyed to see Mary handing him another one.

“Why did you buy Shaun a drink?” I ask her when she returns from the bar.

“Well, he came here with us. I thought it would be rude not to.”

“Yes, but he hasn’t bought us a drink and it looks like he is buying drinks for that woman over there. So you shouldn’t have bought him one.”

“What is up with the two of you anyway?” Mary asks.

“I don’t know,” I shrug. “He’s an idiot and we shouldn’t be together. What can I say? Anyway, it’s your shot,” I add, giving her the cue and the chalk.

Tony and Gareth win the next three games. But when Shaun comes over to sulk at our table, I start potting like a demon again. I double the black so hard that it rattles in the pocket, comes out again and runs along the cushion to drop in the bottom pocket.

“Can I play in your place?” asks Shaun as I am racking the balls.

“No, Mary and I are playing – you’ll have to challenge,” I say. “Put your coin down.”

“Oh, come on. I don’t have a coin. You have been playing all the time. Just let me have one game.”

“He can play in my place,” offers Mary-Agnes and I turn to give her a look.

“Thanks, Mary, but that’s okay. I am obviously not good enough to play with her,” snipes Shaun, swaying unsteadily on his feet.

I can feel Gareth and Tony staring at us. I lean over and whisper in Shaun’s ear, “What the hell is wrong with you? Why don’t you just leave me alone? Why don’t you go and buy your friend at the bar another drink?” I walk away from him and go back over to the table.

“So that’s what your fucking problem is – you are acting like a bitch because I bought someone else a drink and I didn’t buy one for you!” Shaun’s voice is so loud that I am sure that everyone in the pool room is listening to him. “Is that what this is all about? Because I didn’t spend any money on you? You want my money? Here you can have it all!”

He takes a wad of fifty rand notes out of his pocket and flings it at me. Pink fifty rand notes flutter around me, onto the green baize of the pool table, onto the filthy tiled floor. For a moment the room is very quiet. I have never felt more insulted in my life – it’s like he’s slapped me in the face.

“Come,” I say to Mary-Agnes in a choked voice. “Let’s go.” Calmly I unscrew my cue and put it into its case, pick up my jacket and my bag and turn to the Tony and Gareth. They are looking at me like they are not sure about what they should be doing or how they should be reacting. “Thanks for the games. I’m sorry, but we have to leave now.”

Mary-Agnes follows me out of Stix and into the parking lot, with Shaun trailing behind her. I quickly unlock my door and get inside, leaning over to open her door. "Lock it," I say as soon as she sits down in the passenger seat. Shaun comes around to my window.

"Come on Elsie, don't leave. Where are you going? Come on, open up. How am I going to get back home? Come on! What's the matter with you?" he knocks on my window but I don't look at him. I start the car up and pull away. In the rear-view mirror I see him standing there, looking helpless.

"That's it," I say to Mary-Agnes. "That's the end of him."

"He's probably going to turn up at your place. Do you want me to go home with you?"

"No, I'm fine. I can handle him. Besides, it will take him a while to get there. He'll either have to walk or hitch a ride. I'll have his clothes outside my front door by the time he gets there and then I just won't let him in. And anyway, maybe he won't come. Maybe he'll sober up first."

"Where do you think he got all that money from?" Mary asks. "I mean, he acts like he has none and then out of the blue he throws a whole fistful at you."

"I don't know and I don't want to know about it either."

“Well,” she says. “Just call me if he gives you any more trouble. I can always send Sharky or one of his guys to sort him out.”

“Thanks,” I say; not sure if she is being serious or not. “But I’ll be fine.”

I drop Mary off at her house and then drive like a maniac back to town. I am still enraged. At home, I pull the cupboard open and rip all his clothes out. I jumble all his things into a black bag, checking to make sure that there is no trace of him left behind. Then I lug the bag to the front door and leave it against the wall. I don’t care if the *bergies* see it lying there and take it away.

To calm down, I light a cigarette and scour the kitchen for something to drink. Damn! I have no more wine, Shaun’s polished off all the beers and the bottle of vodka I usually keep in the grocery cupboard is empty. I am still staring at the empty vodka bottle when Shaun starts knocking at the door. It has taken him much quicker to get here than I had anticipated.

“Elsie, Elsie, come on, open up. I just want to talk to you!”

I will not respond.

“Come on Elsie, just let me in, give me a chance to explain ... Please, Elsie I know that I was wrong.”

He carries on and on until I can't stand it anymore. "I don't want to see you ever again!" I say, firmly and clearly so that he can hear me through the door. "It's over. Now take your things and fuck off or I'll call the cops!"

"Ag, come on Elsie, don't be like that. I'm sorry. I know I acted like an asshole but I really am sorry. Just let me in, I can't talk to you through a door." He keeps pounding on my door and making a noise, so I give him five more minutes before I call the police.

"I've called the police and they are on their way, so you'd better leave!"

But that doesn't stop him either. He leaves only when the police come and I listen to him telling them that we just had an argument, that he means no harm and that he'll leave by himself. After he's left, they knock on the door to see if I am okay. "I am fine," I say. "Sorry to bother you. I know you must be busy."

But as soon as the cops pull away in their van, Shaun is back, pounding at my door and shouting. I won't bother calling them again. It took them long enough to arrive in the first place and they will think that I am wasting their time. In any case, one of my neighbours will call them sooner or later. With a sigh, I go into the lounge, put my earphones on and look through the CDs in my rack. All those morose ballads I listened to as a teenager have provided me with the perfect soundtrack for moments like these. I would lock myself up in my room for hours and play scratchy records on my hi-fi. Poor Gran, I drove her crazy with that Morrissey song I would play over and over again:

*Every day is like Sunday  
Every day is silent and grey  
Hide on the promenade  
Etch a postcard  
How I dearly wish I was not here  
In this seaside town  
That they forgot to bomb  
Armageddon, come Armageddon come ...*

I thought that those lyrics were so deep and meaningful. Unsurprisingly, the overkill eventually made me hate that song and I haven't replaced that Morrissey record with a CD. I wonder if Gran has kept my hi-fi and my records – she probably has. After all, she still has that old gramophone you have to wind up. Gran has never been one for throwing things away.

I take my Lloyd Cole CD from the rack and put it into the CD player. I moved on to Lloyd Cole after my Morrissey phase. He was a bit more upbeat and much sexier too. What I also liked about him was that he played pool. I once read in an interview that he stopped writing music for a year to concentrate on improving his pool game. And he also wrote amazing lyrics – as I teenager I fantasised that he felt the same about things as I did, that he wrote his songs just for me. I light another cigarette, lie back on the couch and use the remote to fast forward to track eight. The song is most suitable for the moment:

*You don't need a lover in this climate  
You don't need a boyfriend in your bed  
These days, these days put a blanket round you baby ...*

The lyrics make me smile to myself in the dark. I wonder whether Shaun has given up and left yet.

## **Boulders**

I lie in bed early in the morning and listen to the sounds of the sleeping house. Uncle Greg's loud snores travel all the way from the back of the house, right through my door and into my room. The fridge hums quietly and in the distance I hear the faint drone of cars passing by. But the rest of the house is absolutely quiet. I can't go back to sleep now but I don't want to get up and go to school either. It is still dark outside and it is becoming colder and colder as we approach the heart of winter.

Before, when it was so cold, Mother would come into my bedroom in the mornings to give me my school clothes. She'd let me get dressed underneath the blankets so that I wouldn't get cold when I had to get out of bed. Sometimes she'd even warm my socks on the heater so that my feet would feel warm and toasty when I'd put them on. But since she's married Uncle Greg, she does none of those things. It's not her fault though. I suppose she is really tired in the mornings from working all night.

I turn my bedside lamp on and look at my watch. Half past six. I should get up for school. I reach underneath my bed and pull my slippers out. Mother always says that if your feet are cold, the rest of you will be cold too. So I pull my slippers on underneath my blankets and force myself out of bed. I get ready for school quickly and quietly even though I'd rather make a noise and wake Mother up. But making a noise would not make much of a difference – Mother would just roll over and go to sleep again. I close the front door quietly and step outside into the cold morning air without a sound.

The sun has not risen yet and the streetlights are still on. Even though I am wearing my black woollen stockings, my jersey and my blazer, I tremble with cold. It is so cold this morning that I can see my breath in front of me when I walk. It looks like I am smoking. My hands are the coldest – I am going to ask Mother to buy me a pair of gloves like the pair Mary-Agnes has. Quite a few of the girls in my class are wearing maroon woollen gloves, but Mary-Agnes has the best gloves with three black pom-poms on each one.

My moneybox is in my school case and I feel it weighing me down as I walk, the coins rattling against the wood with every step I take. The moneybox makes my case so much heavier, but I never go anywhere without it. It's not that I think that Mother would take my money away from me or anything like that – I just like to keep it with me.

There are barrier guards at Woodstock Station this morning. They are not always here; it's only when they feel like catching the people who steal train. I never steal train because Mother always gives me enough money to buy my first class weekly every Sunday afternoon. But some of the children who go to my school steal train. They are very proud when they talk about it, especially if a conductor comes into the carriage and they manage to escape him or to talk their way out of trouble. But they don't always get away with it. I have seen what happens when the conductors catch you stealing train, so I would never do such a thing. It must be so scary and embarrassing to get caught!

When the barrier guards are at the station, it takes much longer to get to the platform. First you have to join a long queue of people and wait until it is your turn for one of the barrier guards to clip your ticket. There are three people standing in front of me when I see my train pulling into the station. The guard in front doesn't even look up to notice that we are going to miss our train if he doesn't hurry.

Finally he clips my ticket and the train is still there, so I run through the stinking subway, and up the stairs. I get to the platform just in time to see my train pulling out of the station. Disappointed, I go and sit down underneath the sign that says Woodstock Station.

Woodstock Station has four platforms instead of two. You have to make sure that you are on the right platform. Otherwise you'll take the wrong train and who knows where you'd end up? Mother explained this very carefully to me when I first started taking the train, but she needn't have worried. It's not very difficult to tell the difference between Platform Two and Platform Three, so I never take a Cape Flats train instead of a Southern Suburbs one.

I watch out for the next train that will come from Cape Town. Eventually I see a train in the distance, but when it nears the station, it changes over to the Cape Flats track. Well, at least the one after should be the right one. It's windy and cold and I really wish that my train would come, but at least I don't have to worry about being late for school because it is still quite early. Even if I take the half past seven train, I will still get to school before a quarter past eight.

At last the right train comes. The doors swoosh open and I get into the last carriage before third class, as I always do. The carriage is quite full, but not so full so that I have to look for a seat and sit wherever I find one. The first compartment closest to the doors, the one that I always prefer to sit in, has an empty seat at the window. Gratefully I sink into the blue leather seat that sighs as I sit. I always want to sit at the window facing the direction in which we are going because if you sit on the seat opposite, it is like you are travelling in reverse. I like to see what is ahead of me and not what we've already left behind. Although the carriage is much warmer than it was outside, my hands are still freezing so I sit on them.

Since I began taking the train, I have tried to memorise all the stations on the way to Wittebome Station. I could never understand why Granny lives in Wynberg and my school is in Wynberg, yet the station I get off at is Wittebome. Wynberg station is near to the terminus, right on the other side of Wynberg and very far from Granny and my school.

The next station after Woodstock is Salt River. Salt River Station is also very big, like Woodstock Station and it also has more than two platforms. It is much busier than Woodstock Station though, and when the train pulls to a stop and the doors slide open, a whole crowd of people jam themselves through the doorway. I am relieved that none of the people have to stand because Mother says I must always get up to give an older person my seat.

A woman sits down opposite me and takes out a black and white photo storybook. She becomes so absorbed in her story that she doesn't look up when the train stops even though we haven't reached the next station yet. Mother says that photo stories are really stupid and only stupid people read them. She hates things like that, comic books too. She would have a fit if she were to find out that I read the *Archies* and the *Beanos* that Mary-Agnes brings to school. I don't mind not reading them though – because once you've read one, you've read them all. I know that this is also true of *Nancy Drew* and *The Hardy Boys*, but I don't mind those. It's still interesting to guess what's going to happen next to the strawberry blonde girl detective. Nancy Drew leads such an exciting life, I wish that mine could be more like hers. Filled with adventure, always wearing nice clothes and going to interesting places with my nice boyfriend, Ned. And what about strawberry blonde hair? Doesn't that sound so exotic? I love strawberries – they are my favourite fruit, but I can't imagine the colour that would result if you mixed the colour of strawberries with blonde hair. Still, it must be fun to be a strawberry blonde (or titian-haired, as she's sometimes called) girl detective.

When I am at home and trying to remember all the stations on the Southern Suburbs line, I sometimes get them wrong or I get stuck. But when I am on the train, I always know which station will be next. After Salt River comes Observatory. Mother says Observatory has that name because there's an observatory there – which is where you go if you want to look at the stars. At the observatory there are all these big telescopes that you can look out of to see the stars much clearer than you can if you look at them with just your eyes. Mother always promises to take me to the observatory, but she hasn't done it yet.

After Observatory you get Mowbray, which is the station that you would get off at if you wanted to go to Groote Schuur Hospital, which is where I was born. Mother took me there to visit Uncle Hannie after he smashed up Granny's Volksie in an accident. I remember how scared I was of him at the time because he was so bloody and had tubes and things coming out of his arm and a mask covering his nose and mouth. We got off the train at Mowbray Station and then the bus outside the station took us right up to the hospital.

What comes after Mowbray? Rosebank and Rondebosch. I have never gotten off the train at either of these stations before. Then Newlands and Claremont, where we often get off to go and do the shopping. After that is Harfield Road, which is a very small and quiet station – one often ignored by the trains. Then Kenilworth and Wynberg, which is the station just before Wittebome. And Wittebome is the station directly opposite Granny's house and around the corner from my school.

But when the train pulls in to Wittebome Station, I suddenly begin to wonder about all the other stations that come after this one. What is the use of knowing all the stations from Cape Town to Wittebome, if you don't know where it all ends? I see all the maroon and black uniforms getting off the train and hurrying along in the direction of St Anne's, but I remain in my seat. I am not sure if I have the courage to do it or not, until it is too late and the train pulls out of the station. I know that I could get into a lot of trouble for this, but I don't care.

The stations fly by me: Plumstead, Steurhof, Diep River, Heathfield, Retreat. Strange names and places I have never seen before. I worry about the conductor at first, but he barely glances at me as he walks by. Some of the names I recognise like St James, which is where Granny had her first job and Kalk Bay where Granny and Grandpa always took Mother and Hannie when they were children. For a long stretch the train twists and winds along, right next to the sea. The dark blue water churns and swirls below me and grey clouds stretch out all the way to the horizon.

The train stops at Simon's Town and after a few moments I see that I am the only person left in the carriage. I get out of the train and find that the platform is also deserted. So this is it, this is the end of the line.

Without even thinking of what I am going to do next, I find my way out of the station and continue down the road in the direction the train was taking. There are not many people about, so I don't think I have to be too worried about getting into trouble here. Even if someone was to ask me why I am not in school, it is hardly likely that the person would recognise my uniform and phone Sister Theresa. I suppose I could just keep walking down this road and see where it takes me. Maybe it will be like in Nancy Drew and I will have some exciting adventure along the way. Or perhaps it will be more like in *I am David*, the book Sister is reading to us in class. Granny also has a copy of *I am David* at her house, so I have finished the story already – I know what happens to David in the end but the other children in my class do not know.

The wind in Simon's Town is icy and the fingers of the hand carrying my school case are completely white and numb with cold. But I won't let that bother me. Poor David had to endure many hardships and troubles before everything worked out fine in the end. And he had never eaten an orange in his entire life! He had never even seen an orange before! I found that even harder to believe than what Mother said about the people living up in Johannesburg who don't know what the sea looks like.

Well, I am a lot better off than David, I know more things than he did and I won't have to steal food if I get hungry because I have all the money in my moneybox. So I walk and walk and try not to think about what I am doing because then I will get scared and turn around.

I walk for a long time, past all the little shops that line the Main Road, past the long, red brick wall and the sign that says Simon's Town Naval Base. The road starts going uphill and my legs begin to get tired, but I continue until I see a road with a sign that says Boulders and an arrow pointing to the left. I decide to follow the road especially because David avoided busy main roads where people could notice him. In fact he walked at night only and slept in the day. But I don't have to do that because no one is chasing me.

The tarred road becomes a gravel pathway that I follow until it ends. There is a small square of gravel and beyond that, only sand dunes. I wonder what lies beyond the sand dunes, smugglers or robbers perhaps? But beyond the dunes are only rocks and the sea. Carefully, I make my way down the slippery, steep rocks with the wind trying to topple

me. I nearly lose my balance and my grip on my school case. Momentarily picturing my case falling into the sea, I decide to leave it in a safe, secure place. I choose a flat, dry rock for it and see that my hand is red and blistered from carrying it for so long.

Slowly, cautiously, I inch down the rocks to the sea's edge. At last I am standing on the rock that slopes sharply down into the waves below. This is as close as I should go – any further and I will get wet when the next wave crashes over my rock. I crouch on my haunches and stare out at the sea. In the distance, huge black rocks jut out from the sea.

We don't go to the beach as much as I would like to because Mother doesn't like the ones that we're allowed to go to and Granny's legs make it difficult and dangerous for her to walk on the soft sand. But in all the times that I have been to the beach, I have never seen it like this. The sea is so loud and powerful – not calm and inviting as it looked whenever I went to the beach with Mother. The waves are enormous and even though I am crouching quite far back from the rock's edge, spray still manages to reach me, soaking my face, making it cold and sticky and salty. I should move away, but I am mesmerised by the waves. I watch as a wave builds up, growing bigger and bigger until it reaches my rock and crashes against it. I feel very brave to be here; holding my ground as each new wave grows bigger and crashes closer and closer to my spot. A retreating wave meets up with an incoming one. The two waves become one enormous one, slowly coming towards me. Perhaps I should move back, but excitement keeps me rooted to the spot. I stand up as the huge wave crashes over my head. It knocks me back and pulls me from my rock. Panic makes me scream and salt water quickly fills my mouth. I gag and choke

and struggle to hold on to something, anything, but the wave is too powerful – it will not let me go. The wave dies down and I try to struggle forward, but then another wave crashes over my head. I try to stand up, but I can't, there is no sand below my feet, only water. I look back in horror and watch with a mixture of fear and fascination as another wave crashes over me, submerging me. I open my eyes and I see beautiful seaweed, small green pieces and bigger brown ones floating slowly above me. For a moment I am suspended in the water below the seaweed and a strange calmness fills me. A thought enters my head but it doesn't feel like my thought, it feels like someone else is telling me: "this is drowning".

So that is what this is? Drowning? But I am not scared because drowning comes with pretty seaweed and it feels peaceful, magical. Then the voice that is in my head but is not my own says something else. "Get out." I thrash my way up and it takes forever, it feels like my lungs will burst and I won't make it to the top, but finally, finally I break the surface. My lungs scream as the air hits them. I just manage to take a big gasp of breath when another wave catches me from behind. But this one doesn't crash over me; it pushes me forward. I kick furiously and try to swim. I know that I have to get ahead of the wave or it is going to crash and suck me back in. Kicking and thrashing my arms wildly, I manage to scramble ahead of the wave, to the nearest rock. Still kicking and clinging desperately onto the edge of the rock, I manage to keep myself in place as the wave rushes ahead of me. The wave crashes and retreats – trying to pull me back with it – but still I cling to my rock. Realising that I am safe as long as I hold on to the rock, I let my exhausted legs stop kicking and my feet come to rest on the sand below me. My relief

is more enormous and powerful than the wave that swept me from my rock. I let go of the rock and scramble to the shore. I am not even on the beach yet when, on my hands and knees, I start vomiting uncontrollably. My body heaves and tears fall from my eyes and I don't know what to do. For a moment I am sorry that the waves didn't pull right out to sea where I would surely have drowned because I don't know what I am going to do now. There is no way I can go home with wet clothes. What will I say to Mother? I fervently wish that I was safe and dry in my classroom right now but I am so far away from it. What was I thinking of? How could I have been so stupid? I am not David and I am certainly no strawberry blonde girl detective. What am I going to do?

First I have to find my school case, I suppose. And then I have to go home. I am exhausted and freezing – my feet in my wet shoes feel like to blocks of ice and the cold wind chills me to the bone. Suddenly I don't care about what Mother will do or say when she sees me – no punishment that she can think of can make me feel more wretched than I do right now.

It takes me a while, but I manage to find my case and at least it is still dry. I open my case and see that I have my ballet uniform with me. Had I remembered that it was ballet today when the train pulled into Wittebome Station this morning, I would surely be in school right now. Perhaps my ballet uniform will save me from trouble. I will just put it on and leave my clothes here. It will be just like the last time when I walked to Gran's house in my ballet uniform and I left my school uniform in the hall. Granny went back with me to look for it, but my uniform was gone already.

Quickly, I take my wet clothes off, glancing around to make sure that there's no one around. I slip into my pink tights, then my leotard and my pretty ballet jersey that crosses over in front and ties together at the back. For a moment I doubt that this will work – walking in ballet clothes from school to Gran's house is one thing (and I only did that in summer, definitely not in winter), but people will surely look at me if I get onto a train like this. But what else can I do? At least my ballet clothes are dry. I don't know what to do about the shoes though – I have never worn my ballet shoes in the road, it will dirty them and raise suspicion. Even when I walked to Granny's house in my ballet clothes, I always took my ballet shoes off and put my school shoes on. And my school shoes are really expensive, Mother will be furious if she has to pay for another pair. Maybe this isn't such a good idea. I was seven years old when I lost my school uniform and Mother was upset, but it wasn't too bad. But if I were to do it again she will really be mad as I am older now and after that last time I should have learned my lesson. Maybe I should take my school uniform home with me and wash it when Mother's not looking. Yes, that is definitely the best idea. I try to wring the seawater out of my wet school shoes and then I slip my pink stockinged feet into them. I tie my shoes and feel the wetness seeping in through my stockings. With a loud sigh, I pack my school clothes into my ballet bag and set off back to the Main Road.

By the time I reach the Main Road, it starts to rain. I just carry on walking. I am wet already and the rain won't make much difference. It's no use running either because I know that the station is quite far away. At least there's no one around to look at me and be suspicious because of my clothes.

As I walk, I listen to the squelch my wet school shoes make with every step I take. By the time I reach the station, I am entirely soaked once more. I worry about the man who sells tickets, but he doesn't say anything when I ask him for a first class single to Wittebome Station, please. My weekly will get me from Wittebome to Woodstock. I pay for the ticket with a two rand note from my moneybox and put the change he gives me back into it.

The journey back seems a thousand times longer than was when I was coming. I don't bother to read all the signs at the stations we pass. I just keep my head down, shivering with cold and feeling sorry for myself. I don't look up because it will give the other passengers a chance to ask me why I am not in school or why I am wearing ballet clothes in the rain.

What am I going to say to Mother when I get back home? I am going to be in big trouble for sure. No, I will not go home now. I will be better off going to Granny's house – she never gets as cross with me as Mother does when I do something wrong.

I run all the way from the station to Granny's house. Even though I try to enter the house quietly, my squelching shoes announce my arrival. "My God, Elsie! Have you lost your mind? Are you trying to catch your death walking in your ballet clothes in this weather?" Granny scolds, shaking me by my shoulders. I just look down and don't say anything. I can feel that the tears are just behind my eyelids.

"Come on my girl, you get out of those wet clothes immediately – you'll catch pneumonia like that. I am going to run you a nice hot bath and then when you are warm and dry you can have some of this barley soup."

"It's okay Gran, I can run the water in myself," I say softly, eager to get away from her accusing stare. I walk into the bathroom and close the door behind me. While the water is running into the bath, I get out of my wet clothes and put them into the bath, along with my school uniform. But before I can wash them, Granny opens the door and sees what I am doing.

"Elsie September, just what do you think you are doing?" Granny demands and I know that I am in trouble now. She pulls the plug out and wrings my clothes tightly before putting them in the red plastic basin. Then she puts the plug back in and turns the taps on again. "Now you get into that bath, miss." Gingerly I climb into the bath and sit down in the water even though it is hotter than I can stand. Granny pours water into the red basin and puts it down on the bath behind me. She rubs my clothes vigorously with Sunlight soap.

“And please explain to me why you have decided to wash your school clothes in the middle of the week? How do you think we are going to get it dry with all this rain we’ve been having?”

I don’t answer and Granny stops washing my clothes. “I’ll let this soak for a bit. Now let me put these shoes in the warmer,” Granny says, bending down to pick my squelchy shoes up and then turning around to look at me. Her face changes immediately and she gasps out loud, with her hands over her mouth. “Oh, my God Elsie! What has happened to you?”

For a moment, I don’t know what she’s talking about, but when I see where she is looking, the blood rushes to my cheeks and I am hot with shame. I wish I could become like water and escape down the drain to stop Granny from staring at me like that. I try to cover it with my hands, but she comes and sits on the edge of the bath and lifts me up by my arm. “Get up,” she says. “Let me look at this.”

“Elsie, my girl, I know that this is hard for you. But you must tell me who has been interfering with you.”

I can’t think of what to say to Granny, I just lower my eyes and stare down at my privates, looking at them as she must see them – red, puffy and swollen. It is sore and

burny too, especially when I sit in the bath – but it is not as bad as it was at first. At least it is not bleeding anymore.

“Elsie, please. This is not your fault. Whoever has done this to you is bad, very bad. And believe me, my child, I will make sure that it never happens again. Now please tell me who it is. Is it Greg?”

I nod my head silently. “That fucking bastard!” Granny breathes angrily. I look up at her – I have never heard her swear like that before. Granny looks livid – her face is red and she is breathing very heavily. Now I am in even bigger trouble than I was before.

Granny is still looking at me down there. “Does it hurt?” she asks. “It looks very sore,” she says softly. “I think I have to take you to Doctor Grey.”

“No, Granny,” I say miserably. “I don’t want to go to Doctor Grey. I don’t want him to look at me too.”

“Okay then,” Granny says, wrapping a towel around me and holding me tight. “I’ll go to the chemist and see if I can get some ointment for you. Elsie just remember; none of this is your fault. What that pig did to you is very, very wrong. And I will see to it that he doesn’t get away with it, okay? That it never happens again. Do you understand?”

I nod my head again and blink slowly so that the tears won’t come out.

“Good girl.” Granny says. “Now you get out of the bath and I’ll see what clothes of yours I can find. Then I’ll go to the chemist for some ointment, okay?”

Granny tries to pick me up out of the bath but I stop her. She hasn’t picked me up since I was small and she’s not supposed to pick up heavy things because of her bones being so soft. “It’s okay, Granny. I can manage by myself.”

I follow Granny into her bedroom and curl up on her bed while she rummages in her cupboard for clothes that I have left behind. She holds up a pair of old pyjamas that I’ve grown out of already and a tracksuit. “Here, put the pyjamas on,” she says. “You can wear the tracksuit tomorrow.” I put the pyjamas on even though it is still day time and the legs of the pyjama pants don’t even come down to my ankles.

“Okay,” says Granny, picking up her keys and her handbag. “I’m going to the chemist. I won’t be long.”

I hear the front door open and close and the loud engine of her Volksie starting up and roaring away. Uncle Hannie comes into the bedroom with his draughts board. “Hello, Uncle Hannie, I didn’t know you were at home.”

“Hey, Auntie Elsie,” he says. “You want to play?” He doesn’t wait for me to answer before he flops down onto the bed next to me and begins setting up the board.

I don't like playing draughts with Uncle Hannie because he always cheats. And no matter how much you argue with him, you can never get him to admit it or to play properly. He has already won three games by the time Granny returns from the chemist.

"Hannie," says Granny coming into the room with a brown paper packet in her hand.

"Just leave us alone for a moment and close the door behind you."

"But I'm winning!" Uncle Hannie protests.

"Hannie, I spoke to you!" Granny says sharply and he gets up and leaves, but not before pulling his tongue out at Granny behind her back. I struggle not to laugh at him and Granny turns around and gives him one of her threatening looks before he walks out of the room and closes the door.

"Come, pull down your pants," Granny says, opening a big tube of ointment. She coats my privates with a thick layer of the white ointment and then pulls my panties and pants back up.

"You have to put this ointment on three times every day – after you've washed in the mornings, when you come home from school in the afternoon and after you've had your bath at night. Okay?"

I nod my head. The ointment makes my privates burn more at first, but after a while it feels soothing and cool.

“I have some tablets for you to take as well,” Granny continues, “But first you must have something to eat.”

Granny and I are sitting at the kitchen table eating soup and Hannie is making himself a fish paste and cheese sandwich (yuck!) when the telephone rings. Granny answers it.

“Yes, she is here,” she says, looking at me. It must be Mother; she must have been worried when I didn’t come home from school.

“No, Lilly. I am not going to bring her there, not today and never again. You don’t even know what has been happening to your child in your own house. She has been *molested*, Lilly,” Granny whispers, turning away to face the wall. “By that dirty, filthy pig you call a husband. I saw it with my own eyes and I am sick to my stomach! When I think of what he has done to the poor child, I could kill him with my bare hands!”

Granny tries to pull the telephone out of the kitchen, but even though it stretches out of the door, I can still hear what she is saying. “I am going to report him to the police tomorrow. You talk to him, you do what you want, but you are not having this child back. You are not fit to call yourself a mother.” Granny listens for a while, then she says, softly but firmly. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore, Lilly. I don’t care what you have to say; Elsie is my only concern. Goodbye.”

Granny puts the phone back down on the kitchen dresser and sits heavily in her chair at the table. Her face is flushed with anger again. How can I be the cause of so much trouble? Granny doesn't say anything; she just picks up her spoon and continues to eat her soup.

“Hey, Auntie Elsie, look,” says Uncle Hannie. He has buttered two slices of bread and stuck them to the sides of his face.

“Hannie,” says Granny crossly. “You better see that you eat that bread. You are a grown man – you should know better than to play with food!”

## Chapter 6

Alone again after Shaun has left, I have that same familiar feeling of relief as I would always have when Mary and her children left my place after a few days of driving me crazy. I really cannot live with anyone – perhaps it is because I was an only child. I relish the solitude – planning my evenings alone the way other people must plan their dates. For example, this evening after work I stopped by at Exclusives and bought a book I had been looking forward to reading for the longest time. I called Butlers’ and had them deliver my favourite pizza – a medium salami with mushrooms, feta and peppadews and I read my book and ate half of my pizza with a glass of red wine. It was raining outside and getting cold so I had a long bath and got into bed with my book even though it was only ten o’ clock. I read until my eyes couldn’t stay open anymore and I thought I would fall asleep immediately, but now I find that I can’t. I can’t seem to get into a comfortable position and my mind keeps wandering. I turn over to look at my alarm clock. Twelve fifteen. I consider whether I should turn the light on and read some more, maybe get another glass of wine – that should knock me out. Then I hear the knocking at the door. I know that it must be Shaun – who else would turn up at this hour? I look through my peephole and see him standing there, drenched and clasping a bedraggled bunch of flowers. He knocks again.

“What do you want?” I ask loudly so that he will hear me through the door. “Do you know what time it is?”

“Elsie look, I know it’s late but I don’t have anywhere else to go and it’s raining outside. Won’t you let me in, just for the night? I promise I’ll leave in the morning, I’ll sleep on the couch. I won’t bother you, I swear.”

He looks so pathetic that I feel sorry for him and, ignoring my better judgement, I open the door and let him in. “Just for the night,” I say. His eyes look unnaturally bright again and he’s obviously out of it. The way he looks reminds me of the fight that we had and I instantly regret letting him in.

“What happened to your hands?” His hands and fingers are scratched and bleeding.

“I picked these for you. The roses were a bit difficult to get off the bush,” he explains, giving me the weird bunch of flowers – iceberg roses, irises and impatiens. He’s obviously raided someone’s garden. I take the flowers and dump them in the kitchen sink. I’ll throw them away as soon as he’s gone.

“Where do you come from so late and why didn’t you go home?”

“I went to the Waterfront with a friend of mine, but he met a woman there and next thing I know, they’ve both disappeared. It was too late to get a train home and I couldn’t get a lift so I walked here.” It all sounds so convenient that he must have made it up, but I don’t say anything.

“Well, don’t make a habit of it. You can dry yourself in the bathroom and there is a blanket on the couch. I am going back to bed now, I was sleeping already.”

“I am hungry. Won’t you give me something to eat?”

“There’s some pizza in the oven. If you want anything else you can make it yourself. It’s late and I am going to bed.”

I go back into the bedroom and close the door firmly behind me. I pick my book back up and manage to read another chapter before I feel drowsy again, so I switch my bedside lamp off and go to sleep.

I am in that peaceful, drifting off but not yet fully asleep state when my bedroom door opens and a naked body slips into my bed, rolls on top of me, pinning me down with his weight. He kisses my neck and my face and there’s that unmistakable smell of warm beer, cigarettes and chewing gum. I keep my eyes pressed shut and will him to leave me alone, but one hand reaches down and effortlessly slips off my pyjama pants and panties. I try to move, to shrink away, but the warm beery voice whispers in my ear, “You can’t fool me, I know that you want this great big cock inside of you.”

He pushes my legs apart with a knee and pushes his penis inside of me. I have the strange sensation of not being inside my body anymore. Instead, I am fluttering above myself, as trapped by the four walls and the ceiling as that helpless, frightened girl is trapped by that

heavy body above her. No, it can't be. This must be a dream, it can't be real. Can it? But there's that smell, that unmistakable smell of beer and cigarettes and chewing gum. I force my eyes open wide and shout, "What the hell do you think you're doing? Get the fuck off me!"

Somehow I manage to push him off me and he thuds onto the floor and sits there looking stunned. "I told you to fucking leave me alone, what the fuck is wrong with you?" I shout. I am sitting up in bed, breathing so heavily that my nostrils are flaring.

"Okay, okay, I am sorry," he says, creeping back into bed next to me. "You didn't have to do that, I get the message." He curls himself up on the far side of the bed; his back turned towards me. I lie in bed in the dark. Fuck, I am awake now!

"No. You want to fuck, we'll fuck," I say, turning him onto his back and straddling him. Slowly I unbutton my pyjama top and wrap it around his wrist, tying it tightly to my bedpost. I pull the pants out from underneath the duvet and use it to tie his other wrist. I lean over him and reach out for the lighter on my pedestal. I hold the flickering flame to the wick of the candle on the pedestal – left there as tangible evidence of happier times. This time the candle is not lit to create a mood, it is lit because I want him to see what I am going to do, I want him to know what it is like to watch. *Come on, naughty girl, open your eyes and look at daddy's big cock.*

“You want to fuck?” I say, straddling his face and pushing my pubes to his lips. “Well first you have to suck my cunt and make me come.” Looking down at him, I see that his eyes are wide, but whether it’s with excitement or misgiving I can’t be sure. Obediently he begins to lick, suck and nuzzle. I look at his face trapped between my thighs – if I wanted to I could squeeze my legs together and choke the life out of him. “Come on, you can do better than that, can’t you? Do it, make me come.” But I can feel that it is not going to happen, not for a long while. He is probably getting tired by now, jaws aching and wishing desperately for it to be over. *Don’t stop now, you can do it, you can make daddy come.*

At last I feel the first flutterings of my orgasm and carried by its waves, I move down and push his penis up into me. But it takes only a few thrusts and he climaxes too. “Come here,” he says softly. “Untie my now.”

“No. I am not done yet.” I say, shifting to release his limp penis. *I try and try but it won’t grow hard. His face becomes red with anger and a vein throbs wildly on the side of his throat. “Well, I can still teach you a thing or two,” he says, pushing my legs apart and shoving the cold, inflexible neck of his beer bottle up me.*

I lean over and pinch out the candle with my fingers. It sizzles and the smoke steams off the top as I drizzle the hot wax on his chest. A sharp intake of breath: “Aargh, what are you doing?” he screams as I shove the candle up his anus, hot wax side up. He wriggles and kicks his legs wildly, managing to free his hands from my pyjama bonds. He pushes

the candle out and sits up, looking at me with shock and confusion and disgust. “What are you doing? What is the matter with you?” But I don’t answer. I get up and rush out of the room, locking myself in the bathroom. I put the plug in the bathtub and turn on the hot tap. I pour some of my detoxifying mustard bath into the water and turn to the mirror as the water begins to fill the bath. Through the steam I see my eyes, red and wild, my hair bushy and full of knots. “What are you doing? What is the matter with you? What are you doing? What is the matter with you?” I repeat softly.

The water scalds my feet, but force myself to sit in it, then to lie on my back so that the water covers my face. I wish that he would go away and leave me alone again, but I listen in vain for the opening and closing of the front door.

I stay in the bath for the longest time, just adding more hot water when the water gets cold. My skin is wrinkled by the time I get out. Shaun is fast asleep in my bed, so I put my pyjamas back on and leave the bedroom, closing the door behind me. I curl up on the couch and pull the blanket over me. I flick the television on with the remote. Some old karate movie is on. Is it Bruce Lee, Jet Lee or Jackie Chan? I don’t know, I don’t really watch karate movies – they are so badly made that they are embarrassing – the over the top facial expressions, the dubbing that makes the actors look like their mouths are moving too fast to produce the slow, American dialogue. The sound effects are cool though, especially in the fighting scenes. The hero is very good looking too, with a very neat, muscled body – he must be Bruce Lee.

I am very clear headed when I wake up the next morning – this in spite of having had very little sleep last night. I am in and out of the bathroom and dressed in a flash. Shaun is asleep, lying curled up like a foetus in my bed. I don't know what to do about him. I feel so exhausted and empty inside. Maybe I should take some leave, go away for a while. Even better, I should relocate. I could easily move to another city – Durban, Johannesburg, hell, even to Kampala, Nairobi or London for that matter. A place where no one knows me, where I won't have those eyes following me around, that hot breath in my ear, "*Come on, give daddy a kiss.*"

I am very early for work, so I decide to make Shaun breakfast – bacon, eggs, toast, strong filter coffee. I put all the breakfast things on a tray and go back into the bedroom. "Shaun, you awake? I made you some breakfast."

He rubs the sleep from his eyes and regards me warily.

"Look, things got a little weird last night and, well ... I don't know ... But you must realise now that we can't be together."

"What are you talking about? I am okay. I thought that you were too ..."

"No, we are not okay. We have never been okay. I am sorry, I wasn't thinking but I can see now that it was a mistake for us to be together."

“No, I don’t. Elsie, I want to be with you. I love you.”

“What? Are you crazy? You don’t know the first thing about love and I can tell you that whatever we may have had, it wasn’t love it was just fucking. Look, you are just a stupid little boy. You think that fucking me makes you a man? Well it doesn’t. You are still a child and I need a man. Just do us both a favour and go back home to your mother. Go on, fuck off!”

That does it, he looks completely deflated. Carefully, he puts the tray aside and gets up. He dresses quickly in the lounge and then he leaves, without saying a word and slamming the door behind him.

## Chapter 7

You get to work an hour earlier and it's an entirely different place. Instead of the usual craziness you find silent desks, empty chairs, dormant computers. I flick my computer on and go into the kitchen for my cup of coffee. Waiting for the kettle to boil, I pick up last night's paper and idly flip through it. Problems with voter registration, the date for next elections and a fire in the mountains above Fish Hoek – nothing exciting.

The kettle has boiled and I am about to put the paper down and make my coffee when something catches my eye. It's a head and shoulders colour photograph of a slightly younger Shaun than I remember him, staring at me nonchalantly under the heading "Missing". Is it Shaun or is my mind playing tricks on me? I am probably over-reacting, but I can't shake the feeling that something is terribly wrong.

I scan the copy very quickly. A different name is given: Chadwell Johnson. Eighteen year old son of Andrew and Erica Johnson of Lavender Hill. His parents have not seen him for three months, since he walked out of Valkenberg Hospital, where he was being kept as a patient. Yes, there it is: Valkenberg Hospital. When last did I see him? I think it would be about two months ago. What about the different names? And I met other people who called him Shaun too. Or did they? I don't remember. But I certainly would have noticed if someone called him Chadwell. Uugh, what a horrible name! Can it be that he was lying to me all along? Why would anyone do that? I mean, if you were going to lie about what you do, would you really choose to say that you're a psychiatric nurse at Valkenberg? I

suppose it is better than saying you're a patient, though. Ah, I remember when I met him for the first time he did say that he was a patient, then he said he was joking. Oh my God, this is just too fucking weird! All the time he was at my place, I was harbouring an escaped lunatic.

Absently, I make the cup of coffee and walk back to my desk, still clutching the newspaper. Should I do something about this? Does it have anything to do with me or should I just leave it? Eighteen years old – I didn't realise he was that young. Oh, God, I feel like I'm a dirty old man. A dirty older person. Where could Shaun be? Where would he go? And what was he in Valkenberg for? Not only did I fuck a teenager – he's a mental case too! The more I look at Shaun's picture in the paper, the more it disturbs me. I don't like things to be this messy, I thought that we had a nice, neat ending, a clean break.

Sue walks in through the door, her shoulder sagging because of her big gym bag and clutching a bottle of Powerade. "Elsie, you're early. What a surprise," she says. Sue dumps her bag onto the floor, switches her computer on and then heads for the kitchen to make the first of several cups of coffee. I feel a serious headache coming on.

"So, how's it going?" Sue asks, returning with her steaming mug.

"I'm okay. And you?"

“Fine. But are you sure you’re okay? You look a little pale.”

“No, no. I am fine. I’m just having one of those mornings.”

My eyes fall on Shaun’s picture in the newspaper again. Fingerprints – my fingerprints are etched onto the paper. Holding it for as long as I have has stained my hands with ink.

“Sue, did you do that piece in last night’s community section on that missing boy?”

“Umm ... yes. Why?”

“Did you speak to the parents?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have their address?”

“Of course. Now why are you asking me all these questions?”

“Well, it’s just that he looks very familiar but I can’t think of where I could have seen him before.” Sue gives me a funny look, but she doesn’t say anything. She just carries on tapping away at her computer.

When Sue gets up and goes down the passage in the direction of the toilet, I slip over to her desk. Casually, I flip through her pad, hoping that no one else in the office will notice. There it is: The Johnsons 59 Sea Breeze Court, Symphony Road. I tear the page out, grab my things and hastily leave the office. Symphony Road. I know where that is. It's right in the middle of the worst part of Lavender Hill where there is always a shooting, a rape or a murder or something happening to keep people talking. I can't believe that someone like Shaun – I just can't get used to the idea of Chadwell – could come from a place like that. It just doesn't fit. I don't remember us talking about where he comes from, though.

It doesn't take me long to find the place. As it's still quite early, around ten, there aren't many people around. A few children are playing in the concrete courtyard between Sea Breeze and Flora Courts. A skinny, threadbare mongrel yaps after them as they chase one another from one flight of stairs to the next. Then they notice me sitting in my car and suddenly they are all at my door.

"Hello Auntie." They all smile at me. "*Ons sal agter Auntie se kar kyk. Okay Auntie?*" I wasn't even planning on going inside. The block is very big – a four storey one – and I take it that number 59 would be right on the top floor. The Southeaster is blowing so strongly that I have grab onto the rail to help me up the steps – I wonder if this is what they meant by sea breeze. By the time I reach the top I am out of breath.

There are two flats on each landing and I find number 59 on the right. The door is open at number 60, with a baby playing in the space between the front door and two rubbish bins holding up a piece of board so that she can't escape. It looks as though this makeshift barrier has been placed at exactly half of the landing, leaving the rest of the space for the occupants of number 59. The baby regards me curiously, then turns around and crawls inside the house where I can hear *The Bold and the Beautiful* being played very loudly.

I turn around and face the door of number 59 and without knowing what I am going to say, I knock twice. The sound is very hollow and the door feels terribly thin. I wait for a few moments, but no one answers. The small window next to the door is closed, so I suppose that nobody's home. This doesn't stop me from knocking again.

"*Daar's niemand by die huis nie,*" a voice says behind me. I turn around to face a girl who is looking at me with a frown on her face. The girl is wearing big rollers underneath her scarf and she has the baby perched on her hip. She chews gum slowly and deliberately, with her mouth open which reveals her missing front teeth. When I was showing Alison, my distant British relative, all the usual touristy places when she visited last year, the first thing she noticed was how many people she saw with their front teeth missing. She asked me if there was a special reason for that, or if it was simply a matter of bad dental hygiene. Alison looked rather shocked when I replied that for a while, having one's front teeth removed was quite fashionable. Apparently the craze was caused because people said that the removal of their front teeth enabled them to give better blow jobs.

“Do you know when they will be back?” I ask the fashion victim.

She shrugs her shoulders. “They both work in the day,” she says. “Maybe in the evening they will be at home.”

“Do you know their son, Chadwell?” She nods her head cautiously, but doesn’t say anything else. “Well, do you know where I could find him? Do you know where he could be?”

“No,” she says firmly. “He hasn’t been here for a long time now. You are not the only one looking for him,” she smirks.

“Thanks.” I say, turning around and retreating back down the steps. When I get to the bottom I look up and see that the girl is still staring down at me. At my car, the children crowd around me. “*Auntie, ons het mooi agter auntie’s se kar gekyk,*” says one little girl, tugging on my sleeve. I scratch about in my purse and give them each a few coins. It is a relief to get back into my car again and out of that merciless wind.

How is it that I didn’t see what was right in front of me. How could I have spent all that time with Shaun and not know that he is seriously fucked up? But people don’t only get sent to Valkenberg for being fucked up. Maybe he’s not. Maybe he’s some kind of criminal. What do I actually know about him? How do I tell the difference between the lies and the truth? How do I make sense of this mess when I don’t even know where he

is? I start my car up and the children scatter out of my way. They wave enthusiastically and quickly return to their game.

## Chapter 8

I wake up relieved and exhausted. I have not been sleeping well lately. First I struggle to fall asleep and then, when I finally manage to drift off in the early hours of the morning, I inevitably have the nightmares. Perhaps I should go back onto Xanor. Drug-induced sleep would be better than the kind of sleep I have been having.

It is still early but I force myself out of bed. I don't want to be late for my appointment. Even though I am very impatient with most of Sue's hippy bullshit and already convinced that this Meredith person is a quack, I am quite curious about her. And it won't be a complete waste of time – it could also be research for an article that I could sell to one of the women's magazines for extra money. I could ask Sue to recommend a few more psychics and expose them all as quacks. I shower, dress and leave home without first having my cup of coffee because of some vague notion that new age psychics would disapprove of caffeine.

I join the traffic in Buitengracht Street and within minutes I'm on the highway. In a few more minutes I reach the Groote Schuur off-ramp into Observatory. The streets of Observatory are quiet and narrow. I find Tarley Road without needing to look for it – Meredith's directions were clear and precise. I squeeze my car into the small parking space outside the house, pull up the handbrake and turn the ignition off.

There is no mistaking the house. Painted aquamarine in a row of anonymous cream and off-white semis, it stands proudly alone. It is also the only house in the road that has a thriving but overrun garden in front of it. Colourful crystals, wind chimes and bits of mirror hang from pieces of string tied to the branches of an ornamental guava tree. In the shimmering, early morning light the whole scene has the quality of a mirage.

As if the colour of the house and the blinking bits of mirror in the tree were not enough to convince me that I've found the right house, "The Serene Place: Centre for Holistic Health and Healing" has been stencilled in large white lettering next to the door. I nearly laughed out loud when I phoned to make the appointment and the voice on the other side of the line answered with, "The Serene Place, good morning." And I certainly did laugh out loud when Meredith left a lengthy message on my voicemail to confirm our appointment, which she ended: "with love, Meredith".

I wouldn't be here had it not been for Sue and her impeccable timing. I was standing at the window looking out through the grimy glass at the bustling city below me. It is a habit, I suppose. Whenever I am struggling with a piece, standing at the window gives me something to stare at while I think things through. An hour or so before, I had seen a girl lying dead on a dusty pavement in Bonteheuwel. I was two blocks away, following up a lead for another story, when I heard the gunfire. I rushed to the scene, but by the time I pulled up the gunfire had stopped and the perpetrators had fled. A woman – obviously the mother – was screaming and wailing over her daughter's body. She tried to pick the girl up, but collapsed and had to be helped by the people surrounding her.

The crowd had gathered as it usually does, but the police were slow to arrive as could be expected. Someone said that an ambulance had been summoned and that is when I saw that there was another victim, apparently the father, slumped in the driver's seat of a silver '85 or '86 Mazda 323. The father was unconscious and bleeding profusely, but was not dead yet. Dutifully I took my notes: four men in a white Volkswagen Jetta with a CA licence plate, the usual stuff about PAGAD and gangsters. I even secured a photograph of the girl from the shocked, uncomprehending grandmother – the mother was too hysterical to talk to – after solemnly swearing to return it myself.

Anyway, I was struggling to find the right words to describe what I saw. I was stuck on the first sentence and I kept typing a new line, highlighting it and hitting the delete button. An eight year old girl had been killed and I wanted to make the piece different from all the other ones I had written on children caught in gang crossfire. But even though the deadline loomed closer, the words would not come. So I got up to stare out of the window. After a while I felt a hand on my arm.

“Are you okay?” Sue asked, putting her arm around me, her face all serious and concerned. “I heard about the little girl.”

“I am fine,” I said, trying to shrug Sue's arm away – she is such a touchy feely person but it makes me uncomfortable, especially when she does it in the office. “Just struggling to write the story.”

“Elsie. I have something for you and I hope that you will use it.” She handed me a white envelope and I opened it up. I extracted a slim cream card that had a picture of an angel in long dress, complete with halo and trumpet. The name, “Meredith Cox”, was printed underneath the picture. I scanned the card quickly. “This voucher entitles the bearer to a two hour session with Meredith Cox: psycho-spiritual counselling and healing, channelled life purpose messages from the Archangels Gabriel and Michael, past life regressions, future life progressions, reiki ...” The list went on but I didn’t need to read any further.

“Sue, you know how I feel about this sort of thing. I can’t accept it.” I slipped the card into the envelope and tried to give it back to her, but she brushed my hand away.

“Just listen to me Elsie. Meredith is fantastic. I have had a few sessions with her and I can’t even begin to tell you how much she has done for me. Why don’t you give it a try before you dismiss it? I am really worried about you and I know that Meredith can help. She is incredible. Just give her a chance and you’ll see.”

So that is how I came to be here and about to be giving Meredith a chance. I slip out of the car, flick the alarm on and knock on the front door. The woman who opens looks rather nondescript for someone who talks to the angels Gabriel and Michael (I wonder if I should tell her that I don’t even believe in God). She is wearing a skirt, a loose-fitting jersey, thick woollen stockings and slip-on shoes. Grey hair frames a very striking face. I wonder how old she is because the grey hair doesn’t match the youthful, unlined skin.

“You must be Elsie, come inside,” she says, leading me through an empty waiting room – I have taken the first appointment for the day – and into a room that has been decorated entirely in pastel colours. It could almost be a doctor’s room, with a narrow bed along one of the walls, except that the table filled with crystals of different shapes and sizes spoils the illusion.

I sit down in the chair opposite Meredith’s one and note the box of tissues on a low table next to me. “Before we start, I just need to ask you a few questions,” Meredith says. “What is your address?” I answer her and she writes it down on a form. She carries on with this type of questioning and I answer easily – it is the kind of mundane detail most doctors require. The only unusual question is whether or not I abuse alcohol or drugs.

“I usually divide the first session into two. We can do the reading first or we can talk, it’s up to you.”

“I’m curious about the reading. How does it work?”

“Well, you lie down on the bed and relax. I will consult your angels and we can record what they have to say on a tape if you like. And then I use reiki to perform the healing. Would you like to start with the reading?”

“I’m not sure that it will work though. I don’t believe in angels.”

I expect her to try to convince me about them, the angels she talks to, but she doesn't. She doesn't even acknowledge the challenge; she smiles and continues to speak in her slow, careful manner. "So, do you want to get onto the bed and try to relax? Don't worry," she adds, as I hesitate at the bed. "You only need to take your shoes off."

I lie back on the narrow bed and she leans over me. Her grey hair falls into her face and I notice that she has very striking eyes – clear and calm and the most unusual shade of blue. I wonder whether the deep, dark blue is a natural colour or if she is wearing those coloured contact lenses.

"Now close your eyes," she says. "Are you comfortable?" I nod my head and close my eyes. I sense her hands moving in the air above me – over my chest, over my face, but she doesn't actually touch me as I had expected her to. Then I feel her cool hands clasping mine. "You are very troubled," she says in the same voice – I had anticipated it changing, you know, the whole thing of the spirits talking through her. "Perhaps because you are finding it hard to adjust to all the changes in your life. Things will seem to get worse for a while, but after that you will find happiness. Does this make sense to you?"

Not sure whether I am meant to speak or not, I nod my head. I suppose that what she is saying could be true, but the last bit especially makes it sound like fairly standard psychic bullshit that could be applied to anyone really. Tell them what they want to hear: you will meet a new man, happiness is just around the corner, I see travel in your future, the

possibility of a major windfall ... I expect that this is more or less what they teach you to say in psychic school.

“There is so much sadness in you,” Meredith continues in her even tones. “Sadness that you have carried with you for most of your life. The age that is coming to me is ten. When you were ten, you went through a very difficult, a traumatic period. Can you think of anything that happened to you at that age?”

“No, nothing comes to mind,” I say, snapping my eyes open and frowning at her. She smiles and squeezes my hands. This is beginning to freak me out. “That’s enough, I don’t need to hear any more,” I say, sitting up.

“I have said something that disturbed you,” Meredith says quietly. “Would you like to talk about it?”

“No. I shouldn’t be here. I am wasting your time. I don’t usually go in for this sort of thing, it’s really because my friend, Susan Arnold, she’s been seeing you ... well she gave me a voucher and I didn’t want to hurt her feelings.”

“Why don’t you sit down?” Meredith says gently, motioning to the chair I sat in earlier. “It is always painful to open up old wounds, go back to old hurts. I don’t want you to be distressed. Perhaps, when you are ready, you should get back onto the bed and I will perform the reiki for you. It will get rid of all the negative emotions that are blocking

you, so that the healing process can begin. We don't have to do the whole reading today. You don't even have to tell me about what you think of what was said, or about what is troubling you. We will get to all of these things in good time."

"No, you don't understand. It is not that I am disturbed or distressed by what you said. I really don't need this. I mean, I am mostly a together kind of person." But even as I say this, I hear that my voice has become high pitched, the words tumbling out faster and faster. No wonder Meredith does not believe me. She sits and waits patiently for me to say more. I want to leave, but I don't know how. I feel as though I need her permission.

"I am sorry," I say softly. "I am really fine. I have been going through a hard time lately, but it is nothing to get worked up about. My problems are not that great. It's just that I started seeing a younger guy even though I knew that he wasn't right for me. We were together for a while and then we had a big fight and I ended it. I haven't seen him since then, except I go to work one day and see his photograph in the paper and I find out that he's even younger than I thought he was and that he has been missing from home for a while. I suppose that the whole thing has been bothering me, especially since I don't know where he is and I feel a bit uneasy, you know, like I'm responsible for him being missing or something, I don't know ..."

Meredith gazes at me steadily, but makes no move to speak. "Then there's something that happened just before I called to make the appointment. I was trying to write about an eight year old girl who was killed in a shooting in Bontehewel. You know, I was right

there. I saw her lying dead on the pavement, her mother completely hysterical and her father was shot too. And I didn't feel anything. It didn't move me at all – I suppose because I have seen this sort of thing so many times before. But when I was struggling to write the piece, I had the most recent photograph of the girl on my desk and I kept looking at it as if it would inspire me somehow. And then, when the story was printed, I saw that I needn't have worried so much about the writing. The editors cut most of what I had written anyway. They blew the photograph up – it took up almost half of the front page – and the headline above it was just one big bold word: **SLAIN**. You see, what I had not realised was that the girl was exceptionally beautiful. That will horrify the public and boost the circulation figures more than my writing would have. But it bothered me that I spent all that time looking at the photograph, struggling over the story and I hadn't even noticed that she was beautiful. To me, she was just dead.”

“Perhaps we need to take some time to work through the relationship you have just ended. But for the moment, I am more interested in the girl. You said that you didn't feel anything about the girl's death. I don't think that that is true. It seems as though it has had an enormous impact on you – that's why you struggled to write about it. And your feelings about the girl worried you enough to come and see me.”

I think about this for a moment. “I suppose that you are right. I have been obsessing about her ...”

“Why do you think that is? Why have you been obsessing about the girl?”

“I don’t know why.”

Meredith nods her head thoughtfully and I think that there will be another expectant silence, but she begins to talk. “When I was forty,” she says evenly, “I tried to kill myself. My life was a mess; I had been married three times to three abusive men. I had been an alcoholic for twenty years. I took an overdose and I was utterly dismayed when I came to and realised I was in a hospital. I was placed in a psychiatric hospital for observation and it was there that I remembered that between the ages of eight and twelve, I had been sexually abused by my father.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I shift uncomfortably in my seat, thrown off guard by the sudden turn the conversation has taken and wishing that she would stop. What does she want from me? But Meredith just smiles wryly and continues in her clear, measured tones. “You see, I have found that most people who have been sent to me – and believe me, you have been sent – come here because of trauma they experienced during childhood. Because I am open about my own life, others find it easy to share their experiences.” She looks at me as though she expects me to have something to say to that, but I hold her gaze unwaveringly. “Sometimes they don’t even remember their trauma, they have coped with it by repressing all their memories as I had done for some thirty years of my life.”

Again she looks at me as if I should take my cue and start confessing my own sordid past just because she’s told me about hers. I look her straight in the eye and say, in a voice as

clear and as deliberate as her own. “My childhood was normal. Yes, there may have been some trauma, as you call it, but there was also a lot of happiness. I do not see the point of discussing it.”

I am really beginning to feel rather shaken by this Meredith person. She is not at all like the shrinks I have seen. She radiates a sense of calm and her eyes have an almost hypnotic effect. If I am not careful, I could tell her things, let her see those things about myself that I do not wish to bring out into the open. What is this obsession that people have about talking about *everything*? It’s the curse of Oprah Winfrey and her cronies on those American talk shows. I firmly believe that there are some things in life that are better left unsaid, that there are times when it is better to remain silent than to speak.

“Yes, you’re right. But something has happened in your childhood and it is still causing you pain,” Meredith says at last. “You don’t have to tell me what it was, you don’t have to tell me anything. But perhaps your feelings about the girl you described are not about that girl at all. You don’t need to feel grief for a girl you never knew, you need to grieve for your own inner child.”

That's it, I am going to get up and walk straight out of here, but it is Meredith who leaves her chair. She crouches down next to me and puts her hand on my shoulder. "Let's try this," she says softly. "I want you to close your eyes. I want you to clear your mind of everything – all the worries, the fears, the anger and the pain. I want you to trust me for this one moment. Relax. Breathe deeply. Now try to picture that girl in your mind, the girl you once were and never grieved for."

Even though my mind resists, my body follows Meredith's instructions. I am still sitting in the chair, my eyes are closed and I am following her words closely. And I do it; I conjure her up in my mind. "I see her, but I can't see her clearly. She is sitting in a shadowy corner and she has her back turned towards me. She won't let me see her face."

"Tell her that you forgive her, tell her she can turn around now. See yourself as you are now and reach out to her, embrace her."

I want to laugh at the whole farce, I want to get up and leave, but still I see that girl. She turns her head ever so slightly and looks at me over her shoulder. I see her eyes and they are cheeky and bemused. She's wants to laugh, I think. She wants to laugh because she's already been to hell and back and yet she knows that she will live to tell the tale.

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Before I have a chance to turn on my computer and finally go and get my much-needed dose of caffeine, Sue is at my side. "So, how did it go? What do you think of Meredith?"

“I thought that she was quite strange. I don’t know what to make of her.”

“You don’t know what to make of her?” Sue frowns.

“Well, on the one hand I quite like her,” I venture hesitantly. “She seems very calm and centred. And I found her easier to talk to than all those therapists you recommended before. I can appreciate and respect some of the things she said, but then there’s all the stuff that she told me about herself, her failed marriages and her alcoholism, I didn’t know what to do with that ...”

“But that’s what I think is wonderful about her,” Sue says. “When you see a psychiatrist or a psychologist, you do all the talking, you make yourself vulnerable while they sit in judgement of you. Meredith is the complete opposite and I think that her way is far more helpful and natural.”

“Yes, you have a point, but what really bothers me is her reading. You know I don’t believe in angels and all of that, so I really don’t know what to make of the things she said. I hate to say this, but some of it made sense. I don’t understand how she does it and I certainly don’t like it.”

“I don’t think that you need to believe in angels or to understand how she does the reading. Don’t you think that she is worth seeing anyway? You did say that you found her easy to talk to.”

“I don’t know, she wants me to see her a few more times and I said I’ll think about it. I haven’t decided yet. But right now I need some coffee. I haven’t had my first cup yet and I’m suffering from withdrawal.”

“Okay,” Sue says. “I am glad that you went to see her.” She pats me on the arm and goes back to her desk.

I pick my cup up and head for the kitchen. Waiting for the kettle to boil, I picture Meredith and her pastel room in my mind again. I have never met anyone like her before. Perhaps I should go and see her one more time. If for no other reason, it is comforting to know that there are people in the world who have lived lives more fucked up than mine and have managed to turn out okay in the end. Three failed marriages and alcoholism ... by those benchmarks my life is just fine.

## Chapter 9

I had more or less put Shaun out of my mind over the last few days. I can't rationalise it, but something happened that day I went to see Meredith and I have been much calmer and more relaxed ever since. So I am really not prepared when I am at the office one day and Sue replaces her receiver carefully and says to me, quite matter-of-factly: "You know that missing boy you were asking me about? I have just spoken to his mother. They have identified his body at the Salt River Morgue. Apparently he threw himself in front of a train at 5:30, Sunday morning. Poor woman – he was her only child you know."

I look at Sue, sitting there behind her computer screen, not realising what her words have meant to me. I try to let it sink in, but no. This cannot be. It simply cannot be true. It doesn't make sense, no sense at all.

"When is the funeral?" I hear myself ask.

"Ten o'clock on Saturday morning. St Dominic's in Retreat."

"Are you going?" I ask her.

"No. Why would I do that?" she asks with a frown. "Are you okay? Did you know him?"

"No, I am fine. I thought that I knew him when I saw his picture. but I was wrong."

Shaun is dead and I may or may not have had something to do with it. He said that he was happy with me. Would he be alive if I didn't end it? Would he be alive if I didn't treat him so badly? Did I push him over the edge? Or would this have happened no matter what I did or didn't do? Slowly I get up from my desk and go and stand at the window. I stare out through the grime on the window – the window cleaners come only once a year – and the view is still the same. Everything has changed but not the view. I will not fall apart. I know that I will not fall apart because I have survived worse, far worse than this.

## Water Pistol

When I wake up it takes me a few moments to realise that it is Granny's bed I'm lying in. I close my eyes again and in my mind I see Granny staring at me with that look on her face. Now I remember everything about yesterday and that awful feeling seeps into me – that wretched feeling that you get when you know you are in such trouble, you won't even be able to look at your mother's face for the shame of it all.

Granny's not cross with me but I know that with Mother it will be a different story. When I do something wrong and Granny finds out, she gets very cross – she scolds me and sometimes she will even pull my ear and say, “What is this? An ornament?” But I don't mind because after that, she's normal again. But Mother is completely different. She never scolds or pulls my ear. What she does is far, far worse than that. Mother will get a sad, disappointed look in her eyes and she will not say a word. Her shoulders will hunch and she will look at me, her eyes saying, “How could you have done this to me?” And I will feel worse than Judas must have felt when he betrayed Jesus. It will take Mother a few days, sometimes even a week, before she laughs and jokes with me again. Well, at least Mother is not here now.

Even though I am truly sorry that Mother knows, I also feel the huge relief I normally feel when I wake up from my nightmare and Mr Smith's combi is no longer pressing down on my chest. Reluctantly, I get out of bed and find Granny and Uncle Hannie in the kitchen. Granny is sitting at the table with her tea, her smoke and the *Cape Times* and

Uncle Hannie is drawing on his pad. I sit down next to Uncle Hannie and look at what he is drawing.

Uncle Hannie is very good at drawing – much better than I am, but I don't like what he draws and the way he fills each page with blue ink so that everything looks so messy and chaotic. This page is filled with half-naked women and the face of a man with long, wild hair and a deep frown. One woman is draped around a large cross with her one leg lifted up awkwardly to rest on the horizontal bar of the cross. Her dress drapes open at the raised leg and falls open at the breast where there is an ugly, long, gaping wound where her heart is exposed. Hannie doesn't mind me staring while he works, he just carries on, drawing a woman with a snake coiled around her, its head poised erect between her breasts, like it is about to strike out, with its large, menacing eyes bulging and its tongue sticking out.

“How are you feeling, Elsie?” Granny asks me, looking at me over the top of her reading glasses. “Did you sleep okay?”

“Yes, Granny, I'm fine.” I turn away from her and look at the kitchen wall instead. I don't want her to look at me now – it makes me feel hot and naked like I felt in the bath when she stared at my privates like that. My eyes travel up to the clock on the wall.

“Gran, it is half past nine! Why didn't you wake me up? What about school?”

“Don’t worry about school, Elsie.” Granny says. “I gave Sister a call and told her that you are sick.”

“I won’t go to school any more, more, more, there’s a big fat teacher at the door, door, door!” Hannie recites, without lifting his eyes from his drawing. “He hits me on my bum, ’cause I’m a naughty son of a gun. No I won’t go to school any more, more, more!” He giggles quietly to himself.

“Auntie Elsie,” he says, looking at me and still laughing. “Is your teacher big and fat? Does he hit you on your bum?”

“Hannie, leave Elsie alone!” Granny says, and I am surprised because usually she sticks up for him.

“Our teachers don’t hit us and they are not big and fat. When you went to school maybe the teachers were like that, but our teachers work for God!”

Uncle Hannie finds this very funny and he laughs until tears come into his eyes. “How can your teachers work for God? You talk nonsense, Auntie Elsie!”

“Hannie, that’s enough,” says Granny. “Elsie, you go and get dressed and have your breakfast. We have some business to take care of today. I have to take you to the police

station so that we can lay a charge against that man. What he did to you is against the law and he must go to jail so that he can't do it again."

I go to the bathroom to brush my teeth the way Granny taught me to do when I don't have my own toothbrush with me. You just put the toothpaste on your finger and you rub it all over your teeth just like it is a toothbrush.

My face and my neck feel very hot and I see my cheeks turning bright red in the mirror. I feel like Granny's eyes are still on me – staring right through skin and flesh, through all the blood and tissues – staring at me until she can see my bones.

If he goes to jail it will be bad, very bad. What is Granny thinking of? Hasn't she watched all those episodes of *Columbo* and *Derrick* with me? Every time someone causes the bad guy to go to jail, the bad guy spends his time in prison plotting his revenge. With each passing day, the bad guy hates the person more and more. Finally, when he is released, he comes back to kill the person he holds responsible for sending him to jail – but not before he tortures and terrorises the guilty one. And what he will do to me when he gets out of jail is not the worst of my worries. What about Mother? She may never speak to me again. Maybe she will not want to see me anymore, maybe she'll leave me again like that time she went to Johannesburg, only this time she won't come back. Getting him into trouble with Granny is one thing, but sending him to jail is something else entirely.

Granny fusses around me like I am a baby, she helps me to get dressed and she brushes my hair even though I can do both perfectly well by myself. She tells Hannie that he must stay at home, but he insists on coming with us.

When we pull up at the police station, I am scared to get out of the car. "Come," Granny says impatiently and she holds my hand as we cross the road and walk up the steps. There are policemen all around, in their blue uniforms with their guns sticking out of the holsters on their hips. Granny goes to speak to the policeman at the desk while Hannie and I sit on the bench and wait. Another policeman stands with his back to us, a few paces away from Granny, his back bent over as he writes busily on a piece of paper. Hannie gets up quietly and goes to stand behind this policeman. He stands there for a while and I wonder what he is doing. Suddenly he taps the policeman lightly on the shoulder and the man's hand goes straight to his gun as he whirls around with a gasp. "What the *fokken* hell?" he says as he looks confusedly at Hannie's stupid grin.

"Can I look at your revolver please?" Hannie asks the policeman, but before he can answer, Granny sees what Hannie is doing and tells him to sit down. "Sorry," she says to the policeman as Hannie comes to sit back down next to me.

"That's okay, missus," the policeman says to Granny but looking at Hannie with a funny expression on his face. The policeman shakes his head then turns around and begins to write again.

“What were you doing?” I whisper to Hannie, but he just winks at me. He makes a gun with his middle two fingers and his thumb and fires it at the policeman’s back. After firing off a few shots, he blows the top of his gun just like they do in the Friday night cowboy shows on TV.

Granny is finished speaking to the other policeman, the one behind the desk, and she comes towards me, so I get up, thinking that we are going to go now, that it is over. “Elsie, the policeman wants to ask you some questions,” Granny says. “Okay? Will you tell him what you told me?”

Granny nods her head at the policeman and he comes from behind his desk and crouches down in front of me. “Hello Elsie, my name is *Sersant* van der Walt,” he says, speaking with a heavy Afrikaans accent. This policeman is not big and burly like you’d expect a policeman to look. He is very slim and he looks very young. He leans so close to me that I can see the red patch of pimples on his oily forehead. “I just need to ask you a few questions about what your grandmother told me, alright? I just want you to tell me what your stepfather did to you.”

He looks at me expectantly but I can’t say anything. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth and my whole mouth feels as dry as a desert. I don’t think about what I can say to the policeman – what can I say anyway? Instead, I think about water. Maybe when we get out of here. Granny will buy me a coke. The policeman looking at me so closely makes

me feel all hot again and I look at Granny, my eyes begging her to take me away from this place.

“Please Elsie, it is for your own good if you tell me what happened,” the policeman says. “I am just trying to help you to make sure that this bad things won’t happen to you again. Did your stepfather touch you in a way you didn’t like? In a place that made you feel bad?”

“It is okay, my girl,” Granny says. “Just tell the policeman what you told me.”

Granny, the policeman, even Uncle Hannie, all look at me expectantly, waiting for me to say something, anything. Eventually the policeman looks at Granny and says, “Well, it doesn’t look like she will talk about it. You should take her for the examination now. I’ll write down the name of the doctor at Victoria Hospital.”

They go to the desk together and the policeman writes something on a piece of paper and gives it to Granny. They talk a bit longer and then the policeman says goodbye to all of us.

I am very relieved when we finally walk out of the police station and get back into Granny’s car. “Now Elsie,” Granny says, turning around to face me. “I know that this is not easy for you, but you must co-operate. The police can’t do anything if you won’t say what happened.” Granny looks at me like she is waiting for me to say something, but I

just look out of the window, at the barbed wire fence that surrounds the police station. A yellow police van pulls up outside and there are four men locked up in the back. They stare out through the iron grille and one of them smiles at me and winks an eye. I don't smile back or look away. I think about how horrible it must be to have to ride around in the back of a police van so that the entire world can see that you've broken the law, that you are a thief, a murderer or a *molester*. I wonder if they are going to pick Uncle Greg up and lock him in a yellow police van so that he can ride around in the back for everyone to see.

“Well, the policeman said that I have to take you to a doctor so that he can examine you and write a report.” When I don't say anything, Granny sighs and starts up the car. We drive to Victoria Hospital and walk into the waiting room together. Granny goes to speak to the nurse behind the counter and I take her hand and stand with her while she explains to the nurse that we are there for the doctor. I don't like hospitals. They make me feel dizzy and I can't breathe properly because of the smell.

The nurse tells Granny that we have to wait our turn, so we join Hannie on the hard, wooden bench. The benches are placed next to one another and they line all the walls of the room. When someone gets to the top of the bench, closest to the double door, the next time a nurse comes out, she will look at the person and nod her head. She won't say anything, but the person will get up and follow her through the double doors. Then all the people will get up and sit in the next seat. I don't know why they get up, when we have to

move up, I just shift one next to me without getting up. We are in the bench closest to the doors that you come in through, so we are right at the end of the queue.

Our bench has a lot of names on it – some have been carved into it and some have been written with a black Koki pen. I read the names next to me, carved out so that you can see the colour of the wood underneath the white paint. JFK. Josters. Lameeza and Igsaan in a heart with a crooked arrow through it.

I feel a pair of eyes on me – you know that feeling that you get when someone is looking at you even though you can't see it. I look up and see that it is a man sitting on the bench opposite me. He looks terrible, with a bloody bandage around his head. He sits with his hand holding up his head and I can see the blood seeping into the white bandage.

Quickly I turn my head from his gaze. “Granny, I’m thirsty,” I say. “Can’t we get something to drink?”

Before Granny can answer, she looks up in fright at a woman who has come in screaming and swearing. She is holding a towel onto her chest and it is covered with blood. As she walks past us. I see her blood dripping onto the grey floor tiles. The nurse at the counter takes her straight through the double doors; she doesn’t have to wait on the hard benches.

“Just wait a moment,” Granny says. “When that nurse comes back, I will ask her for a glass of water.”

The nurse comes back through the double doors. Her navy blue shoes squeak on the tiles as she walks by. "Excuse me," Granny stops her. "My grandchild is thirsty. Can she have some water?"

"Yes, of course," the nurse says and she smiles at me. "Why don't you come with me and I will give you some water."

I follow her into a small room filled with shelves of boxes and with a little sink in the corner. The nurse takes a paper cup from a long stack and fills it at the tap. "What is your name?" she asks.

"Elsie," I answer.

"I have a niece called Elsie too," the nurse says. "Actually, her name is Elsabe, but we call her Elsie for short. Is your name short for anything?"

I shake my head because I am too busy gulping the water down. It is not very cold and it has the metallic taste of the tap, but I drain the cup gratefully.

"Look at this," the nurse says, taking a large syringe from a shelf and filling it with water. She squirts it up into the air, the water forming a pretty arc and I watch as all the drops float down into the sink. "It is not a syringe anymore, now it's a water pistol," she says. "Here, you can keep it, but you can't play with it inside. Wait until you get home."

“Thank you.” I say, taking the water pistol from her.

“Well, I better get back behind my desk,” she says, leading me out of the room. I put the syringe in my pocket because I don’t want Hannie to see it. I am going to wait until we get home so that I can ambush him. Granny and Hannie haven’t moved along very far, but we are not last in line anymore. There is a woman with a little baby sitting next to Granny. I squeeze in between Granny and Uncle Hannie and get back to waiting.

I don’t know what I hate more, all this boring waiting or all the sick people or the terrible smells. I put my hand in my pocket so that I can feel the syringe water pistol. It is much better than the bright green water pistol Mother bought me a long time ago, because it can take more water. And I am sure that I am the only person in the world who has a syringe water pistol. I can’t wait till we get home so that I can try it out on Hannie – I’m really going to get him this time.

After hours and hours of waiting, it is finally our turn. Granny and I follow the nurse through the doors, but Hannie has to stay on the hard benches in the waiting room. The nurse leads us into a big room that has beds scattered about, some with curtains around them and some without curtains. There are people lying on most of the beds and the nurse leads us to an empty one. She tells me to get onto the bed and she pulls the curtains around us. Then she says she’ll see me later and I am sorry that she is leaving because I like her.

A hand with thick, stubby fingers grasps one of the curtains and pushes it aside. A head leans in to look at Granny and I. The man is quite old – older than Granny I think because his hair and his grizzly beard are both grey while Granny only has some grey hairs that she always asks me to pull out for her. “Mrs September?” he asks and when Granny nods her head, the rest of him appears from behind the curtain.

“Hello,” he says, sitting down on the bed next to me and shaking Granny’s hand. “I am Doctor Van Stavel.” Dr Van Stavel peers at me curiously through his thick black rimmed glasses. “Now, what do we have here?” he opens a cardboard file and looks at a sheet of paper. “Will you get undressed please?” he says to me.

I look at him and Granny and it is like being in the police station again. “Come on Elsie,” Granny says. “Do you want me to help you?” I shake my head miserably.

“I don’t want to get undressed,” I say. “I want to go home.”

“Now look young lady,” Doctor Van Stavel says gruffly. He is frowning and he looks angry, like he would like to smack me. “I don’t have time to argue with you. I have a waiting room full of patients. Patients who have been stabbed, patients who are seriously injured. I certainly do not have all day. So get undressed this instant or I will undress you myself.”

I feel like I am going to cry, but I don't. I take my shoes and my tracksuit off. "Your panties and your vest too," Doctor Van Stavel commands.

So once again I am naked in front of Granny. And naked in front of a horrible doctor. He pokes, prods and scrapes me where it hurts and I look up at the ceiling – I won't look at what he is doing – and wish that I were far away from here.

When it is over and we are allowed to go home, I get into the front seat of Granny's Volksie. I take my syringe water pistol out of my pocket and turn around to show it to Hannie. "Look," I say. "Look what the nurse gave me," I don't feel like ambushing him with my water pistol anymore, which is why I'm showing it to him now. But Hannie isn't even interested. He just says "Oh," and carries on humming to himself.

## **The Avocado Pear Tree**

As Granny parks the Volksie in front of her house, I see Mother getting up from the stoep and my heart sinks. I knew that I had to face her sooner or later, I just wish that it wasn't right now. But Mother doesn't look like she's cross with me. When I get out of the car she flings her arms around me and squeezes me tight.

"My baby," she says. "I am so, so sorry about what you've been through. I only wish that you had come to me. I am your mother, Elsie and I love you very much. There is nothing that you can't tell me, okay?" I can feel that she is crying because her tears are warm against my neck.

"Come inside, Lillian," Granny says. "Give the child a rest, she's had a hard time today."

Mother releases me and takes a tissue from her pocket. She dabs her tears and then blows her nose with the same tissue and returns it to her pocket. We go inside and Granny collapses into her chair at the head of the kitchen table. "Whew," she says, "I'm tired." She lifts her feet up onto the stool as she always does when her legs are sore. "Why don't you make us a cup of tea Lillian? Elsie, why don't you go and have a little nap? You must be tired too."

"I don't feel like sleeping, Gran. You know I can only sleep at night."

“Yes, let Elsie stay,” Mother says, turning around from the sink with the kettle in her hand. “What I have to say to you I want Elsie to hear as well.”

Granny doesn't say anything to Mother; she just gives her a look and reaches into her handbag to pull out her smokes and her lighter. She lights a cigarette and exhales a stream of blue-grey smoke. “Elsie, won't you pass me an ashtray please?” she says.

Mother takes cups, saucers and spoons out while she waits for the kettle to boil. “Do you want anything to drink my darling?” she asks me. I really want coke because I am very thirsty again, but I don't say so because I know that there isn't any. I don't remember being as thirsty as I have been today, especially if you think that it is cold, so it is not like I'm thirsty for a good reason.

“It's okay,” I say to Mother. “I'll make some Squeeze 'n Drink.” Strawberry flavour Squeeze 'n Drink is my favourite, you mix it with milk and it tastes better than milkshake. But it is not as good as coke when you are as thirsty as I am because it doesn't have the fizzy bubbles that really quench your thirst. I go to the fridge and get the milk out which Mother takes and pours into the tea she's just made. I pour myself a large glass of milk and squeeze in some Squeeze 'n Drink, watching the pretty pattern the pink liquid makes as it swirls and melts into the milk.

Mother sits at the bottom end of the table, opposite Granny, and takes a sip of hot tea. I am always amazed at how quickly Mother can drink hot tea or coffee; she can swallow down a whole cup before it has even had a chance to cool down.

“Look,” Mother says to Granny. “I know that you blame me for what’s happened to Elsie and you are right. I should have known that something was wrong. I should have noticed that she has not been herself lately, but I thought that she was just going through a phase. You know, adjusting to Greg, to moving again. For that I will always be sorry. I am really grateful that she could come to you and talk to you and for all your help, but you must understand that Elsie is *my* daughter. I want her to come home with me so that we can work through this terrible, terrible thing together.”

“Lillian, I know that Elsie is your daughter and I certainly would never try to take her away from you. But if you think that you can take this child back into that house with that man still around, you will have to take her over my dead body.”

Now I am sorry that I didn’t go and have a nap as Granny suggested. I wish that I could just get up from this table and walk away. But I am trapped between Mother and Granny just like the time when I was trapped in my swing underneath the avocado pear tree.

When I was very small, Uncle Hannie made me a swing with a thick yellow nylon rope and a big black car tyre. I loved playing in that swing. What I loved most of all was when Hannie would twist the rope round and round for me. The rope would coil up tight, taking me higher and higher off the ground, up close to the branch that held the swing. When

Hannie couldn't twist the rope any more, he would suddenly let it go and I would hold on tight to the sides of the tyre as it went spinning crazily until it slowed down and stopped.

I loved to spin in the swing so much that I would beg and nag Uncle Hannie to twist the swing up for me. Until one day when he twisted the swing up when my hair was loose. I don't know exactly how it happened because it happened so quickly, but I had just started spinning when I was yanked up out of the swing, by my hair. My hair was caught up in the rope and I was hanging by it, dangling and screaming my head off. Uncle Hannie was in such a panic that he couldn't do anything to help me and Mother and Granny came running out of the house.

"Hannie, go and fetch my big black scissors quickly," Granny said. "We'll have to cut her out."

Hannie ran off to go and fetch the scissors and Granny tried to quiet me down. "Do you really think we have to cut her hair?" Mother said to Granny. "I don't think that it is necessary, I can untangle her," she said, yanking and pulling at a tuft of hair until it broke off.

"You'll never untangle this mess," Granny said above my screams which had become much louder in volume since I realised that when she said "cut her out" she was talking about cutting my hair.

Hannie arrived with the big, black-handled scissors and handed it to Granny. “Elsie, what do you want me to do?” Granny asked. “Do you want me to cut you out of the swing now or do you want to let your mother try to untangle you?” What a miserable choice – do I want to hang from a rope by my hair for any longer than I have been hanging already or do I want to lose my long black hair that had never been cut before?

At the time my hair was so long it hung straight down my back in a black sheet. It was almost longer than Mother’s hair and even though it wasn’t curly and bouncy like her hair, I would never have dreamed of letting anyone near it with a scissors. “Your hair is your crowning glory,” Granny would always say to me. And now here she was with a scissors, offering to get rid of my crowning glory with a few deft snips. But at the same time it was bloody painful hanging by my hair. “Cut me loose,” I said to Granny miserably and closed my eyes as I heard the cold sounds of steel on steel.

When I was free, I looked up at the hair, still tangled up in the rope like that. It looked so lifeless and dead now, like you wouldn’t believe that it once was my crowning glory. I don’t know who was more upset at that moment – me or Mother. When I turned around and looked at her, there were tears in her eyes.

“It’s okay, my baby,” she said, putting her hand on my shorn head. “I’ll take you to the hairdresser’s and they can cut it into a nice style for you.”

“Oh, stop getting so worked up about hair,” Granny said. “It will grow back. Hannie, try to pick all that hair out of the rope. We must bury it or flush it down the toilet. You know if the birds get hold of that hair they will all go crazy.” I don’t know why human hair would make birds crazy, but Granny always says that it does.

Anyway, Granny was right. Having short hair was not a big deal and with each passing year it grew a bit longer. Now it is almost as long as it was then. But after that, even though my hair was short and there was no danger of the accident repeating itself, I would never get into that swing again. After a while, I noticed that someone had taken it down. Now I wish that it was still out there, hanging beneath the avocado pear tree. I’d go out there right now and swing on it. Twist myself up without Hannie’s help.

“But I confronted Greg and he said that it is absolutely not true!” Mother says. “And I know him. He loves Elsie like his own child. He would never do a thing to hurt her. He gave me his word, he swore that he would never have dreamt of doing such a thing. He was upset with me for even thinking that it could be him!”

“Lilly, I am sorry to say this, but you don’t deserve to call yourself a mother. Not only did you let that man get hold of Elsie underneath your own roof, but now you call your own daughter a liar? Why don’t you take her inside and ask her to show you what she showed me. Then see if you can look me straight in the face and still try to defend that bastard!”

“Elsie,” Mother says, turning to face me. Silent tears are falling down her anguished face.

“Elsie look, you know that I trust you completely. You know that I always believe what you tell me. But are you sure that it was Uncle Greg who did that to you? Are you positive that it wasn’t someone else?”

I nod my head and Mother looks at me like I had stabbed her through the heart. “Well,” she says dabbing her eyes with the tissue she used before and is already falling apart. “Of course I have to believe you then. I will go back home and ask him to leave. Elsie can stay here in the meantime, but when he is gone, I’m coming to fetch her. Okay baby?” she says, turning to look at me. I nod my head again.

“Can I go and play outside now?” I ask Granny, desperate to get up from the table, out of the room.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit cold to play outside? Why don’t you go and play some draughts or snakes and ladders with your uncle?” Granny says.

I find Uncle Hannie lying on Granny’s bed, listening to her radio. I lie down next to him and he shifts up to give me more space. “Uncle Hannie, do you remember that time when I was small and I got stuck in the rope of the swing you made for me? You remember the swing underneath the avocado pear tree?”

“I remember how you screamed,” Uncle Hannie says, “Waáaaah! Waaaaaah!” he mimics me. “Waaaaaah! My hair! Don’t cut my hair!” We both laugh, although he laughs far more heartily than I do.

“What happened to the swing? It isn’t outside anymore.”

“After you stopped using it, Ma said I must cut it down so I could put the tyre on her car.”

“Don’t lie, Uncle Hannie, that tyre was too old to use on a car. Will you make me a swing again? I feel like swinging.”

“Why don’t you go to the park then? I’ll go with you.”

“No, we better stay here. My mother is crying in the kitchen because Gran said she is a bad mother and I can’t go home with her. So, are you going to build me a swing again? I’ll help you find a tyre.”

“Yes,” Uncle Hannie says. “We can take one tyre off the Volksie for your swing. Ma won’t notice. Just don’t scream like that again, okay?”

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Uncle Hannie and I don’t begin our work on the new swing until the next morning, after Granny has left to fetch her pension. Mother and Granny spent the entire afternoon

yesterday talking and arguing. By the time Mother left, her eyes were red and puffy from all her crying. When I was saying goodbye to her at the front gate I said that I thought she was a very good mother and she mustn't let Granny make her cry like that. What I said made her cry some more and I felt bad because I wanted to make her feel better.

Then when I went back inside, Granny was crying quietly at the kitchen table too and telling Hannie about what a bad person my mother is to let Greg "get hold of" me. How she would never have let something like that happen underneath her own roof. I didn't want to hear more about that, so I went into Granny's room and started reading my library book. I had not even read a chapter when I fell asleep and I slept right through, only waking up this morning.

Anyway, Uncle Hannie has found an old tyre and I checked that he didn't take it from Granny's Volksie. But we are using Granny's towrope to hang the tyre from the lowest branch of the avocado tree. The avocado pear tree is the best tree in Granny's garden. It is so tall and majestic that you cannot see the top of it if you are close by. You can only see the top of the avocado pear tree when you are quite a distance away from it, like if you are waiting at the station for your train.

The avocado pear tree is also the only tree in Granny's garden that I have not climbed yet. I have always wanted to climb it – imagine what you could see from its top branches, surely you'd be able to see the entire world! But the avocado pear tree is impossible to climb because it has no branches that are low down enough for me to reach. Even the

lowest branch, from which we are going to hang the swing, is up above Uncle Hannie's head.

As soon as Granny drove off in her Volksie, Uncle Hannie and I set to work. When I was with Granny in the holidays, I would go with her to collect her pension. Afterwards, we would go to Cut Right, which is opposite the post office, and she would have her hair cut, coloured and blow dried. Then we would go up to Grand Bazaars and Granny would do her grocery shopping. So Granny was surprised when I said that I didn't want to go with her to collect her pension, but Uncle Hannie and I have work to do. Together, we roll the tyre underneath the avocado pear tree. "Uncle Hannie, where did you get this old tyre from?"

"Well, Auntie Elsie, that's for me to know and you to find out," Uncle Hannie says mysteriously. He picks up the rope that was lying on the ground in a loose circle – just like the lassos the cowboys use in the Westerns – and tries to throw it over the lowest branch of the tree. I must say that Uncle Hannie is nowhere near the likes of those cowboys when it comes to throwing a rope accurately. It takes him a few attempts before the rope falls over the bottom branch.

Uncle Hannie picks the tyre up and threads the rope through it. "Elsie, come and hold the tyre here for me while I tie the knot," he says.

This is easier said than done as the tyre is very heavy and I struggle to keep it up. “Uncle Hannie, my arms are getting sore. Can’t you hurry up?”

“It is not easy to tie a good knot, you know. You don’t want the swing to fall down with you in it, do you?”

Just when I feel that I am going to drop the tyre, Uncle Hannie says, “Okay, that should do the trick.”

It is such a relief to let go of the tyre and I want to jump into the swing to try it out, but Uncle Hannie says, “Hold your horses, lets first get the knot up towards the top otherwise it will get in the way.” He pulls at one side of the rope so that the knot travels upward, until it is almost next to the branch.

“Now we have Miss Elsie September from Wynberg, giving the new, improved swing a test ride,” Uncle Hannie announces grandly, speaking into his hand as though it holds a microphone. He lifts me up and slips me through the tyre and gives the swing a gentle nudge. Then he pushes harder and harder. Higher and higher up I go, feeling the cool wind on my cheeks. I look up at the tree above me, the wind rustling the leaves, the weak winter sun struggling to come through between leaves and branches. I close my eyes and feel that I can fly, that I can be like a bird and soar up beyond the house, higher up than any tree in Granny’s garden, than the electricity poles in the road. Higher even than the

tallest building or the highest mountain. The motion of the swing has me hypnotised, but when I open my eyes it is not enough.

“Uncle Hannie, I want to do the twister again. Won’t you twist me up please?”

“Oh, no, what about the hair?” Hannie says and he laughs at me. “Waaaah, waaaah, my hair! Please don’t cut my hair!”

“Uncle Hannie come on, twist me up,” I say irritably. I don’t know why he always has to tease me like that. I wish that I could have just built this swing myself, without his help. Then I wouldn’t have to put up with his nonsense.

I hear the front door open and think that it is Granny, back from fetching her pension already, but it is Mother who comes outside into the yard. “Hello the two of you,” she says, standing on the step at the back door.

“Mother look, we’ve built a swing!” I say as I swing forward towards her.

“That’s lovely, Elsie,” Mother smiles and I am glad because she looks happy again.

Standing there in the doorway, with her hair drawn back from her face and no make up on, she looks much better than she did yesterday when she cried so that black rivers of mascara ran down her cheeks. Mother sits down on the step.

“Where is Ma then?” Mother asks Uncle Hannie, but he doesn’t answer her, he just continues to push me back and forth, higher and higher.

“Granny’s gone to fetch her pension,” I answer for him.

“Oh,” Mother says and she takes her cigarettes and lighter from her handbag. She shakes a cigarette loose from the packet and holds it out to Uncle Hannie. “Want one?” But still Uncle Hannie doesn’t speak. He just continues to push me back and forth, higher and higher.

Mother places the cigarette between her lips and inhales as she holds the flame to it. As she exhales, she leans back against the brick wall that frames the doorway. The weak winter sun shines on her face and she closes her eyes for a moment and half smiles at the sun.

“So, are you feeling a little bit better now Elsie?” she asks me, like I have really been sick as Granny told Sister Theresa. I nod my head anyway because when someone asks you if you feel better you are always supposed to say yes, just like you are supposed to say fine, thank you, when someone asks you how you are. That is, if anyone except Uncle Hannie asks you how you are. When you tell him fine thanks, he says, “You aah fine thanks. And I aah like this.” Then he will imitate the sounds and actions of someone having a pooh in the toilet because that is what he means by aah or maybe aah is the Afrikaans word for pooh.

Mother drops her cigarette stub onto the concrete step below the one she's sitting on and grinds it out with her foot. "Elsie," she says, getting up and wiping her hands on her pants, "I can't wait for your grandmother to get back. I still have a few errands to run. Go and get your school things, I want you to come home with me."

Suddenly Hannie stops pushing the swing and he plants himself firmly between Mother and I. "No," he says. "You are not taking Elsie. Ma said that you must not take Elsie because you are bad to her."

I am surprised that Uncle Hannie has spoken at all, never mind the way he has spoken to Mother. Uncle Hannie sometimes has terrible arguments with Granny and he even shouts and swears at her. Sometimes he gets cross with me too, but he will never say a harsh word to Mother. Granny always says that Mother and Uncle Hannie get on like a house on fire. I climb out of my swing and go and stand next to Mother.

"Oh Hannie please," says Mother irritably. "Don't you also get involved in this." Uncle Hannie's face is pale, but his neck and cheeks have angry red streaks and his ears are turning bright red. "Come on Elsie," Mother says. "Let's go." She takes my hand in hers and tugs me towards the steps.

"I said you must not take Elsie!" Uncle Hannie shouts and he grabs my hand away from Mother and pushes her so hard that she loses balance and falls back, knocking her head on the corner of the step. Before Mother has a chance to get up or to put her hands over

her face, Hannie is sitting astride her chest and beating her face and her arms with his fists.

“Uncle Hannie no! Stop! Stop!” I am screaming and trying to pull him off her, but to him I am nothing but a harmless fly buzzing around him – he doesn’t even look at me or hear me screaming.

“You won’t take Elsie! You won’t take Elsie!” he chants as he rams his fists into my mother’s fragile flesh. “You won’t take Elsie! You won’t take Elsie!” as he clasps Mother’s neck and bangs her head onto the concrete step. Blood runs down from Mother’s nose and from her mouth.

“Please Uncle Hannie, please stop hurting my mother!” I scream, barely noticing how the tears and mucus mingle and fall into my mouth. I don’t know if he hears me at last, but suddenly he does stop. He looks at my mother lying there beneath him, so quiet so still. He looks at his hands covered in blood, my mother’s blood, his own blood. He looks at Mother like he is confused, like he doesn’t know how she came to be lying underneath him, her clothes torn, her face and arms bloody, battered and bruised. He looks at my mother like he had been sleepwalking and has just woken up.

“Lilly?” he whispers. “Lilly are you okay? Do you need help? Can you get up?” Mother doesn’t answer and she doesn’t move. Hannie gets off her chest and crouches at her side.

He lifts my mother's head up from the step. "Lilly, wake up, say something," Uncle Hannie says.

It is quiet, very quiet now – I must have stopped screaming. "Lilly, please get up," Uncle Hannie moans, trying to pull my mother upright. "Oh," Hannie moans, "Oh oh oh oh oh." They both collapse back on the ground again. Hannie gets up and begins to sob loudly, pacing up and down the brick paving, but I barely look at him. I look at my mother, mangled and motionless and I know that now it is up to me. I rush into the kitchen and with shaking, unsteady fingers I find the number of Wynberg Police Station in the phone book.

"Please come, please send an ambulance," I say to the policeman on the other side, wiping my tears and snot away and trying to keep the crying out of my voice so he can understand what I am saying. "It's my mother, she's been beaten very badly and now she's not moving."

"What is your name? Can you give me your address?" the policeman asks. Somehow I manage to answer and he says that he'll send a van and an ambulance right away.

I go back outside. Uncle Hannie is not around anymore – I don't know where he's gone. Mother's eyes are swollen shut and she is breathing in loud dry gasps, her chest rising and falling alarmingly. "Mommy, can you hear me?" I take her cold, limp hand and put it in mine. "Don't worry mommy I called the police and they are going to send an

ambulance – right away he said. Mommy? Can you hear me?” I try not to be scared because she can’t answer, not to be scared by the way she looks, not to be scared by the way she is gasping so loudly for air.

“Mommy please say something. Are you getting cold? I am going to fetch you a blanket.”

I run into the house and return with Granny’s TV blanket. It has taken me no more than a few seconds, but by the time I get back, the racking gasps have stopped. “Mommy? Mommy?” But she is still, completely quiet and still. I put the blanket over her, tucking it around her shoulders as she has done for me so many times. I do not look at her face. I do not see how her chest is no longer rising and falling.

I know what this means, but I will not know. If I do not look, it will be different. I turn my back on Mother and go back to the swing. Grasping the rope above the tyre, I pull myself up and hang until both feet grab hold of the tyre. I pull myself up the rope, balancing my feet carefully on the top part of the tyre. The swing begins to move slightly, with me standing up on top of it. This feels dangerous, it feels like I could fall, but I don’t care. I manoeuvre myself up the rope with my hands and feet, barely noticing how painful and red my palms are becoming. When I reach the branch, I hold onto it with all my strength and pull my legs up after me.

Cautiously, I make my way up from one thick branch to the next. I only focus on the thick branch above me with dark, peeling bark. I will not look down. The higher I get, the smoother the bark becomes as the branches are younger. Right up close to the very top, the branches are pale and smooth. I have to be very careful when I get near to the top because the branches are thinner and more pliable.

At last I am as high up as I could go. I have done it – I have made it right to the top. I can see more than I saw when I climbed the other trees in the yard. I can see beyond the tall buildings in the Main Road, the Medical Centre and the town hall where I go with Granny to pay the electricity. I can see all the way down to the sea in the distance – I think that it must be Muizenberg, which is the closest beach to us. To my left lie the blue velvet Hottentot's Holland mountains that Granny pointed out to me a few weeks ago when we were driving on top of Wetton bridge. Granny pointed out the Hottentot's Holland mountains because they had snow right at the very top of them. That's why it has been so cold lately, she said. This is what I see. Of course it is not the whole world like I thought it would be – I suppose that was a stupid idea, I should have known better.

I am going to stay up here forever. I am never going down. I don't go down when Granny comes into the yard and starts wailing and screaming. I don't go down when policeman and ambulance men come and take my mother away. I don't go down when Granny is screaming. "Elsie? Elsie where are you? Can someone tell me where my grandchild is? Elsie!" I don't go down when it gets dark, when it gets cold. I will only go down if my mother comes to stand at the bottom of the avocado pear tree and calls up to me. Then I

will leap down into her arms. I know that it is high and I am heavy, but her strong arms will hold me, she won't let me fall.

## Chapter 10

Saturday morning is sunny and bright, not the kind of weather you would choose for a funeral. Even though I have spent the last few days in an alcohol-induced haze, I manage to pull myself together. It is a good thing that my wardrobe consists of a lot of black, so getting dressed is not too difficult. I choose a long, flared black skirt and a body hugging black top. I don't know if going to this funeral is a good idea; more than likely it will make me feel worse. But somehow I feel that I have to go, that I have no choice.

I am ready to leave and as I lock up I start to wish that I had taken Mary-Agnes up on her offer to come along. But there can be nothing worse than having to endure the funeral of someone you barely knew.

I find the church easily enough and I am quite surprised at how many cars are cramming the pavements. Could Shaun really have known so many people? The church is one of those new, modern ones, squat and ugly in grey brick. Inside, there is an entrance hall with a small line of people moving into the church itself. Given the circumstances of the death, I would not have imagined that there would be an open coffin, but there it is, right next to the only passageway into the church.

When you are a crime reporter in one of the most violent countries in the world, when you have seen some of the gruesome things I have seen over the past few years, you would not imagine that you would be too distressed by one dead body in a coffin. But as

soon as I look at Shaun's face, which thankfully is all that is exposed, I am instantly sorry that I had not looked the other way as I passed. I do not need to be haunted by another dreadful image that has indelibly printed itself onto my mind. I do not need every sensation, every laugh, every word that was spoken between us to be reduced to this: a lifeless blue-grey face with a weird, frilly lace band around the hairline.

Tears slide down my cheeks and I wipe them away angrily. Why the hell didn't they close the coffin? I mean, he threw himself in front of a train, for God's sake! I never cry, not even when I'm pre-menstrual and touchy. Never crying is something that I am proud of. But seeing Shaun like that ... I ease into a bench near the back of the church and try to compose myself again.

The church organ starts up and people rise and begin to sing. I am not much of a churchgoer, so I have no idea of what the hymn is or where you'd find it in the hymn book that lies on the back of the bench in front of me. Not that I would sing anyway. In the middle of the song, there is the squeak of wheels as the coffin is brought in, flanked by six young men. They take the coffin right up to the front of the church and leave it before the priest. The coffin is completely closed now. It is made of a dark, rich wood and it is draped with a huge arrangement of cream and yellow flowers – day lilies and roses. It is hard to believe that Shaun is inside that coffin, underneath those flowers.

When the singing is over, the priest begins to speak. I have no idea how well this priest knew Chadwell Johnson, but he certainly knows nothing about Shaun. He talks about what a good child Chadwell (Shaun) was and how kind he was to other people and how hard his parents worked to feed, clothe and educate him.

Then the priest calls an uncle up to the lectern and asks him to say a few words about Chadwell (Shaun). He doesn't say much about Chadwell, though. Instead he spends most of his time lecturing us on how something needs to be done about the terrible disregard for human life in this country.

"The family is trying to cover up that it is a suicide," one teenage girl sitting next to me whispers, quite loudly, to the girl on her right. "They are trying to say that it is murder. Can you believe that?"

"Well you know that the church won't bury someone who's committed suicide, maybe that's why," the other girl whispers back.

When the uncle finally stops his rant about the crime rate, he thanks everyone for attending the funeral and says that the burial will be held at Klip Road cemetery and that everyone is welcome to come to his house for cake and tea afterwards. I was planning on only doing the church service, but I find myself following the slow procession of cars to Klip Road cemetery in Grassy Park. My mother is buried in this cemetery and so are my

grandfather and great-grandparents. I have some vague idea about where Mother's grave is, but I wouldn't be able to find the others.

I park my car and follow the rest of the people threading their way through the graves and headstones. Shaun's grave is in a new section, right at the back of the cemetery. I join the crowd gathered around the open grave with soft soil piled in a mound next to it. This bit goes a lot quicker than the church. The priest starts to talk again and some other people have more things to say, but I barely listen. I just stare at Shaun's parents, standing side by side, the father staring blankly into the distance, the mother occasionally dabbing her eyes with a tissue. The father is of medium height and he is quite skinny, the mother is very tall and quite fat. Shaun's face somewhat resembles his mother's and his skinny build obviously comes from his father. The mother notices me staring and I look away quickly, concentrating instead on the blue gum trees in the distance. They are completely ineffective as windbreakers as they do absolutely nothing to stop the wind that scatters the sand that people are ceremoniously trying to throw into the grave. When two workers in green overalls start shovelling the mound of sand back into the grave, people begin to make their way back to their cars. So that is it, it is over now.

I have no idea why I follow the procession to the uncle's house. I have no right to be there – I don't know any of them. The house is crammed with people who are no longer quiet and sombre. Instead, they are quite animated, the women bustling about making sure that everyone has food, small children running about in their church clothes, men drinking in the yard outside.

I join the throng in the lounge, where Shaun's mother sits regally on the biggest couch with sympathisers surrounding her. In an attempt to look less conspicuous, I grab a cup of milky tea and look around for someone approachable enough to talk to.

There is some space next to a grey-haired woman on an overstuffed green velveteen couch so I sit down next to her and she shifts to give me more space even though she looks at me as if to say, "Who the hell are you?"

"My name is Elsie," I say, holding out a hand to shake hers.

"I'm Chadwell's grandmother," she says. "How did you know him?"

"I was a friend," I say lamely, and she looks at me suspiciously but doesn't say any more.

Everything about Shaun's mother seems to sag. Her cheeks, her arms, her heavy thighs all look like they are succumbing to gravity. Her hair looks like it has visited the hairdresser's especially for the occasion, it is very shiny and glossy, streaked with bright red and orangey bits. Somehow, the hair doesn't match the rest of her; it looks out of place above the red-rimmed eyes.

I listen attentively, trying not to look too dumbstruck as I hear what she is talking about.

"I still have all these things to sort out," she says in a calm, clear, but weary voice. "I have a policy on his life, you know, I made sure that Andy took out a life insurance

policy for me and for him and for Chadwell when he was born. I went to Liberty Life to pay the insurance on Wednesday; I didn't say anything to them yet. But we have to go and take in the death certificate now."

The other people nod sympathetically but I can't believe that this woman's just buried her son and here she is talking about his insurance! But then she continues talking and it gets worse.

"And to think, just the other day I bought him a new pair of boots on my Edgars account. I never even had a chance to give them to him, so I am going to take them back. They are quite expensive you know, those new boots that they are all wearing these days, Caterpillars I think they are called." And the people sitting around her just say oh shame and drink their tea. I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this.

A middle age woman in a dark blue skirt with a white blouse comes into the room. She walks over to Erica Johnson, bends down and embraces her. "I am so sorry for your loss," the woman says.

"Oh, Helen, it is like I was telling everyone, he is in a better place now," Chadwell's mother says. "You know, he was a good boy, but he just got involved with the wrong crowd. I kept telling him Chadwell, you must be careful. Of course he would never listen to me, always thought that he knew best. But I think he knew that his time was coming. You know, the last time I saw him, the last night he slept at home, he just wanted to be

with me and his father. His friends came knocking at the door, but he told me I must say that he wasn't there. And he spent a long time cleaning his room up, you know. Packed all his clothes and things neatly. When he went to bed that night I checked up on him and he was reading the bible. Can you believe that? Chadwell was never interested in the bible or going to church. But we have to accept what the Lord has in store for us. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the Lord.”

This is all a bit much for me. I put my teacup down on the coffee table in front of me and walk out of the house without saying a word to anyone. I ease out of the tight parking space and pull away, breathing a sigh of relief. I don't know where I am going. I just want to drive around so that I can concentrate on something as simple as steering and changing gears.

Eventually I find myself at a robot on Liesbeek Parkway. If I carry on straight I will go home, but if I turn right I can either go to the River Club for a few stiff drinks or I can go to Valkenberg. I suppose part of me really wants to do this now, the part that was driving the car because I usually use the M5 or De Waal Drive to get home. The robot turns green and I turn right without indicating.

I will ask to see Shaun's psychiatrist.

I approach the surly, heavyset woman behind the desk and ask to see Chadwell's psychiatrist. I want him to help me to understand why Shaun killed himself. More

importantly. I want him to say that Shaun was going to kill himself anyway and there was nothing that I could have done to encourage him to do it or to prevent him from throwing himself in front of the 5:30 train.

“You want to see Chadwell Johnson’s psychiatrist?” the nurse repeats incredulously, as if I had asked to see God himself. She sighs loudly and then turns to the filing cabinet next to her desk. “That’s ... now let me see ...” She flips through some files. “Ah, yes, that would be Doctor Skinner. You need to make an appointment to see Doctor Skinner; he’s not in today. Do you want to make an appointment now?”

And what would I achieve if I saw Doctor Skinner anyway? He would just give me more of his version of Shaun. In my first class at cadet school, the lecturer told us that two journalists reporting on the same accident would write two completely different reports. I should just give up on everyone else’s version of Shaun and keep my own.

When someone close to you dies, people will always say that everything happens for a reason and one day it will all make sense. But I of all people should know that some things in life happen for no reason and no matter how much you think about it or how hard you try, these things will never make sense. And this is one of them.

“No, that’s okay. Can I see Johannes September instead?” At the back of my mind I may have been thinking of this as a grand, poetic gesture but timing gets in the way of this too.

“There’s no visiting on a Saturday,” the irritated nurse informs me. “Come back tomorrow at two o’ clock.”

“Please, I need to see him now,” I beg her. “I promise I will just take a few minutes.” The nurse has the determined look of those traffic cops who won’t be stopped from writing that ticket out no matter what you say, so I don’t expect her to give in. But, perhaps because of the hysteria in my voice she says, after staring at me for a few moments, “Alright. Follow me.”

She shows me to a waiting area with wooden benches arranged in a semi-circle. “You wait here,” she says. “I will go and fetch him.” I can see why they have chosen this as the waiting area. It is sunny and bright, with cheerful posters on the walls and sunlight streaming through an open window. There is the smell of freshly mown grass in the air, and in the distance I can hear the drone of a lawn mower.

I sit down on the bench underneath the window and feel the sun on my back. There are a couple of old magazines on a small table in front of me, but I don’t pick any of them up. The place is quiet, so I can hear each footstep as Uncle Hannie and the nurse approach.

“See Johannes, I told you there was a visitor for you.”

I know that it has been a long time, but the image I have carried of Uncle Hannie in my head is the way he was when I was still a child. So I have not prepared myself for how

much he has changed. His face is bloated, it must be from all the drugs they give him. And he is completely clean-shaven; he no longer has that thick moustache he used to have. His hair is thinning and peppered with grey, but still kept flat on his head with the hair oil he always used. Because he is wearing old fashioned, black-rimmed glasses and an old grey cardigan that is fraying at the elbows, he reminds me of a photograph that Gran gave me of my grandfather. My grandfather wore rectangular, black rimmed spectacles and he liked to wear cardigans too. Who knows, maybe the cardigan Uncle Hannie is wearing is one that used to belong to my grandfather. They certainly don't make cardigans like that these days.

"Hello, Uncle Hannie," I say uncertainly. "You speak the language?"

He looks at me questioningly. "Lilly? Is that you?"

"No, it's me, Elsie."

"Oh, Elsie. You must be careful of that one, she's full of beans, full of beans," he says to the nurse.

"I'll leave the two of you alone, but only for a few minutes, you understand?" the nurse says and I nod my head quickly.

Hesitantly, Hannie comes to sit next to me on the bench. “You got a smoke?” he asks and I pull my cigarettes and lighter out of my bag. He takes the cigarette gratefully and places it in his mouth, but his trembling fingers make it difficult for him to light it. Drool starts to form in the corner of his mouth, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

“Here, let me do it,” I say, taking the lighter from him and holding a steady flame underneath his cigarette. I put the lighter and the cigarettes down on the table in front of me and look at him, not knowing what to say. Hannie smiles shyly at me and some dribble runs down the side of his mouth. Not finding a tissue in my bag, I reach over and wipe it away with my thumb. His skin is clammy and cool to the touch. Hannie is mine. Granny was right, you can choose your friends but you can’t choose your family and blood is thicker than water.

**Reflections on possible influences, contexts and the process of  
composition and revision that has taken place in the production of**

*The Avocado Pear Tree*

At first I thought that having to preface my creative work with an essay was an unfair requirement. Could the creative work not speak for itself and be judged on its own merits? This requirement seemed similar to asking an artist who has painted a picture to discuss the process of composition. Readers make their own interpretations but how would these interpretations be influenced by what a writer says about his or her creative work? I suppose that I felt this way because, at first, reflecting upon the creative process seemed a far more daunting prospect than the creative process itself. Most of the creative process happened not on paper, but in my head and sometimes on a subconscious level so I could not hope to describe all of it. Perhaps also I feared – justifiably or unjustifiably so – that reflecting on the process of production would somehow tarnish or diminish the creative work.

Sometimes the process seemed chaotic and illogical so I thought that it would be very difficult to discuss it in logical terms. I spent quite a bit of time trying to plan a structure for the essay, trying to make my ideas flow neatly from the one into the other, but I found these attempts limiting and counter-productive. Instead, I have used headings to provide some sense of structure; however, there will be some overlapping of ideas.

### **Historical information**

I started writing *The Avocado Pear Tree* in March 1996 as part of an English honours-level creative writing workshop. It has taken me three years to complete the manuscript. Now, looking back at the work I first produced in the honours workshop and even

looking at the outline of the story that I submitted along with my MA proposal, I realise how differently the manuscript has turned out from my first expectations. So, while I initially resisted the idea of reflecting on the process, I began to see that it could be a useful and interesting exercise.

## **Characters**

When I decided to write a book, my main aim was to create characters engaging enough to hold a reader's attention. The creation of interesting characters, I thought, was the most important aspect in a work of fiction. I put the characters into different contexts and situations, but after approximately one hundred pages of character development, I realised that I sorely needed a plot (but more of this later). Before I began writing, I spent a long time thinking about characters, trying to picture them in my mind.

### ***Elsie's grandmother, Gladys***

*“Gloria would be wearing her high heel shoes and acting like she was a real madam – purple lipstick and bell-bottom pants.”* (Mark Behr, 1995: 2)

Some time before I began writing, I had read *The Smell of Apples* by Mark Behr. Even though I understood that Behr was trying to expose a particular mindset, I was surprised at the way I reacted to descriptions such as the following:

Because Mrs Delport is seldom home in the afternoons, Frikkie and I can wander around the streets while Mum thinks we're doing our homework under Gloria's supervision. But Gloria is hardly ever there herself, and even when she's there, she doesn't care two hoots about what we get up to. Mostly she's painting her lips or standing in front of the bathroom mirrors sticking a funny comb into her afro, trying to make it look bigger. Heaven knows when she gets time to clean the house or do the ironing. Gloria speaks Afrikaans without a coloured accent and Mum says that's why she fancies herself as a white. Frikkie says it's only when she's drunk that the real *gamat* accent comes back. When we pester her about her accent, she simply ignores us, or says something like, all our laughing will turn to bitter crying, and then she smiles like a real floozy and turns her back on us. (1995: 4)

I have always read novels voraciously, particularly those written by South African writers and I can think of several other examples of this sort of description. However, when I read Behr's descriptions, I became incredibly angry. I was tired, on the one hand, of South African writers' obsession with the issue of race, but on the other hand I was even more tired of coming across these stereotypes in South African literature: Gloria is an irresponsible, lazy servant, prone to getting drunk, a floozy, and so on. Behr's other coloured characters are also stereotypes:

Luckily the Coloureds still have a bit of sailor blood in their veins. But by now even that flows so thin, that they're mostly alcoholics who booze up all their wages over weekends. More often than not, they're criminals who won't ever get to see heaven. St Peter, who stands at the portals of eternity, would pass out stone-cold when he smells their breath.

But Doreen, she's a good girl and she might go to heaven. In heaven she'll live with other Christian Coloureds in small houses and the Lord will reward her for never boozing it up like the rest. Also because she never nabs Mum's sugar like Gloria does from Mrs Delport ... (1995: 39)

Incidentally, the coloureds come off marginally better than the black South Africans in Behr's book: "The Bantus are even dumber than the Coloureds" (ibid). So while I

appreciated the value of *The Smell of Apples* (and I do think that it is an important work) and while I didn't want to write about race, I felt compelled to write a novel with more complex and perhaps positive coloured characters in it. (I shall return to the issue of race later in this essay.)

Even though I read *The Smell of Apples* quite some time before I began writing, the descriptions of Gloria stuck in my mind and sparked off the character of the grandmother. I toyed with the idea of calling the grandmother Gloria, eventually decided on Gladys but I don't think that she is referred to by name in the story as Elsie, the narrator, refers to her as "Granny", "Gran" or "my grandmother". I had a very clear image of the grandmother in my head: she wore her bell bottoms and her garish purple or pink lipsticks from the seventies to the nineties. She is not a servant, but before her marriage she cleaned hotel rooms in St James. She is strong, independent and practical. She is happiest in her garden and right from the start I knew that the garden would be a very important space in the story. Because her son is mentally disabled, she has always coddled him and treated her daughter more harshly than perhaps she deserved. I will not provide a detailed character description – the point I want to make is that I had a very clear sense of the grandmother's character from the very beginning.

The grandmother character was the easiest to create. I suppose that I had the maxim – write about what you know – in mind when I started writing. So the grandmother in the story shares some characteristics with my own grandmother: they are both keen gardeners and they both live in Wynberg. My real grandmother and the grandmother in my story

share some other biographical details: they both grew up on farms and both have siblings who either emigrated or had themselves reclassified. This obviously does not mean that the grandmother in my story is my own grandmother. While thinking about my grandmother helped my writing along, particularly when I started out, the more I wrote the more the grandmother in the story evolved into a completely different, separate being. Apart from perhaps noticing the similarities I mentioned, I do not think that my own grandmother would see herself in the grandmother in my story.

### *Elsie*

While I was thinking about the grandmother, I started having ideas about the character who was to become Elsie. As my ideas for Elsie was not sparked off by a description in another book, nor did she share any characteristics with a real life person, I thought that I would develop her character by starting with her birth and working my way up from her childhood through to adulthood. One of the first scenes I wrote was the story her mother tells her about giving birth. I thought about the personality traits Elsie would have as a child – attentive, serious, sensitive, precocious. The visual image I had of her was a skinny girl with intelligent, alert, dark eyes, long hair and scabby knees. I had not originally planned to divide the novel into childhood and adult scenes. I simply thought that, as Elsie was going to be my narrator, I should make sure that she is a well developed, or well rounded character and it would therefore be helpful to describe bits of her childhood. It was really because I wrote the childhood scenes with such ease and my ideas started to flow quite well that I decided to structure the novel in the way that I did.

The structure I have ended up with is very different from what I had initially planned, but once again, more of that later.

Having decided that there would be two narrators – Elsie as a child and Elsie as an adult, I started thinking about the adult character. As an adult, Elsie would be cynical, jaded and emotionally distant. In the story, I would explore what happened to the enthusiastic, idealistic child to turn her into the adult she was to become. I wanted to have two very distinct narrative voices, which I dare say I succeeded in achieving. However, this decision was to lead to a serious problem that I was to become stuck with later on in the writing process.

It was very easy to find the voice for the child narrator as childhood experiences tend to be much more vivid and larger than life than adult experiences. I tried to make sure that the language of the child narrator was always fairly simple. This was not always easy because sometimes I wanted to use vocabulary that a child of ten would not be inclined to use. In fact, when I started thinking about Elsie as a child, the age I had in mind was eight. Quite early in the process, I upped the age to ten as I thought that it would make Elsie's narration more believable.

I decided to make the adult Elsie a journalist. Not only is this an appropriate career for a character who keenly observes everything around her, but I thought that a journalistic, unemotional and sketchy style of narration would contrast well with the intense and detailed narration of the child.

## *Elsie and Shaun*

The major problem that I mentioned earlier is that I became aware, from very early on in the writing process, that the child's voice was stronger than that of the adult. The childhood chapters seemed to be more interesting and more readable than the adult chapters. I was not sure if this was because Elsie's actual childhood experiences were more interesting than her adult experiences or if I had simply created a more skilful child narrator.

What may have contributed to this problem is that most of the drama and action in the story take place in the childhood scenes. Also, from the very start, I had a clearer sense of where I was going with the childhood scenes than I did with the adult scenes. The characters who fill the childhood scenes were with me from the start, whereas I had only decided to create Shaun, the character with whom Elsie has a destructive relationship, when I started thinking about plot. The work I did at honours level had given me a very good sense of my other characters and perhaps it would have helped if I had explored Shaun more before I started writing about him. Perhaps I was doing some comparable character development of Shaun in the chapters that I wrote and then discarded, however.

I tried in many different ways to eliminate or at the very least to minimise this problem. Many writers talk about a state of inspiration when the writing just flows and ideas, even characters, seem to come to them. These writers talk about this state with sometimes lyrical and sometimes mysterious language – they talk of characters “appearing” before

them and leading them. For example, Alice Walker has this to say in an essay on writing

*The Color Purple*:

When I was sure the characters of my new novel were trying to form (or, as I invariably thought of it, trying to contact me, to speak *through* me), I began to make plans to leave New York ... New York, whose people I love for their grace under almost continual unpredictable adversity, was a place the people in *The Color Purple* refused even to visit. The moment any of them started to form – on the subway, a dark street, and especially in the shadow of very tall buildings – they would start to complain.

“What is all this tall shit anyway?” they would ask. (1984: 356, emphasis in original)

I had never really believed writers like Walker who made this sort of claim. It seems to imply that unless writing happens in a similar state of magical or mystical inspiration, then the writing would be of a poorer quality. However, I began to suspect that this was true – with the childhood chapters the ideas and the words seemed to just come to me and my supervisor remarked that the first drafts of these chapters had the quality of final pages. By comparison, I really struggled with the adult chapters and wrote revision upon revision. Because of this, I wrote more childhood chapters than adult ones – my final draft consists of seventeen childhood chapters and only ten adult ones.

I thought that with all the revising and reworking of the adult chapters, I had done enough to address this problem. However, my supervisor returned my first draft with the comment that the adult chapters were not as strong as the childhood ones. I decided to let the story rest as I felt too deeply involved with it at that point to be able to assess the work critically (if it is indeed possible for a writer to be critical of her own work). Then I revised the relevant chapters and handed them back to my supervisor with the suspicion

that while I had improved them, they still could not match the quality of the childhood ones. My supervisor confirmed this and summarised the problem as follows:

The childhood chapters are rich not only in detail but in feeling. The young Elsie has strong and complex feelings about herself and other people, and the prose alertly tracks them. By comparison the Elsie-Shaun chapters lack immediacy and also lack that alertness to feeling. Whereas the young Elsie's life seems to be relived from the inside, the affair with Shaun seems to be reported from the outside. (Coetzee in an email, July 1999)

I felt as though I had fallen into a trap of my own making at this point because, as I saw it, it was my intention to give the adult Elsie this “reported from the outside” style of narration. I saw the adult Elsie as being alienated from her own feelings and this was a result of – but also her way of coping with – the traumas in her life. I created the relationship with Shaun as a subconscious and unacknowledged result of the childhood abuse, but I realised that I was not bringing this out enough. Perhaps it would be useful to provide examples at this point. Two of the chapters I reworked extensively are Chapters 5 and 6. I have included my first and second drafts of these chapters as Appendix 1 and 2 respectively. In my first draft, I tried to provide a sense of Shaun's character and also to show Elsie and Shaun in a “normal” (or non-sexual) context. As most of the action in these chapters is quite commonplace or everyday, I think that these chapters were quite boring. (One of the biggest fears I had while writing was that I would bore the reader.) Of Chapter 6, my supervisor commented that there was a loss of momentum. I was not satisfied with these chapters and decided to dump them. While I knew that I needed to show Elsie and Shaun in a different setting and with other people (they couldn't stay alone in Elsie's place forever), I realised that Chapter 5 particularly was not doing

anything to move the story along. Also, while some parts of Chapter 6 were necessary for the plot, the chapter was simply too plodding and unfocused.

In the second draft I changed the setting of Chapter 5 from a party with Shaun's friends to a pool bar. I thought it a good idea for Elsie and Shaun to go out with Mary-Agnes instead of introducing a whole range of new characters simply to illustrate a social interaction. I used dialogue between Elsie and Mary-Agnes to show how the relationship with Shaun had progressed and to describe how Elsie was now feeling about him. I also decided that this chapter would end in a fight. This, I thought, would make the plot more believable. Instead of Shaun inexplicably disappearing one day, on the same day that Elsie finds out that he had been missing from home for a while, she would make a conscious decision to end it with him. This would also provide some motivation (although obviously not the only motivation) for his suicide. Perhaps I should point out that I didn't want to provide an explicit reason for Shaun's suicide – I thought that it would make the story more complex if Elsie would never have an answer to the question of why he decided to end his life and she would also question whether she played some part in his decision. I assumed that the reader would understand – even though Chapter 6 followed Chapter 5 – that some time had elapsed between the two scenes. I have, however, made this passing of time much clearer in the final draft.

As you will see, Chapters 5 and 6 have been greatly improved in my final draft. For Chapter 5, instead of having Elsie tell Mary-Agnes how she was feeling about Shaun, I decided to illustrate the state of their relationship. While I have retained all the

information of the original Chapter 6 that was crucial to the plot, I put this into Chapter 7 and wrote a new Chapter 6. In this new chapter, Elsie relives the childhood abuse, but she turns it around and becomes, instead, abusive. This is an important moment for her because it is a way of finally gaining closure on that chapter of her life.

With hindsight I can now see that what was aggravating the problem of the poorer quality of the adult scenes is the closeness to the characters and to the story that I mentioned earlier. I don't know if other writers experience this, but I carried the story and the characters in my head all the time and I knew that I would not be conveying everything that I thought about them and about the story onto the page. I am not sure, for example, if a reader would pick up everything I have said about my characters thus far by reading the creative work alone. Even if it was possible to write everything I was thinking about, it would make for a very unwieldy and plodding story.

So, I began to realise that I was not making my ideas about the Elsie-Shaun relationship clear enough. This raises a tension I felt throughout the writing process: the tension between writing too overtly (assuming that one has to spell things out very clearly for the reader or he/she will not understand) and writing too subtly (assuming that the reader knows precisely what is going on inside your head and will therefore make all the conclusions you wish him/her to make). In this instance, I was assuming the latter.

An example of this that comes to mind is the impact of Elsie's job on her psyche. Elsie is a crime reporter because her own experiences have equipped her to handle the ugly, even

ghastly side of life. Being exposed to this side of life every day will obviously have quite a serious psychological effect. Just as countless reports of brutal hijackings, rapes shock most South Africans less and less, so, because of her work, Elsie's has become almost immune to violence and nothing shocks her anymore. I realised that while I had all of this in mind, I didn't put any of it onto the page. I made sure that each of the chapters I wrote moved the story forward and the only scene I wrote that touched on Elsie's job is the scene in which she finds out about Shaun's disappearance. In my final draft I added a section which describes the effects of Elsie's job that I was thinking about but also manages to move the story forward. Elsie goes to see Meredith, the spiritual healer, not only because of the effects of a story she reported on, but also because I thought it necessary to the plot. While working on the final draft I started thinking that Elsie had not seen her uncle for twenty years. Yes, she is going back to the events of her childhood that made her refuse to see Hannie for all those years, but would that have been enough to make her decide to see him in the end? I didn't think so. So I wrote the Meredith scene (in spite of my concerns about introducing a new character, particularly a significant one, at this late stage in the narrative. Perhaps this is also one of the reasons my supervisor suggested I write an additional Meredith scene?) to show a shift in Elsie's thinking, to suggest that she had started to forgive and to accept the child she was.

When I started thinking about the problem of the weaker adult scenes, I began to have the sense with these chapters (particularly chapters 4 – 8) that I was only scraping the surface, that I was shying away from my material. Perhaps I was allowing my own feelings and concerns about the material to get in the way of my writing.

This touches on themes or issues. I recently attended a women writers' indaba at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair. The theme of the indaba was gender, books and development. Several women writers, academics and publishers, presented some interesting papers in which many of them argued that women writers were being silenced, that they could not choose their own themes, but had to write about the soft issues, what is traditionally seen as "women's stuff". Women, they argued, were being censored not only by repressive governments, patriarchal systems and by their publishers, but they were also censoring themselves. The obvious contradiction in this is that these women – particularly well known and widely read writers such as Nawal El Sadaawi, Ama Ata Aidoo and Micere Mugo – were anything but silent. In my own writing, I certainly never felt censored. In fact, I have covered all of the themes in my own work that these women raised as examples of what they were not allowed to write about: domestic violence, child abuse and sexual intercourse. However, I do suspect that finding a publisher and getting the work into print will be the real test of the censorship theory. The strange thing is that now I start to think that perhaps there is something in this argument. Perhaps I struggled with the adult chapters because they focused so much on Elsie's sexuality. In the adult chapters I wanted to explore how the child abuse had affected her adult sexual relationships. I felt quite comfortable and secure with the scenes of childhood abuse because in the back of my mind I probably understood that the reader would be sympathetic to my narrator. However, when trying to write about the sado-masochistic nature of her adult relationship, I sensed that I was on shaky ground. Perhaps in the back

of my mind I also fear that when the book is published, because of the S&M scenes, readers may dismiss the work as sensationalist.

Having discussed the problem of the adult scenes at length, I am now happy to say that I feel completely satisfied with the adult scenes and the Elsie-Shaun relationship. I also need to add that it was in addressing this problem that the context of writing an MA thesis and working with a supervisor really benefited my work. I generally feel quite ambivalent about my writing and only very rarely do I feel completely satisfied with my treatment of a scene or chapter. While on a subconscious level, I may have been feeling particularly dissatisfied with the adult chapters, however, it was only when my supervisor brought the problem to my attention that I was forced to acknowledge it and to work through it. Had my work not received the benefit of Professor Coetzee's critical eye, it is quite likely that I would have put the vague concerns I had about the adult chapters down to my general ambivalence about my own writing.

Perhaps this ambivalence is a result of the nature of writing. As I write, I am constantly aware that the quality of the writing improves with time. This is why, when I return to earlier work such as the writing I did at honours level or the February 1997 outline of the plot, I become embarrassed by the visibly inferior quality of the writing. I wonder how I will feel about *The Avocado Pear Tree* in a year's time or ten years' time and I suspect that I would judge it in much the same way as I do my earlier work.

### *Elsie's mother, Lillian*

When I started writing I was more concerned with creating interesting, life-like characters and examining their relationships rather than with the analysis of issues. I never consciously decided to examine “women’s issues”, such as motherhood, for example. I knew that I wanted Elsie to be raised by both her grandmother and her mother and this would impact on the relationship between Elsie’s mother and her grandmother. This idea was to influence the way in which Elsie’s mother, Lillian, began to evolve. Although it was not my conscious intention, I suppose that what I have done with Lillian’s character was to make her in many ways the opposite of her mother. In crude terms, Gladys is strong and practical; her daughter is weak and impulsive. Lillian began to emerge as beautiful, vain, flighty, not incredibly bright, selfish, etc. There are many reasons for the troubled relationship Lillian has with her mother. From the time her children were born, Gladys focused most of her time and energy on her son, who, in her view, needed her more. As a parent, Gladys is disappointed in her daughter as Lillian has not fulfilled any of her mother’s expectations. Perhaps most importantly, Gladys believes that Elsie should be Lillian’s first priority whereas the latter is more concerned with fulfilling her own desires.

Of all my main characters, I am most troubled about my portrayal of Lillian. I worry that because of the kind of person she is, she is not as interesting or as “present” in the story in comparison to Elsie, Gladys and Hannie. However, there was not much that I could do

to make her more interesting as I was limited by the role she had to play in the plot, which required her to be absent for most of the story.

### *Hannie*

At first, I was least confident with the creation of Johannes or Hannie, as he is called by everyone. Firstly, I worried that as a female, I would not be able to write male characters as convincingly as my female ones. Secondly, while I had very clear ideas of what I wanted to do with Hannie and of his role in the story, I have never met anyone like him. I was not even sure of precisely why he was mentally handicapped (Was he born this way? Did he sustain brain damage through an accident like being dropped as a baby or perhaps in a car accident when he was older? Or was it the result of alcoholism?) and while I was creating him, I felt that perhaps I needed to do some medical research. What helped me with these concerns was the realisation that it did not matter why Hannie was the way I imagined or what the medical reasons were. What really mattered was the way that Elsie saw him and related to him. I had a very vivid picture of Hannie in my head. He is tall and thin, walks with a slight stoop, is dark skinned and has sharp features. Hannie combs his hair flat on his head with a side part and keeps it in place with hair oil, which makes his ears stick out. When he goes out he wears the one suit he owns, whether it is hot or cold. At home he often only wears vests and underpants which annoys his mother and sister but, try as they may, he will refuse to clothe himself. The older Hannie of the last chapter is even more stooped, he has become bloated because of his medication and he has deep lines etched into his face. Having completed my final draft, I am particularly

satisfied with the way in which I portrayed Hannie and now believe that one does not have to be male to create good male characters or vice versa. However, I became concerned about the lack of positive male characters – I had a mentally handicapped murderer, a child abuser and a self-destructive younger man. Especially in the first stages of writing, I tried to limit my main characters as this made the process more manageable for me, so I didn't think that there was room in the story for another male character to balance things out. This is largely why I included the chapters such as the ones in which Elsie's grandmother and her mother tell her about their relationships with her grandfather, highlighting the fact that he was a "good man". Having discussed all of my main characters, I do not think it necessary to include any commentary on the secondary ones, so I will now move onto the next subject, which is plot.

## **Plot**

The reason I did not have a plot to begin with is because I thought I could do without one. A long time ago, I read *The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor, which is a book that may be described as a collection of connected short stories. Each chapter is complete in itself and could be a short story, except that all of the characters live in Brewster Place and interact with one another in different chapters/short stories. I was intrigued by this sort of work and when I started out, I thought that I would have Elsie narrate her own stories, as well as the stories she was told by her grandmother and her mother. I thought that this would make for a more textured or layered effect.

I am not sure why I moved away from my initial idea of interconnected short stories. Perhaps it was because the characters were indeed leading me to something, I don't know. Also, I wasn't sure of what that something was until I consciously decided to write a novel and started working out the plot.

When I was required to outline the plot, I started thinking about the themes that had begun to emerge in the work I had done in the honours workshop. (I will discuss themes in the next section.) So I could say that the characters and the themes led me to the plot. From the time I started out on the MA work, I had the image of Elsie going to see Hannie in Valkenberg after a long, long time and her lighting his cigarette while drool runs down the side of his mouth. This was later to become the ending of *The Avocado Pear Tree*. Thus, two questions led me to the plot: What happened in Elsie's childhood to turn her into the adult she was to become? And what happened between Elsie and Hannie that led to this final scene?

I do not think that it is necessary to summarise the plot. However, as I mentioned earlier, my final draft turned out quite differently from what I had been planning. Even though I now feel somewhat embarrassed by the outline I wrote in February 1997, I have included it as Appendix 3 to provide a sense of what I initially thought my plot was.

Some people say that one ought to be able to summarise a plot in one sentence. If I were pressed to do this, my sentence would be something like, "Hannie killed his sister because he thought that she was a bad mother". While there are major differences

between the outline and the plot of my final draft, this is the one crucial thing that is common to both.

In the next section on themes and issues, I will describe how some of the themes that began to emerge affected my decisions regarding the plot.

### **Themes/Issues**

I have already discussed some of the themes that emerged, such as motherhood, child abuse, domestic violence and sexuality. These are, I suppose, fairly “heavy” or dark themes and I am not quite sure why I (albeit sometimes unconsciously) chose them. The most obvious explanation is that I wrote about the things I saw around me.

In a country scourged by crime, I suppose violence was an obvious choice of subject matter. All the reports of violence I read, saw or heard about must have left an indelible mark on my psyche. Even in the preliminary work I did at honours level, violence emerged quite strongly as a theme. For example, Elsie reports on two rapists who were caught in the act and then released on R200 bail. This was based on an actual report and I wrote the scene because I was outraged when I read about it in a local newspaper. (In fact, my friends and I were so outraged by the rapists’ release that we protested outside the Attorney General’s office.) I thought that writing about the rape would be significant to Elsie because of her past and also, because in addition to raping the woman, her attackers hacked her hair off.

I also wrote a chapter called “Clint Eastwood and the Cops” and it sparked off one of my main ideas for the plot. I found this scene interesting because I wanted to explore how easily, quickly and even thoughtlessly ordinary people become violent. In this chapter, Hannie takes Elsie along with him when he goes to smoke *dagga* with his friends. One of the friends, Bernie, has brought along his father’s gun and he takes it out to impress his friends. When two policemen arrive on the scene, Bernie shoots one of them. I wanted to treat the issue of violence with complexity and, for various reasons, I decided that it would be Hannie who kills his sister. For Hannie, there are several extenuating factors: he is mentally handicapped, he believes that he is protecting Elsie, the act is unpremeditated and happens when he, carried by waves of extreme rage, momentarily loses control.

I chose a woman to be the murder victim perhaps because of all the many reports – and I would always be more outraged by each new one – of a woman killed by her partner or by someone she knew and trusted. What I have found most outrageous was (and from the looks of things, still is) the lenient sentences that some of these perpetrators would be handed down for their crimes. So many cases have been documented, some of them well known, such as the unrepentant and – according to the first judge, understandably so – Di Blasi. Closer to home was the case of a woman I knew who was killed, along with her mother, by her ex-husband. This man shot his ex-wife and her mother in front of his three children and served no time in prison because his expensive lawyers did a good job and managed to put the dead victim on trial. So in my story, Elsie’s mother is killed for being a “bad” mother. Not only does she desert Elsie in the first part of the story, but she fails

to protect Elsie from sexual abuse. Even more damning, she initially does not believe her own daughter and believes, instead, that her husband would never be capable of committing the crime he is accused of.

The real life stories are infinitely more horrifying and gruesome than the fictional ones and my story is no exception. I was constantly aware of making things more palatable for the reader. Although not a social worker, my mother does quite a lot of community work, particularly with the homeless, women inmates at Pollsmoor Prison and with foetal alcohol syndrome children. As a result, she often provides these children with a temporary home and many of these children have been sexually, physically or mentally abused. (Perhaps why I chose abuse as one of the themes?) I could have used some of the horror stories of these children in my work, such as the case of a little four year old girl whose parents prostituted her, but I (rightly?) sensed that it would be too much for a reader to cope with.

I wanted to question some of the common sense notions I had come across in relation to the issues I selected. For example, the pop psychology belief that one has to talk about one's difficult or traumatic experiences in order to deal with them. I deliberately chose to have Elsie deny the childhood abuse to Meredith for many reasons and questioning this notion was one of them. Elsie chose to present herself in a way she wished and she didn't want to be seen as a victim because she is not a victim, she is a survivor. Because she is silent on the subject in this instance does not mean that she is ashamed or in denial. It simply means that she has chosen to work through it in her own way and to keep silent on

the matter. Elsie has reached the point in her life where she owns her experiences, even those of abuse and, aware of how knowledge of it would change the way in which others perceive her, she chooses to keep it to herself. I suppose that this argument may appear contradictory as Elsie does narrate the childhood abuse to Shaun. For practical purposes there was no way around this, but the point I wish to make is that she chooses when to talk and when to remain silent.

What I find interesting about the process is that I found that I could not always make Elsie speak for me. I sometimes tried to make her share my views on certain issues, but found that this did not always work. Not only did Elsie resist becoming a mouthpiece for my views, but I found that most of the time they had no place in the plot. For example, Elsie refused to share my views on the role of race in identity. I believe that people of racially mixed ancestry are, quite simply, people of racially mixed ancestry. I resent the fact that in this country people of racially mixed ancestry have been given the name, coloured, and are treated as a distinct racial group with its own culture, traditions and some would even argue, language. I also, as I mentioned in the section on characters, resent the stereotypes that abound not only in literature but everywhere. Having decided to write against such stereotypes, I thought that I would make Elsie share my sentiments. However, I found myself discarding the chapters I had written on the subject. In one such chapter, I had Elsie recalling how irritated she was in the run-up to the first democratic elections by the media's representation of coloured people in the Western Cape. Elsie was also irritated by her friends who constantly sought her opinion on this matter and on all things that had to do with colour. I discarded this sort of chapter because Elsie was

more concerned with what was happening in her own life than with issues. She was tired of issues and tired of her granny's stories of the injustices she had to face as a result of race. Perhaps there was more to my decision to discard this sort of chapter. It could also be that it seemed at odds with my decision to write a story about people and not issues. It could be that there was no room in the plot for the heavy-handed treatment of yet another issue. It could be that I simply disliked the "obviousness" or the didactic tone of these scenes. It could simply be that as I mentioned earlier, I too, was tired of the obsession with race.

I wanted to present the themes with as much complexity and subtlety as I could. I am not sure that I have achieved this, however. Sometimes I think that I have, but at other times I also think that I handled the themes in too "obvious" a way. Perhaps I could have written more symbolically or metaphorically, I do not know. However, as I said, throughout the process of writing I consciously tried to write a story about people rather than a story about issues.

### **Setting/Space**

The story is set quite firmly in Cape Town. Before I started writing, I was not sure whether or not to set it in an actual, clearly identifiable place. But I thought that to convey a strong sense of realism and for practical reasons it would be a good idea to have a real place in mind. One of my concerns was that the strong sense of locality would make the story less appealing to readers from further afield. For example, there are some

scenes that local readers would be able to call up quite clearly in their minds, such as Boulders, a beach in Simon's Town. While setting the story in an imaginary place would perhaps have given it a more universal appeal, I thought that it was not the kind of story that would easily lend itself to this as the characters were so real and the story itself was so much a reflection on Cape Town. Also, setting the story in the real world helped the writing along as it meant that I was often describing places I knew reasonably well. Even the physical spaces not based on actual real life places, such as the characters' homes and Elsie's school, were easy to portray with a sharp sense of reality as they were quite generic.

While writing, I had a very clear sense of the physical spaces: the house in Wynberg and its garden, the house in Gympie Street, Valkenberg, the beach, etc. Of all the spaces in the story, the grandmother's home is the most significant. What I was trying to create here was a space where a child would feel very safe and secure. It is a commonly held belief that young children particularly need a garden to grow up in. I have already mentioned before that the garden was very important to the story and with me from the start. Elsie's granny often tells her to go and play in the garden – she cannot go and play in the street with the other children as the street is not safe. This is not the only way in which I tried to make this house a safe, secure place. Elsie's grandmother has lived there since her marriage, so to Elsie it seems as though she has lived there forever. The furniture, the rooms and everything about the house – even the trees in the garden, are meant to convey this sense of permanence (as opposed to Elsie's mother's itinerant lifestyle?). Because (I hope that) this space has a sense of security and of permanence, the

action that happens in the chapter entitled “The Avocado Pear Tree” should be more shocking and even sacrilegious.

## **Title**

I thought of the title, *The Avocado Pear Tree*, when I started thinking about the grandmother’s garden. However, I thought of it as a working title and expected to think of a better, perhaps catchier one as the work progressed. Instead, I have tried to use the avocado pear tree as an integrating, unifying symbol that pervades the entire story and I have now reached the point where I cannot imagine another title for the story.

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## Appendix 1

### Chapter 5

“My friends are having a party tonight, would you like to go?” Shaun says to me over the telephone. I had not seen or heard from him for two weeks after we had spent that blissful week together. And then he just calls me out of the blue and invites me to a party. Just like that. No how are you? What have you been up to? Of course I refused to call him at the hospital. That’s one of my rules – I never call at the start of a relationship, I wait until I have had at least five calls before I do that. And anyway, it is not as though I think we have a some kind of future together, I still don’t think that he is the kind of guy I can take home and introduce to Gran. I’m sure that she wouldn’t approve, she wouldn’t like it that he’s younger than me and certainly would not be impressed by what he does for a living.

“Sure,” I say cautiously. “Where is it?”

“In Grassy Park. Do you have a pen? I’ll give you the directions.”

“No, that’s fine, just give me the address and I’ll find it. I know Grassy Park quite well.”

“Okay, it is number sixteen, Eighth Avenue. I’ll be there from nine o’ clock. I’ll see you then.”

I do know Grassy Park fairly well, but I had not been in Eighth Avenue before. It is one of the last roads before Retreat. The house itself is quite strange. It is a double storey and quite upmarket for the area. I suppose the owners extended before the 1990s and all the changes in the country. Never thought that they would be able to move into a better area, so now they've overcapitalised and will never get the money back that they spent on the place. I knock on the door and it is opened by a person with a terrible acne problem, glasses on his face and a toothbrush in his mouth.

"Hi, I'm Elsie," I say. "Shaun invited me."

The person nods and gestures me in. I follow him through the empty house and into the yard outside. "I see you've met Ralphie," Shaun says, smiling at me and pecking me on the lips. "These are my friends, Mario, Elroy and Dalton." They all smile and say hello and then turn back to the fire.

"What can we give you to drink?" asks Dalton. He looks almost like Ralphie so I take it that they are brothers.

"What do you have?"

"You name it, we've got it."

"Vodka?"

“We have everything except vodka. There’s brandy, whiskey and cane.”

“I’ll have some whiskey please.”

Dalton crouches down and picks a bottle of whiskey up from the group of bottles arrayed at his feet. “You want it with water or lemonade?”

“No just ice, thanks.”

He passes the glass to me and then turns back to the fire. I take a sip and Shaun puts his arm around my shoulder.

“So, am I the only woman you’ve invited to this party?” I ask.

“No,” Elroy says. “The girls have gone to the shop to buy things for salad. That’s girls for you. We have a braai and we only need meat and wine. They worry about salad. Who is even going to eat it?”

“Well, seeing that they’re not around now, who’s got a *skyf*?” asks Mario.

Shaun takes two joints out of his cigarette packet, hands one to Mario and lights the other one himself. The guys pass the joints around and the sickly sweet smell of dagga mingles

with the smell of the fire. Shaun offers me the joint but I shake my head. I drain my glass instead and give it back to him for a refill. I have never seen Shaun interacting with anyone else before and it is quite fascinating. He has quite a sense of humour and his friends laugh uproariously at all his jokes and anecdotes. They have obviously been friends for a long time as they talk mostly of their crazy exploits and all the scrapes they got into when they were still at school.

We hear a car pull up outside and the sounds of female voices. This must mean that the “girls” are back. One of them comes outside. “Hi,” she says to me, “I’m Nina.” She is short and looks very young and cute with dimples and long frizzed out hair.

“Elsie,” I reply.

Nina helps herself to a drink and says, “Do you want to come inside and meet the others?”

“Sure,” I say and follow her back into the house.

Two other girls are in the kitchen, deeply engrossed in conversation. “I can’t believe it,” the one is saying to the other. “What an asshole!” They fall silent and stare at me curiously when they notice us standing there. Nina introduces us and the other two are called Donna and Cheryl.

“We’re making salad,” Donna says just in case I thought they were doing something else with the lettuce and cucumber. “Do you want to help?”

While I don’t really want to, I guess it would be rude to say no, so I say, “Fine, what should I do?”

“You can cut up the carrots and the tomatoes. Or would you rather make the bean salad?”

“No, that’s fine. I’ll do the carrots and tomatoes.” I have never made a bean salad before and wouldn’t know quite what to do.

“You know what we forgot? We should have bought a garlic bread,” says Cheryl.

“Hhmm,” agrees Donna. “Nina, stop loafing about and make yourself useful. Why don’t you marinade the meat?” Nina puts her glass down reluctantly and starts rooting about in the kitchen cupboards for spices. Cheryl and Donna resume their discussion.

“You see,” Donna explains to me. “One of our friends, Vanessa, she has just found out that her boyfriend had been screwing someone else. But I think he wanted her to know. I mean, he could have been discreet, but no, he takes her to Images where he knows that a lot of people know both of them. I tell you, if Mario were to do that to me, I’d Bobbit him!”

I nod my head with fake sympathy. I couldn't care less about the problems of people I don't even know. Nina is the only one I can relate to, I find Donna and Cheryl a bit much. As soon as I'm done cutting up carrots and tomatoes, I escape back outside.

"You bored?" Shaun says quietly to me. I nod my head. "Let's go," he says, picking up the bottle of whiskey and two glasses and leading the way back into the house. We walk through the kitchen and the girls look at us oddly, but I ignore them and follow Shaun inside. He opens a door. It is the main bedroom. Shaun sits down on the bed with a really cheesy looking floral duvet cover on it. He pulls me down next to him.

"But whose place is this? We can't just leave them like that! It's so tacky!" I protest.

"You rather want to go back outside? Or do you want to spend some more time with Cheryl, Nina and Donna?"

"No, we can stay. But whose room is this?"

"Ralphie and Dalton's parents."

"And where are they?"

"They've gone away for the weekend."

He opens the whiskey and takes a slug straight from the bottle before passing it to me. Then he takes my shirt and bra off and puts his mouth over my nipples. "Now," he says, looking up at me, "Is there anything else you want to know?"

"Yes, why does Ralphie keep a toothbrush in his mouth all the time?"

"I don't know. I guess he likes to have clean teeth."

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Someone turns the light on and groggily I hear a voice. "Who the hell? What are you doing in my bed? Come on, get out."

I open my eyes wide with fright. A large woman stands over us and she is shaking Shaun. "Come on, get up, you rubbish. I am going to let your mother know all about this. Just you wait and see!"

Quickly, I find my clothes and manage to slip them on, with the woman glaring at both of us. "Oswald, can you believe this? Ralph and Dalton let their friends sleep in our bed!"

The woman shouts down the passage.

Shaun has hastily gathered his clothes. "Sorry, Mrs Abrahams," he says.

"Yes, sorry," I say, trying to squeeze past her through the doorway.

We both rush to the front door. “Goodbye,” says Shaun, but I don’t say anything, I’m too embarrassed to even look at them.

“My God!” I say, as soon as I manage to unlock my car. “I thought you said they went away!”

Shaun is still trying to get dressed; he is pulling on his socks. “I thought they were away! Do you think that I wanted that big, fat bitch to find us like that? I’m going to tell your mother,” he imitates her and collapses into a fit of laughter. Although it wasn’t so funny at the time, I can’t help myself, I start laughing too.

“So what do you want to do now? Are you here with a car or should I drop you somewhere?”

“No, I don’t have a car,” he says. “Let’s go to your place.”

“Okay, but I don’t know how I’m going to get us home. Town seems so far away from here and I had so much to drink.”

“Do you want me to drive?”

“Fine,” I say, and he gets out of the car and gets back in on the driver’s side while I manage to shift over into the passenger’s seat.

Shaun starts up my old Toyota effortlessly and pulls away. "I'm never drinking again," I say and put my head on his lap. He manages to drive with my head in his lap all the way to Town. But I only realise this the next day when I wake up in my bed and he is lying next to me. Somewhere along the way, I must have fallen asleep again.

## Chapter 6

When I wake up the next morning I feel terrible. My head feels like someone is pounding against it with a hammer and my mouth is furry and dry. “Oh,” I moan, curling up against Shaun. “I am never drinking again!”

“Yes, that’s what we all say,” he says, putting his hand on my head and promptly falling asleep again. We spend most of the day in bed, but it is not the same as before. Not only do I have a terrible hangover, but I have an uneasy feeling, like something is not right. I don’t know if it is just about what happened last night or if it is my anxiety about becoming involved with Shaun. Even though I feel terrible, my unease forces me out of bed and I take the third bath that I’ve ever had in the time I’ve lived here. I have to do something about Shaun, I know I do. But I try not to think about it now. Thinking will just make me feel worse.

With the help of vitamins, Panados and litres of water, by early afternoon I feel reasonably okay. Shaun is still sleeping so I decide to go out to the shops to get something to eat. Even though I still feel slightly queasy, I know that eating helps to get rid of a hangover. Oily fish is supposed to be good for it. I go to Spar and see what fish they have. By the time I get back home, Shaun has finally risen and is in the shower. “I’m going to make lunch,” I say. “You eat fish? It is supposed to be good for a hangover.”

“Yes, that’s fine,” he says. He looks so cute standing there in my shower with shampoo on his hair and soapsuds all over him. But how can we carry on together? He is not the kind of person I would have imagined ending up with.

The meal I make actually looks quite good. I am not much of a cook, but it is not too difficult to squeeze garlic and lemon over fish and pop it underneath a grill. I also popped some baby potatoes into a pot of water and made a green, leafy salad. Cheryl and Donna would be impressed, but not if they knew that I simply opened one of Spar’s readymade salads.

“This looks good,” Shaun says, sitting down at the table opposite me.

“How are you feeling?” I ask.

“I’m okay, and you?”

“Terrible, I’m never drinking again.”

“Yes, you keep saying that,” he laughs.

I dish food up into my plate and Shaun helps himself. Having spent so much time going to Spar, where I felt really ill and then still having to put this meal together, I now find that I can’t really eat. But I force myself to have a few forkfuls of fish – anything that

promises to help me feel better is fine by me. I put my fork back down on my plate and look up at Shaun.

“Shaun?” I say hesitantly. “We speak about so many things, but we never talk about what’s going on with us. I mean you turn up sometimes and then I don’t hear from you again, what do you want from me?”

“The big conversation, it had to come sooner or later didn’t it? What do you want me to say? To tell you that I love you and want a commitment?”

“No, don’t be ridiculous,” I say, angry and insulted. “That’s not what I’m saying at all. I just want to know where you see this going.”

“Look,” he says. “Aren’t you happy? Can’t we just take it as it comes? Why do we have to define things?”

“Fine,” I say. “We’ll just take it as it comes.” My head is too sore to carry on with the conversation anyway. And I am still cross with him. I wish I could just put him out of my house and have my life back like it was before.

The next morning, I’m showered, dressed and about to leave by the time Shaun opens an eyelid and squints at me. He throws his head back on the pillow and groans, “You’re going to work?”

“Yes, I have to.”

“Well, I better get up too then.”

“No, it’s fine. You can take your time. There’s a spare key hanging up in the kitchen, just lock up and drop it into my letterbox when you’re done.”

“Okay,” he says and closes his eyes again.

You get to work an hour earlier and it’s an entirely different place. Instead of the usual craziness you find silent desks, empty chairs, dormant computers. I flick my computer on and go into the kitchen for my cup of coffee. Waiting for the kettle to boil, I pick up last Friday’s paper and idly flip through it. Problems with voter registration, the date for next elections and a fire in the mountains above Fish Hoek – nothing unusual appears to be happening.

The kettle has boiled and I am about to put the paper down and make my coffee when something catches my eye. It’s a head and shoulders colour photograph of a slightly younger Shaun staring at me nonchalantly under the heading “Missing”. No. It can’t be. How can Shaun be missing when he’s at my place at this very moment? But I know, I know, at the back of my mind I can’t shake the feeling that something is wrong.

Part of me wants to throw the paper aside, put it down to some weird coincidence – perhaps it is someone who just looks like Shaun. Perhaps my mind is playing tricks on me and I am mistaken. To calm myself down, I scan the copy very quickly. A different name is given: Chadwell Johnson. Eighteen year old son of Andrew and Erica Johnson of Lavender Hill. What about Port Elizabeth? And there’s no mention of any sisters. This really can’t be Shaun; it must be some freakish thing of him looking just like this other person. His parents have not seen him for two months since he walked out of Valkenberg Hospital, where he was being kept as a patient. Yes, there it is: Valkenberg Hospital. I did meet him at Valkenberg, but Chadwell is not his name and he’s from Port Elizabeth, not Lavender Hill. And I met other people who called him Shaun. Or did they? I don’t remember. But I certainly would have noticed if someone called him Chadwell. Uugh, what a horrible name! Can it be that he was lying to me all this time? Why would anyone do that? I mean, if you were going to lie about what you do, would you really choose to say that you’re a psychiatric nurse at Valkenberg? None of this makes the least bit of sense.

Absently, I make the cup of coffee and walk back to my desk, still clutching the newspaper. I pick up the phone and dial my home number. After five rings the answering machine clicks on and impatiently, I wait out my message. “Shaun, are you there? It’s me. I need to talk to you, urgently.” But no one answers.

What should I do? I could just leave it for now and confront him with the evidence later on, if he’s still at my place when I get back from work. But he never said that he would

be there – he never said when I’d see him again. He could still be there now though – he could have been sleeping when the phone rang. I should probably just leave things as they are, get on with my work and ask him about it when I see him again. Eighteen years old – a teenager still. Oh, God, what have I been doing? His parents have not seen him in two months. So he must have left Valkenberg just after I saw him there. Where has he been staying when he wasn’t at my place? And what was at Valkenberg for? Not only have I been fucking a teenager – he’s a mental case too. I grab my bag and my keys before I realise that I am going back home.

I get back home on autopilot – barely noticing the other cars on the road and nearly causing an accident on the M5. Before I unlock the door I check my letterbox. My keys are there so he must have left already. Inside, my home looks like he’d never been here – the bed is neatly made and there is absolutely no sign or trace of him. Well, I suppose I should get back to work now. All I can do is wait until he turns up again.

It’s been about forty minutes since I left work and now the place is entirely different. Computers are humming, fingers are tapping away furiously at keyboards, phones are held between ear and shoulder while mouths jabber away. I feel a serious headache coming on. As I sit down at my desk, Sue looks up from her computer screen. “Hello, Elsie. How are you doing?”

“Hi Sue, I’m fine and you?”

“Are you sure you’re okay? You look a little pale.”

“No, no. I am fine. I just had an exhausting weekend.”

My cup of coffee is cold now and a thin layer of skin has grown over the top. My eyes fall on Shaun’s picture in the newspaper again. Fingerprints – my fingerprints are etched onto the paper. Holding it for as long as I have has stained my hands with ink.

“Sue, did you do that piece in the community section last Friday on that missing boy?”

“Umm ... yes. Why?”

“Did you speak to the parents?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have their address?”

“Of course. Now why are you asking me all these questions?”

“Well, it’s just that he looks very familiar but I can’t think of where I could have seen him before.” Sue gives me a funny look, but she doesn’t say anything. She just carries on tapping away at her computer.

I try not to leave the office all morning, doing all the boring admin things I usually hate, making phone calls. Waiting. But for what? When Sue gets up and goes down the passage in the direction of the toilet, I slip over to her desk. Casually, I flip through her pad, hoping that no one else in the office will notice. There it is: The Johnsons 59 Sea Breeze Court, Symphony Road. I tear the page out, grab my things and leave the office for the second time this morning.

Symphony Road. I know where that is. It's right in the middle of the worst part of Lavender Hill where there is always a shooting, a rape or a murder or something happening to keep people talking. I can't believe that someone like Shaun – I just can't get used to the idea of Chadwell – could come from a place like that. It just doesn't fit. What reason could he possibly have had for telling me that he's from Port Elizabeth when he's actually from Lavender Hill? I suppose he could have felt embarrassed about it, but then why not say Retreat or Grassy Park?

It doesn't take me long to find the place. As it's still quite early, around ten, there aren't many people around. A few children are playing in the concrete courtyard between Sea Breeze and Flora Courts. A skinny, threadbare mongrel yaps after them as they chase one another from one flight of stairs to the next. Then they notice me sitting in my car and suddenly they are all at my door.

“Hello Auntie.” They all smile at me. “*Ons sal agter Auntie's se kar kyk. Okay Auntie?*”

I wasn't even planning on going inside. The block is very big – a four storey one – and I take it that number 59 would be right on the top floor. The South Easter whips me mercilessly as I climb the steps – I wonder if this is what they meant by sea breeze. By the time I reach the top I am out of breath.

There are two flats on each landing and I find number 59 on the right. The door is open at number 60, with a baby playing in the space between the front door and two rubbish bins holding up a piece of board so that she can't escape. It looks as though this makeshift barrier has been placed at exactly half of the landing, leaving the rest of the space for the occupants of number 59. The baby regards me curiously, then turns around and crawls inside the house where I can hear *The Bold and the Beautiful* being played very loudly.

I turn around and face the door of number 59 and without knowing what I am going to say, I knock twice. The sound is very hollow and the door feels terribly thin. I wait for a few moments, but no one answers. The small window next to the door is closed, so I suppose that nobody's home. This doesn't stop me from knocking again.

“*Daar 's niemand by die huis nie,*” a voice says behind me. I turn around to face a girl who is looking at me with a frown on her face. The girl is wearing big rollers underneath her scarf and she has the baby perched on her hip. She chews gum slowly and deliberately, with her mouth open which reveals her missing front teeth. When I was showing Alison, my distant British relative, all the usual touristy places when she visited last year, the first thing she noticed was how many people she saw with their front teeth

missing. She asked me if there was a special reason for that, or if it was simply a matter of bad dental hygiene. Alison looked rather shocked when I replied that for a while, having one's front teeth removed was quite fashionable. Apparently the craze was caused because people said that the removal of their front teeth enabled them to give better blow jobs.

"Do you know when they will be back?" I ask the fashion victim.

She shrugs her shoulders. "They both work in the day," she says. "Maybe in the evening they will be at home."

"Do you know their son, Chadwell?"

She nods her head cautiously, but doesn't say anything else.

"Well, do you know where I could find him? Do you know where he could be?"

"No," she says firmly. "He hasn't been here for a long time now. You are not the only one looking for him," she smirks.

"Thanks," I say, turning around and retreating back down the steps. When I get to the bottom I look up and see that the girl is still staring down at me. At my car, the children crowd around me. "*Ons het mooi agter auntie's se kar gekyk,*" says one little girl,

grabbing me around the leg. I scratch about in my purse and give them each a few coins. It is a relief to get back into my car again and out of that merciless wind.

Well, there's not much else to do except go back to work and wait. I suppose I'll see him when I see him. If I see him. I look back up at Sea Breeze court again. How is it that I know so little about a person who knows so much about me? What do I know about Shaun? How do I tell the difference between the lies and the truth? Now I need to find the truth about everything. I want to meet his mother and his father so that I can ask them about their son. I should try to get hold of his friends. Ralphie and Dalton live nearby, I should go to them first. I start my car up and the children scatter out of my way. They wave enthusiastically and quickly return to their game.

It is a short drive from Shaun's house to Eighth Avenue, Grassy Park. I knock on the door, hoping that the mother won't answer it or if she does, that she won't recognise me. Ralphie opens the door. He still has the bright green toothbrush in his mouth and he doesn't look surprised to see me.

"Ralphie, can I talk to you? Your parents aren't home are they?" He shakes his head. "Is Dalton here?" He shakes his head again and leads me inside. Ralphie shows me to the lounge and I sit down on a couch. I wish that Dalton had been home instead, at least I know that he is capable of verbal communication.

"Ralphie, I am looking for Shaun. Have you seen him anywhere?"

He takes the toothbrush out of his mouth and says, “No, I thought he was with you.” It is the first time since I’ve met him that the toothbrush has come out of his mouth and the first time I have heard him speak. Ralphie’s voice is a lot higher and thinner than I would have imagined it to be. As soon as he’s answered though, he pops the toothbrush back into his mouth and starts sucking on it.

“Have you seen this article? Is this Shaun?” I ask, giving him the paper. Ralphie looks at it quite closely and frowns.

Again, Ralphie takes his toothbrush out of his mouth to answer, “Yes, that’s him. Why?”

“But how can that be him? Why do you call him Shaun if his name is Chadwell?”

I have to fight the almost overwhelming urge to rip Ralphie’s toothbrush from his mouth, break it in half and then throw it in a dirt bin as I see him taking it out again. “We always called him Shaun. That’s his second name. He hates the name, Chadwell.”

“And what about him being in Valkenberg, do you know anything about that?”

“Shaun’s crazy but I never thought he belonged in Valkenberg. His parents put him there because he wasn’t the kind of son they wanted. They were always unhappy about us, you know, his friends. They even blamed us for everything he did, even for him using drugs.”

“What are you talking about? The dagga?”

“Well, Shaun’s been into some other stuff too. I wouldn’t say that he has a problem with it though, I mean you know him. He’s fine. He just likes to try things out. He’s done most drugs that I can think of – ecstasy, acid, cocaine. But he’s always been fine. Until one day a while back, he started acting crazy. It must have been a bad trip or something. He tried to burn his parents place down – tried to burn the whole block down they say. After they got him to stop, he got undressed and tried to walk to Cape Town naked, with the phone book underneath his arm. He said he needed to go there to make a call. They couldn’t get him into the car and they called the police and that’s how he got sent to Valkenberg. His parents thought that they would get him to stop the drugs at Valkenberg. Of course he hasn’t stopped completely, but he seems to have it under control now.”

“But why have his parents reported him as missing?”

“Obviously he is pissed with his parents for sending him to Valkenberg. He doesn’t want to see them anymore. They came and looked for him here. They went to look at all his friends’ houses. But no one knew where he was. He just called us on Saturday to see what we were up to, we hadn’t heard from him since he was in Valkenberg. But he was obviously with you since he’s been out, hasn’t he?”

“Well, he’s come to me some of the time, but he hasn’t been with me for two months. Have you any idea where he could have been in all that time? Would any of your other friends have let him stay with them?”

“No, he wouldn’t have wanted to stay with any of us. We all live with our parents still and any one of them would have called Shaun’s mother to let her know where he was. They stick together, you know, parents.”

“Well, will you help me to find him? Can you tell me where he could be?”

“I can take you to Mario’s house and some of the other places where he could be, but I don’t know if you’ll find him. Shaun must have some other friends I don’t know about. We used to be best friends you know, since we were at high school together. But lately we’ve hardly ever see each other.”

Ralphie takes me all over Retreat and Grassy Park. We even visit shebeens and merchants’ houses. But no one can tell us where Shaun is. When I drop Ralphie off, it is getting dark already. “Thanks for your help,” I say to him. “Here, take my number. If you see him, please let me know.”

“Sure,” Ralphie says. “But I am sure that you will see him first. Don’t worry, Shaun will be fine. He knows what he is doing.” Ralphie pops his toothbrush back into his mouth and opens the car door. As he is getting out of my car, his mother pulls up and parks in

her driveway. She gets out of her car and glares at me. I don't know if it is because she recognises me or if she is wondering what I have been doing with her son. I start my car up quickly and drive away from her glare. Suddenly I feel very tired. God, what a day this has been!

## Appendix 2

### Chapter 5

When Joe's Pool Club closed down, Mary and I had to find another place to play pool. So we relocated to Stix, a pool bar in Mowbray with twenty pool tables which was great because we would never have to wait too long for a game. We have been regulars at Stix ever since it opened about eight years ago and we've stuck by it through all the changes – from trendy, yuppie joint to student hangout. We haven't been here for a few months though so I am surprised to see how seedy it has become. With all the derelict drunks and Main Road prostitutes, it reminds me a bit of Joe's. It's the karaoke that brings the tone of the place down, though. There can be nothing worse than a couple of drunks warbling old, cheesy love songs, reading the words off the television screen and still getting them wrong. I push my way through the crowd around the karaoke area to the bar with Mary and Shaun following me.

“What are you having?”

“Whiskey,” says Shaun.

“Vodka,” says Mary.

Having secured our drinks, we look around for a table. Stix is fuller than I've seen before and the only table that's open has an out of order sign on it. "We'll have to challenge," I tell Mary. "That table okay?"

"No, that one over there where those cute boys are playing," she says, pointing out a table of young guys who are good looking but in a blonde, blue eyed, surfer sort of way – not my type at all. And they are so hopeless, they can barely manage to hold their cues properly.

I put two coins onto the table and then settle down on the barstool next to Mary. "This could take a while," I say. "They can barely manage to pot a ball and there's another coin before ours."

"It doesn't matter," Mary says. "We'll obviously take them off and then have the table to ourselves." She lights a cigarette and offers me one from the pack. "Where's Shaun?"

"I don't know," I say, looking around. "Oh, there he is – at the bar." Shaun is sitting with some scaly looking person, working his way through a couple of shot glasses the barman has lined up before the two of them. I try hard not to become irritated and spoil the evening, but I can't help myself. "Shaun is okay," I tell Mary. "The sex is really great. I mean, it's the best I've ever had. But lately he has really been annoying me. I can't get him to go home. He's basically moved into my place – he's even cleared out one of my cupboards for his clothes. We never discussed it, I mean I don't want to share my place

with anyone, but when I tell him that I need my space, he just goes out for the evening and comes back drunk or stoned. Just look at the way he's drinking – and he was already in a vibe by the time I came home from work.”

“And that's just not on – you bought us a round and I am going to buy one now, but he comes here with us and now he's buying someone else drinks without even asking us if we want another. I'll bet he never pays for anything, does he? He is living with you and has never contributed to your bond, the electricity the phone or the food.”

“Well, to be fair I've never asked him to. I don't want him to give me money because I don't want him to think he has the right to be there.”

“We'll you've been telling me what to do all my life, so now can you listen to me for a change. Get rid of that loser. Sex is not a good enough excuse for keeping him around. Dump him and if you're worried about not having sex, you can always lend my vibrator. At least you can turn it off when you've had enough of it.”

“Oh, gross,” I say, laughing. “But it's not the same as the real thing. Or is it?”

“I don't know,” says Mary. “When you have as many children as I do, sex is the last thing on your mind. This is my idea of fun these days – one night without them. Well, I'm going to get us another round. You having the same or you want something else?”

“The same,” I say, my eyes following her to the bar. She buys Shaun a drink too and she is right – that is not on. One of the blonde boys finally pots the black ball and I get up to put our coin in the table. “Do you mind if we play doubles?” he asks.

“Sure,” I say, packing the balls and then breaking. It is a nice, open break and a solid rolls into the corner pocket. I pot three more solids before Mary returns with our drinks.

“We’re playing doubles,” I tell her. “They are stripes. She nods her head and I give her the cue.

Mary approaches the table, goes down for her shot, aims and pots a ball into the bottom pocket. Then a cut into the centre pocket and she is lying perfectly for our last ball, which is in the middle of the bottom cushion. She rolls the ball and it drops, but she is not in a good position for the black, which is lying just past the centre pocket, close to the top of the table while the white ball is at the bottom pocket where she dropped our last ball.

Mary looks at me. “Cross-double?” she asks and I nod my head. It’s not an easy shot, but our opponents have so many balls on the table it will not make much of a difference if she misses. But she plays that shot perfectly and the black ball drops. They still have all their balls on the table – it’s a whitewash.

“That’s not fair,” says one of the boys. “You never told us you were so good. We have to play you again.”

“Okay,” says Mary and she racks the balls.

We beat them three more times, but they are very pleasant about losing. They seem quite sweet, introducing themselves – though I immediately forget their names, I'm too distracted because I'm seriously pissed off with Shaun – asking us to give them lessons and offering to buy us drinks. Of course we do not accept drinks from them. Since our days of hustling guys for drinks are over, we only accept drinks from people we know. We are in the middle of the fifth game when Shaun comes to the table and asks me if he can play.

“You'll have to challenge,” I say. “Put your coin down.”

“No, come on. I don't have a coin. Let me play in your place.”

“We are in the middle of a game,” I say, not managing to keep the irritation out of my voice. I don't know why he insisted on coming with us in the first place and he looks so drunk, he is even swaying unsteadily on his feet.

“What is the matter with you?” he demands. “You've been playing all the time, all I want is one lousy game.” He is slurring loudly and I can feel people's eyes on us.

“When we are finished with this game you can play, now leave us alone.”

“What the hell is wrong with you? What is your fucking problem?”

“You are drunk, just leave me alone. Go and buy your friend another drink.”

“Oh is that it? You are acting like a bitch because I didn’t buy you a drink. Is that what this is all about? Because I didn’t spend any money on you? You want my money? Here you can have it all.”

He takes a wad of fifty rand notes out of his pocket and flings it at me. Pink fifty rand notes flutter around me, onto the green baize of the pool table, onto the dirty tiled floor. For a moment the room is very quiet. I have never felt more insulted in my life – this moment could not have been worse if he slapped me through the face.

“Come,” I say to Mary-Agnes in that choked, struggling to remain in control voice.

“Let’s go.” Calmly I unscrew my cue and put it into its case, pick up my bag and turn to the boys. “Thanks for the games, but we are leaving now.”

They nod their heads and look at me worriedly. Mary-Agnes follows me out of Stix and into the parking lot, with Shaun trailing behind her. I quickly unlock my door and get inside, leaning over to open her door. “Lock it,” I say as soon as she sits down in the passenger seat. Shaun comes around to my window.

“Come on Elsie, don’t leave. Where are you going? Come on, open up. How am I going to get back home? Come on! What’s the matter with you?” he knocks on my window but I don’t even look at him. I start the car up and pull away without even looking back.

“That’s it,” I say to Mary-Agnes. “That’s the end of him.”

“He’s probably going to turn up at your place. Do you want me to go home with you?”

“No, I’m fine. I can handle him. Besides, it will take him a while to get there. He’ll either have to walk or hitch a ride. I’ll have his clothes outside my front door by the time he gets there and then I just won’t let him in. And anyway, maybe he won’t come. Maybe he’ll sober up first.”

I drop Mary off at her house and then drive like a maniac back to town. I am still enraged. At home, I pull the cupboard open and rip all his clothes out. I jumble them all into a black bag, looking about my place to make sure that there is no trace of him left behind. Then I lug it to the front door and leave it against the wall. I don’t care if bergies see it lying there and take it away.

To calm down, I light a cigarette and put the kettle on to make some *rooibos* tea. I take my tea into the lounge and sit drinking it in the dark. What a bastard! I flick the television on with the remote, and surf through channels without even registering what’s on any one of them. So I flip the television off, put my cup down and lean back into the chair. And

then there's the knocking at the door. "Elsie, Elsie, come on, open up. I just want to talk to you."

"Leave me alone. I have nothing to say to you."

"Come on Elsie, just let me in, just let me talk to you for five minutes."

"No. Just go away. I don't want to see you anymore. It's over. Now take your things and leave or I'll call the cops."

"Ag, come on Elsie, don't be like that. I'm sorry. I know I acted like an idiot but I really am sorry. Just let me in, I can't talk to you through a door." He keeps pounding on my door and making a noise, so I give him five more minutes before I call the police.

"I've called the police and they are on their way, so you'd better leave."

But that doesn't stop him either. He leaves only when the police come and it takes them more than an hour to arrive. I listen to him telling them that we just had an argument, that he means no harm and that he'll leave by himself. After he's left, they knock on the door to see if I am okay. "I am fine," I say.

But they just pull away in their van when Shaun is back, pounding at my door and shouting. I am not going to call the cops again. It took them long enough to arrive the

first time and they will think that I am wasting their time. In any case, one of my neighbours will call them sooner or later. With a sigh, I go back into the lounge and turn the CD player on to drown out the racket Shaun's making. I look through my CD rack, eventually choosing one of my favourite U2 CD's *The Joshua Tree*. Skipping the first two tracks, I lie back on the couch and listen to Bono's voice:

*See the stone set in your eyes  
See the thorn twist in your side  
I wait for you  
Sleight of hand and twist of fate  
On a bed of nails she makes me wait  
And I wait without you  
With or without you  
With or without you ...  
I can't live  
With or without you ...*

Well, I can't live with Shaun but I can damn well live without him. I just wish that he would go away instead of making such an awful noise outside my front door. There is nothing I hate worse than a scene. I am getting cold so I get up and fetch a blanket from my bedroom. I curl up under it on the couch and concentrate on the music so I won't have to listen to him screaming outside.

## Chapter 6

You get to work an hour earlier and it's an entirely different place. Instead of the usual craziness you find silent desks, empty chairs, dormant computers. I flick my computer on and go into the kitchen for my cup of coffee. Waiting for the kettle to boil, I pick up last Friday's paper and idly flip through it. Problems with voter registration, the date for next elections and a fire in the mountains above Fish Hoek – nothing unusual appears to be happening.

The kettle has boiled and I am about to put the paper down and make my coffee when something catches my eye. It's a head and shoulders colour photograph of a slightly younger Shaun staring at me nonchalantly under the heading "Missing". No. It can't be. How can Shaun be missing when he's at my place at this very moment? But I know, I know, at the back of my mind I can't shake the feeling that something is wrong.

Part of me wants to throw the paper aside, put it down to some weird coincidence – perhaps it is someone who just looks like Shaun. Perhaps my mind is playing tricks on me and I am mistaken. To calm myself down, I scan the copy very quickly. A different name is given: Chadwell Johnson. Eighteen year old son of Andrew and Erica Johnson of Lavender Hill. What about Port Elizabeth? And there's no mention of any sisters. This really can't be Shaun; it must be some freakish thing of him looking just like this other person. His parents have not seen him for two months since he walked out of Valkenberg Hospital, where he was being kept as a patient. Yes, there it is: Valkenberg Hospital. I did

meet him at Valkenberg, but Chadwell is not his name and he's from Port Elizabeth, not Lavender Hill. And I met other people who called him Shaun. Or did they? I don't remember. But I certainly would have noticed if someone called him Chadwell. Uugh, what a horrible name! Can it be that he was lying to me all this time? Why would anyone do that? I mean, if you were going to lie about what you do, would you really choose to say that you're a psychiatric nurse at Valkenberg? None of this makes the least bit of sense.

Absently, I make the cup of coffee and walk back to my desk, still clutching the newspaper. I pick up the phone and dial my home number. After five rings the answering machine clicks on and impatiently, I wait out my message. "Shaun, are you there? It's me. I need to talk to you, urgently." But no one answers.

What should I do? I could just leave it for now and confront him with the evidence later on, if he's still at my place when I get back from work. But he never said that he would be there – he never said when I'd see him again. He could still be there now though – he could have been sleeping when the phone rang. I should probably just leave things as they are, get on with my work and ask him about it when I see him again. Eighteen years old – a teenager still. Oh, God, what have I been doing? His parents have not seen him in two months. So he must have left Valkenberg just after I saw him there. Where has he been staying when he wasn't at my place? And what was at Valkenberg for? Not only have I been fucking a teenager – he's a mental case too. I grab my bag and my keys before I realise that I am going back home.

I get back home on autopilot – barely noticing the other cars on the road and nearly causing an accident on the M5. Before I unlock the door I check my letterbox. My keys are there so he must have left already. Inside, my home looks like he'd never been here – the bed is neatly made and there is absolutely no sign or trace of him. Well, I suppose I should get back to work now. All I can do is wait until he turns up again.

It's been about forty minutes since I left work and now the place is entirely different. Computers are humming, fingers are tapping away furiously at keyboards, phones are held between ear and shoulder while mouths jabber away. I feel a serious headache coming on. As I sit down at my desk, Sue looks up from her computer screen. "Hello, Elsie. How are you doing?"

"Hi Sue, I'm fine and you?"

"Are you sure you're okay? You look a little pale."

"No, no. I am fine. I just had an exhausting weekend."

My cup of coffee is cold now and a thin layer of skin has grown over the top. My eyes fall on Shaun's picture in the newspaper again. Fingerprints – my fingerprints are etched onto the paper. Holding it for as long as I have has stained my hands with ink.

"Sue, did you do that piece in the community section last Friday on that missing boy?"

“Umm ... yes. Why?”

“Did you speak to the parents?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have their address?”

“Of course. Now why are you asking me all these questions?”

“Well, it’s just that he looks very familiar but I can’t think of where I could have seen him before.” Sue gives me a funny look, but she doesn’t say anything. She just carries on tapping away at her computer.

I try not to leave the office all morning, doing all the boring admin things I usually hate, making phone calls. Waiting. But for what? When Sue gets up and goes down the passage in the direction of the toilet, I slip over to her desk. Casually, I flip through her pad, hoping that no one else in the office will notice. There it is: The Johnsons 59 Sea Breeze Court, Symphony Road. I tear the page out, grab my things and leave the office for the second time this morning.

Symphony Road. I know where that is. It's right in the middle of the worst part of Lavender Hill where there is always a shooting, a rape or a murder or something happening to keep people talking. I can't believe that someone like Shaun – I just can't get used to the idea of Chadwell – could come from a place like that. It just doesn't fit. What reason could he possibly have had for telling me that he's from Port Elizabeth when he's actually from Lavender Hill? I suppose he could have felt embarrassed about it, but then why not say Retreat or Grassy Park?

It doesn't take me long to find the place. As it's still quite early, around ten, there aren't many people around. A few children are playing in the concrete courtyard between Sea Breeze and Flora Courts. A skinny, threadbare mongrel yaps after them as they chase one another from one flight of stairs to the next. Then they notice me sitting in my car and suddenly they are all at my door.

"Hello Auntie." They all smile at me. "*Ons sal agter Auntie's se kar kyk. Okay Auntie?*" I wasn't even planning on going inside. The block is very big – a four storey one – and I take it that number 59 would be right on the top floor. The South Easter whips me mercilessly as I climb the steps – I wonder if this is what they meant by sea breeze. By the time I reach the top I am out of breath.

There are two flats on each landing and I find number 59 on the right. The door is open at number 60, with a baby playing in the space between the front door and two rubbish bins holding up a piece of board so that she can't escape. It looks as though this makeshift

barrier has been placed at exactly half of the landing, leaving the rest of the space for the occupants of number 59. The baby regards me curiously, then turns around and crawls inside the house where I can hear *The Bold and the Beautiful* being played very loudly.

I turn around and face the door of number 59 and without knowing what I am going to say, I knock twice. The sound is very hollow and the door feels terribly thin. I wait for a few moments, but no one answers. The small window next to the door is closed, so I suppose that nobody's home. This doesn't stop me from knocking again.

“*Daar's niemand by die huis nie,*” a voice says behind me. I turn around to face a girl who is looking at me with a frown on her face. The girl is wearing big rollers underneath her scarf and she has the baby perched on her hip. She chews gum slowly and deliberately, with her mouth open which reveals her missing front teeth. When I was showing Alison, my distant British relative, all the usual touristy places when she visited last year, the first thing she noticed was how many people she saw with their front teeth missing. She asked me if there was a special reason for that, or if it was simply a matter of bad dental hygiene. Alison looked rather shocked when I replied that for a while, having one's front teeth removed was quite fashionable. Apparently the craze was caused because people said that the removal of their front teeth enabled them to give better blow jobs.

“Do you know when they will be back?” I ask the fashion victim.

She shrugs her shoulders. "They both work in the day," she says. "Maybe in the evening they will be at home."

"Do you know their son, Chadwell?"

She nods her head cautiously, but doesn't say anything else.

"Well, do you know where I could find him? Do you know where he could be?"

"No," she says firmly. "He hasn't been here for a long time now. You are not the only one looking for him," she smirks.

"Thanks," I say, turning around and retreating back down the steps. When I get to the bottom I look up and see that the girl is still staring down at me. At my car, the children crowd around me. "*Ons het mooi agter auntie's se kar gekyk,*" says one little girl, grabbing me around the leg. I scratch about in my purse and give them each a few coins. It is a relief to get back into my car again and out of that merciless wind.

Well, there's not much else to do except go back to work and wait. I suppose I'll see him when I see him. If I see him. I look back up at Sea Breeze court again. How is it that I know so little about a person who knows so much about me? What do I know about Shaun? How do I tell the difference between the lies and the truth? Now I need to find the truth about everything. I want to meet his mother and his father so that I can ask them

about their son. I should try to get hold of his friends. Ralphie and Dalton live nearby, I should go to them first. I start my car up and the children scatter out of my way. They wave enthusiastically and quickly return to their game.

It is a short drive from Shaun's house to Eighth Avenue, Grassy Park. I knock on the door, hoping that the mother won't answer it or if she does, that she won't recognise me. Ralphie opens the door. He still has the bright green toothbrush in his mouth and he doesn't look surprised to see me.

"Ralphie, can I talk to you? Your parents aren't home are they?" He shakes his head. "Is Dalton here?" He shakes his head again and leads me inside. Ralphie shows me to the lounge and I sit down on a couch. I wish that Dalton had been home instead, at least I know that he is capable of verbal communication.

"Ralphie, I am looking for Shaun. Have you seen him anywhere?"

He takes the toothbrush out of his mouth and says, "No, I thought he was with you." It is the first time since I've met him that the toothbrush has come out of his mouth and the first time I have heard him speak. Ralphie's voice is a lot higher and thinner than I would have imagined it to be. As soon as he's answered though, he pops the toothbrush back into his mouth and starts sucking on it.

“Have you seen this article? Is this Shaun?” I ask, giving him the paper. Ralphie looks at it quite closely and frowns.

Again, Ralphie takes his toothbrush out of his mouth to answer, “Yes, that’s him. Why?”

“But how can that be him? Why do you call him Shaun if his name is Chadwell?”

I have to fight the almost overwhelming urge to rip Ralphie’s toothbrush from his mouth, break it in half and then throw it in a dirt bin as I see him taking it out again. “We always called him Shaun. That’s his second name. He hates the name, Chadwell.”

“And what about him being in Valkenberg, do you know anything about that?”

“Shaun’s crazy but I never thought he belonged in Valkenberg. His parents put him there because he wasn’t the kind of son they wanted. They were always unhappy about us, you know, his friends. They even blamed us for everything he did, even for him using drugs.”

“What are you talking about? The dagga?”

“Well, Shaun’s been into some other stuff too. I wouldn’t say that he has a problem with it though, I mean you know him. He’s fine. He just likes to try things out. He’s done most drugs that I can think of – ecstasy, acid, cocaine. But he’s always been fine. Until one day a while back, he started acting crazy. It must have been a bad trip or something. He tried

to burn his parents place down – tried to burn the whole block down they say. After they got him to stop, he got undressed and tried to walk to Cape Town naked, with the phone book underneath his arm. He said he needed to go there to make a call. They couldn't get him into the car and they called the police and that's how he got sent to Valkenberg. His parents thought that they would get him to stop the drugs at Valkenberg. Of course he hasn't stopped completely, but he seems to have it under control now.”

“But why have his parents reported him as missing?”

“Obviously he is pissed with his parents for sending him to Valkenberg. He doesn't want to see them anymore. They came and looked for him here. They went to look at all his friends' houses. But no one knew where he was. He just called us on Saturday to see what we were up to, we hadn't heard from him since he was in Valkenberg. But he was obviously with you since he's been out, hasn't he?”

“Well, he's come to me some of the time, but he hasn't been with me for two months. Have you any idea where he could have been in all that time? Would any of your other friends have let him stay with them?”

“No, he wouldn't have wanted to stay with any of us. We all live with our parents still and any one of them would have called Shaun's mother to let her know where he was. They stick together, you know, parents.”

“Well, will you help me to find him? Can you tell me where he could be?”

“I can take you to Mario’s house and some of the other places where he could be, but I don’t know if you’ll find him. Shaun must have some other friends I don’t know about. We used to be best friends you know, since we were at high school together. But lately we’ve hardly ever see each other.”

Ralphie takes me all over Retreat and Grassy Park. We even visit shebeens and merchants’ houses. But no one can tell us where Shaun is. When I drop Ralphie off, it is getting dark already. “Thanks for your help,” I say to him. “Here, take my number. If you see him, please let me know.”

“Sure,” Ralphie says. “But I am sure that you will see him first. Don’t worry, Shaun will be fine. He knows what he is doing.” Ralphie pops his toothbrush back into his mouth and opens the car door. As he is getting out of my car, his mother pulls up and parks in her driveway. She gets out of her car and glares at me. I don’t know if it is because she recognises me or if she is wondering what I have been doing with her son. I start my car up quickly and drive away from her glare. Suddenly I feel very tired. God, what a day this has been!

## Appendix 3

Outline of *The Avocado Pear Tree*:

Elsie's grandmother is old and gravely ill. She persuades Elsie to take her to visit Hannie at Valkenberg Mental Hospital because Elsie has always avoided this and her grandmother worries that when she is no longer around, Hannie will have no outside contact. Hannie is a state patient and it is not immediately clear why he has been committed. This motif will be the main source of interest and tension in the novel. When Elsie eventually goes to Valkenberg, she cannot bear to go into Hannie's ward and she sits outside in the sun and meets a man who starts a conversation with her. Elsie is attracted to this man (let's call him Marcus), even though he is much younger than she is, a pathological liar at best and a schizophrenic at worst. When she asks Marcus why he is there, she thinks that he is joking when he says that he is a patient. Later, Elsie discovers that he really is a patient, and a relationship develops between the two of them. Marcus manages to 'escape' from Valkenberg to visit her and the relationship is extremely odd, because Elsie never knows what to believe and is too ashamed to tell her worried friends about him. Yet in some strange way, Elsie feels that Marcus is good for her, she can tell him anything and he makes her laugh. He brings her out of the lethargy and depression that she had been experiencing before she met him. It is in their conversations that the stories about what happened in Elsie's childhood and what Uncle Hannie did to end up in Valkenberg emerge:

I will establish that Elsie had been left with her grandmother as a young child because her mother moves to Johannesburg. From the grandmother's complaints about her, I will establish that this decision had been for the best of all concerned because Elsie's mother had not taken good care of her. After a year or two, Elsie's mother returned to Cape Town, was about to marry and wanted Elsie to return to Johannesburg with her. Elsie's grandmother opposed this and threatened Elsie's mother with social workers, and so on. Elsie's mother returned when she knew that her mother would not be home, when she was collecting her pension, and tried to take Elsie with her. Hannie, who was looking after Elsie at the time, was enraged and refused to let his sister take her daughter away. He lost control and beat Elsie's mother to death.

Through Marcus, Elsie has been able to confront her past and things begin to go well for her. She is happier and begins to work on the novel that she always had in her head.

While Elsie has told him her life story, she does not know much about him. This is made more difficult because of all the stories he had told her: First he claimed to be a patient at Valkenberg, which she thought was a joke, then he claimed to be an intern, he said that both his parents had died when he was younger, and Elsie will later discover that his mother is still alive, etc. So Elsie is mostly worried about her ill grandmother and sorting out her own life. She is completely shocked when she goes looking for Marcus one day, because she has not heard from him in a while, and is told that he has died. Marcus has either killed himself in his mother's home, or as his mother claims, had been given the wrong medication by the doctors at Valkenberg. Elsie is determined to find out what really happened, so she speaks to his psychiatrists, his mother and younger brother, his

friends. (all of whom cannot understand her interest) and the more she speaks to these people the more she realises that she never knew Marcus at all. Or her version of Marcus does not correspond with that of anyone else. Elsie eventually accepts that she will never know what really happened or who he really was and she finally goes to visit her uncle, Hannie.

I realise that the plot may appear a bit bleak and I do not like novels that make one feel like going out and driving into a wall, so I will try to temper the novel with some lightness. I will also try to retain Elsie's deadpan journalist's voice while she is narrating the story of what happened with Hannie and her mother and when she is trying to find out what happened to Marcus. I will end the novel with a sense of hope and not despair.