The Light by the Sea
A Novel

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CHAPTER ONE

Whitey had once told me that nothing brings a coastal community together like a death at sea. He was right, in more ways than he might have known. I had always looked at life and death as a linear thing. Something with a beginning and an end. But perhaps, that isn't quite right. There are worse things than death, and often these things are preceded by death and dying, which are in many ways, the true catalysts to suffering.

In my dreams I was sliding down a dune in a superhero costume, the Alsatian bounding along beside me with its tongue flapping, while my cape trailed behind me in the wind. It was a happy vision. I had the dream often, until it was time to leave my home and mother behind.

My father drove our dog to its new owners in another Johannesburg suburb and left her there. That same night she was home, scratching at the door and whining pitifully. She had followed her nose for kilometres, through suburbia and its roads and traffic. The next day he took her back. That night, again, she returned. The asphalt scoured her paws, which were raw and hurting. We were betraying her trust. Her new owner had to tie her up. She never got to see the Cape.

My mother stayed behind in Johannesburg. My dad and I loaded the stuttering VW Beetle with some belongings and set out early one morning. Down the N1 highway, all the way to the Cape. I had been told about the sea and the dunes and the mountains, and I had gathered enough stories to enable me to dream about it.

We're going to find the light by the sea again, my mother had said.

What does that mean? I wanted to know.

You'll see, she said.

I remember seeing my brother's face almost every day that summer. Even though we had moved across the country. Even though he had died. It lost clarity, after a while. Perhaps I made him up anew every time I thought about him. I missed him terribly and felt spurned for being the one left behind. I guess that's why he started visiting me.

It was only much later in life, when I was old enough to make sense of it all, that I realised mine was an unusual childhood, perhaps even exceptional, and that it had shaped me in complicated ways, the same way that water steadily eats away at stone.

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On our journey down through the country the car broke down. My father didn't seem surprised. We stayed for a night in Colesberg to have it repaired, a little town in the middle of the country–which is to say in the middle of nowhere. We were in our hotel room after dinner, just my dad and me. I was playing on the bunk bed when we heard the lady next door start to shout her husband's name. Over and over again. The same name. The same hysterical tone and pitch. He'd died right there, in the room next to us, the walls so thin I could almost reach through to touch his corpse.

I couldn't sleep that night. Neither could my father. He went down to the hotel bar and came back with a bunch of beers, clutched between his strong fingers and dangling like over-ripe bananas. I lay on the top bunk, eyes closed, while he sat on the bed below, methodically drinking. His face was white in the half-light, the muscles around his jaw working continuously. I fell asleep at some stage. He woke me early. We had breakfast and then picked up the car from the repair shop. The old man who had died in the room next to us already forgotten with the promise of a new day.

The highway south was a big stretch of monochrome nothing. I couldn't find anywhere for my young eyes to settle on the flat landscape of the Karoo. It was an arid, lunar landscape that carried on until it met the sky in the distance, with nothing in-between to stop its advance into time. We didn't speak much. I dreamed of the dunes, and of the dog.

When we finally pulled into Betty's Bay, it was nothing like I had imagined. There were no big dunes that I could see at first. Lots of dull-green foliage and lots of rocks. Big mountains and open skies. The ocean looked monstrous and rough. I begged my father to stop by the beach. It was as if stepping onto the sand would somehow complete the journey. An act of arrival.

We drove down from the main tarred road, taking the dirt roads, and my dad explained which way the compass fell in this new world. He always said that a man needed to know where he was at any time, so that he could find his way back. All men lose themselves, he said. He pointed down to the sea: The sea is south, Danny, and the mountains are north.

I nodded that I understood.

Show me which way you think is west, he said, looking toward me.

I turned around and pointed with my left hand, and he smiled at me.

He stopped in a little bay with a pebbly beach. We were the only people there, except for a forlorn figure in a tattered overcoat who was sitting on a rock with a fishing pole in his

hands. He was watching us. A wet and sluggish wind tugged at me. It was different from the wind of my old life. The air was sticky, like honey.

This place is called Shelley Point, my dad told me.

I ran to the water's edge, looking for shells, and returned with a bunch of them, carried in my shirt. My dad laughed at me. Drop them, he said.

Why? Look how pretty they are.

Leave them. They're just mussel shells, he said. I'll show you the really good ones.

I dropped them in the sand and picked the best one up again. He let me keep it.

As we walked back to the car, the man who was still fishing on the rocks threw back his head and laughed loudly, an obscene sound that buffeted the wind. My dad saw me startle and said: That's just old Whitey. He's not right in the head.

When we got to the cottage the owner was already there. The front door stood open and his green jeep stood rusting in the driveway. We were late, and he was unfriendly. My dad let him be rude to us, and I couldn't understand why. Back home nobody would have spoken to my dad like that.

The cottage was a small, single-story building set alone on the slopes of the mountain. From its elevated height we looked down across Clarence Drive. Everywhere were green shrubs called Fynbos, a fine leaved plant species only found along that stretch of coastline. The big trees of my old life were gone. The shrubs ran all the way down to the rocky coast. We had no neighbours, no kids to play with. The green was only broken here and there by other homes, and most of them were empty. Holiday houses, my father said.

The town was a long snake of land, constricted by the mountains to the north, and the sea to the south. The main road, Clarence Drive, ran east to west, hemmed in by these geographical burdens. It was a damp new world. The mountains rose up behind the house, dwarfing everything. The sun came up and was soon lost behind the mountain. We were forever living in the shade. The salt that blew in from the sea ate at everything metal, and the damp air bent and buckled the wooden windows and doors. The house seemed to be disintegrating around us, like soft clay.

We rented the cottage already furnished. Our bedding was taken from the back of the Beetle and was already damp by the time we had spread it over our beds. There was no electricity, and I watched my dad light the gas lanterns in the house, their soft light-bags puffing up one by one with the first flame. The water from the taps was brown and untreated. That night I dreamt of Johannesburg and my mother and the dog.

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Mom had said that she had a week left on her work contract with the big bank in Johannesburg, that was why she had to stay behind. I didn't know where she lived for that time, or what she did. I had never been away from her for so long.

I only learned much later that she did not work that week - that she had stayed behind only to grieve. To allow herself a brief respite from motherhood and marriage in order to break down and pull clumps of her own hair out of her skull, to wail so loudly in the little hotel room that the night manager had to enter with his master key to check on her. That he called the doctor to give her something to help her sleep. Almost like the woman in Colesberg, whose husband died in the room next to ours. What do boys know about grief, especially a mother's?

When she returned she looked frail and tired. She had lost weight; I could feel it when I hugged her for the first time. There were new bony ridges to her that my hands and body were unaccustomed to. I held onto her for as long as I could, following her everywhere on that first day, afraid to let her go. She would later pick up some weight and again feel familiar to me, but she would never again pick up the pieces of her old self. A mother is not meant to witness the death of a child, I remember her saying.

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I had some weeks left to myself, before I had to start fourth grade at the new school. My father had joined an old army friend of his, Uncle Marcus, on one of his fishing boats and they were constantly out at sea handlining for snoek or yellowtail. There were some commercial fishermen who had permits to net for crayfish or dive for abalone on a scale that would make money, but these permits were hard to come by. My dad and Uncle Marcus had to fish for those outside of the scope of the law. It was a hard life, that of a fisherman, but my father came home tired yet smiling. It was my mother, who stayed home with me, who seemed most lost.

In Johannesburg she had never owned her own car and got around by using the bus, as many in the city did. Because of this, my mother never acquired a driver's license. Now, in this remote seaside town, far on the southern tip of the country, she was stuck at home. The town was 13 kilometres from end to end, thin as it was. Our house was on the very eastern

edge of town, the last home before it was just wilderness for miles. This made walking impractical.

She knew the odds of her, a white woman, being pulled over by the police would be scant. My dad knew the police in the area, and they knew that he had served in the army with Uncle Marcus, and that meant that the law turned a blind eye to our fishing and would do the same if they found my mother driving without a licence. But for a long time, she refused to drive, saying that it was wrong.

Then, after weeks of her cleaning the house every day, trying to eradicate the damp and the mould, she finally had had enough. She called out to me. I had been playing in the shrubs behind the house, day by day venturing higher and higher up the slopes of the mountain.

I was particularly high up this day, hunting amid the fynbos for any new animals that I had not yet seen. I liked playing alone on that mountain. I could call my brother to come play along with me. As the older brother, I made up the rules, and he played along quietly, happy to be there with me in reality, I thought.

I only heard my mother when, after searching the house and the front garden and then running down the driveway and onto the main road, her heart beating wildly, she had ventured to the back of the house and shouted up to the mountain. Her voice was trouble.

I bounded down the slope, jumping over tea-coloured streams, until I was close enough to hear her cry.

Mom, I said, softly.

She turned at me, her face ashen. She rushed over, and with her left hand grabbed me by the arm and in one yank had lifted me, fully extended, into the air, and with her free hand she smacked me so smartly across my rump that the tears popped and splashed over my cheeks, all of their own accord.

She'd just as soon lowered me back to the ground before she hugged me to her, my face disappearing into her dress. I could feel her shoulders shaking and I recognised that shaking from the day in the back of the ambulance when she had held my brother to her for the final time. It made me feel terribly ashamed for causing her this distress.

When my mother had calmed and we were both inside, her drinking a cup of tea and me wiping my face with a dishcloth, a steely resolve settled on her shoulders and she started searching for the Beetle's key.

That's enough of that, then, she said. Fetch me my purse, Danny Boy.

She liked to call me Daniel when I was doing something wrong, and Danny, normally. Danny Boy was reserved for when she was either very happy or wanted me to know how much she loved me. Or when she felt guilty.

I got her purse and she handed me a jacket. It was midsummer but in the shadow of the mountains and with the damp air from the sea it was never really warm. Not like where we used to live. We got into the car.

My mother knew how to drive. I had seen her park the car in our previous garage many times, back when it was still a dark olive-green Mercedes. But I couldn't remember ever having ridden in the car with her.

What happens if they catch us, mom? I asked.

Well, Danny, then mommy will just have to talk nice, wouldn't I? She smiled at me as she put the key into the ignition. What desolate kind of place doesn't even have a bus service? she asked under her breath as she turned the key.

The Beetle gurgled into life and we stammered off in a cloud of blue smoke. My mother almost stalled it as we pulled onto the main road, but she quickly footed the clutch and saved the combustion, and from then on, I felt safe with her driving the car, even though she sat very near to the steering wheel and gripped it solidly with both hands. Unlike my dad, who would dangle his left hand limply over the wheel, his right arm hung languidly out of the open window with a cigarette flopping over his lower lip.

Where are we going? I asked her, the prospect of getting out of the house exciting me.

She shot me a quick look over her shoulder. First the shop, Danny Boy, then the beach. Let's get out of the shadow of this damned mountain.

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We drove to the centre of town, stopped at the only shop, and after buying two fishnets, we took the small, winding gravel road that led past Bass Lake and to the main beach. The parking area was inside a bowl of dunes with a small cinder-block ablution building off to one side. Ours was the only car there. Back then there were no signs of the sort you see at beaches these days, and the trail to the beach was only a faint outline leading over the southernmost dune.

My mom got out and took off her shoes, and I did the same. We trudged over the dune, and when we crested it, I got my first look at the main beach. I had been to the pebbled coves that were near our house, but this looked completely different. I thought it strange that

we had been in this new town for so long and yet I had never seen this golden beach. It looked much more similar to the image I had conjured up for this place before we moved here.

Down the dune before me stretched sun-bleached sand all the way to the ocean. The beach was far enough from the mountain's shadow that the sun still reached here, and the warmth of it on my back, together with the unbounding freedom of the vast expanse of beach, reached into my frame and soon my legs were working like pistons, cascading me down to the water's edge.

The sour, decaying smell of ocean and rotting kelp rushed through my nose, and I believe for the first time in a while, I was filled with joy. Seagulls noisily circled the air above us as we approached, and settled down again, ahead of us and unperturbed.

We followed the beach west for a couple of hundred meters to where the first rock outcrops began. Here, the white rolling waves were less urgent, and, further on, the rocks created little sand-bottomed auditoriums of sea. We each had a net from the shop, with handles of thin reed with a wire-loop at the end, supporting a net fashioned from the orange webbed material that fruits and vegetables were normally sold in.

My mother walked with me into the cold, shallow waters, and pointing with the reed end of her net, she showed me the tiny white-grey fish that were trapped in the swirling eddy of the sandy pool. The school raced up and down at breakneck speed, and I bounded along after them, swatting furiously with the net, to no avail.

They're baby mullet, Danny. They're way too fast and agile for us to catch without a plan. We'll have to work as a team.

She taught me how to slow my walk, the crystal-clear water showing the fish up well against the white sand. We flanked the school, pushing it as slowly as possible toward each other, and after a while I had managed to slip the net quickly underneath a wayward fish, and it came up gleaming athletically in my net. We let him go, and he twisted his body with hurried spasms and was gone, back among the school. Just another droplet of silver in a fast-moving cloud of fish. She said she'd ask my father to teach me how to catch the big mullets from the old harbour wall.

On our way back I ran ahead, up and down the sides of the dunes, my mother trailing me silently. All I needed was a cape and the Alsatian, and my fantasy image of this place would almost have been fulfilled. In the distance a woman approached, three eager dachshunds bounding around her ankles. The little sausage-like dogs saw me on the dunes and ran up to me, their bodies flexing comically, and I went down and showed them the back

of my hand as my dad had taught me. They frolicked over and around me for a while, before the woman called them back to heel. I could see my mother looking at me thoughtfully, from the foot of the dune. Every boy needs a dog, she told my father that night. But I didn't want to be responsible for it. I didn't want the accountability for another life. I think my dad saw that, and there never was a dog again.

My mother and I were both flushed and out of breath when we got back into the car, our feet encrusted with shelly sea sand. We were laughing and talking all the way back to the house. Things didn't seem so bad, suddenly. We didn't seem so lost.

CHAPTER TWO

The light by the sea had a quality to it that I found mesmerising. I could spend hours along the edges of the rocky coast, looking at the myriad creatures that clung to life in the turbulent waters. But mostly, I just looked at the light. It hit the water as though it were shining through a colourful magnifying glass, distorting it into patterns that gleamed across the azure waters.

The rockpools were a world on their own. Each pool held such an abundance of life, it seemed like its own universe. I would tease the blue-purple anemones, who would pull in their slimy tentacles at the slightest touch and bunch themselves up tightly for protection. I often carefully picked loose the spiky sea urchins from the deeper sections of the pools, their black thorns straight and sharp and dangerous in my palms. Scattered over the smooth submerged rocks were big orange sea stars, and handfuls of the small, armless dwarf cushion stars with their speckled colours. Tiny orange-brown shore crabs scuttled into crevices and motley Klipfish darted in and out of their hiding places.

We found an old rust-red bike in the little shed behind the house. My dad said seeing that we were renting the house furnished, it meant that the bike was part of the furniture and mine to use. He said this with a guilty grin on his face, and that made my riding it even more exhilarating. It was a symbol of freedom to me.

I was allowed to take the bike down to the sea whenever I liked, as long as I was home before dark. My mother would stand on the porch as I biked down the driveway, her arms crossed, her frame visibly stiff. She fought with my dad, telling him that it wasn't safe,

but he calmed her down, telling her that if it wasn't safe for a boy to play outside in the middle of nowhere, where did we have left to go? Every evening, as I returned just before dark, my mom would again be standing on the porch, her arms crossed in front of her, waiting for me.

Don't worry, mom, I would tell her. I'll be fine. I know what I'm doing.

Oh Danny, I know. Mommy's just scared.

Scared of what? I asked.

Mothers are always scared when their children go off alone.

I can stay home tomorrow, I told her.

She brightened up a bit. OK, then. I'll bake us a banana bread for lunch and we can have a picnic outside.

On the days when I didn't bike down to the sea, I played behind the house, on the slopes of the mountain. But adventure was always across the next stream and over the next rise, and it wasn't long before I had climbed past the gentle rising slope of the mountain and into the thick Protea bushes that made a forest much taller than my head, and upward through them onto the steep rise of the mountain. Here I climbed boulders as big as houses and explored caves and slight valleys.

Up there, looking down over the whole world, nature was untouched. In the distance, when a car crept over the snaking black tar of Clarence Drive, it always amazed me how slow it all seemed to move. I shared the mountain with big, hairy baboon spiders, and stout, flat headed puffadders. Both of those I gave a wide berth and I soon learnt, as if by instinct, how to recognise an open spot on a game trail or on an exposed rock where a snake might be basking in the sun. Kicking over large, flat stones or pieces of dead, rotting wood, often revealed a group of tiny, black scorpions. I knew if I told my mother about the snakes and spiders and scorpions, she would put an end to me playing on the mountain–maybe even to me biking down to the ocean's edge. I guess that's how secrets in a family start; with good intentions.

My parents always told me that, in our house, we didn't keep secrets from each other. But after my brother died, I broke that rule for the first time. How was I to tell them that Christopher visited me at times, beginning on the day of his death? He came to me in my dreams that first evening after the accident, and from there on out I could just call to him and he would be there, silently smiling, mischievous.

His face started to dislocate from reality on the first day that I called out to him and he came to me and it has kept shifting every day since then. As I struggled to call to memory

what he looked like, the lines of his face seemed to move about, reorganising themselves. Every other detail stayed fixed in place. His body, his hands. How he moved. Those all remained. It was his face that slipped and blurred.

There were no photos of Christopher displayed in the new house. Mom said it hurt too much to have to look into his blue eyes all the time, and dad didn't seem to want to argue with her on that point. But I knew mom kept a box of pictures of him under her bed, which she kept to herself.

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Christmas that year started as a dull affair. We didn't put up a tree as we normally did, and the day before Christmas my dad went outside and found a dry branch of twigs which he brought inside. He placed some candles around it and lit them that evening when it was nearly dark outside.

Danny, come look at our tree, he said to me.

I didn't know what to make of it. It simply looked sad. It's nice dad, was all I said.

The next morning there was a solitary gift under the tree, wrapped in old newspaper and tied together with a bow of red and blue wool. That must have been my mother's touch, I thought. I had to wait until evening to open it.

Mom and dad drank wine outside on Christmas day. They didn't speak much, and dad lit a fire and was stooped over a bucket filled with live crayfish, shelling the tails and removing the veins, before putting them in a pot next to the fire. Then my mother said, very softly, as if from far away: I miss him terribly today.

She was looking deep into the flames of the fire, her shoulders hunched forward. Dad stopped cleaning crayfish, threw the carapace he held in his hand back into the bucket and stood up. He looked at mom for a while, and must have thought better of it, because he didn't say anything. He just sighed, sat down again, and slowly started to clean the rest of the crayfish.

When it was dark dad lit the candles under the tree again, and when we went in to open my present, one of the tree's dry limbs had caught fire and was smouldering and smoking in the house. Dad picked it up and took it outside, laughing. He threw it on the fire where it burned up quickly, spitting angrily back at us.

We took my gift outside to get away from the smoke, and as my mom was opening windows, I tore away at the newspaper wrapping. Inside was a dark green and brown plastic

case filled with fishing tackle. It contained lines and lures and lead sinker weights. It was perfect. My father was beaming. My mother smiled at me.

The shadows of Christopher's absence on Christmas had briefly been swept aside, and I rushed past my mom to hug my dad, who knelt down and drew me into his embrace. When he was done hugging, he ruffled my hair about, signalling an end to the affection.

We ate crayfish drenched in garlic butter next to the dying embers that night. Around us the world was dark and silent, but there, within that circle of light, we were somehow almost whole again. Mom and dad sat next to each other; his one arm loosely dangled over her shoulders. She even lay her head into the crook of his neck. Dad was full of advice about where to try for a fish first. She was watching my dad and I as we spoke earnestly about what I would catch with my new tackle.

The light by the sea, my mother said to no one in particular, staring into the last spark of the fire.

CHAPTER THREE

We had tried my new tackle off the rocks near Shelley Point but couldn't catch anything, and my dad had taken me to a deep tide pool outside of town, where we sat high above the frothing water. He showed me how to weigh down a limpet line into the deep, and I hooked something that felt big.

Dad grabbed the rod from me after I had messed up the line on the retrieve, and he felt the fish as he tried to unravel the crow's-nest. Maybe a little cob, he said. Maybe something else. Anyway, that was a decent fish Danny. You'll get one soon.

We went fishing for a couple of days, and while I sat over the rocky gorge with the rod in my hands my dad would climb down the rocks and cast two big crayfish nets into the water, wait a while and then haul them up one at a time, the orange carapaces of the catch writhing in the nets. We ate like kings in those days, before the nature conservation officers started clamping down on what they called poaching.

On the morning of the last day of the year, I fetched the bike from behind the house, and just as I was wheeling it away from the back door, my mother's voice came from inside.

Danny?

Yes, mom? I replied.

Are you ok? she asked, her voice sleepy.

I stood very still, looking at the back door from where her voice came. I could hear my dad mumble something to her.

I'm ok.

I could hear her sigh. Are you taking the bike out?

Yes, I said, just for a bit.

Ok. Be home well before dark. We need to get dressed for the party tonight.

I cycled fast, picking up speed on the way down the driveway, and hung a tight right onto the shoulder of the main road, just long enough to check over my shoulder for oncoming cars, and then shot across the asphalt and onto the lonely gravel roads below.

I had no plan, but the bike and the wind pulled me toward Shelley Point without me thinking about it. The air was very clean and comfortable to bike through. I had the sun on my face all the way to the shoreline. A fine mist of sea spray blew over me as I stood facing the little rutted path to the rocky point.

Whitey was sitting on the pebbly beach, his trousers rolled up over his knees and his shoes hung around his neck by their laces. I had become used to seeing him lurking around, but his presence always made me uncomfortable and I didn't trust him behind me when I was playing on the rocks, him being mad and all.

Dad had told me that Whitey was actually one Lewellyn White, who had once been a respected fisherman in the community. He had come to South Africa from England as a young man and had owned a couple of boats and employed a few men in the town.

He had fallen in love with a coloured girl and they had had a baby boy, and then there was a fire at their house in the coloured area and the woman and child burned to death and that was when he lost his mind and became known as Whitey.

Dad said he wasn't sure whether the community treated him like a leper because he was crazy or because he had taken up with a coloured girl. I asked what a leper was. A pariah, my dad replied, not answering my question.

Are we pariah's? I had asked him. He never answered that, either.

Whitey didn't see me, he just sat there with the water licking his feet and I turned away from the little bay.

To the right of Shelley Point the thick milkwood trees clustered together tightly from the very edge of the gravel road and onto the rocks. I went to explore the rockpools over to that side.

Clambering over rocks, I slowly made my way right toward the milkwood trees and out toward the water's edge. The rocks were more jumbled to this side and the climbing took a bit of time. As I went, every new detail and rock outcrop was imprinted onto my memory, creating a mental map that I would later be able to use, enabling me to find my way back.

I climbed a high rocky rise and stood up tall to take in the view. To my left, jutting sharply into the deep blue sea, was Shelley Point, white foam frothing about its jagged edge. Inward and to its right was the pebbly cove where my dad had stopped on our first day here, and where Whitey was now brooding. From the cove the shoreline worked far out into the sea, a jumbled rise and fall of sharp-edged rocks.

It took time to establish the best route through the maze of rocks. Stagnant pools of yellow-foamed water lay in still puddles among the rocks, brought in on the spring tides.

Before me a deep chasm stretched up toward the milkwood forest, and straight down to the tumbling waves. It was as wide as a car is long in most places, narrowing only here and there over the deeper parts. It looked awfully deep but must have been about a six-foot drop.

I worked my way carefully down along the edge of the chasm, and finally recognised the narrowest part of the little gorge. It wasn't much of a jump, maybe four feet, but the drop down was much higher here, and it took my breath away. My heart started pounding loudly in my chest and I kept shifting my feet on the rocky ledge, hoping for a better foothold.

Something was chasing me that day, and as I stood there, I realised I hadn't seen Christopher all day. I thought of him and then he was there, hopping lightly across the gap, laughing on the other side. I swung my arms by my sides to gather some lift, leaned back onto the heels of my feet, then rolled my coiled body forward, stretching my right leg out in front, and landing well clear of the edge on the other side.

This was a new section of the coastline near our house that I had not yet explored, and it took my mind away from everything that was troubling it, and I set out to where the sea spray blew inland in tiny, cool droplets. The rocks levelled out on this side, and I hopped over and around shallow, clear rockpools, searching for the bigger pools I knew I'd find closer to the ocean's edge.

Close to where the waves were breaking, I found a large, deep pool, its waters still placidly awaiting the incoming tide. It was set in a semi-circular enclosure of high rocks that shielded it from the wind and spray from the southern side, keeping the angry waves at bay while allowing new water to flood in on the hightide. At the point closest to the sea it was deeper than I was tall, but the water was so fresh and clear that I could see right down to the bottom. Along the amphitheatre-like rocks was a lower ledge that immediately made me

think of the pews you find in a church. It ran along the edge of the pool for about 5 metres. I walked along the edge, took a seat and let it all in.

Sitting on the pew, my back was to the raging ocean, but the surrounding rock walls were high enough that I was not worried about a wave washing over me. From the deepest end, it got gradually shallower to the northwest. It was mostly rocky at the bottom, but there were a few sandy spots at the deep end that looked clean and would make a nice place to jump in for a swim, I thought.

I leaned my back against the rocks and tilted my face up to the sun, my closed eyelids blazing red against the balls of my eyes. You could see light, even with your eyes shut. I opened my eyes and looked inland up to the mountain. The terrain rose slowly from where I was, stepping gradually up to the foot of the mountain and then rising suddenly to its peaks. There weren't any pathways or roads that made this pool easily accessible, and I felt such a wave of achievement at having found this secret spot that I laughed aloud at the wonder of it, the sound of my voice strangely nondescript against the hiss and thump of the waves. I closed my eyes again and lost track of time.

I opened them after a while because the sounds of the pool had changed. It wasn't just a dull hiss and thump from the sea at my back anymore, but there was a swish and a gurgle in the pool now, as the hightide pushed water into the deep end of the pool in white-foamed bulges, and then sucked it back out to sea through the same rocky funnel.

Looking up, I saw the shadows had crept down from the mountain and were slowly pooling over Clarence Drive. I got up and retraced my steps, hesitating only briefly at the leap. I knew I would be back.

When I parked the bike against the wall and leaned in through the backdoor, my mom was standing in the kitchen, applying powder to her face with one hand, while holding a small round mirror in the other. She was humming happily to herself. She had on a light green dress with puffed shoulder pads, and her hair was piled high on her head. She looked at me and smiled.

Hi mom, I said.

Well, hello Danny Boy, she smiled at me, then went back to the mirror. I put some nice clothes on your bed. Wash up, we have a party to go to. It's New Year's Eve.

The smell of her perfume hung in the house, and I struggled to remember when last I had smelt it on her. There had been a time when she wore it every day, and you could follow her through the big house in Johannesburg just by trusting your nose.

I could hear my dad splashing water in the bath, blowing his nose loudly and clearing his throat. I always tried to get into the bath before him. The idea of lying in the murky water in which he had just bathed made me uneasy.

He saw me pass by the bathroom door and called out: Daniel, I'm done here, come jump in.

I went back and stepped into the tiny bathroom. The bath was an old ball-and-claw enamel bath, stained with many brown rings after years of filthy water. The stories that tub could tell, I thought to myself.

My dad was towelling himself, his back to me. He had an angry scar high on his right shoulder, from when he got shot in the bush-war during a contact. Friendly fire. He always told people who asked him about the war that it was a boring story because the most exciting thing that happened to him was getting shot in the back by one of his own troops.

I undressed and got into the scalding water. My dad always made the water so hot that your skin came out pink and tingling when you were done. I hesitated briefly before throwing water over my head, then soaping myself quickly. The soap couldn't drive the scent of him from the tub.

When I had finished dressing in a jean and t-shirt and had combed my hair sideways and flat, I found my parents sitting by the little kitchen table, each with a drink in hand. They seemed happy and light, and it always worried me because it was only when things started going well that things started going bad.

Look at you, my handsome boy, my mom said, raising her glass toward me.

Well Danny, if there's a girl near your age in this town you'll dance with her tonight, that's for sure, dad said, clinking his glass against my mother's.

The car didn't want to start so I had to help my dad give it a push to start it rolling down the driveway, and we were off with a running start. I had only met my uncle a couple of times, and I was feeling anxious about the party at his house.

My uncle's house was on the far edge of the main beach, situated behind a dune. He had moved here before I was even born. My dad, in better times, had flown down from Johannesburg often to visit him. Between the house and the dune was a thick milkwood forest, which Uncle Lucas had hollowed out in a straight line to make a road to the beach through which he could launch his boat right into the surf.

He didn't have any kids, but my dad said that women had always liked him and that's the reason he never wanted children. That didn't make sense to me, but I never asked him

what he meant by it. My uncle had a big car and a big boat, and the house was big with a high ceiling.

When we pulled into the paved driveway there were already a couple of cars there, and Uncle Lucas' boat was standing on its trailer, the crayfish nets hanging over its sides to dry. The boat was bigger and fancier than the wooden tubs my dad and Marcus used on their fishing runs, with two big black motors hulking on the back.

"The Establishment Blues" by Rodriguez was playing loudly when we stepped inside the house. I liked him better than Bob Dylan. My dad had told me that Rodriguez's music had kept him sane through the war. I didn't really know what that meant at first, but later in life I figured it out and Rodriguez was my last, and strongest, connection to my father. Dad said that he just disappeared one day, and nobody knew what had happened to him. I wasn't sure if it was this fact, or the music itself, that made the lyrics seem so sad. My mother called him the poor man's Bob Dylan.

My parents, each with a fresh drink in hand, were talking to a man and woman I didn't know. My dad was blowing smoke into the face of the lady, and she kept looking at the cigarette stuck between his fingers.

It's just such a tragedy, the lady was telling my mother. I can't imagine what you are going through. We think of you all the time. Mom just smiled a tiny smile at her, shrugging her shoulders.

So, what do you intend to do for work, Dan? the man was asking my father. He too had a cigarette in his hand, but he held it lightly and almost above his head, as if he knew it bothered the lady next to him.

The fishing is good for now, my dad said while blowing out more smoke. I'll see what comes up.

We should talk, Dan, the man said. You're a bit overqualified for this neck of the woods, but a small town can always use a fresh take. Especially from a seasoned journalist. Isn't that right, Liz? he asked the lady.

That's right, she said. Fresh perspective and all. Yes, quite right.

My dad smiled wryly. More like a disgraced journalist at the moment, he said.

Yes well, the man said, you can't go up against the government these days, old boy. Maybe if you were writing from London or Amsterdam, but not from your own soil.

My dad coughed loudly, and a ball of blue smoke flowed through the circle of adults. The lady waved her hand in front of her face and my dad seemed pleased with the reaction.

Oh, here comes Lucas with the ice, my mom said cheerily and a little quickly, breaking the tension.

Uncle Lucas came walking past carrying a heavy cooler box.

Why don't you take a walk down to the beach, Danman? He asked me as he passed. He'd taken to calling me Dan-The-Man, but it sounded like Danman when he said it in his deep voice.

Sure, I said, glad to get away. I went through the backdoor, across a patchy lawn, and found the trail leading toward the milkwood trees.

The milkwoods grew into each other, like fingers intertwining, creating a thick and wind-still forest. The path, cut through the forest, was wide enough and high enough for a car and boat to pass through, and fresh rutted tracks lay deep into the sand. It made a slight rise as it crested the dune, and I could hear the ocean through the far opening.

As I came out of the forest and onto the downward side of the dune, the bright sunlight blinded my eyes for a while, and I raised my hand to my brow in that universal salute to the sun, frowning against the light.

Before me the beach ran gently downward to the calm waters. Long brown and black ropes of kelp lay strewn haphazardly across the warm sand, and little white sea lice jumped about my feet as I walked. I turned right along the water's edge, slowly ambling along in the foot-dragging gait of a bored child.

The sun glinted brightly off her blonde hair and the sight of her sitting on the wet sand with the tide lapping at her slender toes and her sunburned arms hanging loosely around her knees stopped me in my tracks. The breath caught raggedly in my throat.

She saw me too, then, and we both just stared at one another for a long while, alone on the pure white beach and with just a hint of wind ruffling at our hair to show that we were real. She raised her hand and waved at me. I waved back. Then I stood there for another while, briefly considering turning around and running back over the dune and through the milkwood alley and back to the safety of my uncle's house. She made me acutely aware of myself.

I walked over to her and she stood up when I got near, dusting sand from her bum. Her dress trailed down to her feet. She pushed her hair back from her face with one hand.

I'm Clara, she said.

Danny.

I could hear the ocean in the background, humming like some live animal, and the sun too seemed to sing.

So, where did you come from? she asked me, smiling slightly.

I turned and gestured over my shoulder to the dune. My uncle's house is just over the dune there, I said.

Are you here for the New Year's party? She frowned.

Yes, with my parents. You?

Yeah, same. I'm glad there's someone to talk to at least.

She talked in a strange way that I couldn't place, and my English sounded unrefined compared to the way in which she spoke. We both looked down at the sand below our feet. She was waiting for me to say something. She stood with her feet well apart, the sand squelched between the slender toes of her right foot, and her other foot looked out of place. I was staring.

I have a prosthetic, she said, following my gaze.

A what?

She hiked up her dress a little, exposing the steel assembly around the plastic foot. It took me by surprise, and I kept quiet. I had never seen anyone without a leg before. The plastic foot was a lighter shade than her tanned foot, and the sand didn't push up between its toes as it should have.

I lost my leg, she said, leaning over and rapping the shaft of her prosthetic limb smartly with her knuckles. It's a fake leg, not a real one. So that I can walk.

She let her dress slide down, and I just had enough time to see the boyish brown knee of the real leg. It was covered in a light white fluff.

What happened to it? I asked.

She looked at the sea and then at me and said: It's a long story. There was an accident, and then the doctor had to cut it off. But it's OK, I'm used to it now.

She started walking back toward the dunes. Come on then, she called after me.

I followed. We didn't speak on the way back through the forest. The dappled light fell through the leafy canopy in places and cascaded over her hair. I had known that I liked girls, had often thought of touching them or even kissing them. I had experienced the first real nudges of desire, but Clara's presence fell into me with such a rush that it filled me up with hot air, like a blustering mountain wind billowing a drying sheet.

I found myself suddenly thinking of Christopher, missing him even. I briefly wanted to share her with him. I desperately wanted to say something to break the silence. As we came out of the dark canopy, I stopped.

My brother died, I said, my voice suddenly loud.

She stopped and turned around, looking at me with a new expression on her face.

She simply nodded, and turned toward the house, her gait showing for the first time an awkward effort in walking.

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There weren't any other kids close to our age at the party. The music was loud, and the adults didn't seem to notice us much as the night went on. We played pool in Uncle Lucas' bar room, until two men told us to get out underfoot. Then I showed Clara around the house. I showed her the boat and the big motors, suddenly proud that it belonged to my uncle. We sat outside by the fire after the adults had drifted inside and chatted easily. I was playing with a stick, the end of which I would light in the fire, then blow out the flame and swing the burning ember wildly around my head in the dark, creating streaks of bright, orange light.

We were the same age. Her parents had decided to move to South Africa from America recently. She said her dad used to work for the government but was an engineer now. He had to drive up to Cape Town a couple of times every week. She said they had come to Betty's Bay for the peace and quiet. I told her that my dad had said that America helped us in the bush war against the communists. She said she had never heard of that.

I met her parents that evening. Her father drank coffee, which seemed strange to me. All the other adults had drinks in their hands. People weren't supposed to drink coffee at a party. Her mother, though, had a tall wineglass in her one hand, and ruffled my hair with her other and called me a delightful looking boy. The words sounded nice but, somehow, they made me suspicious of her.

Clara's father had a long, sad face. He reminded me of an old, greying poodle. He smiled at me and at his daughter in a sad little manner, as if he felt sorry for all the life still ahead of us. I felt uncomfortable sitting near Clara with him smiling at us. People who smiled all the time made me nervous.

Just before midnight we all ambled over the dunes, under the starless tree canopy, toward the beach to set off fireworks. Clara and I followed behind the main group. People were raucous. She walked really slow, seeming to exert just a little more effort with each swing of her plastic and metal leg than she had used earlier in the day. She had a slight grimace on her face, and I wanted to give her my hand then, but didn't.

My uncle and another man I didn't know were placing roman candles along the shoreline, pointing them steeply over the glistening water. The waves had quieted down, and the surface reflected the light of an almost full moon, strewn across the black sea like spilled milk from a toppled glass. Clara had edged her way slightly forward and was standing next to her parents. I walked up to my mom and she pulled me in front of her and placed both her arms across my chest.

There was a boyish excitement in the way my uncle moved as he lighted each rocket in quick succession. He bounced from one leg to the other with a light, high-kneed hop, and ran a few paces back toward us all after setting fire to the final fuse.

There was a soft serpentine hiss, acrid smoke wafted toward us, and then the brash, rushed spits as the roman candles fired, one after another, then the loud, whip-crack rapports in quick succession, as the smoky flowers bloomed in the night sky.

Their different colours lit up the small crowd, illuminating upturned faces amid loud cries of joy. People were clapping as they were looking at the fireworks, and my gaze fell down fast out of the sky, like something that had dropped, and settled on Clara's upturned face, now lit up neon, her lips slightly parted and her small white teeth glinting. Suddenly she turned to me, saw me staring. We both smiled briefly, and it felt very good to finally have a friend in this place, someone to show the beach and the mountains and the rockpools to. I decided then that we would become best friends. The clock had spilled over into 1990.

CHAPTER FOUR

My mom and dad had slept late the next morning. I woke up early, the images of the new year's party coming back to me in quick flashes. I wanted to take the bike out and head down to my rockpool, but knew I'd be in trouble if they woke up and I were gone. Instead I made a lot of noise in the kitchen, hoping to rouse them, but without success.

In the end I drifted slowly up the mountain, the sun just breaking through the shrubs. Christopher was there, throwing small rocks at a lone boulder, a favourite game of his. He smiled widely at me whenever he scored a hit. I felt guilty for not including him yesterday, but there had been so much happening and I'd been too busy showing Clara around that there

really hadn't been any time to play with him. He was never mad at me anyway. He was the one who always forgave anyone anything.

We were still playing when I could hear the sounds of my dad's morning cough barking up the mountainside, baboon-like. I left Christopher at it and went down slowly. I was hungry.

Mom was in the kitchen, brewing coffee for her and dad.

Morning mom, I said, giving her a loose hug from behind.

You're up early, she said.

It's been light forever, I told her.

She took the kettle off the gas and poured the steaming water into a mug. Well, we all had a big night last night. It was a very nice party, wasn't it, Danny?

I nodded. Yes, it was alright.

Just alright? She turned to look at me, her eyebrows raised. You made a new friend last night, she said, her focus returning to the coffee mugs.

Yeah, she's nice enough. I was quiet for a while, then: You know she only has one leg?

Yes, Danny, we noticed. Mom looked at me sternly. I hope you were nice to her about that and didn't make her uncomfortable.

It's called a prosthetic, I told her. The fake leg, I mean.

We know what it's called, Danny.

I turned around and started toward my room. Just as I was about to make it out of the kitchen mom called my name. I turned around and looked at her.

Would you like it if she came over to play sometime? She's all alone in that big white house of theirs. And an only child. Mom looked up at me suddenly, realising what she had just said. She looked down to compose herself, sighed and then went on.

Her mom spoke quite a bit last night, she said, raising her hand to her lips as if she were drinking something.

How do you know what her house looks like? I wanted to know.

Everyone knows where the Americans live, Danny. They're basically royalty here.

I nodded and turned, but mom said: Well?

Well what?

Would you like it if she came over to play sometime?

I tried to look bored, but inside my heart was pounding and I could feel the excitement of seeing her again rise up in me. Sure, I said. OK.

Good, she said, in her special tone that meant the matter was settled. Because I already told her mother last night that it would be fine for her to come and play with you. It would do you both good to be around someone your own age.

When is she coming?

Not sure. I told them whenever suits them. She picked up both the mugs. Small towns have open doors, Danny Boy. You'll see.

I ducked out quickly and went into my room, looked at the state of it and set to tidying it frantically. I knew I was being silly; she won't come the day after the party, but I dreaded the idea of a girl like her having to play in a mess like that.

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Clara didn't come that day, nor the next. I started to think that maybe she wasn't interested in spending time with me. I only had a vague idea of where their house was, and thought of cycling all the way there, but didn't know what I would do if I even found it. Would she even want to see me?

The new year had started, and it felt much like the year before, with the euphoria of transition now over. My dad had gone out fishing early in the morning, well before the sun had risen. Mom was cleaning the house, her hair tied up in a scarf on top of her head, making her look like one of the black or coloured maids who worked in the wealthier houses.

We had had a maid in Johannesburg, too. Her name was Sophie. I could remember her cooking and cleaning and caring for Christopher and me. She lived in the servant's quarters behind the double garage, where she slept on a single wrought-iron bed which was raised above the ground on bricks. I remember her running loudly past me the day of Christopher's accident, later falling to her knees, wailing loudly and slapping her head repeatedly.

I could remember the warm, soapy smell of her. I could close my eyes and imagine the plumpness of her hugs, her laugh and also the tears when she said goodbye to us before we left for the Cape. She had carried her belongings in a big bag which she balanced on her head, tears running down her cheeks as she slowly made her way down the long driveway. At the gate she had turned around and looked at me with a painful expression. I asked why Sophie couldn't come to the Cape with us, but my father said nothing as we drove off.

Mom was flushed from the hard work, her face pink and sweaty, her breath pursed through parted lips. I heard a car approach, heard its wheels crunch the gravel in our

driveway, but I was so absorbed in the book that I was reading in my room that I only looked up from it when I heard an unmistakeable accent coming from our backdoor.

It was a man's voice, deep and musical. The English was rounded and smooth when he called: Anybody home? Hello? It was Clara's dad.

For a brief while there was no sound at all, then I could hear my mother scurrying in the lounge. Just a minute, she called.

I was still wearing the same clothes from yesterday, had slept in them. My hair was wild, like a mouse nest, and I had not yet brushed my teeth. As my mother opened the door, I was still thinking of how I could slip past the kitchen and into the bathroom when suddenly, there she was, silently appearing in my bedroom doorway.

What are you reading? she asked.

I stood up quickly, my eyes wide, the book clasped in front of my chest. She was wearing a clean white dress, long and reaching her shoes. I could hear my mother offering her dad some tea, pots rattling and chairs scraping in the kitchen. I looked at my unmade bed. Clara came over to me and took the book from my hands.

I like *The Hardy Boys* too, she said, handing the book back to me.

Me too, I said, aware of how awkward I must seem.

Clara's dad was blocking the light in my doorway. Hi Daniel, he said, still smiling.

Hi.

Is it all right with you if I leave Clara in your care for the day? She has been bugging me for days to bring her over to play.

Daddy, Clara said sternly.

He was still smiling.

Yes, sir, I said, fidgeting with the book.

Clara went over to my unmade bed, scooted the blanket aside and sat down where only seconds earlier I had been lying, as if to tell her dad that she was in control here. I wondered briefly if the heat from my body was still in the bed and whether she noticed. He left us alone and I could hear him thank my mother in that echoing voice.

I showed Clara my books. Enid Blyton's *Famous Five*. *Hardy Boys*. Willard Price's *Adventure Series*. Some *Tintin* titles, which she seemed unimpressed by.

Have you read *Nancy Drew*? She asked me.

That's for girls, I said.

You can read them, too, she said. I like *Hardy Boys*, and I'm a girl.

After her dad left, my mother hovered over us, seemingly unsure of what to do. I think it was the first time since Christopher that she had had two kids alone with her. She was still flushed and kept on offering us snacks and milk. She even offered to bake muffins for us. Mom seldom baked.

The house felt ridiculously tiny with Clara in it. As if she were somehow used to inhabiting larger spaces. The mouldy smell of the house, the cheap furniture and dirty gas light fixtures suddenly became starkly obvious to me. Clara didn't seem to mind at all. I wondered what her house and school had looked like in America.

She sat in the kitchen, calmly talking to my mother, while I brushed my teeth, wetting my hair before combing it and pulled on some clean clothes. The shirt had creases in it.

In the kitchen my mom asked me what we were going to do with our day. I asked if it would be okay if I took Clara down to the rockpools. I wanted to show her my rockpool.

Mom looked unsure. Your dad took the car this morning, Daniel, so I can't drive you today.

We'll just take the bike, mom. I can give Clara a lift.

Better if you walk, maybe? she offered.

Clara was looking back and forth between myself and my mom. Danny can lift me Mrs… she said.

Don't missus me, young lady, my mom said, jokingly throwing the kitchen towel into Clara's lap. Clara smiled and threw it back. I was amazed at how at ease and comfortable she was in my house and with my mother. She was unlike any other kid I had ever known. I wondered whether all American kids were this comfortable around adults.

My mother thought it over, then looked at Clara and asked: Can't you ride, sweetheart? You're awfully handy with that leg of yours. Danny can jog along with you, he'll keep up. He's quite the runner, you know.

Clara's face froze for a while. It's too difficult, I've tried a bunch of. I… I'd rather not.

Mom seemed to think for a moment, then she said: All right, you two. But first you have to show me how you plan on both riding that bike. If you can make it around the yard without dropping your friend, I'll allow you to take off, she said, looking at me pointedly. I had expected her to say no, but it seemed that Clara had a calming effect on her. I realised my mom trusted this bright-blonde girl.

Clara wanted to sit on the handlebars in front of me, but that meant I couldn't see ahead of us. I showed her how to sit side saddle on the cross frame, just as Cristopher used to

do. Sitting like that meant my arms had to go around her body to reach the handlebars, and her legs stuck out sideways to the left of us. She was as rigid as a plank, but she didn't complain or protest as I pushed of. I had to tell her to relax, to allow her body to lean with me, and soon she got the hang of it and we were off.

Mom seemed satisfied after a few turns around the yard, and after giving us each an apple and a bottle of water to put in my backpack, she waved us off from the porch, calling after me to be back well before dark.

We didn't talk as we biked down to the ocean. The wind was cool and fresh, and it blew her hair into my face, tickling me. I could smell her shampoo and I let the breeze blow it into my nose. Into my chest. As we bumped along the uneven dirt road, her body would at times brush lightly between my legs and I could feel myself respond in refreshing ways. I couldn't see her face, but I imagined that she was smiling into the wind.

What I hadn't considered was the ravine we had to cross to reach my secret rockpool. It was already a scary jump for me, who had two healthy legs, and I realised we wouldn't get across with only three legs between the two of us. I pedalled us to the little pathway leading to Shelley Point, and we left the bike on a bed of wild figs and walked down into the pebbled cove.

I showed Clara how to dig between the rounded pebbles to find the tiny shells, how to sift them clean in the splashing waves and inspect them under the dazzling sun. We ate our apples and talked about books. She told me about the little library in town, just above Clarence Drive, where she spent afternoons reading, and promised to take me. I have such a desire to read, she told me. I do too, I said.

I asked her about America.

What do you want to know? she asked with the authority of ownership.

Are you rich? My dad says all Americans are rich.

She laughed at me, her hand in front of her mouth. Her tiny teeth glinted like jewels between her fingers. Some people have bigger houses than others, she said. We're not rich.

But my mom said you live in a big white house by the beach, I told her.

She was quiet for a while. It's just a house, she said, getting up. Show me something else, Danny.

Toward the side of the cove there was a shallow rockpool that was nice enough, and I took her there. I walked behind her as we slowly made our way up the steep rocks, and my eyes kept finding her prosthetic leg, gleaming from beneath her dress. When, on a difficult

step, I gallantly held out my hand to support her, she lightly slapped it away, shaking her head. I can do it, she said.

At the edge of the pool I pointed out the different species of sea life to her. I fell over my own words in excitement, rushing to point out and name a different shell or fish. I pulled a cushion star from the clear water and placed it in her hand where it curled up slowly. She beamed at me.

I have a secret pool, I blurted out. One nobody else knows about.

She cocked her head to one side, a slight frown on her brow. Secret?

It's almost impossible to get to, I said, bragging. I might be the first person to have discovered it.

Where is it? she asked firmly.

Just over there, I pointed.

Can we go?

I, I don't think so, I said, looking at her feet.

She followed my gaze. Oh, I see. You think the cripple can't do it? There was a challenge in her tone, and my heart started racing. What if she fell? If something happened to this broken girl because I took her onto the steepest rocks, my parents would be furious. We'd never be allowed to play together again.

We shouldn't, was all I could manage.

Yes. We should. And we will. She picked herself up, standing tall above me. Show me, she said. Damn it, I thought.

We picked our way carefully over the rocky obstacles toward the ravine. She stood at its edge, her hands balled by her sides, taking it in. I knew I could do it easily and thought she would have had no problem too, had it not been for her leg. I wanted to go back. Let's go back to my house. She said no. Resolute.

The sea was angry that day, and the percussion of it hitting the land thudded into my chest. My heart beat wildly, too. I thought she would take her time, talk it through, but I didn't know her well yet. As I stood looking over the waves, the rocking movement of her body caught my eye, and as I turned back to her, she flew.

In slow motion, I saw her stretched out thin against the sky and the rocks, reaching across the abyss, her hands open and grasping at nothing. I could tell, with the intuition of someone watching a ball in motion, that she wasn't going to make it.

I think my eyes welled up instantly. It was the memory of Christopher, of what had happened to him, that struck me suddenly. I had taken a step toward the edge when she hit

the far side with a scraping clap. Her good knee had found purchase on the rocks, but the bad leg was dangling down pitifully, and she hung up to her elbows on sharp rocks.

Then I was there. I can't remember jumping over. But I was there, and I was dragging her up, scraping her roughly over the rocks. It must have hurt but she didn't make a sound. She was deathly quiet, and her face was the colour of waves breaking.

She pulled her leg up to look at her knee. It was raw and angry and little droplets of blood were forming. I was hovering and finally put my hand on her back. She looked up at me and for a moment I thought she might cry, but she squared her jaw and simply said: Damn, that hurt. Damn it. I didn't time it right.

I felt like laughing from relief. Are you all right? I asked.

Except for the scraped-up knee she only had a few scratches on her hands and elbows. She was fine. Tough as nails, I thought to myself. I gave her my hand and she let me hoist her up. She lightly balanced in my grip, before setting herself down solidly on the earth.

It's fine, she said. Really. Let's go on.

She held onto my hand as we slowly made our way to my rockpool. I knew then that it wouldn't be mine alone anymore, it would be ours.

CHAPTER FIVE

The end of the summer holidays brought with it changes so abrupt that it felt, for a while at least, as if I were sprinting through the world. The quiet pace of life in a new town, the sea and its smells, the mountains and the shade, had been a respite that had to end, as all things do.

The little school bus picked me up in front of my house every morning. I had not thought it possible that a school could be that small. Set against the mountainside, the school was a tiny, solitary building that crept gingerly out of the surrounding shrubs. There were less than a hundred children in total, and we came from all of the surrounding coastal towns. A bunch of barefoot, bony-kneed misfits.

Of course, they all knew each other. Levi was new to the school, like me. The class teacher sat us next to each other. We sat at a low desk against the window, one row from the

back. The boys behind us made fun of my protruding ears in quick, spitting whispers. They said I blocked their view of the teacher.

In the front row, Clara sat, her long blonde hair neatly tied at her neck. She looked back at me a few times on the first day, smiling, but this sent the boys behind me into a chorus of whoops and whistles that made Clara glare at them sternly. She soon stopped smiling back at me. Perhaps to save me the humiliation.

Clara was new to the school too, but she had that glowing quality to her that pulled people in and endeared her to them instantly. She had made friends with a group of four popular girls on the first day. All the kids were talking about the American girl. It was obvious that being American was a social currency in its own right. I noticed how they pointed at her leg and gossiped behind her back, too.

Levi kept to himself. He carried around a notebook filled with his drawings, and he was constantly scribbling in it. He wore glasses that kept slipping down his nose, which he would push back up onto his eyes with the palm of his right hand, a pencil stuck between two fingers.

I brought books to school. On the bus and during lunchtimes I would sit next to Levi and he would draw, and I would read. When I tried to see what it was that he was drawing he would instinctively pull up his knees and shield the notebook from my view. We didn't talk much, and as far as friendships went it wasn't much of one. But it was a consolation of sorts to have someone to sit with.

As for my own social standing, I wasn't bothered much by my new lowly station. I gathered that befriending Levi wasn't a social move that would improve my rank, but I didn't care. Levi was easy to be around.

I had been popular. I came from Johannesburg, had been in a big school where I had been part of the well-liked crowd from the start. We had had the big house, the Mercedes, the social position. My father's education and job had made sure that he was well respected. People had known about me and my family, and I had protected Christopher under that banner, too.

In my previous life I had had the kind of social standing now afforded to Clara just for being American. Everyone wanted to be from America. No one knew why, but they all wanted that prestige. But I could be largely unseen. Yes, they gossiped about me - they had heard stories of my family - and subtle bullying started almost on the first day, but I felt fine just putting my head down for once and going wherever the current pushed. That way I didn't have to talk about Christopher – about the past. It was a penance.

At home, things had sped up, too. The new decade seemed full of hot air and turbulence. Dad wasn't bringing in enough money with his fishing, and he had decided to take a job as a foreman with one of the building contractors in one of the larger towns. This meant that he left early each morning, before the bus picked me up, to go to work. The company had given him an old, beat up Isuzu pick-up, which he drove to work, stopping at some of the small townships to pick up the labourers in his work team. In Johannesburg all the labourers were black men, but here in the Cape they were all coloured men who knew the sea like they did themselves and loved to fish. Like my dad, they too couldn't make a living from fishing, so they built houses for the rich.

Dad still went fishing, but only when the fish were really on a run. Then he would go down to the slipway after work and hop onto Marcus' boat and fish into the early hours of the morning. The next day he would be dirty and stinking of fish and beer and stale cigarette smoke. Sometimes petrol and oil too, if the outboard had failed them again. Some mornings he would be too tired to get up for work and mom would have to drive to the payphone at the shop to call his boss and tell him dad's asthma was back.

His new job had made him quiet and sombre, and he would often fly off in a rage when my mom would nag at him about something that needed fixing in the house. Sometimes they would fight about money, and one evening I quietly got up and crept into the kitchen holding my piggybank in both hands, setting it down on the dining room table between them.

You can have mine, I said. I don't mind.

They both looked at me in the half-light of the gas lanterns, and my mother threw her hands into the air as if to say to my dad: See? See what you're doing?

She kept telling dad that he should go to the city and see about a job at one of the English papers, but he said if he couldn't write about the truth in his own language he would be lying if he tried to write about the truth in a foreign language.

Mom said it wasn't a foreign language to him because she had been English the day they got married and it hadn't bothered him then so why should it bother him now.

It started bothering me when you wouldn't take my name, he would tell her. Then it would be a day or two before they spoke to each other again.

I saw Christopher every day after school, and we played his games. Then I left him there, to play by himself, and Clara would come, or I would go to her, and that was really all that mattered.

On that first day at the rockpool, when we had made our way back home, Clara and I had found an area that wasn't as steep, where she could skid down into the gorge on her backside and make the climb up the other end. When we got home, she lied to everyone and told them she had slipped and fell on the gravel. It was clear she intended the rockpool to be our secret.

Clara's dad had come to our house one day with a big, charcoal coloured mountain bike. It was a Raleigh, and everybody wanted a Raleigh back then. He said it had belonged to someone at his office who didn't want it anymore and that he thought it would make lifting Clara about with me easier. He showed me how good the brakes worked and how to use the gears.

My dad wasn't happy about the new bike. He said it was obviously brand new, and that Clara's dad shouldn't be giving me expensive gifts. Mom tried her best to calm him down. She said it was no big deal. I stood listening with big ears, scared that I might lose the bike, and that my dad might say something bad to Clara's dad.

Maybe he should just pay Daniel a fee for driving Miss Daisy around all day, dad said to mom.

Stop it, she said. They're friends and they're good for each other. Don't you spoil this.

We're not beggars, my dad said.

Not yet, mom told him. Not yet.

I got to keep the bike. It was beautiful and it flew. Its chain sang when I pushed the bike hard against the wind, working the gears to get as much speed out of it as possible. I carried the bike into the house every evening even though I knew this angered my dad. It stood against the wall in my room. Every night for the first few weeks I would fight the shadows when I lay in bed, just looking at its flawless frame. It was a symbol of growing up, of being wild and free and able to go where I wanted to go. With Clara perched on the rail, her hair streaming back into my face.

On a warm afternoon, it must have been sometime in late February, I cycled to Clara's to pick her up and go with her to the town library. As was often the case, their front door stood open to allow the breeze to blow through the house. I felt welcome in their house by then and greeted their maid, Maria, as I walked past the kitchen door and up the steps to Clara's room. Maria was one of only a few black women working in the homes of the whites in the area, and she lived in a small, round cottage with a thatched roof, set at the back of the main house. Just a tiny room with her bed and a plastic basin. Some shelves. Some belongings. The outhouse was situated back into the milkwoods. Clara said that Maria had

told her that she didn't trust the coloured men, that they weren't her people. I found that strange as my dad fished and worked with a lot of coloured men and they all seemed nice to me.

Clara's room was immediately to the left of the landing, and her big sash-windows had a view that peaked over the surrounding grass-clad dunes and showed a sliver of blue ocean beyond the breakers.

Her door was slightly ajar, and I quietly peeked around it. She was sitting on her bed, crying. In her hands she held a photo which I couldn't make out.

Clara, I said softly.

She looked up, not really startled. Her eyes were a pinkish-red from crying. She used the back of her hand to wipe her tears away, diverting her face from me.

Is everything ok?

She looked back at me. I'm fine, Danny.

What are you looking at? I asked. I squeezed past the door, into her room. There was a light breeze blowing out her curtains, and her room and the whole house seemed very quiet, save for the muted sounds of Maria cleaning downstairs.

For a moment she covered the photo in her hands, looking down at her lap. I felt bad for intruding. I was hoping that I wasn't the source of her tears.

She handed me the photo. It was slightly blurred, and at first, I couldn't make out what I was supposed to see. Then the shapes realigned themselves. The picture was of a pair of brown legs stretched out on a bed, one drawn slightly under the other. It looked like the kind of picture one took by accident. The kind you would normally throw out when you receive the prints back from the lab. A mistake.

Daddy gave me a camera for my sixth birthday, Clara said. Before the accident. I used to love playing with it. Then after the accident I kind of forgot. She took the photo back and looked at it.

Are those your legs, from before? I asked.

She nodded, sniffing. I found two film rolls the other day while unpacking the last boxes and gave then to daddy to develop. I must have taken the picture by mistake because I can't remember it. She was quiet for a while, then: I'd forgotten what they looked like. Both of them. Together.

Clara was sitting on the edge of her bed, her good leg stretched out straight before her. I noticed that she had taken her prosthetic off. It was lying on the floor, discarded. The stump of her leg was round and smooth and angry, just below the knee.

I can come back tomorrow, if you like.

She looked up at me with a pained expression. No, stay. I don't want to be alone. Can we go to the rockpool?

Sure, I said, relieved that she wanted me there. She was always so tough; I was uncertain how to act amidst this new vulnerability. You want to go now?

She nodded. Can you hand me my leg, please?

I picked up her leg and gave it to her. I had never even touched her prosthetic before, and it was such an intimate moment that I thought then that we would be friends forever.

She put the photo in her shirt pocket and started to fasten the leg. It was such a mechanical act that I looked away.

Mommy is sleeping, she said. I'll just go tell Maria we're heading out.

I pedalled the bike away from the beach road, heading east toward Shelley Point and our rockpool, but as we came around Bass Lake, I thought of something. I took a left fork, heading up to Clarence Drive, toward my house.

Where are we going? Clara yelled over the wind.

I want to show you something, I answered.

Mom had gone into town with dad that morning in order to do some grocery shopping, so I knew we would be alone until late in the afternoon. The photo Clara had shared with me had given me an idea. I wanted to share something personal with Clara too.

We left the bike in the driveway and went in through the back door. The house was dark and quiet. With the doors closed it smelt musty. I was vaguely conscious of how different it was to Clara's house.

I led her into my parents' bedroom. The bed was unmade and there was a strong smell of my dad lingering in the room. On the periphery of this there was a faint hint of my mother's perfume. We were both quiet, all of a sudden respectful of the adult space we were inhabiting - aware of the intimate smell of the bed and the ruffled covers that showed where they had slept. I started looking around the room and got down on all fours to look under the bed.

What are you doing? Clara whispered.

Looking for this, I said, dragging an old shoebox from under the bed. Old photos, I told her as I opened the box. Of Christopher. I'm not allowed to look at these. They don't even realise that I know about them.

The box held a bunch of letters, tied up with some string. There were birthday cards too, with Christopher's name on them. In the bottom of the box I found a bunch of photos. They were all of Christopher.

I hadn't seen his face in a long time. Suddenly, there he was, young and fresh and always smiling. A mouth full of sharp teeth. A thick dash of blonde-brown hair. My dad's blue eyes. I could feel him in the room with us, knew he was there, at the edges of my mind, wanting to join Clara and me in this exciting new game.

I picked up every photo individually, looked at it and then passed it on to Clara. She said nothing as she looked at each in turn. The final photo was a picture of my little brother running past the lens, mouth open, laughing. He was shirtless, his little torso weirdly muscled as he pumped his arms to go faster. The image was blurred in motion, giving it a ghostly quality, as if he was slipping out of the photo. He had always been running, never standing still. Always on the move.

I looked at Clara as I handed her the last picture. She looked at it a long time, a slight smile on her lips. She reached into her pocket and took out the photo of her two brown, healthy legs. She put them together, side by side. We've both lost something important, she whispered.

We packed the box away, making sure everything was exactly as it had been. I cycled us down to the water, and we made it through the gorge without getting wet. By then we had mastered the route to the rockpool, and Clara only took my hand when we went through the gorge. It was the highlight of each visit.

We sat on the amphitheatre-like seats of the rockpool, basking in the sun like puffadders. The sea was quiet. It was an easy summer's day. I could hear the cicadas sounding away among the milkwoods. I felt a profound connection to Clara after showing her the photos of Christopher. He kept lingering in my mind. He kept wanting to play with us.

I had told her the story of the day that Christopher had died, some time before we started at the new school. I told it the same way my parents told it to everybody. The clean version. How he had found my dad's old air rifle in the closet. The one that dad used to shoot the starlings that nested under the eaves of the old house in Johannesburg. How Christopher had somehow managed to cock it. Such a strong little boy. How he must have dropped it. How the old trigger must have released the catch when the butt hit the floor, firing the little lead pellet into his chest. Just so, at just the right angle, that it had passed between two of his ribs and entered his tiny heart. A freak accident, as the newspapers called it.

And then she had told me how she had lost her leg. How she had been playing in the driveway of their house in a small town in the wild state of Montana. Two dolls, a plastic pram. She was sitting on the warm concrete of the driveway. They had a big American lawn in front of their house, but the pram rode better on the concrete. The neighbours' kids were kicking a ball next door. They were loud and it bothered her. Her dad had been in a hurry. When the Chevrolet's engine started, she froze, uncertain. Then she screamed as the car rolled one heavy wheel over her foot. The neighbours' boys came running, yelling. Then the hospital, where the doctor had cut it off. She laughed at the sound of the word amputate.

All of these things we told each other at the rockpool. Nobody could hear us or bother us there. It was a holy place. The rocky ledge on which we sat was our church pew. The sea was our God. Perhaps talking to each other was our own form of the confessional.

What is a confessional? I had asked Clara once.

It's where you confess your sins. Your darkest bad things. Then the priest blesses you and you are free. Free from sin.

I had thought that that sounded very nice. To be free of sin. But Christopher haunted me. He was like a heavy shadow that dragged behind me yet was an unshakeable part of me. I sometimes wondered whether my own shadow hadn't fled me and was now replaced by that of Christopher. Like a ball and chain. But when I checked, the shadow was my own. It moved when I moved. It did what I did.

The confines of that rockpool were an insulator from the world, and within it our emotional understanding of one another grew at a hastened pace. It was as if time was concentrated. It was life, condensed. The pure natural grandeur of the rocks and the sea, with the looming mountains always on friendly overwatch, made us feel a deep contentment in the moment. Nature provided us with a sense of safety that comes from understanding your place in your natural surroundings. In a sense, we were liberated.

Tell me about your brother, she said after a long silence. What was he like? Do you miss him?

I thought about the photo of him running. And I started telling her about Christopher. I told her about his inability to sit still. His smile, his crazy laughter. Him always hugging me when we parted ways in the school hallway, me to my class in the big school, him on his way to the preschool wing. How I protected him even though, for a five-year-old, he was unusually quick with his tiny fists. How he was always running, moving through life at speed, as if it were a constant race. As if he would run out of time if he didn't move fast

enough. I told her how much I had loved him, even though we bickered and fought every other day. As brothers do, my dad would say. I told her how much I love him still.

I hadn't realised that tears had wetted my eyes. I hadn't realised that Clara's hand was resting on mine, warm and cool at the same time. She was looking at me with such concern that I felt shamed at telling her my sad story. I think that was when I realised that I loved her.

I wanted to confess to her. I wanted to bind her to me with another secret, shared only by us.

I see him every day, I told her.

She looked at me, a small frown creasing at the corners of her eyes and across her forehead.

He's here now.

What do mean? she asked. She looked around, over her shoulder, and back at me. You mean you imagine him? Like an imaginary friend?

Not exactly like that. I squirmed around a bit. I was becoming aware of just how strange this sounded aloud. What if she thought I was mad?

So, like a ghost then? Her eyes wide.

No. No. I know it's not him. Not the real him. I know that. But it's also like… Like I know I'm not imagining it either. I can see him, he's really there. His face is blurred, but I can see him.

What does he say? Her hand was still on mine.

I raised my shoulders, pursed my lips. He doesn't say anything. He's just there. He just wants to play.

Clara let go of my hand and patted me on the shoulder. So, like an imaginary friend then, she said with confidence. I've always wanted an imaginary friend. Where is he now?

I pointed to the left of us, to some rocks that formed a set of steps. He's hopping up and down those steps, I said. Up and down. Up and down.

Not saying anything?

Nope. He never says anything.

Clara looked at the rocks, then at me: Can he hear me? Can I speak to him? Will he see me?

I wasn't sure. Christopher, or my visions of him, had never interacted with anyone except me, as far as I could remember. I, I don't know, I said.

Can I try? Clara asked. She seemed almost excited.

All right, I said. I was watching him, still skipping up and down the rocky steps.

Hello Christopher, Clara said in a soft voice, also looking toward the steps. I'm Clara.

After a while she looked at me, questioningly. I raised my shoulders. Nothing. He was still playing happily by himself.

Would it be OK if I were your friend too? I'd like to play with you. Then you and I and Danny can all be best friends.

I was starting to become uncomfortable. I wanted to share my secrets with her, but having Clara talk into the wind to my dead brother, the absurdity of what she was doing, was making me cringe.

Clara was smiling now. It was a game to her, I realised. Just a game. I tried to take her arm, to get up and end this charade.

She shooed me away. Then she said: Chrissy, will you by my friend too?

And then he was there. Right in front of her, smiling at her and nodding. He was looking right at her. She must have seen my face change, because she beamed at me, her eyes bright. You see? She said. Now we can all be friends.

And that's how we became three. What started as a game for Clara soon developed into a real imaginary friendship for her. For the first time my visions of Christopher responded to someone else. When she said something to him, I could see him interact with her. I became their interpreter, and the strange, uncomfortable game soon became a reality to us. To all three of us. She would call him, and there he would be. She would tell him things, tell him about a new game, and then she would look at me and I would tell her what I see. I would paint him to her in words.

Clara and I started holding hands when we were at the rockpool, like a grown couple, and we looked after Christopher, whom she called Chrissy, like a pair of fawning parents.

CHAPTER SIX

The winter that year blew in suddenly on the back of enormous cloudbanks and it was very wet and cold. The rain by the coast was driven sideways in sleets by the howling wind, and it cut through any clothes and stung your face.

Umbrellas were useless in those winds, and I remember one afternoon getting out of the Beetle at the shop and being unable to close the door against the force of it. It had the

power to push you off your feet, and it was not uncommon to see people leaning against it at impossible angles when they walked.

On days when the wind came blasting from the northwest, seeming to pick up speed down the slopes of the mountains, I had to stay indoors and wait it out. Trying to pedal the bike against the gale was a comic effort of balancing it on one spot. I would sit in my room and read, the sound of the furious waves pounding the land acting like a metronome keeping rhythm on the page.

Some days I would sit by the tiny round window overlooking the porch and look at the distant giant rollers, bigger than houses, lurching in and crashing up against the shore, big bright white plumes of spray and angry foam shooting up into the sky to impossible heights, followed by loud cannon booms that gripped your chest.

I missed the thunderstorms of the Johannesburg summers and the dry, clean cold of its winters, but the strangeness of winter in the Cape kept me enthralled for much of that first wet season.

The rains had made the construction sites my father worked on turn to muddy pools, and he mostly came home after dark wet, covered in mud and often with ash-grey droplets of hardened cement caking his eyelashes like some ghoulish mascara.

Dad would leave his mud caked water boots next to the back door, peel off his jacket and slump into his seat next to the tiny fireplace and pop the top off his first beer with calloused hands. After a couple of beers, he would switch to whiskey and become more silent and despondent. We weren't long into that first winter when dad quit his job and didn't come home for a couple of days.

Mom said he had gone on a bender with uncle Lucas and that I shouldn't worry. I wasn't sure then what she meant by a bender. It's what he does to forget about the bush, she told me. I knew the bush meant Angola. After a couple of days uncle Lucas' white BMW pulled into our driveway and my dad got out. He seemed happy as he waved goodbye to his brother, then he turned and slowly looked up into my mother's face. She was standing outside by the backdoor and I was frozen in place halfway between them, unsure if I should run to him or not.

Hey big man, he said then, and motioned for me to come to him. I threw one look at mom who still stood unmoved, her arms crossed, then threw my head down and ran to him. The sun had broken through the clouds that morning and his jacket felt warm and clean when I hugged him.

He held onto me a little longer than usual, even after I had loosened my grip on his back, and then he pulled something from inside his jacket and gave it to me.

Look what your dad got you, he said. Do you like it? He stood up and stepped back, watching me. It was a portable cassette player. A Walkman. Blue with black headphones. I couldn't believe it.

It's great, dad, I said. Thanks.

It's a pleasure my boy, he said as he walked past me toward my mother.

As he got close to her, she turned around and went into the house. He followed her, leaving me alone outside. I went and sat on a log next to the still wet firepit and opened the Walkman's cover to see if there was a tape inside. It was empty.

I sat outside for a while longer, hoping that my parents wouldn't fight and also enjoying the heat of the sun on my face. I put the earphones on and held the blue Walkman in my hands and pretended to listen to a song, my eyes closed in mock concentration.

When I finally went in, the house was quiet and the door to my parents' room was closed. I tiptoed to the door and stood listening. I could hear slight movements and the whisper of their bedsheets shifting, but they weren't fighting, and I knew that the closed door and the hushed sounds were good signs.

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When the weather would let up enough, I would go to Clara and we would walk on the beach and pick up pieces of polished glass that the storms had washed up. Most were brown or green, like the bottles that held beer. Their edges had been sanded smooth by the churning sea, and we hoarded them like treasures.

We hollowed out a section of milkwood brush at the back of a windswept dune to build a fort, and we spent hours in there, hiding from the world. Chrissy was our constant companion, and his presence bound Clara and I together with a common purpose.

The cold weather seemed to affect her leg, and she was often grimacing in pain. What was strange was that she would rub her prosthetic leg when she was sore, and not the stump where I imagined the pain to be.

They say I have a phantom limb, she said one day.

We were sitting in the fort. It was cloudy and windy outside. The dune and the milkwood branches kept us safe from the wind.

A ghost? I asked, thinking she was joking.

She hesitated for a while. Do you remember when you explained Chrissy to me the first time at the rockpool? You said you knew he wasn't really there, but that he was also not like a ghost. That's sort of what my leg feels like.

Clara stretched out both her legs in front of her, the toes of her good leg digging into the sand. When my leg is hurting, she said, it hurts where the leg used to be.

I looked at the steel of her prosthetic leg. But it can't feel, I said. It's not a real leg. It needs skin and blood and stuff to feel.

She looked ready to change the subject. It's difficult to explain, she finally said. I can feel the leg, as if it's still there. If I take off my prosthetic, I can still feel the old leg, as if I never lost it.

I was silent, just looking at her and listening. We were good at being silent together.

The doctors call it a phantom limb because it is like a ghost. Your mind tells you it's there when it isn't. And it hurts as if it's really there. She smoothed her dress out over her legs, then looked at me. Why can we feel pain that we cannot even see?

I don't know, I said. Sometimes I cry because of Christopher and my chest closes and I can't breathe, and it really hurts. Do you think I have a phantom limb too?

Don't be silly, she said. You still have all your limbs.

But not my brother, I thought to myself.

We had a freedom then that was unlike anything you would find today. If the weather was good, we would be at the rockpool, or in the fort at the beach. If it was bad, we would beg one of our parents to drop us off at the library.

It was a small building in the centre of town, hiding among the fynbos. We would sit, cross-legged, on the carpet in the children's reading corner, each with a book in hand. We were almost always the only people there, and the grey-haired librarian let us whisper softly about the books we were reading while she sipped her tea at her desk and stared out of the window.

There was a decent collection of Enid Blyton books on the shelves, and we were working our way through the *Famous Five* series. It was about four kids and a dog that got into all kinds of trouble and went on wonderful adventures. Their parents packed big lunches for them and on some days, we would work up such an appetite reading about the sausages and bread and cheeses, that we would rush to Clara's house to ask Maria to make us a similar lunch. It had to be at Clara's house because we seldom had ham or cheese in ours.

And then we would take our lunch to the fort, or sit in Clara's room, and talk about the current adventures we were reading about. What amazed us was how happy the kids seemed, and how they found the most amazing things to do in every book. They even had an island that they went to in some of the books. Our own adventures started to resemble those in the books, and soon we were searching for hidden caves and lost treasures among the rocks along the coast.

Some days we would see my dad and uncle Lucas driving around town or spot them off the rocks close to our house, both men wrapped up like seals in black wetsuits. Mom had said that dad was working for uncle Lucas now and that we were good for money, but she seemed anxious and they fought a lot.

Dad had to take uncle Lucas' truck into the city once every week, and he normally made the drive after the sun had set and only came back the next morning. Mom said he was doing deliveries. Sometimes, when dad was gone, uncle Lucas would come over for dinner and stay late into the night. It was strange, lying in bed and hearing his voice and mom's laughter in the space where my dad should have been.

Clara's dad had also begun to take an interest in my dad, and he asked me what it was my dad was doing now that he wasn't a builder anymore. I said I wasn't sure and that they fished a lot, but Clara's dad just looked at me with his ever-present smile.

Midway through the winter I had begun to feel at home in the new town. I had some friends, Clara and Levi being the best ones, although Levi wasn't allowed to come out and play with me and Clara because he was a Jehovah's Witness and neither me nor Clara even went to church. Except for the rockpool, of course, but apparently that didn't count.

One Friday, mom had come down with a bad fever and the next day dad had to stay at home to care for her, so uncle Lucas had to drive the truck into Cape Town himself to do the deliveries. He swung by the house in the big pickup to check on my mom. He seemed very concerned and wanted to know whether he should bring something back for her.

Maybe the boy should come with me, he told my father. It's just one stop. We don't have to stay over.

No, dad said. I don't think Danny would like to be holed up in the truck all day.

I'll go with uncle Lucas, dad, I said quickly. I was excited to see the city. Please dad.

Dad was looking stressed, then he must have thought it would be easier to care for just one person, so he nodded and said: OK Lucas, take him. But you come straight back. A boy has no business being out there all night.

The sun was just setting as we got into the truck. All set, Danman?

All set, I answered, my heart fluttering slightly with the excitement of leaving town and driving into the night.

We drove through town, west on Clarence Drive, and the sun was setting low over the sea and into our eyes as we took the mountain pass toward the city. The road was narrow and worn down to gravel in places, and it coiled tightly against the flank of the mountains. On the left it dropped away into the ocean.

Uncle Lucas was lighting a new cigarette with the tip of the one he had just smoked. He liked Lucky Strikes. It's because they're toasted, he said. Because the road had so many hair-pin turns, we wound slowly along it, sometimes curling back onto ourselves like the body of a snake.

Uncle Lucas asked about school and about mom's fever. How's your mother been doing lately, except for the fever?

She's fine, I said.

Just fine? He looked at me with the cigarette stuck between his teeth.

She's herself, I said. She's happy.

Good, he said. That's good.

We rode on in silence for a while. The sun had dipped below the ocean's edge, and the truck's lights now started to show the way.

So, what's with you and the American girl, heh? I see you two always biking here and there. Pretty thing.

His questions started to make me uncomfortable, and I said nothing. The cab was hot from the blower and the air was heavy and bitter from the cigarette smoke.

Well? Answer your uncle.

She's just a friend, I said. I told him we rode around on the bike because she was afraid to go on her own bicycle. She's nice.

I bet, he laughed. You kissing her?

No. I had my hands between my legs and was squirming in the seat.

He laughed a deep laugh that turned into a dry, heaving cough. You should kiss her, he told me. Pretty thing like that. You know what they say about American girls.

What do they say? I asked.

He looked over at me with wet eyes. Just kiss the fucking girly, Danman. Don't let that iron leg get in your way. He laughed again and leaned forward to turn up the radio.

I slipped lower into the seat. The rolling of the suspension around the bends was making me nauseous and sleepy at the same time. I could imagine the wind and the sea outside, but inside the truck it was warm.

When I woke up it was cold and quiet in the truck. My heart skipped a beat and for a moment I had no idea where I was. Then I heard uncle Lucas' voice come from somewhere outside. It was muted, and he was speaking in that low voice that men reserve for speaking in the early morning hours.

There's forty in the bag, he was saying. You've kept me waiting all fucking night. I won't sit here parked and waiting for you next time.

There was a moment's silence, then someone else asked: Who's the kid?

None of your business, uncle Lucas replied.

Someone else was crouching behind the truck, and I tried to see out of the windows, but they were fogged up and it was too dark outside, and I couldn't make anything out. I could hear shoes shuffling over the ground and the rustle of a plastic bag.

Next time be here when I say, I heard uncle Lucas growl.

The truck's door opened, uncle Lucas got in and slammed it shut behind him. A waft of cold air swept into the cab, and I could smell the sea and dead, rotting fish.

Where are we? I asked as he started the motor. The lights shot into the dark and I could see containers stacked three high, towering above us.

We're at the harbour. We should have been out of here a long time ago.

Who were you talking to outside?

A client, he said as we pulled away.

He worked the gears and drove us through piles of containers that looked like office blocks. It was eerily quiet and very dark. We got onto a good tar road and then there were a few streetlights, then the world lit up.

Cape Town City, I said, awed. Huge skyscrapers rose around us and there were lights everywhere. I craned my neck at an angle to the window in order to look up at the tall buildings. Cars started passing us.

We were on a highway, climbing up against the sides of the mountain. Huge buildings sat to our right. What are those buildings? I asked. They sat so high up against the sky that they looked almost suspended in the night.

That's the hospital, and the other one behind it is the university, he said.

Which way are we going now? I asked.

South. We'll get home soon.

The high buildings got lower and gave way to houses. I stared into their driveways and yards and tried to imagine what it might be like to live in a house like that. Eventually we were out of the city and away from the houses and the moon was out and full and hung over the ocean like a glowing pendant.

Open the cubby hole, Danman. There's a bottle in there.

I reached forward and struggled with the latch. It opened and I reached in and scratched around until my hand felt the smooth glass and I pulled it out and handed it to my uncle.

Always have a half-jack in the car, he said, as he twisted off the cap and put the bottle to his lips. He took a mouthful of the amber stuff and pursed his lips as he swallowed.

Who were those men at the harbour? I asked him again.

Bloody Greeks, Uncle Lucas said, as if that explained everything.

Is that where my dad goes when he does deliveries?

Uncle Lucas lowered the bottle before he took the next sip and looked at me thoughtfully. Sometimes, he said. We have a lot of clients.

What do you deliver?

He took that drink then. Spare parts, he said. Now Danman, don't you run around being a brag about this trip with your friends. Especially not to that American missy. You hear me?

Sure, I said, and turned to look out of the window.

We passed two more towns that were lit up before I recognised the mountain pass road by its twists and turns, and knew we were almost home.

We were just about to enter the western edge of Betty's Bay when my eye saw something swirl ahead of us in the headlights, and I cried out in a high-pitched sound. Uncle Lucas swerved the truck to the right but there was a loud thump, a scratch and then the sound of tyres screeching as we pulled to a stop in the middle of the road. When we hit it, I could briefly see something flutter by my window, flapping like the wings of an owl.

Jesus fucking Christ. You OK Daniel?

I, I think so. I looked down at my arms, but it was too dark to see anything. Uncle Lucas opened his door and got out. I opened my door, but he told me in a very steady voice to stay inside. I closed it again.

The headlights of the truck were shining across the road in front of us, and ahead everything looked quiet and calm. The road was wet with dew. I turned in my seat and looked back. I could see uncle Lucas in the red glow of the taillights. He was standing at the edge of

the road, his hands on his hips, looking into the brush. The amber light reminded me of blood, and I sat frozen, not knowing what to do.

Then he turned and walked back to the truck slowly. He got in, closed the door behind him and just sat for a long time. Outside it was deathly quiet. I wanted to go home and hug my mother. I wanted the night to end.

What did we hit? I asked.

Just a buck.

But it was too big for a buck, I said, my voice pleading.

It's a buck, damnit. We've got to go.

Is it dead?

I think so. I'll come back with a light and check.

We drove home fast, the engine roaring through the dark. My heart was still beating fast when we turned left off Clarence drive and crept up our driveway. The house was dark. We got out and it was very cold. I started shivering. My uncle tried the handle on the backdoor, and it opened with a wooden creak. He fumbled in the breast pocket of his jacket and took out his lighter. He flicked it once and it flamed up, lighting the small kitchen.

My dad's voice came from the hallway: Where have you been? It's almost morning.

The Greek was late, my uncle said, lifting the flame in his hand higher to see my dad better.

What happened?

Can we get some proper light? It's like talking to a ghost.

My dad moved into the kitchen, opened a drawer and pulled out a packet of matches. He went to the gas lantern on the wall, turned the knob until there was a faint hiss of gas, then struck the match and brought it to the gasbag. It lit red with a slight pop. He turned the knob more and the bag puffed and glowed white. Close the door, he told my uncle.

Uncle Lucas closed the backdoor, then motioned to me. The boy should go to bed. He's had a long night.

My dad was crouched by the fireplace, rousing the embers out of their bed of ash, adding kindling and blowing a flame to life. When he was done, he stood up and looked at me. Go to bed, Danny. It's late.

I went to my room, the light from the kitchen just enough for me to find my way. I closed the door of my room loud enough for them to hear it shut, waited a few seconds, then opened it softly so that a thin sliver of light fell in through the door and I could hear the sounds of their chairs scraping. I heard ice fall into glasses. Clink, then again, clink.

What happened? my dad asked again.

Uncle Lucas sighed. We've got a problem.

Tell me.

I could hear the ice against their glasses as they drank.

The Greek was late, and I had to wait for him. Bastard. Danman slept in the truck. He's fine, by the way.

Fine? He looks like he's seen a ghost.

Just now, as we got into town, we hit something.

What? my dad asked. Did Danny see?

He saw something.

They were quiet for a short while, then my dad said softly: Hold on.

My door clicked shut, and I felt embarrassed for trying to fool my dad. He had known I would try to listen to them speak.

Their voices were muted, and I couldn't hear them clearly anymore. I strained as hard as I could, but the sounds just floated by like clouds in a high wind, shapeless and hollow.

The backdoor opened, then closed, and I couldn't hear them any longer. I thought of getting up and listening by the door but thought it better not to risk them knowing that I had heard what they had just said.

I pulled the blanket over my head, and the heat and the weight of the long night were dragging me to sleep. I wanted to forget about it all. Close my eyes and wake up and realise I had only dreamt it.

—

When I woke up it was light in my room. It smelt of coffee and smoke, and the familiar sounds of the house and my parents in it coaxed me slowly toward reality. I could hear birds outside, and I could also hear, by the lack of wind, that it would be a clear day. Perhaps not bright, but clear and fresh.

Their voices were soft and cautious and as I woke, I heard them better. Then I picked up on uncle Lucas' voice, low and gravelly, and the night before weighed down onto me and pressed me firmly into my mattress.

I needed to get up and relieve myself. My bladder was painfully bloated. I slowly pulled the blanket away, then stopped. I didn't want to get up, didn't want the day to start. I felt uncertain of what it might hold.

My door stood open. Mom must have come to check on me.

It's not right, I could hear my mom say.

We didn't have a choice, said uncle Lucas. With the boy there and all… We'd have put everyone at risk. For what? Some drunk that nobody will miss.

I just don't know how we could live with this hanging over our heads. She sounded as if she were about to cry.

We've hidden things before, dad said. What's done is done. No point in ruining us all. It was an accident. And he's probably fine, anyhow.

They were silent for a while. My legs were restless under the blanket and I needed to pee.

You'll be surprised how soon you'll move on from this, uncle Lucas said. We'll wake up one day and wonder what all the fuss was about.

I was about to wet my bed, and I hadn't done that in years, so I got up and slipped as quietly as possible out of my room and into the bathroom. I pulled down my trousers and tried to let the water flow softly against the bowl, but the pressure of clenching down on it hurt and I let go and a jet of warm urine hit the bowl loudly.

Danny? It was my mother.

I finished and pulled up my pants. Mom?

Come in here, my boy.

They were quiet as I walked into the kitchen. The fire was still going. The top of the stable door was open, and the light brightened the kitchen. My dad was leaning against the sink, his hands behind him on the countertop. Mom was sitting at the table with uncle Lucas. They were all smoking, and the light from the door caught onto the rolling smoke and made it look like white duvet covers blowing on a line.

How'd you sleep, Daniel? my father asked.

Fine, I guess. What time is it?

Mom looked at her watch and was about to tell me when dad said: I heard you guys knocked into something last night. You must have gotten a fright, eh?

They were all looking at me and I could feel my eyes welling up and I knew that if I cried, I would give myself away. I swallowed hard. It was just a buck, I said. Uncle Lucas checked.

They graze too close to the road in the evenings, dad said. I'm sorry you had to see that.

I felt like saying something, but didn't know what, so I just kept silent and willed the tears away. I was looking at my feet. Did it die?

We checked and there was nothing there. It probably ran off.

Come, sit, mom said. I'll fry some eggs for you. You must be starving.

I was hungry, I realised. I pulled out a chair and sat down. There were empty whiskey glasses on the table among the coffee mugs. The ashtray was full and leaking cigarette butts onto the table. Mom was hiding her flu well but there was a wild look to her – her hair was untidy, and her dressing gown was creased. She looked sad.

Uncle Lucas got up. He looked at my mom for a while. You look after yourself, now. Then he picked up his cigarettes and went out of the backdoor. My dad followed him out. Mom got up and took the big cast iron pan from its hook. While she had her back to me, I got up. I wanted to see what the truck looked like in the light. But my uncle wasn't driving the truck. He pulled away in the white BMW.

I went back to the table and sat down. Dad came back in, walked over to me and put his hand on my head, combing my hair flat with his fingers. He sighed. When you're done with your eggs, we'll take a walk, he said. There's a cave up in the mountain that I've been wanting to show you. He looked at my mom. Will you be OK if we go out? he asked her.

She turned, looked at me, and said: Sure. You two have fun.

I could see she had been crying over the frying pan.

—

The sun was up and chasing fast paced clouds, and the rest of the world was covered in a wet layer of moisture. Giant spiderwebs spanned between the protea plants, and they showed clear with the droplets caught on them. There was the thick, aromatic smell of fynbos and wet earth, and each crease of the mountain held a tea-coloured stream racing down toward the sea below.

My father was ahead by a couple of steps, and he went steadily up the side of the mountain, zigzagging to make it easier for our feet to find purchase on the steep sections. He looked over his shoulder to see how I was doing often but didn't say anything as we climbed.

My legs were hurting but I kept going up, leaning into the mountain. I put my head down and concentrated on every step, not wanting to slow us down.

My feet were wet through my boots, and my trousers were soaked too. My hands were numb from the cold, but the exertion kept me breathing hard, and I could feel trickles of sweat under my armpits.

I think that was his plan. He wanted to drive me hard up that mountain, to tire my body and slow my thoughts down to a slow current, giving my mind time to work without knowing it. By the time we reached the rocky cliff edges of the upper mountain area, I had forgotten all about the previous night.

We sat down and took in the view. I had not realised that we had climbed so high, so quickly. Below us stretched the town and the sea. Every movement far below happened in slow motion. It was quiet and we were truly alone. I felt like hugging my dad but knew that it would spoil the moment, so I sat down on a cold rock next to him, my legs spread wide like his.

What do you see, my boy?

Down there? I don't know. Everything is tiny, I guess.

He passed his water bottle to me and I took a sip as he lit a cigarette.

Everything is small and moves slower once you gain some perspective, he said, taking back the bottle from me and screwing on the cap. People have been climbing mountains for as long as there have been people and mountains, Danny. Why do you think that is?

I thought for a while. Because it's good exercise, I said.

No, he said, laughing. We climb them because they're there. Mallory said that, and he saw some things in his time.

I had no idea who Mallory was but made a mental note of the name to look it up when I went back to the library again.

We climb mountains to get to see ourselves from above. Do you understand?

I think so, I said.

One day I'll take you to Tanzania and show you the roof of Africa, he said, staring into the distance. Come on then, we should go before we get stiff. The cave is just over this first cliff, there's a ledge to the right of it where we can get up.

We made our way along the cliff face, to where a tangle of brush grew in a gully leading at an angle up the rocks. We slowly climbed through it, getting our hair wet as every branch rained droplets down on us as we passed. We came out on top of the first cliff section,

on a slight rocky step, and this became a narrow ledge that hugged the sheer rocks above us. We followed it slowly, and then we were in the cave.

It was as wide as a truck, and higher than my dad's head, but not very deep. The walls and ceiling were blackened by soot.

Wow, I said. This place is amazing, dad.

My dad stood in the mouth of the cave, framed by light, his face in dark shadow. He looked like a stranger for a moment, but I could recognise him by his wide shoulders and the way his hands were resting on his hips. Although I couldn't make out his features, I knew the look that he would have on his face.

I explored the cave, but we hadn't brought a torch and it was difficult to see much as the sun was behind the mountains. It was rounded and tapered down to a dead end. Its bottom was sandy and dry.

We sat in the mouth of the cave. I ate a sandwich that we had packed, and my dad was having a smoke. He told me about the Khoisan people who had lived in these caves thousands of years before the first houses were even built. He said that if I dug around in the sand, I might still find some shells brought into the cave by them.

What happened to them?

We happened, my dad said. When the Europeans came to these shores, they upset the balance. We brought new disease with us, which killed most of the Khoisan population in the area. And when they were gone, the runaway slaves from the Cape sought refuge here. Uncle Lucas will tell you the stories of the whalers who used to sleep in this cave to be lookouts.

Can we sleep here sometime?

I think there's too many ghosts here, my boy, dad said, winking at me. Best to let them have some peace and quiet up here. You'll keep it our secret, right?

I nodded yes, already wondering how I will manage to keep it a secret from Clara.

We sat in silence for a while, and I was trying to think of something to say to keep the conversation going. I looked over at him and he was smiling at me as if he knew what I was thinking.

You see, Danny, people are neither good nor bad when they start out in this world. They're like nature, acting because of forces they have no idea exist. Some good people do bad things, and some bad people even do good things. At the end of the day we must all live with ourselves, and that's all that really matters.

He stood up and held out his hand to me. Come on, down is a longer way than up.

On our way down my legs started to tremble and my dad held me by the shoulder on the slippery descent. We were in the shadow of the mountain again, and my wet clothes and feet were making me miserable. Bright blue and green sunbirds flew ahead of us through the protea bushes, and a couple of klipspringers stared at us as we made our way down the slope, their dainty hooves cleverly finding purchase on even the most unstable areas.

Mom ran me a hot bath at home, and my toes and fingers stung as if pricked by glass as the water heated me up and returned my circulation. I realised that I hadn't thought much of the night in the truck with uncle Lucas, and I was thankful that my dad had taken me up the mountain to get some perspective. I hadn't even seen Christopher once, either.

I floated in the tub and thought about the first people who had lived in the cave, eating fish and using shells as tools, living and laughing in their mountain shelter. Later that night, before bed, I stood outside and stared up at the mountain, imagining the light of a fire from the cave mouth. But there was no flicker of flame, and the mountain was dark and brooding.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mallory was a mountaineer, I learned in the library. Actually, mom told me first, but she didn't know that much about him, so I looked him up. As the winter progressed, I read about him and his expeditions to Mount Everest, where he fervently tried to find a route to the summit. It was as though reading about the snow and glaziers and alpine mountaineers with the cold wind howling outside of the library windows took me away from the sea and into the Himalayas.

Clara knew a lot about the snow and about mountains and skiing. Montana was in her blood, she said. I dreamt of her on mountains covered in thick snow. So, I read about Montana, and bears and trappers and my interests grew. Beyond the adventures of the Famous Five were real people who had dared to go to places where nobody had been before.

I vowed that one day I would hunt in the snowy mountains of Montana and breach the Khumbu ice fall on my way up the South Slope of Everest. As the library became smaller and smaller, the world outside became bigger – and in my imagination, covered in white, powdery snow.

The wind still raged wet across the sea, rousing mountainous waves that crashed into the shore, but the days were becoming warmer and steadily longer. The shadows were losing their hold on the mountains, and we found ourselves outside again more often.

Dad was doing more and more deliveries with uncle Lucas, and Mom had become increasingly worried about his safety, saying that when you live by the sword you will probably die by it, too.

I had figured out what they were doing wasn't exactly legal. Or maybe just not right. But my dad seemed more determined than ever to make money, and it was as if the loss of his job at the Johannesburg newspaper had led him on a path of dark adventure. I guess it seemed romantic to me, the thought of him out there on the sea, diving along the rocky shore and making deliveries to nefarious Greeks amidst the containers of the Cape Town harbour late at night.

It also didn't seem like much of a transgression to fish for seafood and sell it to whoever were willing to pay for it. I knew they weren't selling spare parts. There were fishermen with permits who did the exact same things, and for them it was perfectly legal. We had fish and crayfish and abalone for lunch and dinner almost every other day, as did most families struggling to find work.

Clara told me that her dad thought uncle Lucas and my father were poaching, and that diving out bags full of seafood was bad for the environment, but I thought he was just sticking his nose and smiling face in where it didn't belong.

But my mother's anxiety about what they were doing had increased ever since uncle Lucas and I had done that delivery. Life felt like a seesaw that lifted and fell with the seasons. Just when I felt comfortable and happy, the mood in our family would shift and I too would become restless because of it. What was worse, I had started to become jealous of Clara's affection for, and devotion to, Christopher. He was always there, between us, and even though I had thought she was doing it to be nice to me in the beginning, I started to resent ever telling her about him.

Perhaps it was the severity of the winter that we had yet to get used to, but my mother's dark mood was soon followed by my own sullen demeanour, and my father took notice. Or perhaps it was the word poacher that was now hanging like a sword over our house that forced him to rethink everything.

Him and mom had been fighting more than usual since the night I had gone to the city with uncle Lucas. They were careful to control their fights and not have me hear their arguments, but I could read the tension between them like I could a book and I had my own

ideas about what they were arguing about, although these were, admittedly, vague and ambiguous.

He came home one afternoon, from one of his deliveries, with a second-hand typewriter that he had bought from an old man in Claremont, who he said was too blind to use it any longer. He proudly put it on the table in the kitchen, opened the lid and laid his big hands expertly across the keys.

I was standing by the fireplace, cupping my hands to catch the heat from the embers. Mom came in and took a long look at the typewriter, frowning.

What's all this? my mother asked him.

I'm going to freelance again, dad said, beaming.

I thought you said you'd never write a word in your life again, she said, pulling her eyes up high onto her brow.

We can't go on like this, he said while busying himself with the machine. Things have to change in this house.

They do, she said.

They both looked at me, then back at each other. It was quiet in the kitchen except for the faint crackle of the embers.

Well, we better get some paper for this old thing, then, mom said, and she laughed.

My dad held her gaze and they both laughed. Let's have a drink first, he said.

I spent the rest of that day in the kitchen with them. They drank whiskey, mom fetched some papers and the two of them sat and made notes together. It felt familiar, the teamwork between them, and I kept quiet in the corner, fearful that I might do something to disrupt their happiness. Dad made spaghetti and meatballs as he and mom discussed the books he wanted to write, their talk rising and falling as they fed each other ideas.

A familiar energy filled the space around us. Dad said he just had to write the letters and send them out, then he would go to the city to meet with some editors of the English papers. I'll write for myself again, he said. He said he had had enough of diving in the cold water for our supper, and that seemed to make my mother very happy.

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In the next couple of weeks, we saw less and less of uncle Lucas, and dad stayed at home working on his typewriter, often with my mother. They were working well together. She would carry mugs of coffee to him during the day, and tumblers of whiskey at night. He

took the Beetle out to Cape Town and met with some editors and journalists to discuss freelance work, and he was soon commissioned to write his first piece.

Dad had lost his job in Johannesburg because of what he had written about the government. He had become reckless after Christopher died, and losing his job was part of his cycle of grief. He brought us to the Cape to escape our old lives and start fresh. Which we had done, I thought. I wondered if, when the summer came, we would finally find the light by the sea, if we hadn't already.

But the money came in slowly and mom said dad was too proud to ask his brother for a loan. He kept typing every day and sending queries and pieces off to the papers, but he seemed to be tapping the keys of the typewriter harder every day. We weren't hungry, really. Dad still went down to the rocks to fish and pick mussels, and mom baked bread with a foul-smelling yeast that sat growing in a glass jar in the corner of the kitchen's top shelf.

It was when we couldn't pay the school fees any longer that I offered the contents of my piggybank to my parents again. This time they took it and thanked me.

We'll pay you back, Danny Boy, dad said. Look at you, supporting your family.

Sure, dad.

When the first big cheque came in the post from a Cape Town newspaper, dad paid me back and I filled the piggybank again. I was very pleased with myself. Helping my parents made me feel like a real part of something. But the freelance work came erratically, and just before spring, when the days had warmed and Clara and I were thinking of going for our first swim of the season, dad decided to go out to sea with uncle Lucas. They had heard of a big run of snoek coming through and uncle Lucas was short a man on board.

Mom agreed with dad that it would be a big help if he could bring in some extra money from fishing. But no more crayfish or abalone diving, mom said, and dad agreed, and they seemed happy and in love and the seasons were changing and we were mending, too.

It was a Sunday morning. The air was crisp, and the ground was almost dry. Dad was sitting outside in the faint, early sunlight, organising his handlines. He had his old pair of tattered jeans on, with a thick jacket, faded blue from too much sun, which he always wore out to sea. He wore a pair of cheap black gumboots that came up over his pants and covered his calves.

He was tying big, vicious hooks to the lines, then winding the thick line back around the wooden spools. He had a thick finger-guard over the index finger of his right hand, to stop the line from cutting him to the bone when they hit the fish and things started moving

fast and the silver backs were getting hauled out of the water and into the boat one after the other in a frenzy.

When are you heading out? I asked.

Your uncle will be here any minute. Have a look from the porch, if you want. The boats are already bumping each other.

I looked down to the water and could see a cluster of boats grouped over a throbbing piece of ocean, their hulls seeming to touch.

Can I come too?

Not today, Danny. It's going to get rough out there today. See the white horses out beyond?

I could see them. The wind was coming down from the mountains and frothing the edges of the rollers as they coasted in toward the land. The sea was grey and alive, but not yet angry.

When will you be back?

Hopefully before dark, dad said, smiling. Maybe after. Hold thumbs we fill the boat up to the brim. God knows we need the cash, he said to nobody in particular.

I'll hold both thumbs, dad.

He threw the last wooden spool down by his feet and stood up, straightening his jacket. Come here, he said. I went over to him and fit in close under his arm, the rough sea smell of him falling onto me. Keep an eye on your mom for me, will you?

Sure dad.

Good man, he said, ruffling my hair in his familiar way. Good man, Danny.

Uncle Lucas pulled up with the pickup, which had clearly been mended, trailing the big boat behind it. He didn't drive the rig up into our driveway, rather stopped on the shoulder off Clarence Drive.

My dad collected his lines in a plastic crate, winked at me and walked down the driveway. About time, Lucas, he shouted.

Just get in, uncle Lucas called back. A man I didn't know got out of the passenger side and got onto the back of the boat where two other coloured men were already standing. My dad handed them his lines, then got into the truck and shut the door, his elbow immediately finding the open window. As they pulled away, he raised his hand in a goodbye to me, without looking back.

Mom was inside, sitting by the fire, a bunch of papers on her lap. Your dad gone? She asked me.

He just left.

She looked up from what she was reading. What would you like to do today, young man?

Don't know, I said, shrugging.

Want me to drive you down to Clara's?

I wanted to go but knew I wouldn't be able to see the boats from there, and I told mom I'd rather stay at home. She made us a pot of tea and I took my cup to the round window near the porch, trying to see if any of the boats were pulling in any fish, but it was too far, and I soon got bored. I finished my tea, left the mug balancing on the windowsill, and lay down on my bed to page through a book on World War 2 that my dad had brought me from the city.

The wind was holding steady outside and there was a chill to the air, so I pulled the blanket over me. The hardcover book was growing heavy in my hands and I had to stop it from falling over a couple of times as my eyes grew thick. I dreamt of fishing with my dad and uncle.

Danny, wake up. Wake up. Daniel.

I opened my eyes. The light in my room had turned gloomy. Mom was lightly shaking my shoulder. What is it? I asked.

Get up, Danny. We… we have to go. She was stammering slightly.

I opened my eyes as wide as I could and stared at her for a while. Her eyes were wide too.

What's happening?

Your dad is in trouble. We have to go down to see if we can help.

My mind was waking but struggled to make sense of anything. The whole day's timeline felt wrong. I turned my head to look out of the window. It was almost dark outside.

Where's dad?

Get up, mom said. Get a jacket, its cold outside.

I got up and pulled on my thick jacket. I could hear someone speaking to mom in the kitchen. My door creaked open slowly. I was struggling to lace up my shoes because my hands were shaking although it wasn't that cold. I looked up. Clara was standing in my doorway.

What's going on? I asked her, a note of desperate pleading in my voice.

I don't know much, she said. The other boats all came in. Your dad and uncle… they're still out there. Someone saw a flare. They've called for a rescue boat.

A rescue? I felt like laughing. Where's my uncle?

He's with your dad, Danny. On the boat. Here, let me. She sat down sideways by my feet and laced up my shoe. My dad thought we had better come get you and your mom. Everyone is down at the beach near where the boats last fished.

But they were fishing just off the rocks off the point, I watched them from the porch.

Clara looked at me: They drifted after the schools all day, Danny. Ended up by our place, almost.

Daniel, let's go, my mom called from the kitchen, her voice shrill.

When we got into the kitchen it was dark. The fire was dead. Clara's dad was holding open the backdoor and mom was motioning me to her with one open hand, as if she were hurriedly sweeping crumbs off a table.

Mom spoke with Clara's dad in a low voice. She was asking a lot of questions and Clara's dad kept apologising, saying that he really didn't know much. He said he was sure they'd be fine. Mom asked what about the flare? Clara's dad said he couldn't say.

Clara sat next to me in the car, looking out of her window. We kept quiet. Eventually she looked over at me, a small frown creasing her brow. She took my hand and held it until we pulled into their driveway. My hand was wet with our sweat when the car stopped.

Uncle Markus was there. He had been out on his boat with another crew. Mom went straight to him where he stood on Clara's front porch, head hung low. What do you know, Markus? she asked sternly.

We came back early. It was getting too big out there to stay on anchor, and the wind kept pushing us out when we hoisted.

Where?

About here, he said, pointing past Clara's house toward the beach. Just behind the kelp line. We had been moving with the fish all day. He looked down at the ground, then back at my mom. The Old Mary was the last boat to see them when she came in. They were still anchored and fishing.

Who saw the flare?

James Peterson, uncle Markus said.

He isn't a local, is he? Mom asked.

No. Weekenders. But they have been coming here a long time and he knows the water.

He could be wrong, my mom said. Why aren't you out looking? Where is everyone?

It's too big out there now, and it's dark too. Nobody can risk it. We tried launching a tender from the beach, but the outboard didn't take.

You should all be out there! Mom was yelling now; I could see droplets of her spit flying against the glare of the porch light, and it looked like fireflies darting around each other.

She's a good boat with a good crew. They're all old hands. They'll be fine.

Mom looked at him angrily: I can hear the fucking surf pounding, Markus. It's dark. They've shot a flare. It's big water out there, how do we…

Mom was shaking and couldn't finish her sentence. I didn't know what to do. Around me there was movement, but none of it registered to me in any meaningful way. I thought of Mallory frozen somewhere on the slopes of Everest and realised that I was chilled to the bone. Mom was crying now, wet sobs bubbling up out of her. My dad wasn't there to hug her to him, I realised. He was always the calm one, even with Cristopher. Then Maria stepped into the light, past uncle Markus, and she pulled my mother into her arms wordlessly and held her until her sobs subsided. We all just stared at our feet in embarrassment.

We could hear voices coming from the dunes. They sounded distant and the wind and the crash of the surf stripped them of any meaning. Their calls became more urgent and there was someone with a flashlight standing on a dune, the light waving about in the dark.

They've found something, I heard a winded man say from the dark. I couldn't make him out and didn't recognise his voice.

We were moving. Clara's dad was running next to mom, holding her awkwardly by the elbow. His tall figure, stooped to support her, seemed somehow comic to me and I supressed the urge to laugh aloud. I wasn't running. Then I realised that Clara had a firm grasp of my hand and I was walking slowly to accommodate her own clumsy gait through the deep sand, which seemed thicker and more sluggish than usual.

The wind kept pushing at us and when we crested the dune it pushed me back a step, but not in the direction I had expected. I took a moment to realign myself, then I realised that the wind had changed direction some time during the day. It wasn't a northwester anymore but was blowing along the coast form east to west.

I said it aloud, to nobody in particular.

What? Clara asked.

The wind's changed, I said again, not looking at her. If they shot a flare because the engines died or something, they might be way further out by now.

You mean we shouldn't be looking here?

I don’t know, Clara. My dad would have known.

She thought for a while, then said: Who else would know?

I just shrugged my shoulders in the dark.

We were following the flashlights toward the water’s edge, their erratic patterns looked nonsensical to me. Why couldn’t they hold the damn lights steady? I wondered.

The sea was loud, and it covered up almost all sound. I only heard the wailing when we almost stepped on the body. It was lying face down in the sand, the water gushing up around it in angry foam and then rocking the body as it retracted.

It was a man. He had a bright red, long-sleeved shirt on. Long, yellow hair matted about his head. The legs of his trousers were pushed up over his white calves, and his feet looked a sickly white in the glow of the torchlight. They were wrinkled at the soles the same way my fingers got wrinkled after lying in the bath for too long.

Mom was on her knees, pulling at the body. I could see she was wet already, and I worried that she would be cold. People had their hands on her, but she was strong. A wave came in, bigger than the previous ones, and lifted the body as she was pulling on it. For a moment she and the body were floating like an island. It turned slightly, the head falling into mom’s lap. As the water pulled back, she brushed the blonde hair out of uncle Lucas’ face.

I became slowly aware of my surroundings. My gaze focussed and it was as if time had slowed. Just like looking down on the world from high up on a mountain.

Someone came with a grey woollen blanket and tried to drape it over my mother’s shoulders, but it kept slipping off and was soon sodden. A man with a white shirt and tie picked it up and pulled it over uncle Lucas. Who wears a tie to the beach, at night? I thought. I could smell his strong cologne over the wind and noise, and I marvelled at my own irritation at this smell. My uncle was lying in the wet sand, dead as a log, and all I could smell was cologne, while all I wanted to smell was earth and sand and the sea.

People were organising the search along the beach, and streaks of light moved away from us in two directions, following the outline of the high tide mark. I realised one of the people they were looking for was my father. But the thought of him lying face down in the sand, in this cold, with the wind ripping at him and his feet all baby-soft and deathly white, was as absurd a thing as any I could imagine. If he had to die, I thought, he should disappear like Mallory had on Everest, straight to the bottom of this ocean, never to be found again.

More men came into the torchlight. They lifted mom up by her arms. She hung limp as a rag between them. Then two more lifted uncle Lucas off the wet sand, and his body bent

at the waist and his hips dragged in the sand at times, leaving a strange track unlike anything you would find in the wild.

Uncle Lucas was lying on dry sand, amidst rotting kelp. A circle of people was standing around him, quietly looking at what was left of him. It felt as if they were seeing him in a way that was not theirs to see. Their gaze felt vicious to me. I thought of myself, a long time ago, standing over the body of Christopher and looking at him as if I had never seen him before. Just standing there and gawking. I started pushing people away from him. My small frame had no weight to leverage their mass, and they stepped back apologetically at first, and then resisted my pushing with irritated frowns. Take the boy into the house, someone said. I was pulled away. I was screaming. I realised I was calling for my father.

—

We were dry and warm inside Clara's house. My mother was somewhere downstairs, a cup of untouched tea losing steam in front of her. I was sitting on Clara's bed upstairs. She was sitting on the floor, twirling a loose thread of her dress between her fingers. We didn't speak, but she would look up at me every few minutes. Her prosthetic was standing on its own in the corner of the room, caked in sea sand.

Throughout the night mom had gone back out onto the beach to help with the search. I had been told to stay in the house, and Clara had kept watch over me like a family guard dog; quiet and sincere and comforting. Two more bodies had been found further west along the beach, but there was no sign of my dad or the other deckhand. No debris, either. Which was strange, uncle Markus had mentioned. If they had overturned there should have been debris washed ashore.

The Sea Rescue Institute had dispatched a boat from Simon's Town, and it was waiting for the sun to alight to begin its search. There had been no more flares sighted, even though people had been staring at the black hole where the ocean was all night in case there was a sign. Someone had said that if anyone knew where to look it would be Lewellyn. Old Whitey, they said, knew the currents and the pull of the sea better than anybody. It sounded like a last resource. As if nobody wanted to admit that they needed crazy Whitey's help. He was brought to Clara's house on the back of a pickup. We watched from the stairs as he was ushered into the dining room below, clothed in a thick, long jacket, the colour of which had long become a mystery.

There was a hushed silence as he came in. He apologetically pulled a woollen cap from his head, looked around, dazed like a buck in a light. They waited for him to speak but he stood dead still. Then mother said, in a low and quiet voice. Can you help me? and she looked up from the table as she finished the question and pinned Whitey down with a stare of pain that spurred him into life. He opened his mouth a couple of times, then said: You found three already?

Yes, mom said. Lucas was one.

Nothing else washed up?

Just the bodies.

Whitey nodded and sucked in his lower lip. Shoes?

What? No. Why?

Jackets?

Mom seemed to realise where he was going with this. No. Two deckhands were just in their pants. Lucas still had a shirt on.

Whitey nodded again, looking around him at the density of unapproving people leaning in to hear what he had to say. I'd wager those three made a swim for it, he said. Probably lost the motors, and they weren't too far out and thought they stood a chance. Might have thought they were closer to land than they were. She's a mean bitch in the dark, the sea. Sorry, he said, looking at my mom.

You think my husband and the other man stayed on the boat?

Georgie, a man said from the back. He had a bad leg, wouldn't have been able to swim too well with it.

Yes, mom said, Georgie. She reached for her tea, stopped short. Why would they stay on the boat?

Who knows what they were thinking? It's everyman for himself once death's right under your hull. I'm sorry ma'am, I can just tell you what I think.

Well how would you know? she asked Whitey. Anything could have happened. They might still be out there.

I've been alone out there before, he said. A long time ago. Some of me crew swam. Some of them made it out, some drowned. One man was cut up on the rocks, he got so close.

What did you do?

I stayed aboard through the night. Got pulled out to the deep. A boat picked me up the next afternoon.

They could have drifted into False Bay, someone offered from the kitchen.

No, sir, Whitey said, still looking at my mother. This weather would have pushed them out beyond the point had they stayed afloat long enough to round the bend into the bay.

Do you think they're still alive, Lewellyn? mom asked. She was pleading with herself, I realised.

There's always hope, ma'am. But if something did wash up it would be further west had they stayed aboard.

We should drive out along the coast, uncle Markus said. A couple of cars. Stop every mile or so to see what we find.

Whitey nodded.

Thank you, Lewellyn, mom said.

Ma'am.

Outside, the sun was wearily breaking through the dark.

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They found pieces of the boat washed ashore next to the old whaling station harbour later that morning. Some rubber thongs, a baseball cap. Plastic crates that were used to hold the handlines. These were strewn along a small rocky section. The sea was calming down. The sun grew brighter and the wind died down to a slight breeze.

I was there with Clara next to me. We were ignored mostly. I tried to help but grownups would politely shoo me away from the shore. You look from up there, the two of you. Shout if you spot something.

The Sea Rescue boat was chugging along the coastline, following the contours. Two men stood in the bow of the boat, leaning forward over the water, looking into the sea below them. They had called for divers.

Mom was sitting in a car, resigned. She had stopped crying, and was just staring into the distance, the car door open. The breeze ruffled her hair when I looked back at her, but she didn't see me.

By the time the sun had reached its zenith the divers were there. Two of them suited up in thick, black wetsuits. They were talking to each other and one of them laughed at a joke the other told him. They didn't know it was my dad they were looking for. Bottles were hoisted onto their backs. They spat in their masks and washed them in the shallow water before pulling them onto their faces.

Georgie, the deckhand, was pulled up from the bottom first, just off the point next to the whaling station's old concrete slipway. The boat came alongside the divers and the crew hoisted him unceremoniously over the side. Mom had stepped out of the car. Is it him? she yelled. Not him, Georgie, someone shouted back. She went back and sat in the car again.

From where Clara and I stood we could see a pair of tuxedoed penguins waddling over the rocks unsteadily, then slip gracefully into the water. Their plump bodies made tiny splashes that caught the sun as they cut into the sea.

On shore there was one yellow police van, with two policemen leaning against its bonnet. One was tall and very thin, and his pants seemed to be pulled into his middle to keep them from slipping down. The other had a huge, protruding pouch, that looked at odds with his wiry legs. My dad would have laughed at the cop's beer belly. He always said that a man shouldn't, under any circumstances, look nine months pregnant, especially not because of a love for hops or brandy and coke.

The boat with Georgie on it moved slowly and quietly onto the slipway, and an unmarked white van from the pathology unit reversed down the concrete slope to the water's edge. People were coming closer to have a last look at Georgie's body, and the fat policeman gestured to his tall fellow officer and they ambled down to the water's edge in a lazy saunter, where they told everyone to stand back, their hands on their hips.

We were all concentrating on the removal of Georgie's body from the boat and didn't notice the divers out by the wreck coming up and removing their masks to speak with each other, while they bobbed up and down in the now calm ocean.

Someone noticed them and the crowd shifted its position toward the rocks and to where the divers were still in discussion next to the black-brown rusted ribcage of the Una's wreck sticking up out of the water. The Una had been one of the last coal-fired whalers that had hunted along this stretch of coast, and when the price of whale oil collapsed, she had been scuttled next to the slipway as a breakwater.

The divers replaced their masks and bit over their mouthpieces, and they both rolled over forwards in the water, their backs and behinds showing above the waterline for a second like big black balls, and then their sharp legs stuck straight up into the air, and the wide fins on their feet seemed to splay as they descended toward the bottom, next to the wreck.

Mom had noticed and she had come halfway down the slip and then, on unsteady legs, she had made her way over some rocks to a spot not far behind me and Clara. I thought I heard her say, over the slight breeze: They've found him.

As we watched the rising bubbles come up from the divers and erupt on the surface, the people around us started looking at me and my mom with an uncomfortable uncertainty, and they all seemed to struggle to find a way to stand still and not fidget.

A diver breached, the water washing over his curved back like a retracting tide, and I could see from the way he was hanging face down, heavy toward the front, that he was pulling something up. Something came up briefly and I thought I saw someone, or just the clothing of someone, and then the water took it again and the second diver also surfaced and waved his arms in a cross over his head toward the boat, which by now had offloaded Georgie and was ready for more.

Mom was screaming something, and her legs went out from under her and she sat down heavily on the rocks, like a weight had suddenly fallen onto her and she could not endure the gravity of it. Clara was holding my hand and after that it was all a blur. They pulled him out quickly, over the side of the rescue boat into which he flopped like a caught fish, his legs sticking into the air over the gunwale for a macabre moment before someone reached over and pushed them down into the boat.

The divers also got into the boat and I wanted to yell at them to keep looking for my dad, to dive back down and keep looking, but their job was done, and they knew it.

There was a crowd of genuinely concerned men and women around my mom, shielding me from her view, and from viewing her pain. I made my way down to the wet end of the slipway amidst the crowd of curious onlookers, and nobody noticed the boy who should have been with his mother and not down by the water's edge to have a look at his daddy's corpse. The crowd jostled me, and I shoved back and got a spot in front just as they were unloading the body from the boat.

Oh God, look at his face, one man said, the first to speak in the awed silence. The body was laid down, face up, on the concrete slipway. There was the faint smell of fish surrounding it.

Crayfish went straight for his eyes, another man said, pointing at the face. Look there, ate the eyeballs straight out of his head. Lips too, look. Gone.

Jesus, poor man. Must have washed up against the rocks off the point and then got pinned under the old wreck. He was right next to the shoreline. The man pointed behind him. One lucky wave and he would have been washed straight onto the fucking slip. Safe as a house.

I looked at the soulless sockets where the eyes should have been, and at the mouth that was just a bloated hole, like some obscene orifice. I couldn't tell whether it was my dad

by the look of him. He was no longer a man to behold. The skin on his hands and feet were shrivelled so badly that it looked like white woollen gloves or socks that could be pulled off with ease. It was his jacket and faded, worn jeans that gave an identity to the corpse. I was trembling, but strangely calm. I felt removed from this reality. I was standing high up on a mountain, gaining perspective, looking down at the frozen body of Mallory.

Strong arms pulled me back, out of the crowd. Come now, boy. 'Tis no thing a boy must see, his own father dead like that. Come.

When we were free of the crowd I looked up and saw Whitey, who crouched down in front of me on one knee and embraced me very tightly, and it was then, finally, that I could cry.

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I climbed halfway up the slopes of the mountain and sat waiting on a rock. I could see the cars parked in our driveway and on the shoulder of Clarence Drive far below. Some men were milling around by our backdoor, smoking. Mom was somewhere inside.

We'd had calls from my father's family berating my mother for having him cremated. They wanted him to be buried in Johannesburg with uncle Lucas, in a family plot, next to a line of dead ancestors, most of them completely unknown to me. Also next to Christopher. Mom scoffed at them. There's more dignity in fire, she said.

We had been in the square church that morning, singing hymns and listening to a sermon that droned on unendingly while I could see the birds flying against the clear blue sky through a window set high above the pulpit. The pastor spoke passionately of the tragedy in our community. There were framed pictures of my father and uncle Lucas in the front of the church. I was glad to be out of that gloomy building when it was over. We drove to the house in silence.

Just as with Christopher, the wake was a series of banalities around tables laden with cucumber sandwiches cut into triangles and tea and coffee. You could see that the men were anxious to pay their respects and leave, perhaps to go to the pub and have a drink. Whitey had always said nothing brings a coastal community together like a death at sea.

I stayed there for a long time, while the shadows crept down and over me, and the cars pulled away and drove off. I saw Clara get into the car with her parents, some of the last to leave, and as she got in she looked up at the mountain where she knew I'd be.

The tears had long run their course and I felt dry like sand. In the place of grief and mourning there was only a numbness left. I could still see my father clearly, hear him and smell him. He was still a part of me, but not organically – suddenly unfettered. A phantom limb that was only the remnants of something that had once had substance. I realised that I hated these memories of the dead, yet I was up there on that mountain waiting for my father.

Christopher was there, and in my heart, I begged him to leave, to make room for my dad. But Christopher stayed. It grew cold against the mountain, and I knew my mother was alone in the house, cleaning up the crumbs and dirty plates and cups and mugs. I knew how quiet the house would be, damp and dark in the shadow of the mountain. I stayed up there because I didn't know what I was supposed to say to her. How does a son comfort his mother when there was nobody to comfort him? How would things ever be the same between us?

I had expected my father to come back in the same way that Christopher had come back to me. As some spiritual companion. I thought I would find him on the mountain. He never came. He simply left one afternoon to go to sea, and then he disappeared from my life forever. He left no clue as to what had happened on the boat that night. He left no parting words or wisdoms. He had driven off with a raised hand, without looking back at me, and left for good. All that remained was a small wooden box with his ashes in it, and the nightmares of crayfish crawling over his face below the dark waves.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was then that I became haunted by thoughts of death. How Christopher had shot himself by accident. The old man in Colesburg who had died in the hotel room next to ours. My uncle's wet hair in my mother's lap. The lack of eyes in my father's face.

I spent whole afternoons on the slopes of the mountain behind our house, as the shadows stretched downward from the peaks, over our home and finally out to the shoreline. Christopher was there, in a way, but the more I thought about the finality of death and dying, the more I realised it was time to let Christopher go. I had to grow up before someone else died.

I worried a lot about my mother. After the funeral she had kept me out of school for almost two weeks. The house was in a state, and I started to clean it out of pity for her. The

neighbours stopped bringing cooked meals. We had sandwiches for lunch and dinner. The same fried eggs every morning. I would eat, but mom wouldn't touch her plate.

Mom said she had to take the bus up to Johannesburg, to settle dad's affairs. She arranged that I stay with Clara and her parents for the week that she will be gone. It felt strange to lock the door of our house and drive away in the Beetle. I wanted to know why I couldn't stay at home by myself. I thought I could, perhaps I even wanted to prove it to her. She laughed at me. You're not the man of the house yet, Danny, she said. God knows you're growing up quick enough, but not yet.

When she said goodbye, standing on Clara's porch, she seemed almost happy for the first time since the accident. She was probably relieved to unburden herself from me, even if only for a short while. She had to find space to grieve.

Clara's mom made a bed for me on the big couch in the lounge downstairs. That first night I woke up chilled and crying. I had been dreaming of the cold sea. And I had wet my bed, too.

When it happened again the second night, Clara's mom put down a dry mattress for me in the corner of Clara's room. So that you're closer to the bathroom, she said. I lay on the mattress, shivering. My teeth were chattering, and I could feel the pressure on my chest mounting, my breath coming slow and heavy. My heartbeat against my ribs pounded like drums in my ears. Clara waited for her mom to switch of the light in their room before she got into bed with me and held me. The shivering stopped and I could breathe again.

Clara slept next to me every night. She crawled in wordlessly, leaving the curtains wide open so that the dawn light would wake her early, giving her enough time to creep back into her own bed before her parents got up. She lay tight against my back, her warm breath blowing into the nape of my neck. When I felt her there, next to me, the weight on my chest lifted.

Clara's parents regularly spoke in the kitchen, in low voices, and they would go quiet the moment they sensed me near. Then they would smile and busy themselves with something, and I found it funny how bad they were at hiding the fact that they had been talking about me. Adults weren't good liars. But I started to learn that lying was something grownups did often. Those hushed tones had been a familiar sound in our house, late at night when I was between dreams in the warmth of my bed. I learnt to move like a cat, light on my toes, so that I could catch them at the game.

Clara and I came back from a walk on the beach one afternoon. Her parents were sitting in the lounge. I had sat down on the porch to shake the sand from my feet and Clara

had gone in ahead of me. I heard her mom say: How was the stroll, you two? Clara answered that it had been good, then went up the stairs. They must have thought that I had gone up with Clara, because I heard their conversation start up again in that tell-tale, under-the-breath manner.

I went through the open front door, climbed the first few steps quietly, then froze, listening. I could hear Clara upstairs in her room, moving about.

It all stinks to hell and back, Clara's dad mumbled.

She's not been herself, that's for sure. I had to strain to hear the soft voice of Clara's mom.

Of course not. She's grieving her husband. Dear God, she was still grieving over her boy, now this. You know she told me they came here to start fresh, to give Daniel a new home away from the pain. And to get away from the politics.

You know nobody ever gets away from the politics of a place like this, she said. I don't know how that woman can keep going.

Clara's dad coughed. Well, he said, she's a strong woman. She's asking some uncomfortable questions. And in a community like this… Hell, in a country like this, those types of questions cut deep.

Do you think it's possible someone had a hand in the whole affair?

I don't know to what end, he said. But it is possible.

She's adamant it's the Nationalist Government, upset about his journalism.

Nothing he has been writing lately was very ideological, her dad said. He should have kept working the construction sites. Even the poaching would have been better.

Will you have to write it up?

Yes, they want a full report. He was on the watch list.

There was silence. What are we doing here? We should take Clara home.

If I want to climb the ranks this is the post I'll have to man, you know how it goes.

And what happens if the next post is in Angola? Or some Middle Eastern sandpit?

Clara's dad sighed. I have a duty to our country. And to this family to provide for us all.

You have a duty to your wife and daughter too.

I heard one of them get up and the clink of a cup, and I took the steps two at a time, as soft as I could, praying I didn't make a noise. Clara wasn't in her room and I saw that the bathroom door was closed. I sat down on her bed. I was angered by all the secrecy. By the lies that adults told over and over. Always gossiping and conspiring about something or

another. The world belonged to adults, and was built on the lies they told each other, and we just lived in it. Better to be seen and not heard, uncle Lucas had once said to me.

They must have been talking about my parents. That much I could figure out. I tried to make sense of it, but the words of their conversation slipped away. The bathroom door opened. Clara came in, swinging easily between her crutches. She had gone to rinse the sand off her prosthetic. I knew where it stood, too. She would have left it, dripping, propped between the bath and the basin.

Mom was on her way back, and I was looking forward to seeing her. The school bus had dropped us off and Clara and I walked the last stretch over gravel roads to her house. It was to be my last night staying over at Clara's. I liked the idea of having my mother back, but the week with Clara had slowly and softly chipped away some of the pain. I wasn't thinking about my dad or Christopher. Not much, anyway.

When we got up the driveway, I saw Clara's dad talking to Whitey by the porch.

Whitey wanted to come see how you're doing, Daniel. I said maybe another time, you must be tired after school.

It's fine, I said. Hi Whitey.

Hello boy, he said.

All right then, come Clara. Let's get lunch ready for you. Clara went inside with her dad. Whitey and I stood awkwardly next to the porch. I wondered whether I should invite him in, but he was such a strange character that I didn't know what the correct protocol would be. Anyway, it wasn't my house.

I just thought I'd come see how you are faring. I know you must be hurting awful.

It's OK, I said. We both shuffled our feet in the gravel.

You should have it out, boy, he said. Can't bottle these things in.

I'm fine. Thanks.

He looked at me for a long while. I looked down. His eyes were very clear, and I could feel his gaze as if it were sunlight falling on me.

Well, best be going then, he said, turning to leave. He stopped and turned back to me. You need anything, boy, you know where to find me.

I don't know where you live, I said.

Oh, I'm around most the time. You need anything you come ask me. He nodded once, turned and got onto his bike. Its chain rattled loudly in protest as he took off. It needed grease. I watched him go for a while. I briefly thought of him hugging me at the slipway that morning, and the genuine concern he has shown. I went inside and the house was cool and quiet. Mom would be here to pick me up after school tomorrow.

After lunch Clara and I went for a walk on the beach. She picked up a few pieces of polished glass, collecting them in the fold of her shirt, the slight bump of her tummy showing. Once, bent over, she stumbled slightly and grabbed my hand, and she didn't let it go for a long time.

Is Chrissy joining us today, she asked, smiling.

No, I said.

We carried on walking, the air clean and salty around us. The sea was calm, and the gentle rolling hiss of the small breakers kept time with our stride.

I miss him, she said after a while.

He's dead, same as my dad.

She stopped, holding me back. But we can still play with him. Can't we?

I don't know, Clara. Things are different.

Maybe his silly games can make us laugh, she said, a hopeful smile beaming up at me and reflecting the light.

I'm letting him go. What we're doing isn't right.

Why? What do you mean?

I'm saying goodbye. Same as with dad. They're gone, Clara. They're never coming back and I don't want to think about them all the time. My voice rose and I realised I was almost shouting at her. Clara came over and hugged me. I don't know how long we stood there, but at some point she pulled away and, still holding my hand, led me to the dune fort where we hunkered under the milkwoods, the sour smell of the trees hanging over us like a damp blanket.

I have something that I want you to have, she said after a while.

I looked at her. She was searching in her back pocket for something, and her hand seemed to hesitate for a while before she drew it out.

Actually, I have something I need to give back to you, she said. I took something that was yours. Please don't be mad at me.

I frowned. I won't be mad.

She pulled out a wrinkled piece of paper, its edges curled over. I took it from her and turned it over in my hands. It was two photos, taped together. The top photo was of a little boy, mouth open, laughing, running through the sunlight. The other was of a pair of small legs, crossed over each other at the knees.

I looked up from the photos. Where did you get this picture? I asked, my voice hoarse.

I took it the day you showed it to me in your parent's room. While you were packing everything away, I slipped it into my pocket.

I looked down at it. Why would you steal a picture of Cristopher?

I didn't steal it, she said indignantly. I just wanted to look at it once more, before I gave it back. I just wanted some time to see Chrissy properly. I wanted to know how you felt.

You wanted to know how I felt because my brother died?

Something like that, she said.

These are your legs, I said, pointing at the bottom photo.

Yes, from before my accident.

Why did you put these photos together?

Clara looked away. Cicadas were flexing their muscles among the milkwood trees, drowning out the sound of the ocean. She had closed her eyes and the light fell in broken pieces onto her upturned face, like a shattering of glass.

I wanted to remember that we are the same, she said. We both lost a piece of ourselves.

You can keep it, I said after some time. I'm done with holding on.

Maybe we should let go together? she asked after a long silence.

We waded into the low surf. The sun had just crept behind the mountains and I could feel it cool down around us. We both held onto the photos, and together, let go. It flipped over once and drifted for a second on the hot air before it stuck to the water. The white froth of the surf held it up for a brief moment, and then it slipped under.

We walked back to her house. The sea seemed angrier than before. Clara's mom asked me if I was excited that my mom would be back tomorrow, and I said yes, I was. She seemed glad that mom was coming back. I hoped she didn't know that Clara slept next to me on the mattress on the floor every night.

Clara's dad had left for Cape Town that afternoon, and it was just the three of us sitting in the kitchen. Maria had cooked dinner. Clara had to explain to me what meatloaf

was. I had never heard of it. Maria seemed almost apologetic when she served me a slice, as if to say she knew it was a strange dish.

Clara and her mother spoke about school while we ate. They directed questions at me too, but I did my best to have a mouth full of meatloaf every time. It tasted like cottage pie or meatballs, but it looked like neither.

When we were done with dinner I asked to be excused and went to take a bath. I had to leave the bathwater in the tub for Clara. She bathed while I got dressed in her room. Her mother offered to read us a passage from *The BFG*, but I said I was very tired and asked if I could go to bed early.

I could hear the low voice of Clara's mom drifting up the stairs, the sing-song rhythm of the story bringing fragments of sentences to my ears. Clara laughed a couple of times. They seemed happy together. The house felt safe around me and the bed was soft and warm.

When I woke up the house was dark and quiet. I could feel Clara slipping under the covers next to me. She had waited until her mother had switched off her own light.

I normally made sure to turn onto my side, facing the wall, when Clara crept into my bed. I tried to turn then, but stopped, lying on my back when she whispered: Don't tell your mother I slept in your bed with you.

I promise I won't, I said, the words thick and slow in my throat.

Her arm brushed over my chest as she straightened the blanket, and as I was about to turn onto my side her hand felt me and stopped. We both lay frozen and wide awake. Her grip was as light as if she held a bird or a spider caged within her fingers. She moved her hand slowly away, and I finally turned over quickly.

I won't tell anyone either, she said, warm in the back of my neck.

CHAPTER NINE

Mom had come back from her trip with an undeniable sense of determination about her. She never was still for a moment in the first few weeks after travelling to Johannesburg. We packed up my father's belongings, quickly and precisely. Boxed it all up and put it in the tacky shed, where we kept all the other things that got in the way.

She had finished her grieving alone. We didn't speak much of her time away. She was just resolve now. Not cold to the absence of my father, but steadfast in keeping our heads above water. She was keeping me busy, too. I didn't see much of Clara in that first week or two, just quick hello's at school.

I let the grief come to me alone in bed at night. Not so much for my dad, or even for Christopher, but more for myself. This was inevitably followed by bouts of guilt. I felt older but in no way wiser. The world was still just as big and uncompromising as before.

We got some money from a policy that dad had managed to keep paid up, and mom said there would be more once all the paperwork was settled. Bloody bureaucracy, she called it. Dad had had a stake in a family trust fund, with his other siblings, and mom said this would revert to me once I went to university. Not much, but a start, she said. I asked her what about uncle Lucas? She said he never wanted a part of the family's money. His house had been willed to a woman in Ireland whom nobody knew anything of. Mom said this pissed off the entire family. Just what Lucas would have wanted, she laughed.

She said we should scatter dad's ashes in the shallows at the beach. He loved the sea. I told her I had a better idea, that I knew where he would want to be. Danny Boy, she replied, your mother isn't going to hike up her skirt and climb a mountain to scatter a handful of ash in a cave. The beach will do.

We never spoke about it again and we didn't take dad down to the beach and the little box of ashes sat, alone, on a top shelf in the cluttered living room, perpetually in the shadows of the house.

With spring, the damp lifted. The winds blew in softer and smelled like dried herbs. Our windows and the backdoor of the house stood open throughout the day. Mom only closed the stable door when she was cooking, to keep the wild mongoose from pilfering food straight off the table. I started venturing higher up the mountain, drawn to the cave, but still a little scared of going all that way alone, yet also knowing that I had to at some point.

At school we played cricket. I preferred this to rugby. It was an elegant sport. A thinking game that meandered slowly through the course of an afternoon. The moments of action were brief and sudden, but very pleasing. We had finished practise after school, and I was packing my kit away, getting ready for the bus ride home. I was pushed, hard, from behind.

I turned to have a look. It was one of the older boys who played in the teams above us. He was taller than me and very heavyset. His neck was thick and motley red, sweat stuck

in little diamonds of light on the fluff of his upper lip. Jou ma praat kak, was all he said. Your mom talks shit.

What? I asked.

Fokkof net, he replied. Just fuck off. I walked out of the changing room and looked back. He stood in the doorway, following me with his unblinking eyes.

Danie, Levi said as we got onto the bus. His name is Danie.

What's he talking about?

Don't know, Levi said. Fokkof was all I got. We both laughed at Levi's bad Afrikaans.

But seriously, I said, what did he mean?

Levi was quiet for a while, looking down at a spot on the floor between his legs. The bus drove out through the school gate.

Some of the kids, grownups too, they're saying your mom is asking too many questions.

About what?

She thinks… she's saying what happened to your dad wasn't an accident. Or maybe not. I, I don't know Danny.

That's silly, I said. Of course it was.

My dad says that the things your dad was writing for the newspapers might have gotten him into trouble.

What things?

Apparently, he was spending a lot of time with Whitey. And they say your dad had strange ideas about things.

I had no idea what dad had sent to the newspapers. I had never read a newspaper. It was something grownups did, pulling the wide sheets over their laps like blankets. It was the first time that I wondered if stories could be dangerous.

Maybe ask your mom, Levi said, almost pleading.

She doesn't tell me anything, I thought, but I said: It was just an accident. I tried to remember the conversation I had overheard between Clara's parents, but couldn't make sense of it. The world passed green past the bus.

Mom was napping when I got home. I went into her room and looked at her sleeping. She lay on top of the made-up bed, her arms by her side. Her mouth was slightly open, and I could hear her steady breathing.

Mom, I said.

She pulled in a breath, rolled her lips and stretched open her eyes. How was school Danny Boy?

I wanted to ask her about my father. I had so many questions that I was unable to choose one. I stood mute.

Everything good?

Yes mom, I said.

She got up. Come, I'll fix you lunch.

I sat at the kitchen table while she made me a sandwich. I watched her cut the bread into four square blocks, the way I liked it.

What did dad write for the papers?

What do you mean? He wrote articles. And he was researching a book.

About Whitey?

She froze, her back to me. I heard her put the knife down. She turned toward me. Where are you hearing this?

Some kids at school, I said.

Which kids? she asked slowly and evenly.

Just some boy. Older. He pushed me today. Said that you were lying or something. Levi said…

What is this older boy's name?

I don't know, I lied.

Mom brought my sandwich to the table. She put it down in front of me and stood there for a while, staring at me. Well, she said, find out what his name is. I'd like to know.

I said yes mom. She picked up a dishcloth and started cleaning the counter. And Danny, she said over her shoulder.

Mom?

Don't let anyone push you around.

I nodded at her and ate my sandwich.

It was strange how Clara took to the water like a fish, while on land her disability was such an obvious disadvantage. She had admitted to me that the pain in her phantom limb was driving her crazy, and that she spent hours crying some nights. Her parents and her doctor

had decided that they couldn't increase the dosage of her pain pills, and as she got used to the pills the pain worsened.

But among the waves, lying flat on the bodyboard, her one leg, finned, jetting her through the swell, she was free. She gleamed. And she understood the swell immediately. She acquired a sense of the currents, was willing to follow them.

Don't ever fight the current, Dwayne said on our first lesson. You'll just tire yourself out. Rather work with it. I wondered if my dad had died because he fought the currents alone in the cold and dark? But mom had said that dad was a very good swimmer and knew the sea as well as the next man and that's why she couldn't let it go.

I had kept well out of the water after dad's death. I wasn't really afraid of the sea, didn't think I would drown, but deep within me was a reluctance to be in the same water in which my dad had died. Mom had met Dwayne on the beach on one of her morning walks, and after telling him about me he had suggested surfing as a means of coping.

One Saturday morning, mom put me in the car and said we were going to pick Clara up and then go to the beach for a bit. A little surprise, she said. When we parked in front of the dunes in the lot at the main beach, a big, red Ford F150 pulled up next to us, and out climbed Dwayne.

He was tall, lanky and very tanned. Thinking back now he was the exact stereotype of a surf bum; it was just his dishevelled red hair and beard that lent him a shade of Viking that gave the boy in me instant trust in him. You must be Danny, he said upon seeing me. He came toward me with a long, outstretched arm and I shook his hand. I'm Dwayne, he said.

He looked over my head and let my hand go. And this is Clara, he said.

How do you do?

An American in our midst. He had picked up on her accent immediately.

From the great state of Montana, Clara said, rolling her r's and n's for effect.

Dwayne looked over at my mother, his brow raised in feigned surprise. Mom was enjoying the meeting; I could tell by her lazy smile.

You staying to watch, mom?

I'll stay as long as I don't have to get wet, she laughed.

Can't promise that, Dwayne said, winking at mom. It felt strange seeing her joke in this way with another man. He looked older than mom, but definitely a lot younger than my father had been.

Dwayne threw a big duffel bag over one shoulder and set about unloading two surfboards. One was really long, bright red and extending over the cab of the truck, much

longer than Dwayne himself, who just a moment ago had been the tallest thing around. The other was slightly shorter than Dwayne, and sleeker than the big red board. It was a light blue, with yellow lines along the edges. Rails, Dwayne taught us.

Clara looked with apprehension at the big surfboards, but Dwayne pulled a much smaller and lighter bodyboard from the back of the truck, and without making a fuss said to Clara: This one's for you, Sunshine. It's gonna give you wings.

The sun was well up and it was a warm day. A light breeze rolled in, pushed up against the landfall by the rolling surf that extended in long, curved lines across the sea. For the next hour or so Dwayne gave us our first lesson in surfing, taught from the safety of the beach.

We were told how to lie down on the boards, paddle with our arms, keeping our heads up and our legs straight. Dwayne had stripped down to just his bathing trunks, and his brown, muscled torso made me keep my shirt on. Mom sat way back on a dune, a big straw hat covering her head, her knees drawn up under her chin.

When we were covered in sand from scratching around like beached turtles, and our heads were swimming with new information, Dwayne pulled out a bunch of wetsuits and told us to suit up.

Clara stripped down to her bikini without as much as a thought, and for a second I felt protective; not of her near naked body, but rather of her prosthetic leg. Just as she sat down in the sand to pull the suit over her legs, Dwayne told her: No Sunshine, best you leave the metal boot safe on land where it belongs.

Clara smiled at him and immediately stripped off her prosthetic, plunking it down on her dress and towel as if it were only an afterthought. I'd seen her float in our rockpool without the leg, but I was worried about her now, so unbalanced in the surf.

Dwayne slipped into his wetsuit in a second. I had only managed to get the suit up and over my legs when he turned me around by the shoulders with a steady hand and pulled and stretched the suit over my arms and shoulders. Come on, slip on into it, he said. It's like your second skin. You'll get it, Buddy.

We helped Clara up and she wriggled her arms into the suit without any help from Dwayne. Dwayne showed her how to do up the zipper behind her back.

Good fit? he asked her.

She stretched out her left arm, her right was around my neck for support. It's fine, she said, except for the leg.

Dwayne looked at the flopping length of wetsuit dangling where a leg should have filled it out, and said Aha, with a raised finger. I believe I brought a tool to fix that. He rummaged in the duffle bag and pulled out a short and vicious knife. For a moment I couldn't understand what he intended to do with it, but he moved quickly, stretched the suit out over Clara's stump and sliced it off in a slow, clean motion. The offending rubber leg flapped to the sand like an eel. All three of us looked at it.

Righto, Dwayne said. Let's get wet.

Dwayne didn't offer to help Clara into the water, and I was thankful for it. She instinctively grabbed onto my shoulder, hopping on her good leg in perfect rhythm with my slow stride, as we had done so many times before. Everything felt just the way it should have.

Dwayne had left his big board, which he called the Red Charger, on the beach and had brought the blue board and the bodyboard into the shallows. He had already waded into the white rollers, the water just below his hips, both boards floating on the water at either side of him, his hands steering them.

The surf was nice and calm, tiny whitewash waves that rolled in on regular sets, well-spaced and even. I knew the sandbank extended far into the ocean to where the big glassy swells broke for the first time, and that we would be able to stand easily as long as we kept in the whitewash.

Buddy, you're up first, he told me, shoving the blue board toward me. Get up on, then when I tell you, paddle like you mean it. Don't worry about standing up yet. Just ride her all the way to the beach and bring her back if you want more. Easy.

I was on the board and suddenly realised it wasn't as easy to keep your balance as it had been on land. Just as the nerves began to hit and I wanted to panic, Dwayne yelled Paddle, and I paddled.

Just as I was about to keel over, I felt something lift me by the feet, tilting the board forward suddenly. I could feel the speed, the powerful push of the surf behind and under me, and I was suddenly sliding down the whitewash, feeling as if the nose of the board was going to slice straight down into the sea. I tried to pull the board up, but then the quick slide was finished and the board lay flat on the water and the rolling wave was pushing me from behind. I was balanced, and in control.

I let out a whoop so loud it startled even me, and I could just make out my mother, standing on the beach, hopping up and down and waving her arms about her head, big straw hat in one hand.

I rolled off the board into the shallows and got back to my feet. A smile was stuck onto my face. I turned the board around, and started wading back in. I wanted more. I waved. Clara was bobbing flat on the bodyboard, yelling something at me that I couldn't hear, and Dwayne stood up as tall as a ship's mast, his big fist up in the air in a salute.

I knew then and there that I had tasted something, and that whatever it was, I wanted more of it.

As I waded back out, I watched as Dwayne lined Clara up on the bodyboard and pushed her into a roller. It lifted her up for a moment, then shot her down and she bounced once, the board nearly going out from under her. And then she felt it and understood it and she instinctively angled the board with the wave, and as she came past me, I saw something in her face that I can only comprehend now as being pure rapture. Clara was flying.

For several hours that sunny day we surfed in the whitewash. Whenever Dwayne would ask if we'd had enough, we would beg for one more ride, and he'd laugh and push us off. The hours peeled off the sun like the rind from a tangerine, in big delicious chunks that browned our skin and flushed our faces.

When all we could taste was salt and we had headaches from the glare and the thirst, we each took our last ride for the day onto the beach, where we sat happily shivering in the final rays of the sun.

Sunshine and Buddy, Dwayne said, shaking his head. The beauty of youth. And he smiled at mom and told her we were naturals.

We drank our bellies full straight from the tap in the parking lot and washed the salt off of us and shed our wetsuits like writhing sea snakes.

Right then, you two grommets, Dwayne said as he threw the bag into the back of the truck where the boards were already tied down. You two were so eager I couldn't even get my hair wet today, and he patted his long red board. Next time I'll show you some moves.

When? Clara yelled; her voice was hoarse from the day's excitement.

Soon as the rollers look right, I'll let you know. School closes next week, doesn't it?

Sure does, I said.

I'll come pick you up if it looks like there's a good swell out there. That good with you, mom?

Fine with me, mom said. Just be careful they don't keep you here all day.

Oh, I have time, he said. That I have plenty of. And he got in his truck and roared off.

You two like that? Mom asked us.

Our laughter in the back of the car was all the answer she needed.

We spent every day we could in the sea, learning to surf. My mother and Clara's parents offered to pay Dwayne something for the lessons he was giving us, and he declined, saying it wasn't about the money. I wasn't sure what he got from it, but it did seem to make him happy. The beauty of youth, he'd often say to us, shaking his head as if in disbelief.

Clara became one with her board. She couldn't wait to pull off her prosthetic and get into the water. The thing she normally used to make her mobile was nothing but an anchor in the water, and the metal leg lay discarded on the sand.

Dwayne gave her a single short, wide fin that she strapped onto her foot when she was in the water, and her one good leg thrust her through the waves like a dolphin's tail. It was beautiful to see her sail across the sea, seemingly free from the restraints of gravity. She quickly wanted to go out deeper and surf bigger waves, and Dwayne had to hold her back, calling her a mustang and chastising her gently.

Clara's dad bought Clara her own bodyboard, and with it came a seven-foot, pure white surfboard for me. He told mom he had gotten it for nothing at a second-hand store, and I didn't think mom believed him, but she didn't seem to mind, either.

When there was a good, clean wave out in the deep, Dwayne would leave us and fetch the Red Charger and walk east along the beach to where the sandbank gave way to a deep rip current. He would casually launch himself into the pulling waters and shoot out past the breakers, where he would bob for a long time, sitting upright on the longboard.

Clara and I would ride a roller out to the beach and hop up onto one of the dunes where we'd sit and watch him. It was like some strange, beautiful dance, and neither of us knew why it touched us the way it did. He would be alone out there, with nothing but the sea around him. It seemed lonely from afar, but also looked like freedom at the same time.

And then he'd turn the long nose of the board away from the waves in a slow arc and begin to paddle at an angle to the wave. We'd hold our breath as he dropped down the steep slope of the swell, and then pull the board onto the face of the wave with a nonchalant flick of his hips, stepping forward and backward on the board, willing it to surf on the correct plane with a slight bend of his knees.

It was poetry in motion. Art. If I could play music to accompany it, I thought I'd play some of mom's classical records. It had that kind of deep and complicated rhythm to it. It was something that wasn't meant to be understood, just felt.

Some days we would see Whitey come walking down the beach, and he would stop to sit in the sand and watch us for a while. Mom had said I shouldn't talk to him too much. I said Whitey wasn't a stranger and she answered that he might not be a stranger but he sure was very strange.

Dwayne was a year younger than my mother. Mom said he was still a puppy. A shaggy pup, she smiled. I could tell that she liked him, and thoughts of my dad made me have brief flashes of jealousy that burned into anger toward Dwayne. I liked him too much for it to bother me for any length of time though, and besides, I needed him to teach me to surf.

A couple of days before Christmas, I told my mom I was going for a walk by the rockpools. When I was outside, I quietly snuck the surfboard out of the shed and held it under my arm and across the handlebar and biked off to the beach.

My arm ached from the awkward position around the board, and I had to cycle slowly because the nose of the board would sometimes catch the wind violently.

At the beach I sat on the board, looking out at the water, summoning the courage to go in. It was a calm day, but the swell was well out and bigger than usual, and the waves broke in long lines from west to east, rolling in perfect looping figures until the whole long thing would close up and collapse into a big line of white froth.

I only had my boardshorts on, and the water was cold and pulled my skin taut around me as I waded in. I paddled out and duck dived my way through the rollers, but the rush of the whitewash kept pushing me back to the shore. I realised I would have to use the rip current. I rode a breaker out to the beach and walked east to where the current pulled the waves flat for a narrow section.

I was alone and the beach stretched gold and white for miles in either direction. The rip pulled me out immediately as if someone was dragging me across the water against my will. My heart was pounding in my chest. Trust the current, Dwayne had said. Let the currents do the work for you.

Before I had a chance to look back to the shore to see how far I had gone, I realised I was behind the breakers and among the sets of swell, and the enormity of their rolling bulks sucked me up and over each one and it felt like riding on the backs of prehistoric dinosaurs.

I quickly saw that the waves were much bigger than I had anticipated, and that I was completely out of my league. I knew there was no way I could surf one of those monsters. I forgot what I had learned and turned the board back to the shore but realised I wouldn't be able to paddle it in against the current. If I went further east, I'd be sucked out into deep

waters where there were many other currents that went out even deeper. I didn't like my chances if that happened.

I hoped someone would see me from the beach, but it was deserted. It was just me and the sea. The sun sat still and contrary overhead. Things were suddenly vast and terrifying, and I wanted to be home. I couldn't remember why I had decided to come out alone. If I think about it now, I can see it was the first reckless push toward danger, toward doing something that was bigger than me and my mother and this little town and my whole life.

I had only one way out and that was on one of the waves. Scared lifeless and to the point of tears I paddled west, behind the breakers and sat up on my board the way we had watched Dwayne do so many times.

The set came in from the horizon in fat grey lines, and the first swell picked me up high. I could see the other waves in the line-up before it pulled me over into the bowl behind it. I turned the board and began to paddle and the second wave caught me so suddenly and completely that I reared back, trying to pull out of its grasp, but I was too late and I could feel it had me and by some instinct I was standing up on the board. I made the drop and tried to turn into the face, but I was too slow.

I got sucked into the pit of the wave as it broke, and it yanked me up its face and then threw me down, off the board and over the falls. I was pulled down and held under, the power of the thing throwing me around as if in some otherworldly washing machine. I could feel my ankle that had the leash tied to it viciously snatched upward, and then I broke the surface and it was still and white from the froth and when I looked back the next wave was already on me and I got held under again without breath in my lungs.

I didn't know what was up and what was down. For a moment I just hung in the water, my eyes closed, and thought this is what dying is like.

When I broke the surface again, I realised that I had been pushed onto the sandbank and I managed to haul myself onto the board and paddle with the last strength I had, and I caught the next roller and rode it to the beach. The ride was shorter than I thought it should have been. I sat on the sand, cold and shivering. For a moment the elation of living filled me with something that I didn't understand, and I contemplated doing it again. I felt crazed. And then I got up and picked up the board and made my way back to the parking lot and the bike. I had managed to do something on my own, just for myself, and it felt like some form of betrayal, but it also felt like liberation. I needed to risk being alone sometimes. It was a sweet taste that I would hunger after for the rest of my life.

We spent Christmas alone, just my mother and me. I had bought her a bunch of scented candles, different colours and packed in an abalone shell. She bought me a 4mm, full-body neoprene wetsuit. It was brand new and perfectly black and smooth. It smelled good and to this day the smell of a wetsuit stirs something in me.

We spent new years' eve at Clara's house. Her mother had insisted that we join them. There were lots of people there who I had never met, and they were dressed to the nines. Capetonians, mom said. There were two older boys and a girl our age. City kids who looked unimpressed with us. The eldest boy was tall and had thin lips and a sharp nose. The other was a tiny, wiry kid with a snotty nose that he kept wiping with the back of his hand. The girl had jet-black hair and the muscled shoulders of a swimmer.

They decided on the games, and we played truth or dare outside on the grass, away from the adults. When the bottle fell on Clara, both boys grinned at each other. It was the small kid's turn to ask. Truth or dare?

Dare, Clara said immediately.

He wiped his nose in anticipation, then pointed his hand at the tall boy and said: I dare you to kiss Greg.

Greg was leaning back on his elbows, but his expression showed how pleased he was with this. They had obviously planned it. Clara's mom had braided her hair and stuck it full of frangipani flowers, and she was wearing a long, smooth grey dress. She looked lovely.

Clara looked at Greg, then back at the short one. No, she said.

You have to, Greg told her. You asked for a dare.

I felt my heartbeat race. I didn't want her to kiss the boy but didn't know what I should do to stop it. Clara caught my eye, but I looked away, ashamed that I was being meek.

Come on, we want to see a kiss, the little one yelled.

Greg leaned onto one elbow, closer toward Clara. She looked at him, then turned suddenly and leaned toward me on her hands and knee and kissed me full on the lips. Her lips were very soft, and they felt wet and smooth. She tasted like Coca Cola. Her kiss held my upper lip between her lips softly, and the slightest touch of her tongue flew over me. She had her eyes closed, but mine were wide open.

Then she pulled back, and for a brief moment I saw her parted lips and the wet tip of her tongue in the low light. I could just see that she was blushing. All the other kids had been staring at us. There was a very awkward silence. Then Greg got up. Come on, he said to the

small kid, I'm bored with this game. The boys left, and the girls smiled at each other, sharing some secret knowledge that I was oblivious to. I bulged in my shorts and sat with my legs up, hoping nobody would notice.

Clara didn't say anything about the kiss afterwards, and I didn't ask, but I felt irrevocably tied to her after that moment, as if she were some sort of extension of myself - or I of her.

The years after my father's death were somehow calm and serene. I thought of him often, with love and regret, and when the tears finally dried up what was left were fond memories of him ruffling my hair, calling me Danman and poking jokes at me over little things, gentle mocking in order to teach me. When the sorrow left, what remained was thoughts of him that put a lopsided grin on my face.

I had thought that I had let go of Christopher, but he was still there, lurking in the shadows that followed me everywhere. My image of him had become even more blurred and distorted and I started to wonder whether there was something wrong with me for seeing him at all. I think I already knew at that young age that there was something about Christopher that I would have to deal with on a deep, personal level, and that nobody but me would be able to see it through.

Clara and I surfed in the sun and in the rain. On most days it was just the two of us bobbing out in the big ocean, alone and free. There were a few older kids who surfed but we seldom spent time with them other than in the water, where they tolerated our presence as long as we kept to our place in the line-up and didn't steal their waves. The weekends and summer holidays brought wealthy kids and their parents to our little town, pretty girls with beautiful hair and sleek dresses and bronze boys with expensive sneakers. We smirked at them and kept to ourselves.

We had to partake in at least one school sport, but that meant less time to surf. Dwayne came up with a plan that freed us from monotonous team sports and granted us our afternoons to ourselves. He started a surfing club and sent a letter to the school principal which got our little club accepted as an extramural activity. Clara and I were its only members.

When the sea was too rough or dead and flat, we would spend our time at the rockpool, and when the winter storms rolled in, we would go to the library and read. Clara

would distract the librarian with a polite question, and I would sneak off to grab a Mills and Boon title off the forbidden shelves, and we would hide it among our other books and sit in a corner and read it together, our arms touching and our breaths coming hot and sharp.

We paged through the boring bits and stopped to read where the kissing started. We didn't fully understand what exactly was happening in these books, but it was exciting and we both wanted to know more about sex and the desires of youth which we had, by then, both felt the first tugs of.

We joked about French kissing and stuck our tongues out at each other in mock disgust, but I could remember the delicious wet tip of Clara's tongue which I had felt so briefly when she had kissed me on the mouth.

When we got to Clara's house one afternoon and nobody was there, we grew quiet together in her room. Sitting on her bed she said we should try it. Excitement and fear coursed through me.

Let's just do a normal kiss first, she said.

I could barely speak but agreed. I leaned toward her, my whole body trembling, and with closed eyes our lips met and we held the kiss for a long time, so long that I felt the warmth of her breath through her nose. I opened my eyes and was surprised to see that she had hers open and was looking at my face with a new interest.

We broke the kiss and pulled back, and she put her hand on my shoulder and drew me closer and when we kissed again, our lips now slightly parted off their own accord, the searching snake of her tongue crept wet into my mouth and the shock of it drove me wild. Our tongues tumbled over each other in a probing way, while the rest of our bodies were held perfectly still in a self-conscious pose. It felt like hours before we let each other go, both too afraid of the awkwardness that would follow when we looked at each other again.

She wiped her lips softly with the back of her hand, and the faint, white fuzz on her arm showed against her skin and I could see that she had gooseflesh. That was nice, she said. We kissed again and kept at it until we heard the door slam shut and her mother calling to her. When we came down the stairs, our faces flushed, Clara's mother gave us a curious look.

Clara explained what first base meant, and I was very proud of this achievement. It was our secret and the delightfulness of it preoccupied my thoughts constantly. What are the other bases? I wanted to know.

Touching, she said.

But we touch all the time.

No silly, she laughed. It's when you touch each other's… you know.

I shook my head.

She rolled her eyes at my ignorance. Private parts, she said.

I thought of the things we had read slyly in the library; how wonderful it would be to seek out her body and discover what was there.

How old must we be to do that?

I don't know, she said. I guess we can try.

She was like some improbable Nabokovian creature. Eager and erotically inquisitive. She was more aware of our bodies than I was, and her curious nature pushed her at a pace far greater than that of other kids our age. I was just all too happy to go with her, wherever it might lead.

We thought that making love meant we had to lie on top of each other, completely naked, and kiss. It was the sort of wild adventure that Clara would set off on. We timed it for when my mother wasn't home, and on my bed, under the covers, we each took off our clothes, and then I lied on top of Clara and we kissed.

Most of what I can remember of that cloudy afternoon in my bed is a painful desire to do something, anything more, but not knowing how to fulfil the moment. Clara's tiny fingers eagerly explored me, and I placed my shaking hand on parts of her, and then withdrew it, and then we got dressed under the covers and I stole visions of her back and bum, and I rode her back home perched on my bike like some Roman marbled sculpture pictured in the encyclopaedias in the library.

How parents suspect things, how they intuit their children's actions, was a mystery to us. Not long after that dreamy afternoon in my bed, Clara's mom had a talk with her about the birds and the bees, and that wondrous afternoon in my bed was pushed from exciting possibility to aching memory.

We kept up our illicit reading in the library, and our understanding of first and second base developed. We were seen as a couple at school, and I called Clara my girlfriend, and she told me how, in Montana, the kids called it going steady.

Sometimes we went weeks without kissing, and I would wait, mad with the thought of it, until Clara would coyly suggest it, and we would go to the rockpool or the fort in the dunes, and then spend hours kissing until our mouths were sore and our lips chapped. She was in control of our youthful desires, and I liked how it felt to let her decide, to just be there, ready and willing, for her.

We had no need to discuss the afternoon in my bed. It was beautiful how we kept it to ourselves, as if we were carrying something valuable and fragile between us and had to handle it with the utmost care.

It was when the light by the sea reflected Clara back at me through the mysterious mechanisations of a long, slim mirror, that I reached a level of intimacy with her that was mature well beyond our years.

We were alone in her room. A warm wind that meant rain pushed the curtains and folded then into the room. The sky was blue outside, and the light entered the window in beats through the flapping cloth. Clara was lying on the bed, a book in one hand, the other rubbing her stump.

She was trying to massage the pain away. I was in the corner, sitting on the carpet, reading something by Terry Pratchett that made me laugh out loud and then impatiently reread passages of it to Clara. After one such section, she kept quiet and I looked up to see that she was softly crying. Her pain had become worse and the pills weren't working.

Is my mom back yet? She kept her eyes shut under the tears.

No, she said she'll be back late afternoon. Maria's still here. Must I call her for you?

No, she said. Mom rubs my leg with oil. It helps.

I'll do it for you, I said automatically.

She opened her eyes, pooled wet, and nodded once at me.

I sat next to her on the bed and she handed me a small jar of arnica oil and told me how to warm it in my hands. Then she hitched up her dress high over her thighs and lay back with one hand over her eyes.

I had never touched her leg frankly, only in brief fumbles of childish play. It felt like the most private part of her. I lowered my hands onto the beginning of her stump, the ridges of the scarring protruding onto my touch, and I slowly pushed both my cupped hands reverently over her stump and up over her thigh.

She gave a deep, gratified sigh, and I slid my slick hands up and down her leg, keeping the pressure soft at the end where I imagined it would hurt. She spoke to me in a whisper, instructing me where to apply more force, and after I had followed her directions I managed some sort of rhythm and Clara fell completely still and it was only the rise of her chest that showed she was still alive.

With her eyes closed I drank in every image of that leg, loving it not for what it was but for who it belonged to. I crept up almost into the crook of her legs where her sheer white panties showed but stopped firmly at an invisible line that was torture to draw.

Somewhere else, far away, I could hear the sea crash and pull across the sand, and the warm wind was fragrant and pleasant coming into the room, and among the two of us there was no sound. I was lulled into an enjoyable placidity. Time coalesced.

Thanks Danny, I feel better now.

Pulled out of my trance I saw Clara smiling at me. The wind had slowed, and the light slanted into the room at a different angle.

Does it still hurt?

The pain never really goes away, but you did make me feel better. Her voice came to me slow and thick, as if through mist.

I was desperate for the moment not to end. What else can I do?

She rolled her eyes. Magically bring my leg back, she joked.

I turned my head away from her, slightly shamed. In the far corner of her room stood a tall mirror, and I saw us both reflected back in it. We looked small and far away, but the image was clear. I thought about the photo she had shown me of both of her legs from before her accident, and my mind jumped a clear arc across the room toward that mirror.

I moved quickly. The mirror was light and freestanding, and I picked it up and carried it to Clara's bed.

What are you doing?

Trust me?

Yes, she said immediately. But what are you going to do with my mirror?

I just want to try something. Please, Clara.

OK, she said. She was up on both her elbows.

Just lie still, I said.

I placed the mirror on the bed between her legs. I slid it slowly up toward her. She watched me like a hawk as I angled the mirror toward her good leg and moved to that side of her bed. I looked in the mirror. It was like seeing the photo of both her good legs again.

Look at your leg, I said.

She looked first at her good leg, then at the other.

No. Look at it in the mirror. I held the mirror and told her to lean her head toward her good leg. She looked at it. Her whole body jerked back, as if she had been startled. She gasped loudly. She looked into the mirror with fiery intensity. She slowly twitched the toes of her foot, and in the mirror an opposite foot did the same. Clara giggled. She stretched out her whole leg, then leaned on one elbow and with the other hand pulled up her dress completely, exposing her underwear without any reserve.

In the mirror was another full and golden leg. A twin to the vital, live leg on the bed. Her thighs were smooth and thin, and her tiny toes danced about, ten miniature ballerinas that pirouetted lightly in the warm glow of the late afternoon.

Oh Danny, it's as if I can feel it again. I *can* feel it again. She bent her leg at the knee, and the twin obeyed on time. I was smiling. She kept making all kinds of movements with her leg, and from where I stood it looked as if she were running.

If I move it around, I can't feel the pain, she yelled, her voice loud and shrill in the room. Tears were running down her cheeks, but she was smiling. I stood over Clara, holding the mirror, while she experimented with movements. She kept smiling up at me with wet eyes, and I felt like I could pick up the earth and carry it.

What in God's name are you two doing? Clara's mother was standing in the doorway, glaring angrily at us, and I looked at Clara for help.

Look mommy, Clara said. Danny made me all better.

Some years later, after Clara had left me, a doctor in America published *Phantoms in the Brain*, in which he detailed a similar technique used on amputees which he dubbed mirror therapy; but we had got there first, alone on Clara's bed in a small coastal town at the bottom of the world, and in our own creative, naïve way. Through an act of love. I think it are moments like these that happen between two people that build a mass of trust which becomes the dense gravity that keeps pulling them inexorably together for the rest of their lives.

CHAPTER TEN

There had been an ongoing investigation into the deaths of my father and uncle. The same had happened after Christopher's death.

My mother had spent entire evenings at first, poring over boxes of typed papers and enveloped letters which, it seemed to me, had appeared out of nowhere. Just your dad's old things, she had said, as if they were of little value.

At school there had been rumours about the drownings. There were always rumours, and anyway, I lived mostly in my head and for Clara, so I paid them little heed. People spin a web of gossip to keep themselves entertained, I thought to myself. And we were in high school by then, where little of the small town's politics and gossip found much purchase.

At fourteen, after years of surfing and diving in the ocean, my shoulders had broadened and the muscles covering my stomach had tightened and set into regular patterns. Puberty had come early, and I thought this might have had something to do with Clara and the incessant desire I felt for her. I was bronzed by the sun. I felt fit and healthy. Clara had changed too.

She had stretched and curved into forms that felt moulded to my hands. She was slightly taller than me, but not by much. Her shoulders were well defined, and her skin shone against the blonde of her hair. Her breasts filled out. She had started shaving her leg, and it gleamed fresh in the sun, and when she was in her bikini, I could still glimpse the familiar white fuzz covering her thighs.

Clara and I kept our secrets. Where we went and what we did was the topic of much discussion at school, and Clara seemed to relish in the often-lewd attention it bestowed on her; as if she felt empowered by the mystery it created. I avoided any questions as best as I could. Some of the boys would try to goad me into telling them what I did with the girl with one leg. How do you do it with a girl without both legs? they'd laugh. I would smile and shake my head, and they would move on to other topics.

Levi, still bespectacled, awkward and a social outcast, convinced me to go with him and join the high school newspaper. I wrote my first article for the paper. My essay piece turned into a lengthy ramble that inelegantly asked why our school sports teams weren't more integrated yet, in order to build a stronger team which might then actually have a chance of winning some matches.

It was the first time that I wrote something for a potential audience of students and their parents, and my hand flew across the page chasing the next words as they rushed out of my mind in one long, steady stream. When I was done, I reread it and felt very good about it. I wrote it over in a neat hand and showed it to Levi.

Levi read it once, looked at me over his glasses and, sniffing, said: Danny, the new principal won't let us run this.

Why?

Just too controversial for the school.

Why should what I wrote be taken as controversial?

You know why, Levi said. Why don't you rather write something on surfing?

You know that Clara says we're a backwater bunch? I asked him.

Well, easy for her to say. She has an American passport. Americans can say whatever they want about us.

I ended up writing a short piece on surfing as a sport, which Levi liked. I saw my name in print for the first time and decided I wanted to start writing essays and stories like my father had done. I asked mom if I could have the typewriter.

It was a strange concept, to want to write. I believe a love of reading gave rise to the idea. Perhaps I wanted to be like my father, to have something tangible of him. Maybe I wanted to make him proud. My mother sat quietly at the kitchen table and listened as I told her about the essays I would write. She nodded as I spoke.

You should start by keeping a diary, as well as a notebook, she advised. Write down your thoughts, or just what happened, in your diary every evening. It will teach you to reflect. Keep a notebook at hand to write down ideas, and those good sentences that can be so fickle.

How do you know so much about writing?

I went to university too, she said. A long time ago.

Was dad happy as a journalist? Is it a good job?

It can be, she said. But I have found happiness has less to do with what you do, than with how you do it. She smiled at me. Right now, though, you shouldn't worry too much about these things. Having fun should be your main priority.

Can I have the typewriter? I asked again.

Sure. Come help me take it out. She led me to her room and opened her cupboard. She pushed apart the rows of dresses hanging from the rail. The typewriter sat on a yellowed box on the floor of her cupboard. I picked it up. The box underneath was sealed with brown box tape. Mom quickly pulled the dresses back on the railing.

I put the typewriter down on the kitchen table, and mom wiped the dust from it. We'll have to get you a fresh ribbon for it, she said.

What did dad write about?

Mom pulled out a chair and sat down. He wrote about lots of things, she said. He wrote for one of the big newspapers. He covered sports for a while. Then mostly politics later on. He was quite good.

Why did he stop?

I guess people didn't like what he had to say, she said. Oh, it's all very boring, Danny Boy. And it feels so long ago.

I could feel questions nagging at me. It felt as if I lived on the periphery of my own life, only allowed to know what was deemed necessary by adults. Policed, somehow. I felt surrounded by lies and conspiracies. Sheltered from the truth. I wanted to know more.

What about apartheid? I asked, looking at the typewriter.

Oh Danny. Where are all these questions coming from?

I want to know.

It's complicated, she sighed.

Well did he write about apartheid issues? Was that why he lost his job?

Yes, and no.

What does that mean?

It means this is a country where things come to pass beyond our control, mom said. Kids shouldn't have to worry about the politics of a few old men.

I don't understand.

Danny, this country we call home, one your father went to war for, has never had only one single history. It is a story I do not yet know how to tell you.

Just tell me what you know. What was our part in all of this?

Our part? she mused. Well, much the same as everybody else's, I guess. People in our generation just kept our heads down and tried to make a living. None of us really wanted anything to do with the sordid government policies of the time. Your dad felt… compelled to write about it. And look where that got him.

Then that was our part, I said. We chose to do nothing. To bury our heads in the sand.

Danny, it is nowhere near as simple as you are making it out to be.

Why isn't it? It seems simple to me.

Well, it is not. It has never been. Africa is complicated.

We're still in Africa, mom. Even if we are hiding out in some small, windswept bay.

Look, Daniel. We brought you here because this community was, in a way, sheltered from many of the bad things that had been happening. Your father spoke out against the policies of the Nationalist Government and that got him fired and placed on a watchlist. We didn't feel safe in Johannesburg.

That's not a reason to hide away.

We wanted to be safe. After Chris… after what happened with your brother, we all fell apart in different ways. Your father and I made decisions in your best interest, to the best of our abilities. I'll grant you we've made mistakes; but we set a course and we stayed on it. Sometimes that is all you can do as a parent.

Have you been lying to me about everything? What haven't you told me?

Parents lie! She was standing over me now, her index finger only millimetres from my nose. She had never before shouted at me with such violence. A parent's job, Daniel, is to protect her children. One day, you will understand.

Like you protected Christopher?

The slap was so sudden and so sharp that it threw me back against the kitchen counter. My ears rang from the fury of it. Mom said nothing. She stared me down.

I'm sorry, I said. I didn't mean to say that.

Never speak like that again. The things we've done for you, to protect you from the world… You do not get to speak to me like that ever again. How dare you? You of all people. She turned; her shoulders slumped in resignation. Her bedroom door slammed shut, and then the house was very quiet. The typewriter stood on the kitchen table, a silent witness.

I had never really known my mother. We know little of the adults who raise us, and in youth are unable to gauge their characters. After the loss of both my brother and my father, the day to day life in our house was based on routine more than anything else. We ate breakfast and dinner at a set time every day, and our conversations would only touch on the mundane details of our daily goings on. I was happy, yes, but unfulfilled. There was love left in the relationship between us, but not much depth. We didn't hug or kiss anymore, we never cuddled. At the time it felt normal but, looking back, I can see how she had distanced herself from me. Perhaps that was due to a fear of losing me too.

The most honest memory that I have of us was that slap. It is a moment to which I have clung all my life. A moment of truth. Sometimes I would rile her up, hoping she would lash out at me, show some passion, but she never hit me again. When I would really taunt her, she would only give me a disdainful smile and walk away. I must have reminded her of all that she had lost.

She had many affairs over the years. I would come home after a day out surfing and would smell the sour sweat and tobacco scent of another man. Another stranger. She was always very careful with these encounters, and I seldom saw her lovers. I was only aware of their presence in a sensory way. The droplets of piss on the open toilet bowl, the smells, the heavy silence which hung over us, as if she knew I knew and was just waiting for me to say something so that she can confirm it in an act of defiance.

One man came back more than once. There would always be a glass that smelled of brandy left standing in the kitchen. This one didn't reek as most of the others did. He smelled like woodsmoke and cheap, green soap. He smelled like the fynbos against the mountainside. He was somehow familiar to me.

It was this lingering presence that made me take down the box with my father's ashes one afternoon, and set out up the mountain, toward the cave. It felt as if his memory was being defiled by this other male manifestation. I didn't care what my mother would say. She never even looked at the box where it sat collecting dust.

Climbing up to the cave, I was aware of the irony of carrying him, the only earthly remnants of him, in my hands as I ascended. It was a hot day and the wind was light and dry. I clambered my way to the mouth of the cave in the shadowy lee of the imposing cliff faces above.

When I got to the mouth of the cave, I was winded and wet with perspiration. Everything looked exactly as it had the day when I had stood there with my father. It was smaller on the inside than I remembered, but the view over the town and across the calm, blue ocean was unchanged. I sat down in the mouth of the cave and looked far across the sea. The box of ashes was between my legs. Christopher's presence clung around us, too.

I could barely remember my father's face, or the sound of his voice. I could imagine the smell of him, and still feel his strong hands ruffling my hair with affection, but so much had been lost with time. I placed my hand on the box. I miss you, dad. I miss you every day.

There was no reply. I knew there wouldn't be, couldn't ever be again, yet for a brief moment I had closed my eyes and hoped that there would be some hint of him, some farewell. There was only ash. I lifted the top off the box. Inside was a clear plastic bag that contained the ashes. It contained more of the coarse grey and white material than I had expected. I lifted it out and opened it. I put my nose in the bag and smelled it, half expecting the putrid olfactory punch of decay. It smelt of nothing. Death was sterile.

I stood up and walked to a ledge that extended over the steep dropdown, upturned the bag and let the ash slowly trickle out. It trailed down in a grey column, and then the slight wind picked it up and twirled it back on itself and blew it up and over me in a fine cloud. For a brief moment, I stood in a haze of my father's ashes, surrounded by the last corporeal remnants of him. As it cleared, like the last fingers of smoke from a dying fire, I was left standing with the empty plastic bag and no idea of what to do with it.

I took the wooden box back down with me, and the plastic bag I stuffed into the back pocket of my pants. I decided I will have to throw it in the trash. I had considered burying the

box and the bag in the soft soil of the cave, amidst the shell middens of the original people of the land, but that would have been a taint on the landscape and the history of the cave.

These were all small, obscene attempts at letting go; not so much of the dead and their memories, but rather of parts of myself that no longer served a purpose. I had given the photo of Christopher to the sea and my father's ashes to the mountain winds. A plastic bag, however significant, belonged in the trash.

When the steepest section was behind me, I ran down the rest of the mountainside in long, flying strides, the air whipping past my ears, exhilarated by the speed and the peril of it. At home I took the box and placed it on the table in the corner of my room. In time I filled it with little keepsakes that I collected over the years. Rocks, fragments of coloured glass, a letter from Clara. I filled the box with pieces of me.

My mother noticed the missing box that very same evening. The house was quiet and dimly lit by the gas lanterns. Although Betty's Bay had received electrical reticulation only two years after we first moved there, we were still lighting the gas lanterns every night. Clinging to the past. There was an electrical box outside the yard, and we could connect to the grid, but our landlord, who did as little maintenance to the place as possible, had said that the cost of wiring the house was too high and that it would increase the rent. When we sat down to dinner she said, as she was loading her fork: I see you took down your father's ashes. I trust you thought of a suitable location for him.

I cleared my throat. Yes. I did.

Well? Mountain or sea? Which will it be? I could see she had enjoyed quite a few whiskey's by then.

Mountain, I answered. I strew his ashes out near the cave.

She chewed her food slowly, keeping her eyes on me. Well, that would make it rather difficult for me to visit then, wouldn't it?

I didn't think you'd mind, I said. I strew him from a ledge. The wind blew it all over the place. You could just look at the mountain if you need something to look at. I picked at my food to avert my eyes. She could have him on the mountain, I thought, but I needed him in the wind. There's wind everywhere.

The silence was cold between us. She laughed humourlessly. I see the young bull is growing his horns, she said. I guess it was bound to happen sooner than later.

I frowned at her questioningly.

It means you're growing up. Becoming a man. She drank the last of the amber stuff and stood to refill her drink. The ice clinked into the glass twice. She pushed her plate aside as she sat down. She hadn't eaten much.

It was just sitting there on the shelf, gathering dust, I explained.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, she laughed, swirling the liquid in her glass and taking a sip. I'm not angry, Daniel. Just tired.

I finished my food in silence and went to bed.

There was only a week left of the schoolyear. Then it would be the long summer holidays which would mean Clara and I would spend every second we could together. Our time together had increasingly, throughout the last year, turned from childish play and naïve banter, to eager lustful episodes of erotic study. What had all along been determined by curiosity and ignorance had developed into a force driven and controlled by our evolving adolescent bodies. Something that was becoming a thing beyond our control.

By then we had absorbed every lascivious detail from the bodice rippers in the library, and our understanding of the intricacies of sex had been greatly helped along by an informative book Clara's mother had given her to read when she had started to go through puberty. We took turns to read the book, then sat together next to our rockpool and discussed it with wonderment and in great detail.

By the end of that year my hands had learnt how to cup her soft breasts and to kiss her neck in yielding flutters. She whispered instructions eagerly, without any sign of timidity, and our tentative stimulation brought us both to delicate, exquisite climax. When I look at my own children now it is hard to comprehend how natural and innocuous these sexual acts were between Clara and me. The beauty of youth, as Dwayne called it. If only everybody could be so lucky to experience their sexual awakening in such a tender, innocent way. I was devastatingly in love. It was the ultimate agony.

The ultimate intimacy, however, remained framed by the long mirror in Clara's room. Whenever we were alone in her house we would forego the more erotic pursuits and, in silent agreement, I would bring the mirror to her bed and massage her leg with arnica and then sit and watch as the pain left her body and drained out of her through the enchanted healing of the image reflected back to her. It was our cure against the injustices of the world.

By then we had both become very proficient surfers. We were strong and well trained by Dwayne, who had ceased formally instructing us, saying he had taught us everything he knew. He had been a perfect mentor to us both: for Clara he was a foil against the soft-natured safeguarding of her father, and for me he was a kind of father figure that gave me some semblance of what masculinity should look like. I was drawn to such figures wherever I could find them.

We saw less and less of Dwayne that summer. We made no secret of our affections for each other in front of him, and I guessed then that it had made him uncomfortable. I should have known what the real reason for his distant nature was, but as with most things it took a crisis for me to comprehend what was really going on.

Clara and I were bobbing up and down on our boards in the swell. It was a short wave that day that hit the sandbank and closed up in one enormous dump of angry water, and we ended up sitting behind the backline, joking about school and dreaming about what next year at the high school might hold in store for us.

Clara saw it first. Look at the smoke, she said quietly.

I turned and looked over my shoulder toward the shore. In the distance, against the foot of the mountains, a grey and white plume rose into the sky like some biblical tower.

Fire, I said.

No shit, Clara laughed and splashed water at me. We better go back out, this wind is blowing up.

We paddled back to land and glided in on the same messy wave. The sky had taken on an angry red glow from the smoke. The wind was in our faces and coming hot down the mountainsides. That's pushing toward your place, Clara said, a worried look on her face.

We better hurry. I grabbed our gear as Clara fastened her leg, then helped her over the sand toward the parking lot where we had left my bike. As we turned left onto Bass Road, toward Clara's place, we heard the familiar stutter of the Beetle behind us and the weak blare of the horn. The car stopped next to us, in the middle of the road.

Come on, let's go, my mother said. Put it all on the roof. We can drop your gear at your house, Clara. I tied the boards and the bike onto the roof of the car in an awkward bundle, and we set off. The roads were suddenly quite busy, and familiar people in familiar cars drove by, each one stopping as it passed us to have a quick word. It seemed the fire was bad and had started in a thick stand of brush and with the wind coming in like it was, it was heading down the slopes and toward the houses next to the main road.

We had experienced these wild mountain blazes before, but the familiar excitement and dread was always there. Houses had been eaten up previously, and the fires sometimes got so big that they would ride the wind and jump the main road or the firebreaks with ease and eat up hundreds of hectares of delicate fynbos and burn so close to some houses that the heat would break the windows and set the curtains alight and then the whole place would go up in a pillar of black, greasy smoke.

Because the town was so constricted by land and sea, it often happened that you could be stranded on one side of town if the fire department and police closed off the roads. When we got to Clara's house and climbed out of the car, the smoke was thick around us.

As we stood next to the car Clara's parents pulled up. They had just come back from the shop where they had gone to find news on the blaze.

It's a bad one, Clara's dad said. It's pushing down to the main road and west toward the centre of town. They're closing the main road now.

Clara was concerned about Maria, but her mother said she had left early to visit her sister in the next town.

Why don't you all come to our house for the night, my mother said. Wait it out there. At least we'll be out of the smoke and can monitor it from there. If the wind changes, we could move east over the Palmiet River.

Clara's parents looked at each other for a while, and it was decided. We'll need to grab a few things, her dad said. Clara drove with us to my house. Mom took us through the gravel roads next to the coast, and we came out of the smoke into fresh blue air and arrived at the cottage. Looking west from there we could see the entire centre of the town was smothered under a thick blanket of smoke.

Clara's parents arrived soon after. Our house felt extremely small and stuffy with everyone in it, and Clara and I climbed up the mountain behind the house a ways to have a better view of the fire. The sun had gone down behind the mountains, and with all the smoke to the west it was becoming gloomy and ominous. Although we seemed to be well clear of the smoke we could still smell it on ourselves as it wafted across the whole area in mysteries eddies of wind.

There were indistinct red glows in the smoke, but we could not see the actual flames and we soon made our way back down. Mom had made a bed for me on the floor of my room – Clara was to sleep in mine. Mom had given her bed to Clara's parents and she was going to sleep on the couch in the lounge.

The grownups stayed up late and checked on the fire. We were allowed to stay up with them and sat huddling under blankets on the porch looking at the ominous glow of it in the distance. The police and fire department trucks were constantly patrolling the road to make sure nobody was foolish enough to venture into the smoke and flames, and Clara's dad walked down to the tar road a couple of times to get updates from them. The fire had stayed above Clarence Drive and was by then burning up the mountainside, and no houses had been in danger yet.

It must have been past midnight when I heard an engine roar in a familiar tone and cut out in our driveway. I could hear the adults greeting someone through the open door of my room. Clara was still fast asleep in my bed, and I got up and crept out. I walked softly toward the kitchen and leaned around the doorway. It was Dwayne, and I could just hear Clara's dad asking him questions as he came in through the backdoor and tenderly hugged my mother. Then he put his hands on her face and kissed her on her forehead with a worried look on his face. Clara's parents averted their eyes.

I should have known. I knew the smell of him. The clean soap and fynbos scent. He was the man my mother had been seeing regularly. It was his stains, familiar to me by then, that I had found so often in her bed. He'd been too busy sleeping with her, in my father's bed, to spend time surfing with us. I imagined the naked soles of his feet, which I had so often seen splayed out flat on his surfboard, sticking out from under the bedcovers. His hairy, muscled torso against my mother's body.

That's just great, I said softly from the doorway.

They all looked up at me in surprise. My mother gave a long sigh and looked from me to Dwayne. Buddy… he said, then closed his mouth again. I turned around and went to bed, closing the door behind me. They can come and open it again if they want to, I thought. I got into my bed on the floor.

You all right? Clara asked quietly. She must have heard them too.

My mind raced as I tried to figure it all out. How her parents had averted their gaze when Dwayne kissed my mother, without any sign of surprise. It's what happens in small towns. Everybody knows everybody's business. The gossip spreads easily, like a plague, and the adults keep it tight in their web of lies. Small towns have open doors, my mother had said. Do they really think they kept us safe in their web of lies? But Clara must have heard the faint vibrations of the truth.

Did you know? My voice sounded angry.

She was silent for a while. Some of it, she said.

I'm going to sleep now.

Danny, come on.

No, I said. And then I fell asleep easily, as if nothing had happened. As if there wasn't a fire raging over the mountains outside, consuming everything in its path indiscriminately.

The next morning, I woke late. The house was quiet again. I expected to find everyone in the kitchen or out on the porch, but nobody was there. Just our car stood in the driveway. The skies had cleared away most of the smoke, but the acrid smell of it was everywhere and every surface in the house was covered in a thin layer of soot.

I went out through the backdoor and found my mother hanging dishcloths on the washing line. Morning, she said without looking at me.

Morning, I said under my breath.

Fire's out. Mostly.

That's good, I said. Where's everybody?

Home. To check on their own things. No school today. She flung a rag across her shoulder and turned to me. We have to talk. Her eyes were red and bloodshot. They must have stayed up all night. Or she drank too much again. Or she cried. I couldn't be sure which.

I don't feel like talking, I said, turning to go back in.

Daniel, sit down. She pulled the rag off her shoulder and motioned me to one of the plastic chairs. She sat down opposite me.

I know, I said. It's complicated. That's what you're going to say, isn't it?

She shook her head a little. Well, yes, it sort of is.

I don't care, I said. Do whatever you want.

I know he's your friend, Daniel, but he has become a comfort to me. Grownups also get lonely. I like him, she said with a little smile.

Why? I asked.

She thought for a while. He makes me laugh and I need some adult conversation from time to time.

You mean you're having sex with him, I said flatly. This took her aback. She rubbed her eyes with her palms. She hadn't had the talk with me yet. I wondered whether she had even noticed that I had reached puberty. Clara's parents had so far been very open with her

about the changes of her body and the facts around sex. Perhaps American parents were just more honest with their children, I thought.

What do you know about sex? she asked. Wait, you and Clara aren't… She couldn't finish the sentence. Daniel?

Of course not, we're just friends, I lied. But we read. The kids at school talk about it all the time. You do know we're in high school, right?

She looked a little lost. Do you mean to say there are kids at school, in your age group, having sex?

Maybe, I don't know. More lies coming out of my mouth. I did know, of course. We all knew each other's business.

Oh God, my mother said. I always figured your father would have this talk with you.

Yeah well, he's gone. I got up. Anyway, I said over my shoulder, I got all the facts from books. And friends. I'm not stupid.

Come back here, she said.

Have fun with Dwayne, I said and went inside. I got my gear and went back out to get the bike. She was still standing outside, looking up at the mountain, having a cigarette as I biked down the drive.

A few days later the school closed, and the summer holidays began, but I had lost some of the excitement I had felt. I avoided Clara. I felt betrayed that she hadn't shared her knowledge of Dwayne and my mother with me. How could she of all people have kept something like that from me?

The big holiday crowds hadn't arrived yet, and I surfed alone for the first week or two of the holidays. I kept going harder and attacking bigger waves, pushing myself and getting spat about by the sea for my effort.

Then one afternoon, Clara's dad was standing in our driveway when I got back from the beach. He was alone and my mother was still at work. He had his long, doglike smile out in full force, his droopy eyes sagging even lower than usual.

Hi Danny, he said.

Hi. I parked the bike and the surfboard against the wall of the cottage.

There was a short, uncomfortable silence. We had never really learned how to communicate. Perhaps we were both too inhibited. Clara misses you, he finally said.

This made me blush and look down. Sorry, I said, I've been very busy.

Yes, well, it is a busy time of year, he drawled in his thick accent. I just thought I'd swing by and check on you. The house has been quiet without your visits.

Yeah, a lot going on, was the best I could do.

He looked at me for a while, that sad smile pushing down on me. You should talk to her, Danny. You're best friends. Talk it out, OK? Had I detected genuine interest, I wondered?

I will, I said.

He pursed his lips and stood still, as if he was about to say something, but then he let the thought go in a puff of breath. Very good. Send my regards to your mother. And he left.

I sat in my room and thought about Clara. I had avoided her because I was angry, but I missed her, too. Even Christopher's ghostly presence had weighed heavier on me lately. I felt petty for hurting her. We never went more than a day or two without seeing each other. It was already late, and I thought I'd look desperate if I went there then, so I decided to go early the next day.

When I got there the house was quiet. Their car wasn't in the driveway. I knocked on the door, tried the handle. It was locked. I sat on the porch to wait. The cicadas were trilling the sound of the dunes, and I could already tell that it was going to be a hot day. I heard Clara's laugh in the distance, and she and Maria came walking up the driveway, back from a walk. She saw me as I rose, and immediately burst out smiling. She gave me a little quick wave.

Hi, I said when they reached the house.

Hi, she said smiling. I'm glad you came. Maria opened the door and we went in. It was cool inside. Come on up, Clara said from the stairs.

We sat on her bed. We made small talk for a while. How's this one and that one? It was strangely awkward. She looked at me fixedly: I hope you're not angry with me anymore.

I shook my head. No. I'm sorry I was so distant. I should have come earlier.

I looked for you at the fort and the beach. I even saw you surfing once, but I didn't want to bother you. Thought you might need some time.

Yeah, I was an ass. Sorry.

It's OK. How's things at home? she asked.

I shrugged. The same, I guess. Haven't seen Dwayne since the fire. Mom's quiet. We had a talk, I said, stressing the word talk.

She raised her eyebrow. A talk?

I told her about the strange conversation that had happened between my mother and me the other day. She had her hand in front of her face in shock. You don't think she thinks…? she gasped, a guilty smile badly hidden beneath her fingers.

I don't really think so, I said. Doesn't matter what she thinks.

There was another dragging silence between us. We had discussed sex before. Had even talked about when we would be old enough. Fifteen? Sixteen? How should we have known? We knew of at least one girl our age who it was rumoured had lost her virginity with an older boy behind the wall of the tennis court. I think the ability we had of talking so openly and comfortably about embarrassing subjects was part of how we flirted. We pushed the boundaries of what was considered polite conversation.

My parents went to the city, Clara said. They're only due back late tonight. I can ask Maria to pack us lunch and we can have a picnic on the beach?

That'll be fun, I said.

That afternoon will always be etched onto my mind in a jumble of short, sharp memories. Maria packed us a big lunch and a blanket, her one eyebrow always vigilantly raised as if she didn't trust us. And she would have been right not to.

We had been so protected. Not just by the environment in which we were raised, but also by the stories that had been curated for us. Made to fit us. Today they talk of helicopter parents and coddled children, but we were the true innocents – for a while at least. We had access to very little popular culture such as television to influence us. The books available to us were mostly old and conservative; censored for our emotional education by the previous paternal government, those abhorrent guardians of virtue. Peer pressure never penetrated very far into the bubble Clara and I whirled around ourselves. Free and innocent like wild things. I guess you couldn't blame our parents for believing we would not get up to any trouble. We were in Eden, after all.

We made our way over the dunes and down the beach, toward our fort. The sea was glistening, and the water looked wet and delicious. We spread the blanket just above the tide line, knowing it was waning. We had the concerto of the sea and the gulls to serenade us.

We spread crackers with cream cheese, ate crisps from the packet, and burst ripe red cherry tomatoes between our tongues and the ridges of our palettes. We chatted easily about school. Clara told me about a book she had been reading of an amputee who became a Paralympic snow skiing champion. We drank Fanta orange straight from the glass bottle, passing it between us like a cool baton.

When both our brows and backs were moist from the heat of the sun, Clara took off her leg and, sitting, pulled her dress over her head. Her bikini top and bottom were black and showed off her supple skin. I jumped up and pulled off my shirt, and she gave me her hand and I helped her up and we entered the crystal blue water. We hopped in, her arm around my

shoulder, deep out across the sandbank. To our left there were a few beachgoers, but it was mostly quiet where we were.

When the water crept up over our navels, Clara put her arms around my neck and wrapped her cool thighs around my hips. Our foreheads met and I waded us in until the gentle swell made us bounce lightly up and down with the rise of it and pushed the water up to our necks. I kissed her, light at first, then eagerly, and the taste of her tongue and the drops of saltwater mixed together into a suggestion of flavour. Her wet hair drifted like drenched snakes around our shoulders. I held onto her ass, and her arms pulled around me completely so that I could feel her nipples hard against my chest.

When we got out, we left the basket with the opened crackers and the empty bottle right on the sand where it lay and grabbed only the blanket. We also forgot Clara's precious prosthetic in our haste. We went as quickly as we could up the beach, then I picked Clara up onto my back and we disappeared from view into the many lanes between the dunes, which for us were like well know roads. We crept wordlessly under the low hanging branches of the dune fort, shielded from the eyes of the world.

When I had spread the blanket Clara pulled me down onto her, and with shaking hands undid the shoulder straps behind her neck. We kissed, then we had a hold of each other, each of us cold to the initial touch, then very warm. Our senses were heightened, aroused by the sea and the sky and the possibilities of our lives. We were both breathing hard, unaware of our own sounds. Blind to anything but each other and ourselves.

Without stopping, without saying a word, we both knew what to do, and it happened so intuitively. I could feel myself pressing hard against her, trying to open her up, while she moved her hips fitfully about. The initial friction and impatience, both bodies quivering with yearning, then suddenly the utter delight and surprise as we entered a world inside of each other. She had never before held onto me so tightly. I think I ceased breathing.

When she sat up later with the dappling light dancing on her naked back, and I lay on the blanket with one leg pulled up shyly hiding my changing nakedness, I knew we had stepped through some unearthly portal. There was no need for words. She looked behind her, smiled at me, and flicked her hair across her shoulder with her hand. Then she pulled on her bikini bottom first, and she held her hair up so that I could bow the strings of her top around her neck.

We crept out of the fort and saw the sun had reached just past its zenith, and the light was so bright to be dull, and the beachgoers swimming in the shallows were vague and out of focus to my eyes. My ears hissed with sound and my heart thumped a steady, deep rhythm. I

felt drunk in my head, off balance. As I packed everything up, Clara sat in the sand and redid her leg, and then we walked slowly back with our bodies touching at every swaying step.

When we stopped on Clara's porch, she leaned her body against mine and her head on my shoulder. I've got sand everywhere, she said with lowered eyes and a pouting smile.

Me too, I grinned. I gave her a long, hard hug. Are you OK?

She reached up to me and kissed me on the lips. I'm perfect, she whispered.

As I biked down their drive, with the fresh ocean wind blowing lightly over me, I realised that I had never before felt such joy or such love. Nothing could have hurt me then.

The euphoria of those early days of our lovemaking is still there when I close my eyes. I don't think it will ever disappear. We had wondered what it would be like for so long, had dreamed of it and been afraid of it, and after the first time we would often laugh at how silly we had been to be scared of something so simple in its beauty. I wish we had done it earlier, Clara had told me.

Our sexual intercourse was simple and uncomplicated. Langued. We had never had access to pornography of any kind, and it was difficult for us to fully visualise what we had read in books. But the open and forward nature of our relationship, coupled with years of lesser intimacies, meant we fulfilled each other naturally. Clara was uninhibited in front of me, and would touch herself lightly as we made love, while I had learned to ride on that tide with her until it was time to let go, together. How clever we were.

That summer was the most breathless, exhilarating time of my life. Not quite fifteen yet, and I thought I had everything I would ever need. We surfed, swam in our pool, made friends on the beach, even. Perhaps we did mature that holiday. Not yet into adulthood, but away from our wide-eyed naivety toward a fuller state of being. Our bodies had led us there independently from any social influence.

When I looked at Clara then, saw how her body moved beneath her clothes or in her bathing suit, it was with a regard that owned a part of her; as she owned all of me. Somehow, my eyes understood the wonders of her, and I found her looking at me in the same way often, her bottom lip between her teeth.

I was able to let go of the raging anger that had swelled between my mother and me somewhat. Not that anything had changed between the two of us, but I found myself suddenly free from the need for mothering. Her role as my mother was mostly fulfilled, I felt.

She was not an unlikeable woman – not even when she drank - and so the evenings in the cottage were spent more amicably between us.

She must have known, I think. She didn't ask any questions, didn't make any lewd remarks, but she did say one evening after many whiskey's: You had better be nice to that girl, you hear me?

I had looked her straight in the eyes, nodded once and said: Of course, mom. And that was that about that.

What seemed to surprise her more happened one day when I came home early. I would have stayed at Clara's place till sunset - I had already started leaving my surfing gear there to make things easier - but I rushed back home to get a set of warm clothes. We had met a bunch of teenagers that had managed to obtain a hoard of beers and ciders and were going to make a bonfire on the beach. When I came barging in through the half open kitchen door I almost walked straight into Dwayne, who was midway in the act of pulling his shirt over his head. We both froze. Hi Dwayne, I said as I headed toward my room.

Dwayne's eyes were wide as I brushed past him. Hey Buddy, he said. I didn't know you'd be back so early.

Just picking up some things, I said from my room. When I went back out through the kitchen my mother was standing next to Dwayne. She had a light, flowing dress on and I noticed she seemed naked under it. She actually looked young and quite pretty, I noted with a sense of pride.

Hey mom, I said in a friendly tone. There's a bonfire on the beach tonight. Bunch of holiday kids. Clara's dad said it's OK, I lied. Is it OK with you?

She looked at Dwayne. I guess it's fine?

I think Buddy can look after himself, Dwayne said.

Be back before ten, she said. Otherwise I'll have to come looking for you.

Thanks, I said, squeezing past them. As I got on the bike I said over my shoulder: You kids have fun now.

I might have been a bit reckless that summer, but I felt so strong and full of vitality. Youth should be allowed a certain exuberance, some small rebellions. And that was my time. Clara and I were so caught up in the unbridled joy we found ourselves in, that we never stopped to consider what consequences we might face if we were caught out. We probably wouldn't have cared if someone had warned us. And Clara was fearless. She was soft and feminine, but strong, too. She knew when to push me on. She squeezed every drop of life out of that summer.

That night, as the sun set and the bonfire's flames licked the first stars, Clara sat comfortably between my legs, chatting with two older girls from Cape Town, and there could be no question in any of those teenager's minds that we were a real couple and that we loved each other. Most of the young people we shared the fire with that night were older, but nobody looked at us like we were kids. It was just all so easy for us. I spoke with a guy who told me about a really big wave called Dungeons, and every now and then Clara would lean back and kiss me, and the guy would wait politely until our kiss finished, and then resume his story.

We drank the beers they gave us. A big, strong-shouldered guy had put all the beers in a hole in the shallows, and we pulled them out of the water chilled and rinsed the sand from them before we cracked them open. Twice that night, as I handed a fresh beer to Clara, she said: Thanks Babe. And I was fulfilled.

The rest of that summer was just a jumble of happy, warm memories. Of the feeling of Clara's skin against mine. Of our arms wrapped around each other so tightly, as if we were on some precipice and if we were to let go of one another we would slip away and fall into a void. The smell of her hair, of sunscreen and saltwater, and of the mixing of our bodies.

We should have left right then and there. Ran away together. I know this sounds ridiculous and completely implausible coming from a grown man, but yes, I stand by it. We should just have left on our own. What we had was too valuable to lose. We lose so much when we're young because of society. Because of fear. Because of all the fucking inane bureaucracy. When are we more beautiful than in youth? When else does the world truly belong to us?

Obviously, we couldn't, and we didn't. We stayed on in the safety of our pleasant fantasy. As the holiday drew to a close and the start of the new schoolyear loomed, I even felt a sense of excitement at the idea of going back to school. I thought we would sit in the bus together and it would be so obvious to everyone seeing us that we had changed, that we had morphed miraculously into something akin to adulthood. I wanted the world to know that we were together, completely, and that we belonged to one another, mated for life. Like the penguins at Stoney Point.

The week before school started, Clara seemed distant. We didn't see much of each other and I thought it was simply because we had so much to do to get ready for school. There was a niggling worry at the back of my mind which, like some anxious self-doubt, plagued my thoughts, but I dismissed it stoically. Everything was just perfect.

When I got on the bus for the long journey to school, Clara was already sitting on an open seat near the front. She smiled at me as I sat down next to her, but her demeanour seemed skittish. She looked stressed. Her eyes were puffy, and she leaned back in the seat, her head to one side.

What's wrong, I asked.

She gave a weak smile. Think I might have the flu or something. Feel terrible.

Why didn't you stay at home?

I didn't want my parents to worry, she said.

Clara was quiet at school. We had been placed in separate classes, so we only saw each other briefly during breaks and on the way back after school. She seemed better on the trip back, smiling and joking with the girls seated behind us. I felt the worry seep out of me. Just for a brief moment I had felt the first pangs of jealous anxiety that maybe things weren't so perfect between us.

For the next couple of days, the mood between Clara and myself shifted often. She would be her happy self one moment, and I would even get the odd stolen kiss, or she would hold my hand when I least expected it, but then a curtain would close, and I would feel the distance between us grow. She kept feeling ill and got terribly annoyed at my constant questions: How are you? How do you feel today? Is everything OK?

All of a sudden, I had stumbled into the complexities of a relationship which I didn't understand. I felt jealous and betrayed by the lack of attention. What had changed between us? Why was she acting so differently?

When we finally had some time alone together at her house over the weekend, I wanted to kiss her and hold her to me, but she pulled away and said she didn't feel well. I'm going to see the doctor next week, she told me.

How's your leg? I asked.

It's not my leg, Danny. It's everything else.

I felt a panic rise in me. I sat on the very edge of her bed as she lay with her hand over her eyes. I was angry at myself for feeling neglected when I should have shown empathy. I was angry at her for shunning me without telling me what was going on.

What's going on with you? I asked her. Why are things so different now, compared to how they were over the holiday?

What do you mean?

Don't you like me anymore? I must have been a sorry sight with my tiny voice and drooping eyes. I probably reminded her of her father in that moment.

Oh Danny. Maybe I'm just not feeling well, and you're making it about you. Just go. I want to rest. She turned onto her side, away from me, and it felt as if my stomach had been ripped out of me leaving only a hollow cavity.

Scorned, I stood up and left. As I exited her room I turned around and said: Maybe this summer should never have happened. I could see her body visibly stiffen at my words. And then I ran out.

Clara wasn't on the bus that Monday. I sat on our seat alone, and my chest was gripped as if in a vice. I figured she had gone to the doctor and would be back the next day. People get sick, I told myself. I sorely needed to apologise for what I had said in her room. My leg kept shaking and it was impossible for me to concentrate on any of my classes that day. I thought of biking out to see her after school, but I was still angry and reluctant because of how I had acted, and I thought if I didn't just run to her on the first day of her absence, she might realise how I felt about her distant behaviour. I imagined her coming to school the next day and apologising and telling me it was her fault because she felt ill but she felt better already and everything was just fine and she missed me.

She wasn't on the bus the next day either. Some of her friends asked me why she wasn't at school and I told them she just had the flu and was staying home. My anxiety was mounting. What if something was seriously wrong with Clara? There had been a younger kid in our primary school who had died of leukaemia. He also just stopped coming to school and then one day the headmaster called us to an assembly and told the school that the boy had died. Then we went back to class.

When I got home that afternoon, I didn't even take the time to change. I just pulled my tie off and threw it with my bag on the floor of my room, got on the bike and sped off to Clara's. Their car wasn't there but the front door stood open and I felt a sense of relief that I would find her peacefully breaking a fever in her bed and saw myself holding her hand and laughing with her about all of it.

Maria came to the door as I was racing op the porch steps. She's not here, Daniel. She went to the city with her parents. To the doctor there. She kept wiping her hands on her apron as she spoke.

What's wrong with her? I asked Maria.

She's not well, that child. You must go home. They will only be back late. She began to close the door on me.

Maria. Please tell her I was here.

OK. Go home now. And she shut the door and I stood alone on Clara's porch and everything went very quiet. I felt my face blushing from anger or fear. My hands were shaking and clammy.

I could barely eat that evening. My mother looked at me with a raised eyebrow and asked what was bothering me. I lied and told her my stomach was upset. She didn't seem too convinced, but she didn't push the matter any further.

When I boarded the bus on Wednesday morning and saw Clara was still absent my stomach really did turn. I barely made it to school and had to run to the bathroom where I voided my bowls violently and stood sweating in front of the mirror. My anxiety over Clara had manifested itself as a physical illness. I was sweating profusely whenever a thought of her crossed my mind, and I could not eat or drink anything for fear of retching. After second break I went to the infirmary to lie down and wait for the bus to take me home, and the school nurse brought a wet cloth which she placed over my forehead.

When I got home, I stalled in my room for a long time, unable to summon the courage to get on the bike. When I finally did the bike felt heavy and my legs felt swollen and slow. It felt like riding through deep mud.

As I pulled into Clara's driveway, I noticed their car was there, and behind it a large flat trailer was hitched, already partially loaded with boxes. Clara's dad was loading a box onto the trailer and had his sleeves rolled up over his elbows and his forearms flexed as he strained to load it.

He hadn't always been such a moping old man, Clara had told me once. We had been sitting in my room and I had been complaining to her about my mother when she started telling me the real story of her and her dad. It had been a foul-weather day and we had surrounded ourselves with books in my room, cosying up to each other as we paged through a volume on the British settlement of the Cape.

He and Clara's mother had been very sociable in Montana, apparently. It was hard for me to picture him laughing and joking loudly, cocktail in hand, in the warm glow of a fire in some large ski resort tucked high in the mountains. He loved to entertain, Clara had told me. And mom loved to be the centre of attention. They were so popular back then.

Clara painted a picture of them together; successful, wealthy, high society. But all of that came at a price, and her father's job at a large engineering firm kept him away every

other weekend and late on most weeknights. He had to travel abroad for weeks at a time. She said he started to drink too much. She used the term alcoholic. Mom had said he was turning into a proper drunk, she said. They fought a lot.

Dad had come home one afternoon after a day at the country club, Clara said. Mom yelled at him. Called him a drunk. Said she was tired of doing everything herself. Clara turned another page in the book without reading. They had a big row, that's why I was playing outside, in the driveway. I guess everybody knew, except me. I was so young. Clara sighed, shifting her leg. Her prosthetic was lying on my bed. He was in a rage, she said softly. He slammed the door of the house. For a moment, as I heard his footsteps, I thought he was coming to get me. But then I heard his car door shut and the motor turn. She took a deep breath, exhaled it slowly. She looked at me briefly from under her lashes. He was on his way back to the club, Danny. That's why he drove over my leg.

There was a long silence. I didn't know what to say.

Anyway, she sniffed. He never had a drink again. Never forgave himself. Now he's just a shell of the man who was my father.

That's terrible, I said.

Oh well. Like I keep telling you. We've all lost something.

Is that why he always looks so sad? I asked.

I guess so, she replied. He used to be so big and strong in my eyes. Now I just feel sorry for him.

Is that why you came to South Africa? I asked. To leave the ghosts behind?

No silly, she smiled. We came so that I could find you.

That conversation felt like a million years ago as I got off the bike and pushed it slowly up the drive, to where Clara's dad was loading the trailer.

He saw me and froze, then put the box down on top of another.

You shouldn't be here, Daniel. Clara's not feeling well, and she doesn't want any visitors.

What's wrong with her? I asked him.

He looked at me for a long time, then pursed his lips together. If he had always looked to me like a sad dog with a hang face, he now looked like a dog ready to bite or run. Daniel, she's not well and we're taking her away for a while to see the doctor. It will be better if you don't talk to her right now. He had his arms crossed over his chest.

Can I just go up and say hi, please? I'll be quick. All the kids at school are wondering about her.

He shook his head, and the sad face returned. I'm sorry, Daniel. Not today. Some other time.

When will she be back? My voice croaked. I was keeping the tears back.

We'll see, he said. Just then there were heavy footsteps on the porch and Clara's mother came flying down the steps, her whole frame moving like a charging animal.

You must go home right away, young man. Right now. Clara's dad stepped into her path and held her by the shoulders. She craned her neck to see past him. You mustn't come here again, Danny. Clara's been through plenty.

That's enough, Clara's dad was saying. I'll deal with him.

Please go, Daniel. We'll talk later. Clara's dad still had his one hand on his wife's shoulder. I turned and got on the bike. Daniel, he said. Take care of yourself. I'm sure Clara will write you.

Tears of rage and shame streamed down my face. As I turned out of the driveway, I stole a quick look over my shoulders, and high above the two of them I could see the curtains being pulled shut in Clara's room. The road home was a blur of tears. It felt as if my whole spine had been plucked cleanly out of me, and there was nothing to keep me up. I felt like shouting and kicking. I wanted to break something.

The story was that Clara's father had been planning on returning to Montana for a while, and that Clara's condition had meant that they had to move quickly. They were said to have taken her to a hospital in Cape Town first, and when that didn't work, they boarded a plane and flew back to the States, back to Clara's Montana. It was some kind of complication with her amputated leg, apparently. Everyone just raised their shoulders and sighed and said how sad, she was such a great kid and it had been so good for the society to have the cultured Americans around. I kept seeing Clara's mother storm toward me like the angry matriarch of an elephant herd, and they didn't seem so cultured then.

The next few weeks were a blur to me. I remember being mostly angry, then sad. I biked past their house every other day, hoping I would see Clara's windows open, the air blowing the curtains into her room like the sails on a ship. I would stop the bike in her driveway and look at her house, and what was once airy and light, open and inviting, had become closed solid and foreboding. I was shut out.

I had no way of finding Clara. I had no forwarding address or telephone number for her. No way to look her up. For the first time South Africa seemed very far away from the rest of the world. I again had no control over the direction of our relationship, and I began to resent my lack of agency. I had no choice but to wait for her to come back to me. I truly believed she would.

Maria came to our house on a Sunday. She had been to church, as she did every week, and had walked all the way to our place to see me. Mom invited her in and made tea, being very quick to hide her whiskey glass behind the big pot of flour on the kitchen counter. The two of them spoke in low voices. Mom sounded sympathetic and had to drag the conversation out of Maria, who now that she was there, seemed unsure of what she had come to say. I drifted to my room but was soon called into the kitchen. Maria has something for you, Danny, mom said.

I sat down between them at the kitchen table. The wood was worn and splintered. I couldn't remember it having always been that way. I wondered if I should look for some sanding paper in the shed.

I'm very sorry, Maria said to me. You miss the girl?

I nodded.

She reached out her hand and placed it over mine on the table. Her hand was plump and warm, but strong. You were good to that girl. I know. She was a happy child when you were there.

There was a long silence. Have you heard anything, Maria? I asked.

She seemed to hesitate for a moment, then said: I thought maybe they would come back. Their furniture is still inside that house. Nobody goes to clean it. Maria shook her head sadly. When they left, when the American mister was packing, the girl wrote this and gave it to me. She said I must keep it a secret from the parents. She said I must do her a favour and bring it to you. Maria reached into her pocket and brought out a white envelope. It had my name on it, neatly printed in Clara's small, square hand. Next to my name Clara had drawn a flowing heart, the one half eloquently larger than the other. Maria placed it on the table and slid it under my hand. Then she patted my hand a few times, almost possessively.

You have a good boy, she said to my mother.

Thank you, Maria, mom said. If you ever need anything, you must come see me.

Maria stood up, straightening her dress down at the front. I must head back now, she said. It's getting dark.

I'll take you, mother said.

I sat at the kitchen table and listened to the groan of the Beetle as it went chugging down the road. The letter was still under my sweaty palm. I sat looking at it dumbly. Its presence gripped me with fear for what it might contain. I thought for a moment that it might be best to throw it into the fire and let it burn away. Perhaps not knowing what had really happened would be better.

Eventually I pried open the envelope. I pulled a neatly folded page out of it, and I recognised the paper as a page from one of Clara's notepads that had been on her bedside table. I unfolded it and put it to my nose. I could smell her room. I could smell Clara on the page, as if she had been sitting there right next to me, holding my hand.

> Dearest Danny
>
> I'm sitting in my room, writing you this letter to say goodbye, for now. Daddy says we have to leave for Montana as soon as we can get a flight. Some things have happened, and I'll tell you all about them as soon as I can, but for now we have to go back to America.
> You know I haven't been feeling well, and we were at the doctor in Cape Town, and, well, I don't really know how to tell you yet, but I will. The doctors back home can help me. I just want you to know that none of this is your fault. I'm not even really sure what is going on. Everything is a bit of a mess.
> What you said to me the other day really hurt, but I know you didn't mean it. That's OK. Of course, this summer must have happened. It was the most important summer in the world.
> I have your address and I will write you as soon as I can. Please don't be sad. I know how you can get. This isn't really goodbye. And don't be mad at my mom and dad. It's all for the best, really. I'll be all better soon, and Daddy says we'll come right back then. Please save my seat on the bus next to you. And tell your mom to get a phone so I can call you.
> You're the best friend that I have ever had. We'll be together for always. This summer has been the best time of my life. I can't ever be with anyone, the way that I have been with you. You know what I mean… Please wait for me.
> Anyway, I have to go. It's like a prison here. All secrets and hush hush. Save a spot in the backline for me, too.
> Love you, my Danny Boy.
>
> Clara
> xxx

I inhaled the scent from the letter again. It was already fainter. It felt like I knew less than before I had read it. Why couldn't she just tell me what was going on? I could feel the heavy grip on my chest tightening, the weight descending on me. I saw that my hand was shaking, and the paper fluttered like a leaf being blown on. I folded it up and put it back in the envelope.

I knew some things about loss by then. I was aware that its presence stayed with you the same way that the lingering ghost of Christopher clung onto me. But I was not prepared

for the absence of Clara from my life. I was left in a limbo of denial. I didn't hear from Clara again for many months, and she didn't come back for me as I had hoped.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Memory has always been a fickle thing. Much of it is made up, fictionalised. Filled in like lines on a form. Most of it is needless information, there only to cushion the truth. The truth is short and sharp and brutal, mostly. It can be beautiful, too, but it is always vicious in its honesty.

The truth is that without Clara there, my life fell apart the way a building degrades over decades and slowly, imperceptibly, crumbles into ruin. Until there is only a jumbled mass of rubble, with only the foundations intact enough to give a legible indication of what it might have been. I ostracised myself from any meaningful interaction with people, even with my environment. I became reckless in my solitary state. I dove in the nature reserve for abalone and crayfish, which I sold to assorted nefarious characters who used young men like me to do their dirty labour. The money was good. And I figured nobody would think some kid would be reckless enough to poach the bounty of the protected wildlife areas. And I was right.

The first letter Clara sent me came months after her sudden departure from my life. When my mother handed it to me, I was already broken, and I didn't hold out much hope for it being an affirmation of love, or a promise that she would be back soon. I had been numbed by then.

The letter was a muddle of information that came breathlessly and unbalanced across the page. Oh, how I've missed you. I've been meaning to write you but struggled with what to say. We're not going back to South Africa. Montana is home. I miss you. I miss us. Please wait for me.

I wrote her back immediately. Mine was a long, serious letter. What we have transcends love. I will come find you. Please wait for me too.

But her replies came slowly, and the content of her letters became less about us and our love, and more about her day to day life. The tone changed from that of longing and a sad hope, to the easy banter between two friends who knew each other deeply. I was too afraid to

ask her directly what we had become to each other. What are we? Who are you? Who is holding the mirror for you now?

I didn't surf much, either. Clara haunted me among the waves. The loneliness of the rolling swells, which many found to be a tonic, had become a self-imposed torment to me. I disappeared at school. Sunk into the woodwork of the writing desks and wooden floors of its hallways. My grades were average. I had no interest in the advances from the girls who reached out to me, had no desire to join in the social complexities of the school community. I became, to a large extent, unknown. Unknowable.

The only worlds in which I still felt comfortable were those of the library and of Christopher. He stayed with me, unrelenting in his companionship. It was as if he surpassed the laws of existence. It wasn't long after Clara had left that he began to speak to me in a flat voice that reverberated dully inside my skull. It didn't take me long to start talking back to him.

This presented even more challenges, as the urge to speak aloud to him had to be suppressed constantly, lest someone heard me talking to my dead brother and labelled me crazy. They all called me weird already, so to be condemned as an invalid would not have been much of a reach.

The school library was like an alternate universe into which I could slip, as if through some wormhole in the fabric of space and time, into a place that afforded me a chance at redemption. It brought me into worlds that were not of my own making and gave me the respite I needed to keep going. The world opened up to me among the pages of books. I realised that I could not live in that small town forever. I would have to venture out of the borders of the rugged coastal setting, and seek my own road, and ultimately, my own perspective. There were no manuals on how to survive Clara - I would have to carve my own way.

Dwayne had moved in with my mother and me soon after Clara had left. He seemed to have an endless supply of money. He's a trust fund baby, my mother had said. Poor man hasn't known a day's work. Has more money than brains. His father was a plastic surgeon with a private practice in the city. He had wanted Dwayne to follow in his footsteps, to perpetuate the family in name and action, but all Dwayne wanted to do was surf and smoke weed, so his dad gave him access to his trust fund early on, as long as he wouldn't live in the city where he could potentially shame the family name.

When his father died and there was nobody looking over his shoulder, Dwayne bought the cottage we lived in outright. You're a damn fool, my mother had told him.

What does that say about you? he had asked her.

I'm not sure, mom had said, shaking her head at herself.

Dwayne set to doing improvements on the cottage himself. Mom said it gave him something to do, a purpose. We lived those years in a perpetual cycle of dust and mortar, woodchips and wet paint. Mom said he's a buffoon because he could just hire a contractor to do it all in one go, but she let him get on with it. She did really love him.

Most evenings he would sit outside, carefully rolling a joint while my mother sipped her whiskey, and the two of them would quietly disappear into themselves. They had, for the most part, stopped parenting me. Perhaps they had no need to. I think my mother had resented my presence in the absence of Christopher. Whether she missed my father or not was hard to say. We never spoke about him much.

Dwayne taught me much during those lonely years. His quiet nature and unruffled attitude tempered my own reactions. He rolled me my own joint when I turned sixteen, and we sat on the beach and smoked together. He never really became an adult, and perhaps that was why my mother loved him and wanted to be with him. The effects of marijuana were wasted on me. My memory slipped and my entire temporal framework collapsed around me that day on the beach. We sat on the sand for hours, which felt like years to me, and I was glad to have my faculties back when the fugue lifted.

You didn't like it, hey? he laughed as we stumbled slowly home.

No, Jesus, I said. Felt like a goldfish swimming in a round bowl.

Ever nick your mother's whiskey?

A couple of times.

And? Did you like that? he asked.

Not really, I said. Can't stand the headaches.

Dwayne laughed at me, shaking his head. You're a good one, Buddy. You're the best man on earth.

After I had turned eighteen, in my final year at school, my mother took me to an attorney in the city and we were read the contents and conditions of the trust my dad had left to me. It was more substantial than we had thought possible.

Well look at you, Dan the Man, she said sarcastically as we walked back to the dingy car. Chock full of money and not a care in the world. Must be nice.

It must have been painfully ironic to her that both her lover and her only remaining son had been gifted trust funds to kickstart their lives. I don't know, I said. I'll probably just use it for university.

Just for university? she laughed through a ragged cough. You could be a student for life on that. Where was it all when we couldn't afford shoes for you and had to send you to school barefoot?

Why don't you just take half of it? I asked her as we got into the car. It's as much yours as it is mine.

She paused for a moment, then turned the key in the ignition and said: No, Daniel, I want no part of his family's money. That's your inheritance. God knows those people owe you enough.

Why?

Why? Where were they when your brother died? Where were they when your dad dragged us to the bottom of Africa so we could all find ourselves? Nowhere, that's where they all were. Glad to be rid of us and our pain.

Where did the money come from?

She coughed again. You grandfather was politically connected in the old government. The Prime Minister and his wife even went to their house sometimes for Sunday lunches. The National Party took care of its own. And now it's taking care of you.

I don't know if I want it, I said.

Oh, bollocks. Take it. What does it matter now, where it comes from?

I applied to the University of Cape Town. My grades were not good enough to get me a bursary, but I had the trust money. I had no idea what to do with the rest of my life. I had stacks of notebooks filled with my notes and essays, but no plan for them. I had always thought I would study journalism, if I studied at all. In the end I decided on a bachelor's degree with an English major.

Won't find much work with that, mom had said.

I could only shrug at that.

Dwayne proved to be a wealth of information on Cape Town and especially the university. He had spent more than two years there studying marine biology. I asked him why he had given it up. Fucking bureaucracy, man. That shit kills your spirit.

The cottage had morphed into something that had a life of its own under Dwayne's handiwork. It was bright white on the outside, with an aquamarine roof so startlingly bright that it shocked you every time your eyes happened upon it from some distance. The garden was littered haphazardly with old, sun-bleached whale bones, and the eaves were strung with an assortment of buoys and salvaged fishing paraphernalia that looked like some grotesque

fisherman's Christmas decorations. To call it eclectic would have been to do it an unworthy service. I was looking forward to the sterility of the dorm residence at the university.

In the final days of that last summer in Betty's Bay, the peaceful community rose up in an indignant uproar when one of the holiday makers shot and killed a mountain leopard that had killed his dog. The episode had a profound impact on Dwayne, who moped about in irritation for days.

It's a wild animal, he said. There's a reason we don't allow fences around the homes here. It's to bring us all into contact with nature. And this guy comes here and shoots a leopard. A leopard, man. Priorities, Buddy, he said to me. People need to get their priorities straight.

Dwayne took me down to Stoney Point, and we sat on the rocks and watched the nesting penguins shuffle about. You see the fence? he asked me.

Yeah.

Used to be all open, but then the penguins got taken out by a leopard or two. They came down from the mountains because the penguins were an easy meal to them. They were adapting. But this is only one of a few African Penguin colonies on the continent, so they had to put up the fence.

So, should they have just left it open? I asked. Surely then we wouldn't have any penguins left here.

You see, man, that's the problem. If nature took out all the penguins, then so be it. If the leopards starved without them, so be it. Thing is, we shouldn't be getting involved.

To the left of us lay the concrete slipway where they had hauled out my father's corpse. I shoved the memory aside. His hollow eyes were only allowed to stalk me in my sleep.

You know this used to be a whaling station? Dwayne asked.

Yeah, my dad had told me about it.

This town was born around the slaughter of defenceless animals. He shook his head sadly and waved his arm inland. This all used to be full of buildings where they cooked the blubber. Processed whales so Her Majesty could burn oil in her streetlamps. Long live the Empire.

How did they do it?

Kill the whales?

Yes. How do you manage to kill something so big? I asked.

Oh, they had a couple of steamboats that chugged out to sea from this bay. When they found a pod, they would aim for the biggest one and shoot it with a harpoon. They put explosives in the harpoon head, meant to kill the animal immediately. But the story is that many whales didn't die quickly, and they say you could hear them scream as they died in pain. Dwayne snorted and spat over his shoulder. The real animals are us, he said.

All that for some oil?

They brought the whales back here and they were pulled up that slipway, he said, pointing. Then they would butcher it and process it.

I looked at the slip. It seemed so small and calm. None of the buildings remained except for some round brick structures on the rocks. Dwayne saw me looking at the slip and changed the subject. You know there was a radar station here, during the war?

The Angolan war?

No, world war two, Dwayne said. It scanned for enemy planes. There was another one on Hangklip Mountain that looked for German submarines. They were staffed with women because the men were needed for the war effort.

Why would there be German ships or planes here? I asked.

We might be at the bottom of the world, Buddy, but they all had to come around the Cape after the Suez was closed. It's always been an important place, this. He shook his head again. Fucking politics.

Did you go to Angola like my dad?

He squinted at me. No way, man. I had too many tricks for them. Anyway, I wouldn't make much of a soldier. He stared at the sea. Your dad was a great man, Danny. You know I can't replace him?

I know, I said.

Do you miss him?

All the time.

Yeah, I miss my old man too, he said. Even though he was a bastard.

Dwayne put his arm around my shoulder. You should take your father's book with you when you go to UCT. Finish it.

What book? I asked.

Dwayne frowned. The book on Whitey.

I don't know of any book. Mom said he only wrote for the newspapers.

Yeah, he did, Dwayne said. He was bloody good, too. But he started writing a book on Whitey. His story.

Why would he write about Whitey?

You ever read Steinbeck? *Of Mice and Men*?

I shook my head.

Sometimes the lesser man's story is the most important story.

It's in the box in mom's cupboard, isn't it? I asked.

Dwayne nodded his head. I'll speak to your mother. It should be yours.

Have you read it?

I have. And it's a story I believe should be told.

Why? Whitey's a nice guy, I guess, but why should his story be interesting to my father.

Dwayne thought for a while. White guy shacks up with brown girl. Builds them a nice house in the coloured area. They make a mixed blood baby. You know that was illegal under the old government?

Really?

Yeah. And then some. Anyway, he loses his wife and kid in a house fire, goes bonkers. So, he just floats around town like some vagabond, no longer white or brown. Society doesn't know what to make of him. Doesn't know where to put him. Now that's a good story.

I can't wait to get out of here, I said.

You'll be back, Dwayne said. Places like these, they become a part of you. It always pulls you back.

Didn't pull Clara back, I said.

Well, now that's a different story. She never tell you why they left so suddenly?

No. She needed surgery on her leg. Doctors here couldn't help. You know.

I don't think that's the whole truth, Buddy. You should ask her.

We don't talk anymore. She has her own life now.

You should talk to her. You're both adults now. Dwayne stood up. Come on. I'll buy you a beer at the pub, what do you say?

As we walked back to his pick-up, I asked him why he liked my mother.

He laughed at me and leaned against the bonnet of the truck. She's a strong one, your mother. Knows what she wants. I like it when they take the reins, he said, winking at me.

You make her sound like a horse, I joked.

Yeah well, she's the kind of horse you don't knee hobble.

Tell me about it, I said, climbing into the truck.

After he shut the door, Dwayne turned to me. The two of you have had it rough, Buddy. But she's all you've got, so don't be too hard on her. Trust me. When they're gone, all you'll remember are the good things.

We drank too much at the pub that night, and I got into a fist fight with a guy whose girlfriend kept flirting with me. Dwayne tried to be diplomatic and kept pulling us apart, and for his troubles he got knocked flat on his ass with an elbow. I walked away with a split lip and a swollen eye, but I was laughing when we got home. It was liberating to know I could take a punch. That I wasn't made out of porcelain. My mother just shook her head at us and gave us each a kitchen towel with ice in it, before she went to bed on unsteady legs.

She's getting worse, I said to Dwayne.

He had his head back on the chair and held the ice to his temple. Oh, she'll be all right, Buddy. I'll make sure of it.

After he went to bed, I stood in the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. My face looked bad, but the pain was nothing. I could deal with it. I could take a punch.

CHAPTER TWELVE

My mother didn't give me the box with Whitey's story. I asked for it before I left for university, and she said she'd think about it, but not even Dwayne's steady nagging could get her to give it up. Once I had moved into res and started my classes, I didn't give it much thought any longer.

I was at home among the ivy clad colonial buildings of the University of Cape Town's upper campus. My grades were excellent, and I fit in easily among different groups. The shadows that crept over the campus in the afternoons were familiar, and the light gleaming from the sea below filtered over me in an acquainted way.

Weekends were spent in various bars on Long Street, or at any of the beaches. I had never before experienced young girls who were so well dressed and made up. I went looking for Clara in every girl I could find. I surfed enormous hills of water in Kommetjie. I bought a motorbike. It was a sunset-red 1987 Yamaha, 125 horsepower. It took me all across the city.

In the first year of my studies I went home regularly, but the ramshackle cottage and the forlorn state of my mother and her raging bouts of coughing, depressed me and I

preferred the empty room that I shared with a philosophy major called Michael. He was a pensive kid with a wild mop of yellow hair and bad acne that had pocked his face severely. They had a farm in Zimbabwe where they grew tobacco and flowers, and although they must have been wealthy, you wouldn't have thought it if you looked at him. He was a sad kid, and in a way reminded me of Clara's father.

They're going to take the farm, anyway, Michael told me. I don't know why my dad doesn't just sell now while he still can and move back to England. We have no place here.

But you were born there, I said. You're a Zimbabwean citizen. You have rights.

Michael laughed. We don't belong in Africa, Daniel. As soon as I'm done with my degree I'm going back to Europe.

Where you belong?

Michael pulled up his shoulders, ending the conversation.

The first woman I slept with after Clara was a girl who was studying business administration and whose father had a yacht that stood on anchor in the Cape Town Yacht Club. Her name was Elisabeth Clarkson. She took me to meet him for lunch at the Vineyard Hotel. I could tell immediately that he didn't like me. I was beneath his daughter.

She was dressed to the nines in a peach dress that stretched to below her knees. I felt uncomfortable in my jeans and a buttoned shirt, untucked. Elisabeth had the kind of ease among wealthy people and highbrow places you only get through old money.

I learned quickly that class divisions in the city were a way for the entrenched wealth to remain spread among those who were deemed as part of the group. Who you came from meant more than who you were. I found it all quite banal.

Do you sail? Mr Clarkson asked me.

No Sir. Where I grew up, we had little use for leisure at sea.

But you surf? That's a leisure activity, no?

I wouldn't call it that. I'd say it is a lifestyle, Sir.

And what does your father do? He sipped his tea with his ringed pinkie finger raised like a flag.

He's dead. I looked at him to see whether this would strike a nerve, but he simply drank his tea and grunted. And your mother?

She's a secretary, I said.

Ah, he said.

Elisabeth tried her best to ease the tension, and she steered the conversation to UCT and the classes we were taking.

And, what do you intend to do with an English major? he asked me.

Daddy, Elisabeth said.

Let the boy speak for himself, Liz.

I'm not sure yet, I said.

Daniel is writing a book, Elisabeth said.

On?

It's about whaling in Betty's Bay, I told him.

You know the Verwoerd family has a home there? he asked, his eyebrows raised.

I shook my head no. That evening, Elisabeth drove me to the yacht club and the guard opened the gate for her with a familiar tip of his head. I had never been on a yacht before. She led me to the main cabin and then took me into her mouth with such a wild hunger that I stood there wondering what her pompous father would think if he could see me now with his precious daughter's lips around my cock.

Elisabeth toyed with me for more than a year, but she eventually found someone from her own tribe. He had studied medicine and was doing his residency. She even sent me an invite to the sudden wedding, which I burned over a candle in my room in an uncharacteristic act of theatre.

The longest relationship that I had while living in Cape Town was with an older widower who had a loft apartment that overlooked Lion's Head, and the sea beyond that. Melanie was a very creative type and well entrenched in the city's clique of art creators and purveyors. I met her at a poetry reading in a dark bar close to the gardens, and she doted over me the entire evening, then promptly took me to her apartment where she told me to strip naked and get on my knees. I complied, partly out of curiosity, but mostly from a desire to be told what to do. She had a firm yet kind dominance to her.

I saw her weekly, sometimes twice a week, and it was evident that sex was not her main concern. She moved slowly and would sometimes drag the hours before us like a heavy yoke, which put me in a trance-like state of acquiescence that took my consciousness out of my body and suspended it somewhere above us in the dusty rafters.

When she was satisfied, she would throw the paraphernalia of her craft to one side and pull me on top of her, and our lovemaking would be slow and sensual, almost tender, and would almost always culminate in just my climax. Just think of your own needs now, she told me. You're not here to make me come.

Afterwards we would lie entwined, and she would lightly caress the fine scars that lined the inside of my left arm, and kiss them with soft, parted lips. We never spoke about

ourselves, about our scars. I knew nothing of her life outside of our time in the loft apartment. We never went out together. I knew she had other lovers. Melanie offered me something, I'm unsure what it was, and in return I fulfilled something in her, and that was enough.

I completed my degree, and with good marks and a letter of recommendation from my professor I was given a job at a travel magazine in the city. It didn't pay much, but it afforded me my own bachelor's flat in a rundown Sea Point apartment building, and it put gas in the bike.

Venture Magazine, under the editorship of Barry Littlebrother, was situated in a decrepit office building close to the foreshore. Barry stank of tobacco and stale sweat, and he had a heavy lisp and a penchant for spraying a fine mist of spittle over you and your desk as he leaned forward to eagerly discuss a new feature.

My first assignments were local, but as I learned the trade and gathered by-lines, Barry took a liking to me and I finally got my first big assignment. Dan, he said. I need you to go up that volcano in East Africa. They say it's as clogged-up as a public toilet in season, these days. Coke cans and crap all over the routes.

Kilimanjaro?

That's the one. The Everest of Africa. Read up on it and come see me so we can work the angle.

Yes Sir, I said.

Barry, he shouted at me over his shoulder as he crashed back to his office. Or if you must, Littlebrother. Hell, call me Bigbrother. Just stop with the Sir's.

I smiled at myself as he shut the door loudly behind him.

The life of a travel writer suited me just fine. I had no particular ties to any one place and could be ready to head off within hours of being handed a new assignment. The hike up Kilimanjaro was not as eventful as I had hoped. The initial promise of the lower forests, teeming with wildlife, quickly gave way to an almost lunar alpine landscape. There wasn't much actual climbing involved either. A gang of young porters, mostly Tanzanians, carried everything up the mountain for us. It felt like some colonial era safari.

I had managed to convince Barry to let me ascend along the Umbwe route, which was more challenging than the other quicker routes and therefore had less traffic. It afforded me glimpses of the mess and chaos of the Machame Gate and surrounds, but then put me on a difficult climb to the top. That was the angle I was working: that there were still technical and quieter routes for the serious climbers.

We acclimatised for an extra day, and on the morning of the sixth day we made our push to the summit. The biting cold and the encircling darkness slowed me down, and it felt as if the blood in my veins had become thick and turgid. Like black tar. We stopped often to rest for short periods, but the lead porters never let us be still for too long. The altitude was cruel on me. The sun broke through as we neared Stella Point and rose over Mawenzi Peak in piercing swords of red and yellow. Below us the mountain disappeared into a thick, ethereal landscape of clouds. I had the distinct feeling of flying. I thought of Mallory and of my father, who in a way had brought me there.

The cloud banks stretched all the way to the horizon, obscuring the earth below completely. The sun's light bounced off the clouds as it rose above them, and it was almost as if we had transcended the earthly realm and arisen in heaven. We spent some minutes at Uhuru Peak, before beginning the descent.

Back at the hotel in Moshi, I spent two days lazing by the green pool, compiling my notes. I was excited to sit down at my desk and write the piece. Until then I had been doing a great job of pushing the lingering thoughts of Clara from my mind, but lying next to that pool they swamped me, heavy as the humid Tanzanian air.

When I got home there were texts on the Nokia from Dwayne and Melanie. Dwayne wanted to come visit me to hear about the trip, and Melanie wanted to know when I could come over. I texted her back, saying I'd come that evening. I gave Dwayne a call and he arranged to come over the next day and spend the night. I got something you might be interested in, he said over the phone.

The trip up the mountain had awoken some need in me for conversation. On a whim I took a bottle of red wine out of my cupboard and put it in my backpack. I kicked the Yamaha to life, and it peeled off the curb and into the pre-evening traffic in a trail of two-stroke fumes.

When the lift opened into Melanie's apartment, I pulled the wine from my bag and handed it to her. She frowned at it before reluctantly taking it from me. And this?

Thought we could first have a drink, I said. I was away on a trip.

A trip, she said. Business or pleasure? She headed to the kitchenette and opened the wine. She poured some into two coffee mugs for us.

I'm writing an article on Kilimanjaro, I told her.

You climbed it?

Yeah, it was incredible. You should have seen the views. It was…

Listen, Melanie said. We're not really into the whole catching up thing, are we?

I just thought we could talk about something other than… you know.

You want to introduce pillow talk all of a sudden? She sighed. I thought you knew what this is. I don't have space in my life for anything more right now. She put her wine down on the counter. Put down your wine, she said calmly.

I obeyed. She came over to me and undid my belt, then she yanked it off so suddenly that it burnt me around my hips. Turn around, she said. Put your hands on the chair there. I turned slowly and grabbed hold of the chair. The first blow ripped through the silent apartment. When I sensed the second blow, I turned and caught hold of her arm, the belt falling limply on my legs.

Melanie tried to pull back her arm, but I held onto it tightly. She struggled against me for a little while, then suddenly leaned forward into me and kissed me roughly on the mouth. Her teeth were sharp against my lips and I knew I would taste blood.

I turned her around, reaching under her dress and pulling her panties to the side. She was pushing back against me wildly, and I reached over her shoulder and placed my hand around her neck to pull her closer to me. I felt her body relax and give in. Then she grabbed my hand that was loosely around her throat and started to press it down on herself. I could hear her breath rasp ruggedly in her throat as her airway was constricted. She threw herself backwards and onto me with such force that she winded me, all the while keeping my hand tightly around her neck. I could see the blood pool in her face and neck, across her shoulders, and I tried to release the pressure, but she would not let me, and she reached climax suddenly and spasmed like a shot animal before sliding down against the table.

I stood very still for a while. Then I pulled up my pants and asked her: Are you OK?

Melanie straightened her dress and stood up with her back still towards me. You're not the kind of guy for this, Kid. You should go.

I picked my belt up off the floor. I'm sorry, I said, as I buckled it up. I thought you wanted that.

She turned and looked at me, a sad smile on her mouth. I do want that, too, just not from you. You should go now. Go find whoever is haunting you so much. She handed me my backpack and walked to the elevator door. Take care, Kid, she said as the door closed between us.

I drove the bike down to the promenade and watched the ocean in the dim light of the city's glow. The violence and desperation of what had just happened between Melanie and myself bothered me. I didn't like the complicity I had with the act. How easy it had been to love and be loved with Clara. We were tender with each other and confident. Melanie and I

had been looking for something else, lost in the city amid all the lights, drifting like the fog over the mountain, unsubstantial.

Dwayne arrived the next day after work. He had bought a new truck which was sleeker and modern looking, and somehow felt out of tune with his personality. Yeah, it's godawful ugly, I know, he said as he came up the stairs and saw me looking at it. But it runs, so.

He put down his bag on the landing and gave me a big bear hug. I've missed you, man.

I've missed you too. How's mom?

Oh, you know. Hard-headed as always. He winked at me. How was Kili?

We went down to Camps Bay beach and sat on the west end of the beach, near the rocks, and I told Dwayne about climbing Mount Kilimanjaro. He listened without interrupting. Ah, I wish I could have gone with you, he said. I'd like to see the roof of Africa.

You would love it, I said.

We stopped at the Greenleaf Tavern, just off the main road, and sat at a dark table in the corner. We ordered a couple of beers and their famous seafood platter. Dwayne didn't bother shelling the prawn tails, and ate them with shell and all, his mouth grinding in a wet crunch. I smiled at him, always doing everything with gusto. He was the type of uncomplicated man who loved life and lived every experience as if it was the best thing in the world to do.

So, Kilimanjaro hey. You going to be a mountaineer now? He was vigorously washing his hands in the finger bowl, spilling water and lemon slices.

Sure, I said. If Barry would send me to another mountain and pay for the trip.

Dwayne laughed. What a way to see the world. You get paid to do all the fun stuff.

Yeah, but you still have to write about it, and that's the hard part.

Harder than climbing the highest peak in Africa? Come on Buddy, I've read your articles. You're a natural. Don't overthink it.

You're right, I said.

It's like surfing, man. You got to be confident, otherwise you'll wipe out. Know what you're capable of, trust yourself and commit. You still working on the book?

I drank the last of my beer. It's not going anywhere, I told him. I've shelved it for now. Nobody would be interested in a whaling story set in some shitty town.

Tell that to Ahab, Dwayne said.

Captain Ahab didn't write the book, I said. Melville did.

Well tell it to him then, Dwayne said, grinning over his glass.

Maybe you can steal my dad's notes for me, maybe there's a story worth writing in there.

Dwayne put down his empty glass and tipped his head apologetically to the side. You know how she is, Buddy. He was quiet then, looking down at something I couldn't see on the white tablecloth in front of him. Danny, you should come see your mother. She's not doing too well.

What do you mean? I asked.

Well, you know how she has always smoked. The drinking hasn't helped. I love her too much to interfere. Or maybe I'm just too scared to rile her up. But she's not healthy. He looked me in the eye. She started coughing up blood.

That's serious. What do the doctors say?

You know your mother. There haven't been any doctors. The waiter arrived and placed the bill on the table. Dwayne took it before I could. As he was shuffling money into the leather fold-book, he said: I was hoping you could come down and try to talk some sense into her.

It must be very bad if you came here hoping she would listen to anything I tell her.

Dwayne nodded.

When we were back in my flat, we took two chairs and placed them on the tiny balcony outside. We sat facing the ocean, which we couldn't see in the dark, but which we could place by the familiar smell that washed over us. I had poured us both a brandy and we sat in easy silence.

When was the last time you wrote to Clara? Dwayne asked.

I shrugged. I don't know, a while back. We emailed a bit when I was still at University, but what's the point?

And, what did she say?

Nothing, really.

Do you guys ever talk about the two of you? About what you had between you?

I shook my head. Not lately. She has her own life now, and I have mine. I don't really have anything to say to her anymore.

I know, Dwayne said. She told me.

You talked to her?

She wrote me a week or so ago and we chatted a bit. She said you didn't seem interested in your friendship anymore.

I gave a little laugh. That's rich, I said. She was the one who became all distant the moment they left. You know she told me to wait for her?

We all say that kind of stuff when we're young and in love, Dwayne said and patted me on the shoulder. But life gets in the way.

I thought she meant it.

She's a complicated person, Buddy.

You have no idea, I said, finishing the brandy, hoping that the burn of it will take the thoughts of her away.

She's doing very well with the alpine skiing, did you know?

All she talks about when she does write, I lied.

Do you know she's going to Italy for the winter Paralympics?

Clara had mentioned her skiing achievements, but only briefly. Of course, I had looked her up online. She had become somewhat of a celebrity in the Montana skiing community. She had always been humble. She had said nothing of the Olympics. I didn't know that, I said.

Next year March. It's in Turin. He turned and looked at me pointedly. Maybe there's a mountain you could climb. You know, strictly business.

I laughed. No way Barry's sending me to Italy to go climb a mountain. Anyway, she didn't tell me about it, so…

I'm just saying, Dwayne said sagely.

I gave Dwayne my bed that night and slept on the couch. It was too short for me and my legs hung over the armrest. I lay staring at the mouldy ceiling that might have been a crisp white a long time ago but had steadily darkened with the onslaught of sea air that blew into the apartment. I tried to push Clara from my thoughts, but she persisted, and Christopher was there laughing at me and telling me to go find her and the fine white hairs on her arms and thighs haunted me and the taste of her tongue when I had kissed her in the sea the day we first made love clawed into my nose and onto my palette. I realised that I was aroused by my memories of a teenage girl that I had once loved and berated myself and screamed at

Christopher and Clara in silent outrage and indignation. I fought with myself, and with them, into the early hours of the morning to stave off the yearning of the memories, and somewhere in the dark night I loudly told them both to leave me alone, and I slept. Uncomfortable. Hard. And very, very alone.

The next morning Dwayne told me he had heard me talking in my sleep. You were quite animated, he said. Hell of a mind you have there, Buddy.

After he had left, I went to the office and sat down at my desk to write up the feature on Kilimanjaro. The words ran like salt from a jar and spilled onto the screen in a steady torrent. The tone of the piece took on my sullen mood, and I lamented the loss of the wild freedom of the vanished mountaineering days, when it had still been true exploration and adventure. The days of Mallory. And of my father. I didn't think Barry would like it, but he did.

This is good. He shook the printed draft in his fist. It's not the regular travel fare, I'll grant you that, but this kind of take will stand out. We're running it. It needs some work, though, but we'll get it polished.

I'd like to do more of them, I told Barry. Summits, that is.

Hold your horses, young man. These things cost a fortune. Look around you. Do we look like the kind of publication with a surplus budget? You don't climb Everest at a sprint. You put one labouring boot slowly in front of the other. Step by step. Writing's the same.

What's next? I asked. The languid smoke from Barry's cigarette mushroomed between us and I had to squint to see his expression through it. I was being assessed under his gaze.

I wanted to give it to Mark, but you've got it now, Barry said, stamping out his cigarette into an overflowing ashtray. He ran the magazine as if it were his own universe, and had scant regard for the country's tobacco laws, or the health of his employees. You're going to hike the Fish River Canyon. I want this kind of take on it, he said and waved the article tellingly toward me. Mark is good at gushing and gloating, but let's see a fresh view for a change. Not the normal tourist claptrap. An authentic, objective take. Go find the story behind the destination.

Thanks, I said. When do I go?

In the next few weeks I read up on the Fish River Canyon and the history of Namibia. Barry had tasked me with going to the library and reading as much Theroux as I could stomach, and I also read Jon Krakauer's account of his part in the 1996 Everest disaster. I was intrigued to learn that there had been a South African team on the mountain that year, which had played a small but damning part in the events that unfolded. It read like an indictment of the South African attitude – always a country unto itself.

I scurried up the sides of Table Mountain once a week to prepare myself for the hike. I spoke with some of the students who I knew from my days at UCT who had hiked the Fish, and one Afrikaans rugby player told me it was a walk in the park and that he had done it in a pair of sandals. I thought better of his advice and packed my leather hiking boots.

A week before the bus was scheduled to depart for the Namibian border, Dwayne phoned me on my cell and asked if I had decided on a date to come for a visit. I could really use your help here, Buddy, he said in a tired voice.

I had been thinking of visiting my mother since Dwayne's last visit but had been so busy with the edits of the Kilimanjaro article and the preparations for hiking the Fish, that I had pushed her out of my mind. I told Dwayne I'd try and make it for the weekend, but by Friday night I sat on the balcony of my apartment and texted him a lame excuse. OK, you take care now, was all he texted back.

I sat in the bus on our way to Namibia, and as the barren landscapes of the interior flitted past the window, I let go of everything else. I pushed all thought of my mother from my mind. I forgot about Melanie. I allowed myself to be in the moment, to absorb the experience. It was almost a naked sense of being. Unburdened. It was like heaving an anchor. I knew it was selfish, and the faint tingles of guilt tickled over my skin, but I had to be adrift to find the real story. It was just Christopher, of course, who was with me in the bus, bouncing up and down in his seat expectantly. The mirror that I held up to myself. A reminder of what I owed the world.

The descent into the canyon caught me by surprise. If I had done it in sandals I might have been in serious trouble. When we reached the bottom of the canyon floor, the high cliffs above us closed in and we viewed the blue sky through the rocky frame of it. It was breath-taking. Namibia was a land seemingly made for giants. Everything seemed to have been shaped on a grander scale.

The group I was with was a mix of Afrikaners from the northern suburbs, and very colonial English types from the southern suburbs. I clung somewhere to the cultural divide

between the two groups – at home as the group's outsider. For the most part it was an easy group to trek with. South Africans, in general, are a hardy, outdoors type.

I found my angle for the article when we stopped at the grave of Lieutenant Thilo von Trotha, a German soldier who was murdered in 1905 while negotiating peace with the Nama people of the region. This occurred during the Herero-Nama genocide, which had been prompted by the lieutenant's own uncle, General Lothar von Trotha, and starting in 1904. It is seen as the first genocide of the 20th century.

Mistakenly believing that Lieutenant Trotha had led them into a trap, the Nama's executed him by gunshot to the head. He was buried where he fell, in the widened, undulating valley of the Fish River near Ai-Ais.

Someone should write a book about all of this, a woman from Simon's Town said gravely as we listened to our guide relate the history.

Someone should, I replied quietly.

When we finally plodded our way out of the canyon and into the Ai-Ais Hotsprings Resort, we were all tired and dirty. At the entrance of the hotel someone saw our arrival, and a salutary bell was rung. It felt like being welcomed home after some medieval wartime campaign. Survivors of battle on the dark continent. Then it struck me as such an obvious human ritual of self-congratulation, and I made a mental note to devote a passage in the article to that very superfluous alarm.

There was some elation as we welcomed the comforts of home and sat down in the decidedly colonial-style bar of the resort, where we drank large glasses of German beer while discussing the hike. My mind kept wandering to the grave of Von Trotha and the stories buried in the canyon and the many bones that must lie beneath the sands of that desert country.

When I got home it took a while to place myself. While I had been in the canyon, I had been cut off from everything by the steep valley walls that leaned in and seemed to hug you deeper into the earth. I had forgotten about myself in my own material world. It was the kind of refuge I was familiar with. Giving yourself up to nature. Placing one foot in front of the other, the very effort of that act alone occupying you in such a complete way that there was little room for anything else except the here and the now. The boredom of it all numbing your brain to the point that the shadow of an eagle would be exciting. A highlight. Most people

look at barren landscapes and let their gaze glide over it. Inconsequential vistas. Uninhabitable lands. Yet, unknown to them, in that barren loneliness lies the best respite from oneself. And there is life to be found.

My piece on Kilimanjaro had come out in print while I had been away, and it had been well received in SA, as well as in London, where the magazine published a small run. Barry shook my hand warmly the first day back at the office. What have you got? he asked, getting straight to business as usual.

I handed him my notes and sat in his office getting saturated by cigarette smoke as he read through them. His face was very expressive as he read, like old leather in motion. It moved as if it had hinges beneath the skin that struggled and creaked and needed lubrication. So, let me get this straight, he finally said. You want to lead a story of a hike through a canyon by digressing into early 20th century genocide. You know my wife was German? He eyed me over his glasses.

I shook my head.

Well she was, bless her. And her family were good people. From Frankfurt. Very pragmatic. Her father was a bastard, though, he said as he paged through my notes again.

Aren't they all? I said.

Barry put down the papers and took off his glasses. He threw them onto the table, where they bounced when they landed. You know what the role of a good magazine editor is? he asked, his head slightly down and his eyebrows raised.

Guide everyone to bring out their best work?

That too. Our job is to find talent and help it grow. That's the moral pursuit of an editor. That's the calling. Hopefully to your own publication's benefit, but often not. You've been right before, so I'm inclined to go with your gut feeling on this.

Thank you, sir, I said.

Barry, he spat at me.

Thank you, Barry.

He put his glasses back on and I saw it as a cue and rose to leave. He held up his hand, palm open, and I stopped. I don't know what it is that you have, kid, but you have something and I'm not too proud to run with it. Write it up. Genocide and all. And when you're done, I want three pitches from you.

Yes, si… Yes Mr Littlebrother.

Oh, for fucks sake, just get out.

I closed the door as I left and smiled on my way to my desk. I liked my job, I realised. It was a good time to be young and good at something.

I spent the next few days in the office, only leaving when I couldn't stand the hunger anymore or when I couldn't see straight and needed a few hours' sleep. Nothing writes itself, my professor had always said, but this piece came as easily as the previous one, if not more so. I had texts on the Nokia from Dwayne who wanted to know about the trip and when I could come visit, and from Michael who was finishing his MA in political studies and wanted to grab a beer to tell me about things back home in Zimbabwe. I ignored them.

When the story was done, I handed it to Barry and he had me sit there, squirming, as he read the whole thing slowly. We're a travel magazine, Daniel, not a goddamn political mouthpiece, he said, throwing my work onto his desk. He shook his head. You know who owns this magazine?

I shook my head no.

Bruno Del Fava.

The farming magnate?

Yes, Barry said, that Bruno Del Fava. Whose daddy fought in the war.

Angola?

Barry shook his head at me. No, my boy, not the bush skirmish. The war. World War Two. The late Mr Del Fava fought with the Germans. You see? He was captured in East Africa and brought here as a POW. Spent years building that snake of a road around the south coast. Hated South Africa and hated South Africans. For some reason Bruno came back from Italy when the old man died, started a small farm and made something of himself. Today he's our benefactor.

Are you talking about the POW's who built Clarence Drive? I asked. It couldn't be, but I had to ask.

Sound's right, Barry said. Why?

I shook my head again, realising I had been doing a lot of that around Barry. It's just that my father told me that story before he died. A long time ago. I grew up in Betty's Bay.

Barry eyed me for a while. I knew your father, he said eventually. Not personally, but I read his work. Part of the reason I hired you. Thought talent might run along the gene line. And I was right.

I had nothing to say to that and suppressed the subconscious desire to shake my head again.

Look, Daniel, I didn't want to blow your horn. You're young. Too young, actually, but truth is your piece on Kili ruffled feathers and got picked up everywhere. Bruno thinks that kind of writing must be the future of our venture here. He wants us to take the thing online, too. It's a big deal. I'm just worried what he'll think about this piece, though.

It's the piece I had to write, I said. Pull it if you don't like it.

Oh, I like it. I do. Barry coughed and I could hear the wet phlegm shift crassly over his vocal cords. He bobbed his head and stared into the distance. Fuck it. Let's go with it, he said.

Really?

Yes, why not. I'm tired of printing word for mundane word, trying to mirror the Getaway. Let's branch out, shall we? We'll run it. And not just because it's good, but mostly just to satisfy my editorial curiosity.

I was elated. I thought it was an important piece. I started seeing travel writing as more than just an advertisement for a destination, and more like a window through which new perspective could be found. You climb mountains to find perspective, my dad had told me. Because they're there, Mallory had said. Because I'm looking for a respite from the ghosts, my mind yelled. Because I want to find Clara in the snow.

Daniel, Barry said loudly. You hear me?

I had been blanking out, looking at Christopher's image hovering around the office. Sorry?

Your pitches?

Oh, yes, I said. I only have one.

I told you to bring three, Barry said, switching the goodwill of a moment earlier off as if it were a switch. Where is it, then?

I want you to send me to Italy, I said calmly. To learn to climb in the Alps. I have an angle. It was only after the statement escaped my lips that I realised what had driven it.

Italy? Why? When?

Next year, as early as possible. I'd like to be in Turin by March.

What for? Barry sounded confused.

Mont Blanc, I said. The birthplace of modern mountaineering.

That's French, young man. It's called Monte Blanco in Italian. Did you bring a proper pitch or are you just making this up?

Barry had written a book on the history of mountaineering, although he himself had never climbed. It was the only thing he had ever written, and it had only sold a few hundred

copies. That had been one of the primary reasons why I had chosen to apply for a job at his magazine. I didn't tell him that.

Monte Blanco, then. I looked him straight in the eye. There's a group of guys in the Italian Alpine Club that I've been chatting to online, and they've invited me to come join them for a series of the lesser routes, before we go for Mont Blanc later in the year. They're based in Turin.

Isn't the Winter Olympics there this year?

Is it? I asked deadpan.

I think it is. He thought for a while. Worst case we can syndicate a piece or two about the frivolities of the modern Olympic bureaucracy. But Daniel, there's no way I can afford to base you there for more than a few weeks. We don't have the budget.

It's Italy, I said brazenly. Why don't you ask Bruno?

Barry seemed stunned. I'm either very right, or very wrong about you, he said. For once it was he that was shaking his head. I don't know. Let me think about it.

We can start covering the big peaks, if I can learn about Alpine Climbing. If we go online that will bring in clicks. I can cover Base Camp.

What's driving you? he asked me, eyes half closed.

Perspective, I said.

He shrugged his shoulders. Sat back and thought for a while. Then he said: Oh, what I wouldn't give to have the benefit of youth again.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The beauty of youth. But I wasn't a child any longer, and my mother wasn't a young woman either. She wasn't old. Not by today's standards. But she had aged quickly. That's how time works. There is a temporal dissonance in the way we perceive time, and how time perceives us, between when we are really young, and when we are mature. Adulthood speeds up time. A day at school used to feel like an entire age, and now I can barely close my eyes for a while and open them and that time would have passed, seemingly in a blink. How short your days must become when you are a tired old man, I thought.

I owed it to Dwayne to go visit my mother. His messages and phone calls had become more urgent. I didn't feel like I owed it to her. Perhaps I went just to assuage my own guilt.

To show the community that I was a caring son. Whatever the reason, I went. I went against my own will, against my better judgement, but I went.

When I rode into Betty's Bay the sun had already gone down behind the mountains and a few houses here and there showed their occupancy through their glowing windows. Not much had changed. It was still the same dreamy seaside town, just with more holiday homes and newer shops and a few restaurants trying to survive outside of the holiday season.

I did feel some form of nostalgia as I let the motorbike glide slowly along Clarence Drive, but inevitably memories of my childhood came rushing back, and almost all of them belonged exclusively to Clara. She still held my youth, and so much more.

Inside the house the scents of my mother and Dwayne hung heavy in the air, mixed up into a musky odour that perplexed me. And on the edge of that, a very faint hint of decay. Each time I came home I half expected to find some faint trace of my father, some familiar olfactory reminder that this is home, but it was long gone, and I felt out of place.

The walls needed a fresh coat of paint, and inside it was in disarray, unkept. My room was still much the same as when I had left for university, the only change being stacks of boxes and rubbish that stood against the far wall in a disorganised mess. As if the chaos was slowly encroaching onto the last remnants of me in the house, deliberately engulfing that too.

We had an early dinner that night, sitting around the kitchen table. Dwayne did most of the talking, and he tried to lighten the mood, but my mother sat in a quiet gloom, not touching her food. She smoked one cigarette after the other, and she was racked by bouts of coughing that hunched her frail shoulders forward and bent her over double at the waist. It was obvious to me that she was in pain. Real, physical agony. She was the type who strove to be a martyr in pain – to suffer alone as if that was the measure of true bravery.

Her skin had dried up and her face was a maze of fine lines, crossing and intersecting each other at random. The flesh had peeled off of her and she was a bony bag of sharp edges and hard bulges. Since the last time I had seen her, maybe six months earlier, the change had occurred so suddenly and so completely and ruthlessly that it was difficult for me to look at her.

When are you going to see a doctor? I asked her after Dwayne had cleared the plates and brought us all a fresh whiskey.

She sighed impatiently and waved the idea away with the familiar cigarette in hand. What are they going to do? The new doctor isn't much older than you, anyway. Still learning.

Go to another one then, I said.

Oh, Danny, she shook her head. What for? I'm fine. I'm just tired.

Mom, maybe you're tired all the time because something else is wrong.

She just shook her head again, saying nothing.

And you're smoking too much.

Ha! I've been smoking too much all my life. She gave a rueful laugh. Anyway, it's all I've got left.

There was an awkward silence, then Dwayne stepped in: All you've left? What about me then?

She looked at him and smiled, and I could see a brief flicker of the fondness between them. Yes, and you, she said to him. She patted his cheek. I decided not to push the issue any further.

Dwayne says you're going to Europe, mom said.

Yes. I'm leaving in a few weeks, in the new year. I'll write about the climbing culture there. There's a South African representing us at the Winter Paralympics, so should be interesting. Might write about that too. I looked at Dwayne, but his face gave nothing away.

That's good, she said. You're doing well for yourself. And at least that British passport you got from my side of the family can be put to use now.

I nodded. Thanks mom.

Gift of the gab, same as your father. But what's with the sudden interest in mountain climbing?

I think the bug bit him in East Africa, Dwayne said.

I thought for a while. I'm not sure, I said. I think I look at mountains and the sea the same way people look at railway lines or airports. As a path out of somewhere.

You talk like someone who went to university and doesn't want anyone to forget it, she said, finishing her drink and holding her hand over the glass when Dwayne tried to pick it up to refill it. Well, there's nothing holding you here. I wasn't sure whether that was implied as a jab at my absence from home, and from her life.

I'm sorry I haven't been around much, I said. I've just been very busy.

She looked at me curiously. Don't say sorry for living your life, Daniel. When I was young and met your father, I walked away from my parents to start my own life, same as you're doing now. Children are supposed to fly the nest. One certainty for each and every parent is that you will lose your children, all of them, sooner or later. One way or the other.

Christopher was there again, hovering around us in the kitchen. My father had died and at least he had left us all in peace, but my brother stuck around as if his ghostly presence

wanted to remind us of something. Some dark secret. He was always on the verge of my vision and in every loaded conversation I had with my mother.

I'm going to lie down now, mom said as she got up. I could see by the careful way she walked that she was drunk. For a brief moment I was saddened by what had been lost between us. Who was to blame?

Night mom, I said. The door of her room clicked closed behind her.

Dwayne woke me up early the next morning, and we loaded his truck with our wetsuits and boards and idled slowly down the gravel driveway so as not to wake my mother. We drove to the main beach, and we were pulling on our suits as the sun came up over the distant mountains to the east. The dawny wave, as Dwayne called it.

There was nobody else on the beach. The sea was calm and glassy, and the break was a small, quick wave which we surfed for an hour or two. We cavorted like wild children, two boys playing. I wondered if that was why he held such a special place in my mother's affections. A forever boy.

We sat on the warming sand, our wetsuits stripped down to our waists. We might as well have been on a deserted island, we were so far removed from the rest of the world. We shared an easy silence and listened to the sea and the breeze.

So how long will you be away? Dwayne asked in a lazy voice. He was lying back on his elbows, and the lines between his abs were tanned into dark black canyons.

A couple of months, I said. I'm joining a group of guys from the Italian Alpine Club. If all goes well, we'll summit Mont Blanc.

So, are you going to Turin?

Yeah. Turin. Torino. I'll be in the area.

Will you be there in March?

I cocked my head to the side. I knew where he was going. Probably, I said.

Does she know you're coming?

I shook my head. No. And don't write her about it.

Dwayne laughed. I won't, Buddy. She's your girl, not mine. I'm just glad you're going to find her.

I'm not, I lied. I'm going to Italy to climb.

Sure Buddy, Dwayne said as he got up. He looked down at me. Sunshine and Buddy, he said. Would be a bloody shame if nothing ever comes of that.

Dwayne picked up his towel and his board. See you at the truck, he said over his shoulder as he left.

I sat for a while longer. Not far behind me was the dune fort where Clara and I had spent so much time as kids. Where we had talked about our secrets, our pains and desires. Where we had made love for the first time. I wondered if that hollowed out nest was still the same, but I couldn't get myself to go scrutinise. I was too afraid to see it differently. Smaller or damaged or overgrown. Worse, defiled by some other youngsters. I picked up my gear and followed in Dwayne's footsteps, back to the parking lot.

The planning for the trip to Italy took a long time. I was doing research on the Graian Alps and the general area and also read *Eiger Dreams* by Krakauer and *Nanga Parbat Pilgrimage* by Buhl. Both were fascinating, but I felt Krakauer to be too technical in his appraisals. As if he left the spirit of mountaineering unobserved.

There were logistics to think of: flights and accommodation, passport and papers. Barry had squeezed a decent budget out of Bruno, and I had decided to use my own funds to extend the duration of the trip if I had to. I was finally honest with myself. I was going to Italy to find Clara.

What would come of that, I had no idea, but it was something I had to do. I realised that I would never be able to move on if I couldn't sit down with her and see if there might be anything left after all the years. I doubted that there would be, but there was always hope, I told myself naively. I wrote her an email to ask about the Paralympics, which I told her Dwayne had informed me about. I said nothing about going to Italy. She responded a day later.

> Danny
>
> It is so good to hear from you! I have been thinking about you often these last few months. About our time in the sun… It feels like a lifetime ago, yet it has been only a decade. Guess that is a lifetime. I've tried to find you online but couldn't. Send me a photo. I can only picture you as that gorgeous boy I last saw. Perhaps you've gotten old and unattractive… ☺

Yes, I'm representing the USA at the Winter Paralympics in Turin next year. I still can't believe it. It really is a dream come true. Three-track skiing really saved my life after we left. I needed something to replace surfing. It's all speed and action on the skis. But I'm afraid you'll laugh at me. I'm not as graceful on the skis as I think I might have seemed in the water. Water is a great equaliser, no?

No, the pain isn't gone completely. They couldn't put all of me together again. ☺ But it is better. I still use your mirror therapy; can you believe it?!

My parents are fine. They took a year sabbatical and are touring the States in a van. I don't get to see them as much as I'd like. They are meeting up with me in Italy. How is your mother doing?

Tomás and I aren't seeing each other anymore. I guess it wasn't as serious as he had led me to believe. Anyway, I think I'm taking a break from dating for a good long while. I need to focus on skiing. It's sort of become my career now. No idea why I went through the trouble of getting a law degree. Don't think I'll ever use it.

I read your piece on climbing Kilimanjaro. Dwayne forwarded it to me. Wow!!! It's great work, Dan. I'm so proud of you. I knew you'd do great things. You've always had that shine to you – like a halo.

I really do miss you, you know. You're still my person. I don't think we get two friendships in life like ours. Please write again. What are your plans? What are you writing about next? You know there are mountains around Turin to climb? ☺ Just kidding.

And are you seeing someone? You must be. I thought for sure you would have gotten married by now. You were always so serious.

I have to go. My trainer is pure evil and will drill me to death if I am late for practice. Hold thumbs for me. Maybe I can win a medal. Wouldn't that be something?

Yours, as always

Clara

Xxx

I had to take deep breaths to bring my heartbeat back down. It had bolted off. I had to force myself not to read too much into her email. I had to keep the walls up. I had to keep from getting hurt.

Oh Clara. God damn Clara. I'm sure you'd be as graceful as ever on a pair of skis. Grace can be more than just movement; it can be a state of being. You're my person too. You always have been. I've been a stupid fucker, haven't I? How have I kept my feelings for you wrapped up? How have I let go so easily of something so great? Why is it easy for me to shut love out, to lock it away behind a thick steel door?

Over the next weeks, into the new year, we wrote each other every day. It was like rediscovering a good book. I was in a mad rush to tell her everything, but I had to be careful. I didn't want to step over a line, seem too forward, scare her away. Having felt some vestige of hope I could not bear to lose it. I had to force myself through enormous acts of willpower to wait twenty-four hours before I checked my Gmail for her next letter. It was the sweet agony of falling in love, all over again. And in each of her emails, I thought I detected the same eagerness, the same breathlessness that pervaded my own writing. It was like finding each other again. Two bright kids on a warm beach, tentatively reaching out and touching each other's hearts. The creation of love.

The hope and excitement I had been feeling was brought low when Dwayne called me one sweltering February morning, just three weeks before my flight to Europe. I was sitting on the balcony; the sun was bright and hot. It was a Saturday, and I was contemplating a run on the beach.

Hey Buddy. We got the results back and it's bad news.

Cancer? I asked.

It's in both her lungs. Stage four. I'm sorry, Buddy. Dwayne explained the prognosis to me, and he seemed very comfortable using medical jargon. The legacy from growing up in a family of doctors, I thought. He explained the different treatment options. But you know her, he said. I don't know whether she will want to go through all that.

So, what are you saying? They can't cure her?

No. They can treat it to slow it down, ease her pain. But you can't cure it at this stage.

I could hear Dwayne swallowing on the other end of the line. This had to be a really difficult call for him to make.

How long?

I don't know Buddy. Less than a year, probably. Who knows.

I was quiet for a while, my hand shaking against my ear. I'll pack my things and come over, I said.

When I walked into the tiny kitchen Neil Diamond was blaring over the record player, and my mother was pulling a roast out of the oven, a cigarette in her left hand. She startled when she saw me. You sure got here quick, she said, putting down the tray. She looked around for the ashtray and stubbed out the half-smoked cigarette, giving me a guilty smile. Old habits, she said.

Shouldn't you be in bed? I asked, placing my bag on the floor next to the wood stove.

Come here and at least hug your mother before you begin the Spanish Inquisition. She played her fingers through my hair and said: When you were a boy, I used to comb your hair and hold you and kiss you. And now you're a grown man and I'm not allowed those intimacies anymore. Now you will pass them on to another, younger woman. She smiled a sad smile.

She was even thinner than I had remembered. Where's Dwayne? I asked, trying to break the awkwardness.

Sent him to the shops for potatoes, she laughed. A pile of peeled potatoes stood in a glass bowl on the table. She saw me looking at it and shook her head. He's like a little boy, she said. He hovers over me like I'm about to drop dead any second.

I raised my eyebrows and gave her a harsh look.

Well not any second, she joked. We have time. Come, sit, she said and pulled out a chair for me.

It was surreal. I came here expecting to find her prone in bed, arms crossed over her chest, the house dark and subdued as if for a wake. I had been planning how I would break the news to Barry that I couldn't go to Italy, had to stay here to help my mother. I had been thinking what I would tell Clara and wondering if there would ever be another chance like this. And here mom was, cooking and smiling, music loud. She seemed happy. As if a great burden had fallen off of her. As if death was some kind of respite, after all.

Don't look so sad, it doesn't suit you. Chin up. She patted my hand. It is what it is, Danny Boy. I'm not going to waste what time I have left by feeling sorry for myself.

I'm cancelling the trip, I said. I want to help you get the best treatment you can. You can come and stay in Cape Town with me, closer to the hospitals.

She slapped the table in irritation. You will do no such thing, Daniel. You are not putting your life on hold for me. Anyway, I have Dwayne to do all that. Lord knows I can't deal with two of you fussing over me. Go to Italy. Go see your girl.

Dwayne told you.

She nodded.

I should be here, with you.

She sighed. No, Daniel. I don't need you. Don't you see? I have myself and I have Dwayne. Your being here isn't going to help one bit. And anyway, I feel fine. When you're back I'll still be here. Maybe just with less hair, she smiled, flicking her bangs with a set of bony fingers. You need to learn to put yourself first, because everything and everyone will try to put you second.

So, you'll go for the treatment?

If I don't go Dwayne will probably try to administer it himself, the big fool. Her eyes softened. I'll take my medicine. You go to Italy.

We sat in silence for a while, the smell of fynbos wafting through the doorway from the warm mountainside. I wondered how we had drifted apart during my teenage years. How we had lost our affection for one another. As I looked at her, I realised it had never really gone away, it had just been misplaced. Set aside because of the pressures of life and the lingering pain of the deaths of my brother and my father.

Come, she said, standing up and taking me by the hand. I have something for you. She led me into my room, and on my bed was the brown box that had been hidden from the light in her closet all these years. I want you to have it. It's your dad's notes for the book he was writing on Whitey. You should finish it for him.

I opened the box and reached inside, pulling out a stack of yellowed papers. Why now? I asked.

I don't know why I didn't give it to you earlier, to be honest. Maybe I wanted to keep something of him for myself. It's yours now.

I flipped through the pages. Most were typed up, double spaced and neat, and the rest were written in my father's long, curled hand. There were newspaper clippings and old photos. Thank you, I said. This means a lot.

Well now, mom said. Tea? I'd like to hear about the American girl.

That's a long story, I said as I sat down in the kitchen while mom put the kettle on the stove.

Oh, I bet it is, she laughed. I bet it is.

I didn't sleep much that evening. I lay in my old bed listening to my mother's raging cough that swelled into a bark throughout the night. Again, I decided to stay, to cancel my trip, to be here for my mother. Yet, when the morning came, she was in the same happy mood as the day before, frying eggs and bacon. It's just bad in the evenings, she said. I feel fine now. Look. And she even did a little twirl with her apron held up daintily.

The three of us ate breakfast in the kitchen, laughing and joking. Go, mom said again. You have to go. And Dwayne nodded to me as well.

We strapped the box with my father's notes on top of my bag onto the back of the motorcycle, snugly in the crook of my back. I kept feeling for it as I cruised around the turns of Clarence Drive, on my way back to the city. It felt heavy on the back of the bike, as if it were another person.

She had promised to go for treatment. Dwayne would update me constantly. I could fly back if she took a turn for the worse. My mind was made up for me. I'm coming to see you, Clara, I said into my helmet. Somewhere behind me, perched on the box, Christopher was coming along too.

Barry dropped me off at the airport and rattled off strings of instructions laced with profanities. Don't fuck this one up, kid.

I settled into the short flight to Johannesburg International Airport, feeling somewhat guilty that I was using my job, and especially Barry, as a means to find Clara. It wasn't the sort of thing I would normally do, but there I was regardless. Rebellious in love.

I browsed the bookstore in the airport and bought Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*. A poignant memoir exploring grief in all its forms, the blurb read. I had read some of her essays previously and liked her investigative style and objective writing. It would turn out to be a fitting read for the times ahead.

I started it as the plane left the runway in Johannesburg and finished it as we were cruising over the enormity that was Africa, the Sahara somewhere below us, just a monotone desert landscape absorbing the last rays of the sun which was setting far to the west. I could relate to the crazy no-man's-land that Didion described after the death of her husband – a desert of despair, I thought. A fantasy world filled with ghosts and hauntings.

I arrived in Turin from Milan on the 1st of March after almost two solid days of travel, and I was tired and dirty. I had never gone so far before. The Paralympic Games was to hold its opening on the tenth. I didn't have a lot of time to find Clara. I knew she would be in the Paralympic Athletes Village in Sestriere, which was also where all the Alpine events would take place. It was also where Barry had booked accommodation in a condominio apartment which I was to share with other international journalists.

It is difficult to convey the strange feeling of homecoming that I felt when I first exited the Porta Susa train station and saw Europe on street level with my own eyes. It had always been on a map, etched on my skin, some distant dream or nightmare but surely an indelible part of me. But it had also felt like a vision, a place that couldn't possibly exist as the books said, a place that was impossible to conceive of from the remote African soil over which I walked.

What I saw at first was not much different from what I had expected. Another city. A congregation of people and the flutter and flailing of the things they surround themselves with. Humanity, then. But with each step, dragging my suitcase and hefting my bag across my shoulder, I glimpsed the old world hidden under the asphalt, behind the glass windows and storefronts. It seemed almost humbly unaware of how old it was – of what lay beneath it, of what it had been built on.

Why the feeling of arrival? I do not know. Perhaps some remnant of the past, of the genes that I carried. Or perhaps, and more likely, a remnant of a cultural past that had been clung to and revered and told over and over in stories and fables and books and movies. An inability of European culture to assimilate and let go of itself. That said, it did feel like arriving on familiar shores.

I had no idea what it meant to be labelled European. For me it meant the colour of my skin, but in Turin I could feel it meant something else. Something I wasn't really a part of, not fully. I was familiar with occupying the spaces in between.

It was not as cold as I had expected, yet the air had an unknown bite to it that stung my lungs and made me miss my mother. Or home. At the same time, it was exhilarating. I could smell the mould of the old stones. It smelt just the way I had imagined it would.

Angelo had given me directions to Caffé Torino where he would meet me, but I had trouble making sense of the Italian names, and the directions which had seemed so simple suddenly were inadequate in the enormity of it all. Just head south down the gravel road, until you get to the big tree, then take the path to your left, I'll meet you there. Those were the kind of directions I was familiar with. I suddenly realised I was incapable of orienting myself in terms of blocks and avenues, Italian cathedrals and piazzas. I couldn't find the sun, and without its light I was quite suddenly lost.

I've always felt nervous about being late, but walking those streets, I felt a peacefulness – as if getting lost there wasn't like getting lost back home. Perhaps I was being ignorant, wilfully even, but I felt safe enough to take a few wrong turns. It was OK to figure things out.

I thought of hailing a taxi, something which I had never done in South Africa, but decided that walking was the best way to experience the city. Feet flat on the cobbles. What should have taken me 30 minutes took almost an hour. I had to stop constantly at some street corner to orient myself on the map I carried.

I found Angelo sitting at a small table right in front of the arched entrance to the café. I recognised him from pictures he had sent me. I had walked around the cafe for some time,

before I realised it was actually situated in the enormous Piazza San Carlo, with its bronze horse rider and two beautiful old churches. The piazza was filled with people and Olympic flags were draped everywhere. In front of the café, by my feet, was a figure of a bronze bull laid into the cobblestones. Torino. I had expected Angelo to be irritable, but he possessed the kind of patience reserved only for those who had found their calling in life, was secure within themselves and had no need to hurry anywhere

Daniel, he greeted me, stressing the 'a'. Benvenuto. He brought me in by the arm and brushed my right cheek with a salutary kiss. You made it. Is normally quiet, he indicated the square with a sweep of his arm, but you come when it's Olympics.

We sat down and I thanked him for waiting. The café was set in a gorgeous old building with a row of high porticos spanning its front. If the colonial architecture found in Cape Town held any of the same old charm of these European establishments, it must surely have been borrowed from here.

Angelo ordered me a coffee. His English was good. From being ski instructor, he said. Americano. Britannico. My Italian, which I had thought was getting somewhere, suddenly fell flat among the nuances and accents of the spoken language. The coffee came and it was strong and black and just enough to wake me up.

What do you think of Torino, heh?

It's amazing, I said. Beautiful.

Better than your Cape Town?

Maybe. Different, that's for sure. This is my first time in Europe.

He brushed my comment away. You'll love it. People are very friendly. And if you are a climber, you will have many friends here.

Angelo explained the public transport system to me. He was amazed at how little I knew of trains and metro's, trams and busses. How do you do in Cape Town? he asked.

Everybody has cars, I said. I have a motorbike. Mostly the poor use buses and trains. Not so safe.

He laughed merrily, quite entertained. Well then here we are all poor. We all take the train or the bus. Even politico.

For the first time I realised how different South Africa was from the rest of the world. I had imagined many similarities but had not thought of how the legacy of my country could translate to such direct and obvious disparities in how things were done.

Angelo called for the cheque and refused my offer to pay. He handed me a sim-card for my phone, a better foldout map and a woollen beanie with a bull embroidered in it. For

the cold, he said. I was to stay with him in his uncle's apartment for a few days, before booking into my apartment in Sestriere. It's very busy now with the Games. Too many people. You sure you don't stay with us here until after the Olympics finish?

No, I have to write about the Paralympics, I told him. We have one South African athlete participating.

OK. Then after, you come and stay with us again. We have lots of time before we climb. Monte Blanco is only in June.

The budget Barry had worked out for me would never stretch to a June summit attempt; I had known that well beforehand. But I was in Italy just in time for the Games, and for Clara, and that was all that mattered at that moment. Maybe after the Games, I said, and Angelo nodded.

We jumped on a tram south, then got on the bus which took us further south to the Nizza stop in San Salvario. From there it was a short walk to Angelo's uncle's apartment. Most of the buildings were 5 story blocks, many with modern facades, while some seemed much older. We went through a creaking door in front of an older, grey building, and rode a rickety, tiny steel-caged elevator up to the fourth floor. The hallway was musty and carpeted, and Angelo opened the second door down. My uncle rents it out for the holiday makers. Skiers and tourist. But when we come, he gives it to us rent free.

Inside, the apartment was tiny but very clean and light, in stark contrast to the hallway outside. The doorway opened onto a living room that was sparsely furnished in modern-looking trappings. All Ikea, Angelo told me.

There was a figure stretched over the couch. She was a short girl with olive skin and an incredibly thin midriff that was accentuated by the girth of her powerful thighs.

This is Daniel, Angelo said as I stepped in.

Danny, I said.

The figure on the couch pulled itself up lazily and eyed me with suspicion. Ciao, she murmured.

This is Aurora, Angelo said. Come, mi casa su casa. You know that one?

I nodded.

Birra? Aurora asked, extending a tall green bottle toward me.

Thanks, I said as I took it. It still had the cap on, and I stood around holding the bottle, waiting for someone to offer me an opener. Angelo picked up an open beer, raised it and said: Salute! I clinked glasses with them, and Aurora noticed my dilemma and motioned me to

hand the beer over to her, which I did. She put the top into her mouth, screwed up her eyes as she bit into the cap, and deftly popped it off of the bottle.

Thanks, I said as she handed it to me.

Prego, she answered, disappearing back into the couch.

All the travelling had tired me immensely, and by the third beer I had a warm glow about me and was nodding off on the couch. I was questioned about South Africa, the Drakensberg Mountains, Cape Town and where I grew up.

Quite often the two of them would take off in Italian and I would be left to doze off as the language rose and rang around me, melodic and strangely soothing. It reminded me of falling asleep on the couch in the living room when I was young, with the soothing voices of my parents low and soft in the background.

I woke up the next morning, still on the couch. Someone had placed a pillow under my head and draped a heavy blanket over me. I was wet with perspiration – even though it was wintry and cold outside, I was unaccustomed to the central heating and the stuffy indoors. I felt like throwing open the windows, but those were firmly shut against the winter air.

Angelo and Aurora showed me around town for the next few days, took me to protracted lunches, and made me feel welcome. Perhaps I was European after all, I thought. It was difficult to imagine anyone feeling out of place among the old-world sites and the hospitality of the Winter Olympics, which brought a lively air to the place.

Aurora, although having a distant front to her, was easy going around Angelo, and I was sure there was something going on between them. I found myself very curious about her. I asked Angelo one evening as we had dinner in a café a few blocks from his place. She had been pinning me down all night with a serious look that seemed almost to be a challenge.

She is not only one man's woman, he said, shaking his head and smiling. Aurora does what she wants with who she wants. If you're lucky, maybe she likes you too.

I shook my head no, and Angelo just gave a knowing laugh.

That evening Angelo went out late to see his uncle in the city. I was sitting on the couch dozing off, and Aurora was next to me, reading a book of which I couldn't make out the title.

Before I saw it coming, she had placed down her book and shifted quickly onto my lap and was kissing me wetly. I could taste the coffee she was drinking, and her body was indulgent and warm in my hands. I was suffering from such an intense skin hunger that I almost let myself fall into the softness of her, before I willed myself to pull away.

She simply frowned and sat up. She didn't seem particularly hurt by my self-restraint, just mildly amused. You have a girlfriend? she asked.

Si. No, I mean, not really.

Aurora gave a light laugh, slid off me and sat next to me tightly, her hand resting on my knee.

What is her name?

Clara. But I haven't seen her in many years.

Where is Clara? Cape Town?

Actually, she's here in Italy, I said. She's in Sestriere somewhere.

Bravo, she said, slapping my knee. So, you go to her?

It's complicated. She doesn't know I'm here. And I still have to find her.

We must go tomorrow, she said eagerly. On an adventure to find Danny's girl. It will be fun.

The Italian love for life, for falling in love and simply for the beauty of love, was on full display that evening when Angelo arrived home and Aurora told him about Clara and her plan to help me find her. Soon we were all talking over one another, the two of them often in Italian with each other, and Aurora would interpret with quick one-liners in English. I think if things had turned out differently for me, I would have stayed in Italy, just for the exhilaration of the place and its people.

We took the train to Oulx on the French border, and then got on a bus that took us up the winding mountain road and into Sestriere. Aurora and Angelo took on the responsibility of helping me find Clara as if they each had their own stake in it.

I liked the constant motion, always moving about in new places. I had found that when I was surrounded by the unexpected, when my mind was primarily concerned with the next small challenge of getting from here to there, Christopher's presence was less heavy, not as dense as when I was standing still. It felt as if I could move out from under him, and he couldn't keep up.

I booked into my accommodation in Sestriere, and Angelo and Aurora went to stay with a friend outside of town, on a tiny piece of farmland. It was there that Angelo finally stole her for himself, I think. Or where she allowed herself to settle for one partner. Amidst an adventure of love.

Aurora had set up a network of friends and acquaintances who either lived or worked in the area, and via text they pinpointed the room in the Olympic Village in which the American girl with the bright hair was staying. I had wanted to simply send her an email to tell her I was there, but the Italians would not hear of it.

You need a grand gesture, Aurora said. For a story like this it must be romantic.

For all their planning it turned out to be not as romantic as the Italian love stories you hear about. On the second day there, while Aurora was still trying to formulate a grand plan, Angelo suggested taking me up the slopes that were open to visitors for my first ski lesson. You surf, so we try snowboarding, he said eagerly.

On the outskirts of town, we took a lift up onto the beginners' slopes where Angelo introduced me to Layla, a tiny girl from Spain who worked all over Europe as a ski instructor. Snowboarding was nothing like surfing, and my hopes of being a natural was immediately quelled.

No, said the petit Spaniard, shaking her head. Is not skating, is not surfing. You're trying too hard. She moved behind me and grabbed me by my hips, thrusting them forward. See?

I did a few erratic hip prods that amused her. Like that?

No. Eh… You know how boys stand when they peepee? It's like that. She grabbed hold of an imaginary phallus and thrust her hips forward, gyrating in a slow figure of eight, the way little boys pissed with their shorts on their ankles, ballistically aiming at moths or crickets, or just jetting their initials onto the hot asphalt. I struck the pose of the urinal.

Si, she said, clapping. Si. Bien. Muy bien.

It was in this awkward pose, with Layla clapping me on, that I heard the song of a familiar voice give a little laugh, then ask: Danny? No way!

Clara was on one ski, her stump tucked in behind her knee, an outrigger in each hand that kept her upright. She was beaming, her face split by a smile, and her hair, longer than I had ever pictured it, streamed out behind her like a tail in the wind.

Hi, I said.

Jesus. Is it really you? She glided effortlessly over to me, stopping in front of me with a sharp turn. Oh my God. Daniel. What on earth are you doing here? She grabbed onto me tightly, both her arms around me, and having no control over the board it went out from under me and we both ended up in the snow in a bundle of limbs. Clara was laughing.

One of her friends, also American judging by the flags on her ski jacket, helped Clara up while looking angrily at me. It's OK, Clara told her, he's an old friend. She looked over at me. I haven't seen him in ages.

Layla helped me out of my bindings, and I got up. I was relieved to find I was taller than Clara by more than a head. The sun was out, and she had tied her jacket around her middle. There she was right in front of me. I was suddenly very aware of how absurd this situation must seem. How would I tell her that I had been waiting for this moment since I last saw a glimmer of her through her bedroom window, so long ago?

She was more substantive. If the child Clara had been more ethereal, like a dream, she now was a person with her own story. Less a creature of daydreams and fantasies, but a real authentication of that youthful spirit that I knew so well. She had become a woman. Strong and light.

The lines that had etched themselves around her mouth were a mapped reality of her life, and of the decade lost between us. Crow's-feet made her smiles even more sincere. But it was the small pearls of her white teeth that had not changed. They were still the tiny sharp teeth that I had loved so hard, and around them her mouth had retained the same shape and lustre. It still formed my name in the exact same way. Her voice had always been slightly hoarse, but now it had become husky, deep and strangely mellifluous. Like musk and honey. It quavered over my eardrums.

We stood looking at each other for a long time. I have to go down, she said, pointing at her stump. Meet you below? She laughed, her mouth open and her head back. I cannot believe you're here.

I looked down the slope, which suddenly seemed steep and challenging.

No, you're not going down on that, she laughed. You take the lift down. Let's get something to drink.

OK, great, I said, smiling at her.

OK, she said, and pushed off on the outriggers. I watched her flow over the snow, as smooth as water. She was more beautiful than I could remember, and more graceful than ever.

I need to go, I told Layla. Angelo was still somewhere on the blue run above us, and I left him and picked up my board and ran, heavy-footed, toward the ski lifts.

Clara showed me to an outside table at a café and we sat down for coffee with her American teammate Linda. The sun was setting over the mountain and the light wind was cold. Linda had a disapproving look on her face. She's jealous, I recognised. We were awkward and spoke about the Olympics; what had been the highlights of the Winter Games thus far, and what Clara was looking forward to in the Paralympics.

Finally, Linda left, telling Clara that she will see her at their apartment, and we were alone for the first time in more than a decade. I had no idea what to say. We smiled at each other over our coffees.

I just had this feeling that you might come, she said. I don't know why. We've been chatting so much over email lately, and you've been quiet on your plans. I think in the back of my mind I had hoped you might show up.

I drank the last of my coffee. After Kilimanjaro I was looking at places to climb in the Alps, hoping I could do a story on it. And then I learned you were coming to the Torino Games. I was blushing and looking down into my empty cup. I looked up at her face, eager. So here I am.

I'm glad you're here, she said. We have so much to catch up on. I have so much to tell you.

Are you with someone? I asked her.

What? Like a date?

No, I mean your parents or someone. I knew I was sounding like an idiot. Are you here on a date?

Clara laughed. No. My parents are flying over in a couple of days, that's all. Tomás and I are finished. He wanted to come, but it'll never work out. So, I'm not seeing anyone. You?

No, definitely not, I said, as if the thought of me seeing someone was completely outrageous.

Good. Then there's no one to interrupt us. She opened her eyes wide. I mean nobody to disrupt our catching up, that's what I meant. She was quiet for a while. It's so weird seeing you in Italy, and all grown up.

I haven't changed that much, I said.

Yes and no, she said. She squinted as if she was studying me. You're still my Danny. Just older and sadder looking.

And you're just as graceful on skis as you are in the water, I said.

Thank you, Danny.

Just then Angelo found us and yelled my name as he came toward our table in quick strides. Is this the girl? he asked.

Clara, this is my friend Angelo, I said.

Clara offered her hand, which Angelo took and kissed, bowing to her as though she was royalty. Danny said you were pretty, but he didn't tell me you were gorgeous. Bellissima.

Clara smiled at me, her head to the side. You've been gossiping about me, have you?

All he can talk about, Angelo said. The American girl with the bright hair. Angelo took a seat at the table and waved over a waiter. We must have a drink to celebrate. I must call Aurora and tell her the news.

Aurora arrived shortly after, and the four of us sat drinking cold beers, talking and laughing like old friends. Angelo had moved his chair to make space for Aurora, shoving me tightly against Clara. The two Italians were natural Cupids.

It was good having them around to lighten the mood. We stayed late into the night. Around us the floodlights had come on and illuminated the white expanse of the slopes, trailing bright white up against the mountain.

We hadn't seen each other in person in such a long time. Clara was both familiar and unfamiliar to me at the same time. We used to share long silences as if it was our own special language, and now it felt as if I couldn't reach the right words – as if my tongue had grown thick and dull in my mouth. Our only form of recent communication had been over email, and I felt the disconnect between the electronic format and the intimacy of speaking face to face. Having the company of my friends, who took to Clara immediately and carried the conversation, was a big relief.

At the end we chose the language we were best at, that of touch, to fill in the silences. When Clara laughed at a story Angelo was telling, she draped her arm over my shoulder and pressed her face into my arm, and it was as familiar as if she had done it yesterday. As she told them stories of me growing up, she would jokingly poke my side and squeeze my hand, and by the end of the evening, when the beer and the thin, clear air had tired us, she leaned her body against mine, her head resting on my shoulder, and her hand on my knee. It felt like arriving somewhere memorable after a long journey.

We walked Clara to her building, a tall round tower inside the village, and she hugged everyone good night. She put her hand behind my neck and gave me a kiss on the cheek, and as we pulled away her lips lightly grazed mine, her breath soft and warm.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In my apartment that night I could hardly sleep. I was in Italy. I had a job which I loved. And I had found Clara again. What kept me awake was everything else. The whole decade that divided us. As much as the evening had been wonderful, I feared that I would not live up to the idea of the boy. The reality of life suddenly came down on me, heavy as damp earth, and I realised I now had something to lose again. And that made me afraid.

Clara was training with her coach every day, preparing for her events, and I only got to see her twice more for a quick coffee before the Games started. It was agony. I lay in bed at night, myself in my hand, replaying every image and smell I had captured of her on that first day we spent together in the café. She was right there, but I had to wait for her.

I attended the opening ceremony with my press pass and saw Clara walk below the American flag, waving and smiling. I was happy for her. She seemed content. I scanned the crowd for her father's long face but could not find him. I wondered if he knew I was there, watching Clara too.

I tried to watch all of Clara's para alpine events, but Barry had scheduled an interview with Bryce Walker, South Africa's only winter Paralympian, and I met with him as Clara was doing the super-G event.

I got access to the Olympic Village and met Walker in the cafeteria. His story was inspiring. The interview went well, but I kept checking my watch and he asked me if I was in a hurry. I told him a friend was going down the hill as we spoke. When we finished the interview, I learned that Clara had taken silver. Clara was an Olympian.

The little girl with the iron leg had sailed down the snow to get on the podium. I sat at a café at the foot of the mountain, among other journalists and spectators, and I thought of her dusting the sand off her bum when she got up to say hello on that first sunny day on the beach. How she had taken to water like a fish, her injury forgotten among the waves. I understood more in that moment of her inner strength, of what it took to get there.

What this would mean for the rest of her life, I didn't know, and I thought I was being selfish for worrying. This was Clara's story, and mine would have to wait if I wanted her. I toasted the mountains, Italy, Clara. To you, Clara, I said as I raised my glass.

After her final event, Clara moved out of the Paralympic Village, and into a hotel room where her parents were staying. I got invited to have lunch with them at a restaurant in town. Her father had grown a long grey beard that hid the sadness from his features. He greeted me warmly, shaking my hand and ending it in a one-armed hug. Clara's eyes jumped from him to me, glowing.

Her mother seemed displeased by my presence. She didn't get up and only shook my hand, her limp fingers long and cold in my grip. Clara and her father tried to steer the conversation to Betty's Bay and my job as a travel writer, but her mother was uninterested and made a point of informing me of all the public events Clara would have in the States once she got back home. Clara laughed and said she hadn't even booked a ticket back yet; thought she might take some time off in Italy before heading home. But her mother kept up her litany of things that would happen in America, much to Clara's exasperation.

Clara tells me you're writing a book as well, her dad said.

Yeah. I got all my dad's old notes on Whitey's life, his whole story. I'm trying to finish what he started.

Clara's parents shared a look. How far have you got? her dad asked me.

Not far, I said. It's a big project.

I'd love to read it when you're done.

And how is your mother doing? Clara's mom asked me.

Oh, she's doing fine, I said. She's very happy by the sea.

When Clara's mother went to find the bathroom, Clara got up quickly and said she'd join her. Her dad and I chatted about South African politics for a while, then he said: I'm happy you and Clara have connected again, Daniel. He nodded his head to himself as if he still needed some convincing. I know she missed you terribly. And you kids had something special. I've realised over the years how unique your bond must have been.

Thanks, I said, not sure whether he was being sincere.

Did you know I went back to South Africa, not too long after we first left?

I frowned. No, I said. What for.

He was pensive. I had to tie up loose ends, that kind of thing. He saw my uncertainty and carried on. Let's just say the job I was doing at the time, the organisation I was working for, needed me to wrap up affairs.

You could have said hello.

It was probably better that I didn't. He took a long drink of his wine. But I did hear that you were all doing fine and coping, so that gave some closure. Perhaps I'll explain one day. Anyway, I'm retired now. Life does begin after sixty, as they say.

I'll take your word for it, I said.

So, what are your plans with my daughter? he asked seriously.

I took my time before I answered. I guess I'm going to try to make up for lost time, I told him.

He nodded, a slight smile creasing his beard. I still feel bad that we had to leave so suddenly, that we had to rip you guys apart like that. But with what happened, you know… We didn't have a choice.

I frowned questioningly, not sure what he was getting at. I thought I saw a moment of panic on his face, some recognition, and then Clara and her mother were back.

What are you boys gossiping about? Clara asked jokingly.

Clara's dad looked at me as he replied: Just politics, my girl. Nothing serious.

I walked Clara back to the hotel after lunch. Her parents had gone ahead of us. Thanks, she said. That was fun.

It was.

See you tomorrow?

We'll pick you up, I said.

Clara hugged me and her hair smelled like fresh rain. I placed my hands on her cheeks and drew her face to mine. I kissed her lips softly, held the kiss for a while, and I felt her lips part slightly, and our tongues met, and we kissed deeply, holding onto each other tightly. When I let her go we were both smiling. That was nice, she said, and I knew she remembered too.

Aurora, with the help of Angelo, had invited us to have dinner with them at their friend's place, to celebrate Clara's achievement. I spent the day transcribing my interview with Walker, and the hours moved like syrup, thick and treacly.

Angelo picked me up in his friend's tiny Fiat, and we picked Clara up at her hotel. She was waiting for us. We drove out of Sestriere, down the mountain pass, and stopped at a tiny villa just as the sun set and the shadows spilled into the valley.

Angelo opened wine for us, and Aurora set the table in the rustic kitchen. A fire was blazing in the hearth and it was warm and cosy inside. She served us lasagne with a fresh salad and focaccia still hot from the oven.

The two Italians were all over each other, like newlyweds. Their open displays of affection had Clara and me glance sideways at each other a couple of times. I'm glad for you two, I told them.

It's the time of love, no? Angelo said. Just look at you two.

There was only one spare bedroom, and if there had been another, I'm sure Angelo wouldn't have told us about it. I can take the couch, I told Clara.

No, Clara said to me, her voice low and warm.

There was no haste in our lovemaking. I helped Clara remove her prosthetic and ran my hands over her stump and felt her scars. We undressed slowly under the covers, kissing each other languidly, soaking one another up. I knew every detail and response of her body so well, and she handled me as if we had never stopped making love. We came together like fluid, effortlessly.

When we had consumed each other we lay intertwined, exhausted but glowing warmly. My whole being felt satisfied. I can't believe I've missed out on a decade of that, Clara said softly. Her hair was spread over my chest.

I can't either, I said.

I almost feel like having a cigarette, she laughed.

I didn't know you smoked.

I did for a while in college.

I thought for a bit, playing with her hair. I guess there's a lot of holes in our story we'll have to fill, I said.

We have all the time in the world, she sighed. As long as we don't let go of each other again.

I lay with Clara in my arms, safe and secure, and I was hesitant to question anything from the past. It was as if what we had just regained in the present was so fragile that any minor collision from the past could shatter it forever. Finally, I asked her: Why did you have to leave, Clara?

Oh Danny, how on earth haven't you figured that out by now? You never asked me what was going on. For a clever man you can be very thick.

You told me. You said you had to go to the States for your leg. You said you'll be back. My tone was rising.

She sat up, raising her leg to her chest. Her long hair was over her shoulder and I looked at her perfect back, the soft white down gleaming across her shoulders like a fine dew. There was a heavy absence of words, then: I was pregnant, Danny. We were pregnant.

I sat up, reached out for her, then let my hand fall onto the bed. It felt like the wind was knocked out of me. For a moment, images of Christopher and my father flashed through my mind. Then of Clara watching me from her window as her dad packed the trailer.

Why didn't you say anything?

Because I was all alone, Danny. I was scared. I was afraid you'd be hurt, too. What should we have done? Become teenage parents? Had none of this, no lives of our own? Imagine a fucking teenage girl with only one leg, taking care of a helpless baby. It's laughable. She was crying, and I put my hand on her back. I could feel something shift in me too, and my eyes felt ripe with tears.

Clara, I'm so sorry. God, I'm so sorry.

You see? she said. Now you feel bad too. And that's the thing, you couldn't do anything about it back then. We had to rush home so that I could get an abortion. I couldn't stay with you. I didn't even understand what was happening at the time. It all happened so fast.

I pulled Clara toward me, and we sat closely together. She told me the whole story. I was angry at myself for not realising what had happened. I could feel the weight settle around my chest again. How could I have let a child die? How could I have let Christopher die, and then my own child? I had been selfish. Absorbed in my own despair.

My parents were just doing their best to look out for me. It's what parents do, Clara said. They protect us from ourselves. They'll lie to the whole world if that's what's best for us.

Who else knew? I asked.

Dwayne, nobody else. I told him years after we left. He kept in contact. You weren't writing back much and I wanted to have some connection to you.

So, you have carried this thing alone, all this time?

Pretty much. She reached up and put her hand on my cheek. But I had our memories. Those kept me going.

Do you think the universe is against us? I asked.

She smiled. No, I don't. It brought us here, didn't it?

Clara's parents left the next day, and we departed Sestriere with Angelo and Aurora, and stayed with them in Turin for a few days, where we saw the sights of the city and just enjoyed being in Italy as lovers. We did all the tourist things, and in the mornings and the evenings, I wrote the piece on Walker that Barry was waiting for.

Then we went up to Biella, where we rented a room in an old hotel. Clara wanted to see the cathedral. Sitting in the old church on the wooden pews, I was reminded of our rockpool in Betty's Bay. Cristopher was with us, and his presence was weary, as if he had something to say. I had to push him from my mind the whole time, but there was an earnestness to his haunting. As soon as I had seen Clara again his manifestations had become more substantial, more weighted. It felt like he could erupt around us.

We had a week left together, and we had already planned things out. Clara had to go back to Montana, where she had a string of engagements to celebrate her achievement. She had a job offer to be a ski instructor at one of the best resorts in the USA, but she had decided to come back to Italy. I'll find a job as an instructor here, she told me.

I had finished the piece on Warner, and Barry had already written me asking how soon I could have something ready on the alps and climbing. Angelo had organised a trip for me, Aurora and him, to climb Monte Mucrone near Biella. It was to be my initiation into ropework, crampons and ice axes. Real climbing. In the real Alps. I was looking forward to that immensely, but at the same time I dreaded being away from Clara again, even just for a few weeks. I worried that she might change her mind and never come back.

Clara's attitude toward me, and toward us, showed the exact opposite to what my anxieties were conjuring up. She made decisions for our future together without any hesitation, with a confidence that reminded me of how we had felt as kids. You're my person, she said. And I've got you back now.

She wanted to come back and stay with me in Italy until after the Monte Blanco summit. And then? I had asked her.

You tell me.

Our plan was to go back to South Africa together, to see my mother and stay in Cape Town for a while, until we could decide where our future would be. Clara said it would be like a holiday for her. She said we could live anywhere and do anything. I almost believed her.

For the rest of our week together we stayed in Biella, and travelled up and down the mountains, exploring the many small settlements and all of the majestic sites. In our hotel

room we made love every morning, and in the evenings, after dinner, we rushed back to our room like two guilty teenagers. The day before we left for Turin, Clara was lying on the bed in a state between this world and that of sleep, and I noticed she was rubbing her leg. I found the arnica oil next to her toothbrush in the bathroom and went to her: Do you want me to do your leg?

She looked up slowly. You make it sound like you want to make love to it.

I do, I said. I want to make love to all of you.

After Clara left, we spent three days in a hut in the mountains, surrounded by rocks and snow and ice. Angelo and Aurora taught me as much as possible about alpine climbing. From the little hut it was a two-day ascent to the summit. Mucrone wasn't very technical, but I learned much, soaking up every detail and experience. I thought if the boy in the tiny library in Betty's Bay, paging through books on Everest and Mallory, could see me now he would smile a triumphant grin. Standing on the summit I thought of my father, and of finding perspective. Little Christopher was there too, subdued. Almost menacing.

Why the interest in climbing? Clara had asked me one evening as we lay naked in bed.

I always thought it was a way out, I said. Like a route you take to get away from somewhere. I turned and looked at her. Now I know it was always a way of getting closer to you. A way to find you again. I have been dreaming about you in the snows of Montana for a very long time.

When we got back to Turin, I found several messages from Dwayne. I called him and his voice sounded like it had travelled across a great distance. Over the lag on the line he explained that my mother had taken a sudden turn for the worse. You should come home, Buddy. You'll regret it if you don't.

I called Barry and gave him the news. Go home, he said. That big pile of rocks and snow won't go anywhere. He managed to get me a flight home from Milan in a few days. I typed Clara a hasty email and said that I would call her when I got back to South Africa.

It's just the way life works, these ups and downs. There is a constant flux between the highs and lows, like some regular wavelength rippling through our very existence. To survive life, I needed to learn to ride that wave, slowly and confidently, trusting that the chaotic rush down the face will be tempered again by the inevitable rise to stability.

A few weeks after arriving home, my mother passed away in Groote Schuur hospital. There isn't much to say about those hours and days spent sitting with her, watching her fade. I cried a lot. Berated myself for not being stronger. I told her of Clara, of everything, and the story brought a slight smile to her lips. The only treatment she received in the end had been palliative. Dwayne told me that her last truly good day had been when I had visited them before leaving for Italy. It was like she slipped over a ledge, man, Dwayne said. And then she just kept on slipping faster and faster.

Dwayne organised a beautiful ceremony on the main beach in Betty's Bay. I was surprised by the crowd that gathered to see her off. It was as if I had been blind to a side of her that had eluded me. I met many members of her extended family for the first time in my life. Dwayne and I waded out into the surf, where he had taught Clara and I how to read the currents. We scattered my mother's ashes into the sea where the waves caught her and carried her off. I was caught between the mountain winds and the sea.

After everybody had slowly trudged their way through the soft sand and gotten in their cars and left, Dwayne and I fetched our surfboards and surfed in silence until the light faded away and we drove home with the headlights on.

Clara's in London at the moment, waiting for her connecting flight. Can I borrow your truck tomorrow to go pick her up? I asked as we crept up the driveway. The cottage sat alone in the twilight.

Sure Buddy, Dwayne said tiredly. Any time.

When we got into the house, I noticed all of the boxes stacked in the living room. You've been packing up mom's stuff?

No, Dwayne said. I'll leave that for you to do. I've just been packing up my things.

Why? I asked. This is your house.

No Buddy. It's your house now. I can't live here without your mother. I have an old place in Kalk Bay that belonged to my father. I'm going there. Figured I could fix the place up. Keep myself busy. He pointed to a brown manila folder on the coffee table. She wanted you to have it, he said. It's in her will.

But you bought the place, I said, frowning.

When I bought it, I put it in her name. It was always hers.

Jesus, I said. I don't want to live here, too many bad memories.

Dwayne looked at me without expression. So, make new memories. Better memories.

We made a fire outside and sat by it. We toasted my mother. I told Dwayne about Italy. Said I wanted to go back to climb Monte Blanco. We spoke about Clara and about the

child that we made that never saw the world. Dwayne listened without judgement, then told me stories of him and my mother. Happy moments. He showed me pictures of them together that I had never seen before, and she looked happy, light and fulfilled. They had been good for each other – had found each other in their moments of longing, and in their own strange way they had made love work. We sat into the early morning hours, the fire shooting embers up into the blackness around us, trails of red lights like departing souls.

You know I'll always be there for you, right? I know I can't replace your parents, but you really are like a son to me.

I reached out and squeezed Dwayne's hand. Thank you, I said. You're the only family I have left.

The next day I left in the truck while Dwayne was still diligently packing his things into boxes. We agreed that he'd stay on a for a while, to see Clara and for us to be together in a time when we needed one another most. I had read the will that morning, and the cottage had indeed been bequeathed to me, but the document called it a house, which somehow seemed strange to me.

I parked in an open-air lot at Cape Town International, and made my way into the airport building, looking for a coffee shop. I was early and sat nursing my coffee in front of a large window overlooking the runway, watching the international flights nose in one after the other, a conveyer belt of tourists and loved ones coming and going.

When the overhead screen prompted Clara's flight number as landed, I ambled through the throng of wide eyed, khaki-clad tourists and tie-dyed youths toward the international arrivals. My palms were sweating. When Clara came through the door, wheeling her luggage in front of her on a steel trolley, I made my way around the throng and caught her eye. She waved a quick hello, made her way slowly through the maze of barriers designed to stop a stampede of impatience, and then she was in my arms and I was heaving, great deep breaths of relief. She had come.

Welcome home, I blurted out before I realised what I had said.

She held my face in her hands. We'll see, she said.

I filled her in on the details of the last few days and weeks, quickly and concisely; I didn't want her arrival to be marred by the sadness of tragedy. I asked her about her trip

home, to America and Montana. She told me of the many receptions she received; from her old school, the mayor of their town, even a photo session with the governor of Montana.

I'm surprised the president didn't call you, I said.

Bush? Oh please. I'd have put the phone down in his big old ear, she joked, and we had a good laugh, one of the first moments of mirth I had experienced since arriving home.

Driving along Clarence Drive, south toward Betty's Bay, the cliffs below our feet and the steep mountain slopes hugging tightly onto the edge of the road, I felt a moment of absolute peacefulness. Clara had her hand over mine on the gear lever, and the cab and my senses were infused with the familiar smell of her, dancing lightly on the wind that came in warm and fuzzy through the open windows. I had somehow managed to leave Christopher behind in the cottage, and I was content.

To see Dwayne brighten up when he saw Clara, how he lifted her off the ground with his big bear claws and carried her over the threshold like a bag of potatoes over his shoulder, all of us laughing like children, dispelled the morbid mood that had saturated us lately. Clara brought the light back to the place, and to my heart. She belonged here, in this small enclave, it was as much hers as mine, or anybody else's.

We spent a few days surfing along the main beach, the three of us hanging out alone behind the backline, chatting and joking like kids. When others entered the water we drifted away, on our own. I watched Clara's body twist through the water expertly, as if she had been surfing professionally all these years, and not skiing. The same fearless girl that had gone deeper and harder when we had been so young. I guess we all want to belong to a clan, some ancient pull toward factions, and I watched us, three lonely figures out in the big blue, and realised this was my tribe.

Dwayne was set to leave us the next day. He had hired a truck to pack up all his things and transport him to his new home. It's time you guys have some space to yourselves, he said. It's time.

As we left the beach that afternoon, our spirits high, Dwayne went up to a fisherman sitting in the sand and bought a decent sized cob from him. We drove east along the lake, then back to the shoreline, where Dwayne and I foraged the low-water section of a rock outcrop for mussels.

We built a fire. Dwayne brought out a bottle of good scotch. Clara baked a beer bread in a cast iron pot, setting it over some embers and placing more on top of the lid. I fried off the mussels in garlic and butter until their shells opened like hungry mouths, and Dwayne butterflied the cob and stuck it in a grid, rubbed some spices into it and put it at an angle next

to the fire. Familiar aromas surrounded us. It was the smell of the sea after the sun had gone down.

God, I've missed this, Clara said. Do you remember all the fish and crayfish we ate right here with your dad? I nodded yes.

It's a lucky childhood, Dwayne said. Not many people get to grow up the way you two did.

We were all silent for a while. Then I said: It had its price though.

We all have to pay, Buddy, one way or another.

We helped Dwayne and some workers load the truck. He had told us not to make a big fuss about saying goodbye. I'm just around the bay from you, he said. When they had picked up the truck's side panels and tied everything down, it left in a cloud of exhaust, swaying on weak suspension down the gravel driveway.

Dwayne looked at his watch. The bugger's late, he said. I have a surprise planned for you. He should be here any moment.

We stood around waiting, and then I knew what it was. I heard it before I saw it. It was the unmistakeable din of the thirteen-hundred motor of our old VW Beetle. The chrome bumpers gleamed in the sun, and it had been painted two-tone grey. There was a new pair of roof racks fitted with clamps for our boards. It was perfect.

Can't drive your girl around on a bike forever, Dwayne said and winked at me. Not even a motorbike. I had old Klaus redo the whole thing a while back.

Klaus was a short, grey old man in a dirty blue overall. His glasses were smeared with oil and grease and he had a surly disposition toward me and Clara as he proudly showed us all the changes that had been made.

We said our goodbyes and Klaus climbed into the truck with Dwayne to catch a lift back to his workshop. And then they were off, and we were alone.

I have you all to myself now, she said, and we both laughed. It was a new beginning.

I had a week left of leave before I had to go back and report to Barry Littlebrother. And as we always did, Clara and I dove straight into making serious decisions about our future. She told me she felt so at home in the cottage that she thought we should consider staying for a while. At least till the next ski season up north. My biggest concern was keeping my job and having enough money to get by. Although I still had some funds left from my

father's trust fund and there was a bit of money in my mother's will, I didn't want to eat into the capital.

We bought a second-hand VW Polo with an automatic gearbox, and as Clara had already learnt how to drive automatic in the States, she was immediately mobile. We slept in my old bed, tight against each other. All of the personal items of my mother - make-up, an old toothbrush, her underwear - were boxed up neatly and stored in her room. I knew at some stage I would have to sort it all out, but it could wait.

My little brother was a shadow that crept over the house and my conscience constantly, and I had to fight the memories of him back. I had no intention of sharing Clara with him this time around. It was mentally and physically draining, but I kept him at bay.

After our week in the sun was over, we drove back to my apartment in Cape Town. I reported to the office and immediately got spat on by Barry, who seemed to have forgotten that my mother had just died and grilled me for material. I wrote a piece on Turin, and then immediately produced a piece based on the little climbing I had done in the Alps, and this seemed to soothe him. Not my best work, but it did the job.

It took another week of daily early-morning meetings, and calmly sitting through lots of swearing and kicking and fussing, to convince Barry to let me work remotely from the cottage. I offered to drive in once a week, to take on any jobs he sent my way, and to always be just an email away. I was breaking new ground at that time, and for some reason Barry saw the logic in it and let me go. We settled on a cut in my salary, I had to be in the office twice a week, and I didn't get to dictate my assignments. I walked out smiling, a small box of office supplies under my arm.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

And then we settled. We slowed down and took to our new life together with a maturity and determination I might have expected, had I ever thought all of it could actually come to pass. As the winter approached, we holed up in the cottage. I wrote whatever Barry asked of me, and twice a week I took the bike or the Beetle into the city and spent a day at the office. It

was a long commute, but it suited me. Most of my spare time was spent working through my father's notes and writing chapters of what I hoped would become a proper book.

I went to see Whitey. He had built a one-bedroom, open plan home for himself on the periphery of town, where he existed between worlds. He had grown old and bald, and his beard was salt and pepper. We sat on the steps that led into his house, and I showed him my father's notes.

You know they say I'm not right up here? he said and tapped his temple with one gnarled finger.

All I know is when my dad died you were the only one who could make sense of it all, I said. You were the one who helped us find him, so I think you're alright up there. People just don't understand grief.

He nodded, his beard bobbing below his chin. Your dad was a different kind of man. Your uncle, he was trouble. Not much liked among the community here, he was. But your father was a good man, he was just ahead of his time.

We talked about my dad, about the accident, about the fire that took Whitey's young lover and their baby. He showed no signs of being deranged. He just seemed tired. Spread too thin over time. Can I finish this story? I asked him. I think it's an important story that this country should hear.

My boy, you can do with it as you please. I've always seen your father in you. I watched you, when you were a boy. It's good that you're back.

Do you know what really happened that night my dad drowned? I asked uncertainly.

Whitey sagged lower, his long arms hanging over his knees. I can tell you a story I know, he said. But what sense you can make from it, well, that's for you to make, now isn't it? Then he told me of a young man, a little drunk. A bit of a troublemaker, who had fallen in and out of the law. A man who had visited his girlfriend in the next town, and who had stayed too late into the evening, and had gotten on his bike in the dark and cycled alone along Clarence Drive, home to his mother and sister where he stayed. He was a good enough boy, Whitey said. Just troubled. The young man got hit by a car. The car stopped. A tall man got out and listened to him cry for help. Then the tall man got back into his car and left him there for dead.

I kept silent, my heart racing. I knew the story. I was there that night.

You see, the tall man that left him there was your uncle Lucas. And the young man was called Georgie. His leg was shattered. The one was left shorter than the other. When we

found his shoes washed up next to Stoney Point, we knew it was him. The one shoe had a built-up heel to help him walk normally. We knew it was Georgie had died.

It started coming together in my mind. Their whispered talk that night in the cottage. They had gone back to see if there was a body they had to dispose of. They wanted to protect me, didn't want me to suffer through another ordeal.

I was in the truck that night, I said softly. With Uncle Lucas. I realised I was wet with tears, saw them falling onto my pants. Whitey put an arm around my shoulder, and I could smell the woodsmoke on him. I know ye were, he said. It's no fault of yours.

The day your daddy drowned, Georgie was the last man to get on the boat. He begged to be a deckhand. The fish were running and there were people everywhere saw him get on. Why he wanted to be on that boat, with your uncle the skipper, we can only guess at. But whatever happened, him and your daddy stayed the course and they died together. Whatever happened I don't think he was on that boat for your father.

Whitey got up and made us some tea. We sat inside in his kitchen on a rickety wooden bench. He had the cup up to his nose and was inhaling the steam. You don't make sense of things in this country, he said. You just live through them. We're all trying to swim against the current, and that's how you drown.

So just let it all go? I asked him.

Don't you think the reckoning has been enough?

I visited Whitey several times as I was writing the book. He filled in the gaps in his story and told me of the days he and my father had spent together, fishing and talking, my dad making notes furiously. Your daddy was too serious, he joked. Always making notes. What book will an old fisherman's life make, heh?

When the book was almost done Whitey disappeared. Some thought he had gone back to England to live with his estranged family, to mend relationships that had been lost to time. Others said he had gone up the West Coast, maybe to Saldanha, or even further north, to Walvis Bay. Wherever he had gone, it was strange how noticeable his absence was along the beach and the rocky shoreline that he had always haunted. I think he wanted to put as much distance as possible between himself and his life's story. Perhaps that reckoning was one too many.

I went back to Italy in July, joined up with Angelo and Aurora, who had gotten married in Rome where her family had a comfortable home with a big garden and a view over the city, and we climbed Monte Blanco. We summited it twice, first from the French side at Chamonix, then again from the Italian side. While we were on the mountain, two inexperienced climbers lost their lives and I wrote about the dangers of unregulated peaks, and the thrill of them, too. Who has the right to govern the risks we take in life?

When I got back home, I arrived just as a major storm was brewing. It came in from the Atlantic in huge, foreboding masses of cloudbanks, and it had shaken the plane as we had descended. Clara picked me up and we drove home around the coast in an ominous light that seemed to suck the life right out of the atmosphere.

After dark that evening the wind came in suddenly, and then the deluge. It was so loud that we had trouble hearing each other speak. We moved the dining table in the kitchen to one side and threw a mattress on the floor in front of the woodstove. I told her about Italy, my mouth close to her ear. We fell asleep very late, as the storm finally abated, and when we woke up the next morning, it was past ten and the sun was out, and the wind had died down completely.

The storm damage was extensive. A tree had been uprooted and had fallen across my bike, tipping it over. A branch from a thick bush had broken two windows in the lounge. And on further inspection a whole section of the roofing that was over the main bedroom had been blown clean off.

I opened the door to my mother's old room and was shocked to find that the ceiling boards had collapsed inward and everything was completely soaked through. The smell of damp boxes was overpowering. I guess the time has come to sort this all out, Clara said.

We cleared the living room, laid out some plastic sheeting on the ground, and began to take everything out of the sodden boxes from mom's room and lay it out on the plastic. I got some old boards and nails in the storeroom and boarded up the roof as best I could. It was a crude job.

When we had everything out of the room, we mopped it up as best we could, opened all the windows for it to air dry, and then we set to organising my mother's earthly belongings. Trust fate to force me to do such a dark job.

There were piles of old clothes that stank of mothballs and mould. You want any of this, I asked with doubt verging on disgust.

Some of these are actually quite cute, Clara said without any hint of feigning. She picked out a handful of dresses, one of which she wore when we got married in a small ceremony on the beach, and then again at a big, lavish affair in Montana, some years later.

Combs, nail clippers, panty liners, red lipstick. It was all there. The detritus of a whole life laid bare. I thought it would have been much more respectable if all of our sundry items could just disappear with us at the moment of death. To spare those left behind the embarrassment of having to admit that their parents, children, lovers, were all just normal people, with the normal bodily functions and needs as all other normal people.

Clara picked out an old shoebox. She held it out to me. Is this what I think it is? Clara asked.

I recognised the box. It was the same one Clara and I had dragged from under my parents' bed so many years ago, the one with the photos of Christopher. Where did this come from, I asked.

It was hidden way back in the closet, under a whole bunch of other stuff. Do you want to look?

I didn't, but I nodded yes. Clara took the lid off slowly, almost reverently. A little dramatic, I thought. She started pulling out birthday cards and photos. Look at this one, she said, and handed me a card. It was a light blue card with the number four in a huge white letter, shaped like a cloud. It read: Happy Birthday. You Are Four. I opened it. Inside I immediately recognised my father's long handwriting, and my mother's square lettering. I read the messages. They were nice, loving and light. I could picture the two of them smiling as they wrote in the card.

I saw Christopher then. He was standing right next to Clara, his tiny hand on her shoulder. He was clearer than I had ever seen him. I could make out his features which were no longer shifting and blurring. Clara passed me a photo. It was of him on a red-brown Shetland pony with a flowing white mane. Christopher was clinging onto its mane with both tiny fists, and his mouth was open and happy in a scream of joy. I felt the tears stir. I looked up and saw him, still standing there, glaring at me as if I had done something. As if he wanted me to know something. I tried to push him from my mind, but he was too solid, too substantial for me to budge.

Clara had picked something up and looked at it, then she quickly placed it back in the box. It's just an article on the accident, she said. You don't want to read that now. She took the lid and closed the box. Come on, she said. Let's put this away for now. I grabbed the box

from her, and there was a moment of surprise on her face, an uncertainty I had never seen before.

I opened it and took out the newspaper clipping. The heading read: Questions Remain After Boy (5) Dies Tragically. I looked up, at Christopher and then at Clara. She followed my gaze, then she jumped up as if startled. Is he here? she yelled at me. Are you still seeing him?

My mouth was numb. I couldn't speak. It felt as if my tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth. I nodded, tears coursing down my face, rivers of it just flowing freely. Clara stood very straight, her arms by her sides. I read the article: unclear as to how the trigger mechanism could have disengaged in such a way | angle of entry was inconsistent with report, read coroner's official findings | conflicting reports | underage family member not named. I was shaking. The weightless newspaper was moving like a live thing in my hands. A strangled cry erupted from my throat, my back arching as if I was suffering convulsions. I looked to Clara's side, and saw him reach out his tiny hand, slowly in front of him, as if to say: no. stop. He was looking at me, straight at me and his features were strained in pain. Then I blacked out.

Clara was next to me; she had my head in her hand and was slapping my cheek. Daniel. Daniel, wake up! I opened my eyes and saw how frantic she was. What the fuck, Daniel? What the fuck is this?

He's here, I croaked.

OK. That's it. We need to get you some help. You need to see someone.

I pushed her away. She let me go, as if she was afraid of me. She saw me looking next to her, where Christopher was still standing, and she scooted sideways, away from his ghost. I managed to sit up. Oh God, I said. Oh God.

Danny, Clara said, crying now, you need to tell me what the fuck is going on.

And then it all came out of me. I told her the true story. Not the lie. Not the fabrication. It came out of me like puss bursting from a gangrenous wound. I told her the whole nasty business, and she held my hand through it all, fresh tears running over the salt already on her cheeks. Christopher stood like a sentinel and watched me with a sad face as I recounted the story.

Chrissy and I had been playing outside in the treehouse most of the day. He had been a nuisance all day long, jabbering on and on and interrupting my games. I was bullying him into doing what I wanted. At one stage I pushed him, and he fell the three feet out of the tree, tumbling over backwards. And my mother had come out, yelling at me and coddling him. And we were sent inside. And my mother was busy in dad's office, shoving mounds of

papers around, the door half closed. And there had been clouds in front of the sun. Fat, dark ones. There was a thunderstorm on its way. The air was thick with the electricity of it. Sophie was in the kitchen, cooking our dinner. It was late afternoon. A Saturday. Dad had gone back to the office. He had been irritable when he left. Mad at someone. Bang Bang, the pots in the kitchen. Sophie, tell those boys to quiet down, my mother yelled from the office. Yes missus, Sophie's melody voice. A crackle from the kitchen. Sophie had the wireless on. We were running up and down the wooden floors of the hallway. Thump Thump Thump. All normal sounds. Dad had shot the starlings that morning, I remembered. Bloody nuisance, he had said. I beckoned Chrissy to follow me. It was a long shot, I knew, but sometimes he forgot to put it back up high in the closet, where even the chair can't make me reach. We giggle. Chrissy giggles with his hand in front of his mouth. Co-conspirator. It's there! Dad had been in a hurry. We have a quick scuffle. I'm older so I win. My turn first, I tell him, my eyes big, eyebrows raised, signalling dominance. His shoulders slump. OK, you're bigger, but then my turn. OK. I release the lever under the barrel. It swings freely. I'm surprised. It's loaded. Both our eyes are big now. Huge. We have ourselves an adventure. We can't cock that lever ourselves. Only father is strong enough. Shoot a bird, Chrissy says. Shoot a bird. I'll decide, I tell him. You scout. We go out through the sliding door of mom and dad's room. We're on the other side of the house now. They won't look here for us. They're too busy. We're hunters, like daddy. We scan the eaves of the roof for nests and birds. We scan the trees. We can't go out front where the doves are, someone will see us. Big trouble. Here's nothing to shoot, I tell him. Run and let's see how good my aim is. He laughs nervously, shaking his head. No. He's shy now. I pick up the gun. Never aim at anything you don't want to destroy, daddy always says. But I won't squeeze the trigger. I'm just playing. I give him an evil grin. You're the enemy, I say. He shakes his head no. Stand against the wall, this is a firing squad. We play wargames a lot. Daddy was a hero in the war. No, he shakes his head. I raise the gun again. Aim at his chest. I know where the heart is. He looks nervous, but he is smiling. He trusts his big brother. Good man, I tell him. I am about to take my finger off the trigger. Your finger is the only safety on a gun, daddy always says. Loud noise behind me. LOUD. Danny?! Sophie is yelling, she had dropped something. We're in trouble now. I jerk my head around to see, my arm is too short on the long stock, my finger has the trigger, too tight. The shot goes off. I drop the gun. It will be miss. I missed. I missed. I missed. Chrissy is holding his chest. I know where the heart is. He's looking down at his hand, as if he has a tiny fluttering bird in there. Shoot a bird, he had said. Sophie is yelling again. Missus! Missus! Ai Ai Ai. Chrissy takes his hand away. There's a tiny bit of blood. Then a lot. Too much. He's

tiny, mustn't have so much blood. My sauce is running out, he says in a tiny voice. Look. He loves tomato sauce. Puts it over everything. He's looking at me. He still trusts me. Sophie has run away. I hear doors bang. Danny, he says. Don't cry, I say. He falls, straight down, like a tent when you pull the poles out. I'm holding his chest now. He's looking at me and his face is screaming: Why? Then he starts shaking a little. He squishes up his eyes. Tight. He's looking at me again, right into me. Right into my soul. His head becomes heavy. It rolls to one side. His eyes are glazed. They're open. He's gone. I've seen animals die the same. Daddy is a good hunter. Mom's there. I fall over. She pushed me, hard. She's yelling. NO. NO. NO. Christopher. Chrissy. God NO. Oh God NO. What have you done? What have you done? Then dad's there. He's back from the office. He picks Chrissy up in his arms and carried him away from everyone, tight to his chest. He just carries him away. To be alone. He has blood all over him. Then I hear the ambulance. Lots of lights. And dad is shaking me. Mom is there. Sophie is there. Dad is shaking me. He is yelling. It was an accident. The gun fell. He shot himself. Do you hear me? It was an accident. The gun fell. He shot himself. On and on. Then they took Chrissy away and mom and dad in the ambulance with the lights and the noise. But I knew he was gone. I had killed my brother.

Oh God, Danny. Oh, my fucking God. Oh Jesus. Clara had her hand in front of her mouth. She'll leave me now, I thought. I'm no good.

I'm so sorry, I said. I wasn't allowed to tell anyone the truth.

Clara's eyes were very wide but they showed none of the apprehension of earlier. They were trying to protect you, Danny. It wasn't your fault. None of it was.

The story was finished. It had always been there, in me. A part of me. I had carried it with me every day. Christopher had been my lifelong shadow, a ball and chain. My reckoning. The truth had always been right there, waiting to come out. Just under the skin.

But my parents had clad such a tight wall around it that I had blocked it out. I had believed the lie my father had made up in a moment of desperation. Perhaps I had been a willing accomplice. I had given in to the ease of the fiction. The cleaner story and the new beginning. I won't lose both my boys; he had yelled at my mother late that night. And she had held her head in her hands and she had nodded.

And now it was done. I looked up and saw Christopher. His features were starting to blur again, but he was still clear enough for me to see that he was smiling. He looked older all of a sudden. He was smiling, happy, free. My mind could let him go. He reached out his hand and touched my heart, and then he was gone, free to join the other souls. Free from being a prisoner of my conscience. The weight fell off me like slabs of rock in a landslide.

The book had done well. *A Man Called Whitey.* Really well. My dad would have been proud. So would my mother and Christopher. We took some money and renovated the cottage. It became a proper house. We broke down the internal walls and created a big open-plan living space with a hug hearth and a slate floor strewn with thick rugs. We redid the kitchen. We put up a new roof with high, open beams. Large windows at the back, overlooking the mountains. Large windows at the front, overlooking the sea. My father was in the gusting mountain winds, my mother in the sea. And Christopher was in my heart. I still thought of him every day, but he stopped tormenting me. Or maybe I finally stopped tormenting him.

We built onto the main area. Three new bedrooms. A large main bedroom with an en-suite bathroom and shower. We put an old ball-and-claw bath right next to the bed. It was open and light. Big views of the mountains right from the bath. We built on two more rooms. A guest bedroom, and another one for a family. For the child we never had.

Clara had asked me in Biella, many years ago: Would you want to have kids now that we're older. I had said no. But that too had changed. In time I had found an inner peace and calmness, and we had tried for another child, but it had not worked out. Something to do with the abortion, perhaps a tiny infection. The doctors could not say. They couldn't find anything physically wrong with either of us. Perhaps the trauma of loss, my psychiatrist had offered.

I had helped Clara to discover mirror therapy, and she later said that it had saved her life in a time when she had needed it most. And she had guided me to find the help I needed to treat the trauma that had haunted me for so long. We were better together; it was as simple as that.

Both of us had been dealing with our own forms of chronic pain. Clara's phantom limb had almost brought her low, and my PTSD, anxiety and bouts of depression would have killed me, I was sure, if I hadn't been able to confess to Clara. And neither of us had any physical wounds where the pain was. Clara's pain was in a place where there used to be a leg and where now there was nothing, and mine was in my mind or my soul or even my heart, who knew. But both of us had suffered through immense pain, and that pain had been very real. Invisible or not, it had raged mercilessly.

I climbed with Angelo and Aurora many times, and both of them had become legends of the alpine climbing world in their own right. I wrote about them extensively. I had gone

freelance at Barry's suggestion, and Clara travelled with me all over the world as I followed the lifestyle of alpine mountaineers. Clara had, in a way, given me my career.

I covered Angelo and Aurora's second attempt at Everest in 2015. I was in Lukla when the avalanche struck, and I thought I had lost them, but they came out wide eyed, sad, but unscathed. They had twins the next year, a boy and a girl. They visited us in 2017, and we set the twins up in the room we had hoped would be our child's room. It was an incredible two weeks, spending time with old friends and having the house filled with the laughter of the little ones. We took them out surfing and Angelo and I climbed the mountain behind our house, up to the cave, and we spent the night there next to a fire, warm in our sleeping bags.

Clara never skied professionally again. I wanted her to compete, but she said the others were too young, too fast, and besides, she only had one good leg left, she didn't want to risk damaging it. She told me that on the high slopes she had felt as if she had nothing to lose and had pushed herself dangerously hard; now that she had something good, true, that could be lost, she felt no need to tempt fate. I knew she missed it, and we went up to Montana every winter season to play on the blue runs with her parents, but it must have been a sacrifice to settle for silver.

Clara's father opened up over the years and explained some of the reasons for his presence in South Africa. Why he stationed his family in a small town where nobody knew him and where they could go unnoticed. How governments ruled the lives of men, and by extension, their families too. I never pushed him for all the details, and Clara and I didn't discuss it much. Their reckoning had been enough, too.

Clara started a not-for-profit program that brokered legal advice to other, smaller not-for-profits around South Africa. She worked with a bright bunch of young lawyers who came for the experience and not the pay, and she enjoyed the work.

In 2020 we hunkered down. We stayed like that for a long time. Not leaving the house much, not interacting with the outside world any more than we had too. We weren't reliant on a big social circle; we had our own universe between us. We were cocooned. Safe. We were like hens nesting on an egg.

Then early in the new year, we picked up the go-bag and set off into an overrun hospital, where Christine was born amidst global uncertainty. I forgot our masks and we had to stop at a pharmacy on the way, me bouncing around like a jack-in-the-box, and Clara, as always, cool and calm and reassuring. All of that, all of the insecurity and fear, that too passed. We had found what we had always been chasing: the light by the sea.

I woke up one morning and the bed was empty. I popped my head into Christine's room and her cot was also empty. It was barely light outside. I found the two of them swaddled tightly under a blanket, sitting on the porch.

Morning you, she said.

Hey you.

Come and join us. Clara patted the bench next to her. I sat down and she threw a piece of the blanket over my legs. She had Christine up on her breast, and I could see her mouth working furiously, the dark lines of Clara's nipple visible when she lost the latch.

What are we looking at? I asked.

Your redemption, she replied through a smile.

Way out over the ocean, the sun was rising. I could feel its heat coming over us, and the shadows grew fresh as if awakened from sleep. I looked at the bright orb, rising quickly now, and watched as it stretched out over the curve of the ocean like a tear drop rising up from the globe of an eye, pulled out of shape for one elongated moment, before it rounded back into its natural sphere, risen free from the gravity of the obscuring ball of water and land and, surely, us too. It was a new day that I knew, if I allowed it, would bring a new beginning.

Clara was patting Christine, gently rocking her. We have a good story, don't we?

We do, I said.

You should write it all down, she said gently.

I already have. I got up and opened a drawer in the lounge, took out a thick pile of bound paper. I placed it in her lap. It's all in there, I said.

The Light by the Sea, she smiled. I like that.

I thought you might.

She turned the first page and read.

THE END
