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one tongue singing

by

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

Signed

Signed by candidate

Synopsis

one tongue singing is a novel which unfolds in two time-frames. In the first, a young unmarried French nurse comes to South Africa with her father and her small daughter during the closing years of apartheid. The family settles amongst a small wine-growing community in the Western Cape where they become involved in the lives of victims of the System. In the second frame, the daughter, now about nineteen years old, is a talented artist who enrolls at the exclusive Art School of a womanising painter. The man walks a tightrope between popular success and a deep-seated fear of failure (linked to a growing awareness of being a fake). He has started to suffer from panic attacks.

Through a syncopated interaction between the two frames, the lives of the protagonists are explored in order to interrogate their value systems and their relationship to two different historical periods, each with its own demands, burdens and challenges.

one tongue singing

a novel

by Susan Mann

Part I

'We are our own demons, we expel ourselves
from our paradise' - Goethe

'History chokes on the little bones
of meaning, the little bones
of love.' – Anne Michaels

University of Cape Town

She is running. Hair matted, dress torn and filthy, eyes swollen. Her face a mucous mess. She pushes blindly as tangled branches cut in front of her, and thorns tear at her skin. The wind keeps coming at her like a lasso, whipping up dust into her open mouth. An animal screams. She does not stop for a second. Does not utter a sound. Her only contribution to the rustles and cries of the earth is her breath, sharp and shallow, and the crackle of her bare feet trampling over leaves, broken twigs, thorns and dung. For hours she has been running, faster and faster. Into the jaws of the mountain; into the arms of the night.

She is six years old. Just six years old.

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Chapter One

In the still heat of a late Cape February Jake Coleman lies awake again. He shifts position for the umpteenth time. No need to confirm the hour from the art deco alarm clock pulsing steadily next to his head. From the oppressive silence he already knows it is somewhere around three. Suicide hour. Death by suffocation. Suffocation by silence. The night is unbearably still. Crickets no longer vibrate. Beetles no longer buzz. Only the occasional jeer of a mosquito pokes the silence.

With eyes that burn with wakefulness and a mind bristling with an annoying clarity, he glances across at his sleeping partner. Maria's ample form engulfs his space. Monopolises the cotton sheets. Her arm slopes heavily over the edge of the bed and a thin line of saliva trickles from the corner of her mouth onto the crumpled cotton pillowcase.

He sighs. Maria is upset with him again. And probably back to popping pills. One for sleeping, one for waking, one for smiling. Enslaved by pharmaceuticals. He knows it was probably the phone-call that afternoon that had set it off. She lifted the receiver, said hello, and the person on the other end hung up. Simple as that.

Again he sighs. If only he could explain it to her, he thinks. If only he could just admit to her that he does not believe in love. Or at least not in her concept of it. If only he could simply confess that in his opinion, to love only one person is a rather irritating, middle-class, female preoccupation. The meagre product of a supreme lack of imagination. The demise of a mind small enough to be hemmed in by garden fences, corporate success stories and fifteen days leave per annum... And in this country, if he were to take it one step further, the perfect scenario would usually come complete with razor wire trimmings and two corpulent, gas-filled Staffordshire bull terriers. The thought snakes down his spine. No, it is not for him, definitely not for him. For a man like him to be expected to love only one woman, is unthinkable. After all, his entire life has been devoted to the pursuit of beauty.

His entire life. His fame. His painting. *Shit!* The panic sits in his throat, pricks his palms with needles of perspiration. Once again, the same swollen thoughts swelter malevolently in his brain, choking him, destroying him. If he doesn't produce something soon, he can kiss his career goodbye. Because while he will always have the school, he knows how fickle the art world can be. It does not take long for people to forget who you are.

If only Maria would understand. He watches her sleeping. Wishes she were awake so that he could take her generous hand and hold it. She had been so comforting earlier today, before that phone call. So assuring. Confirming that people were still paying handsomely for an original Coleman, not only locally, but in many far off places. 'Of course you're still popular Jake,' she had said, running her manicured nails through his hair. 'People are still asking for you all the time at the gallery.' Then she had gone on to remind him about all those students passionate about fine art flocking from all over the country to The Jake Coleman International School of Fine Art to learn, to absorb like cotton swabs, a fragment of his genius. He wishes she would wake up, so that she could tell him again.

Because for months Jake has produced nothing. His work lacks life and purpose. His expression is two dimensional. People may be buying because he is still fashionable. And well-marketed. But if probed, nobody really knows why. Critics are silent and gallery owners know better than to amputate a sure source of income. But none of this fools the Doctor of Fine Art himself.

At least there is the school, to help take his mind off it all during the day. Although even that has lost its allure lately. His thoughts rewind back to the new students who enrolled the previous week. Predictable as ever. Always two types. The first: suburban angels. Private school products. Apple of mummy and daddy's fond gaze. Affluently dressed with teeth individually arranged by good orthodontists. Their faces flat and shiny. Flat with inexperience. And shiny with idealism and expectation. Too young to know it is the experience of life that creates art. Too cosseted to understand it is our dark side, with its memories, its secrets and its shadows that ultimately define us.

Then there is the other kind: dirty, hung-over and profoundly talented in a haphazard, disorientated kind of way. The kind who stagger in bleary-eyed to first lecture like misplaced vagrants. Still smelling of last night's excesses, heavy-lidded and queasy. The kind who is never a hundred percent certain that the tattered T-shirt or vest thrown carelessly over their junk-food-filled bodies in a vague attempt at respectability, belongs to them. Nor care. The kind who look as though they were conceived with their tattoos, pierced nostrils and tongues.

But they are always there. The paragons and the pariahs. For a second this affirmation is like warm milk to a fractious child. He is brilliant. Special. Not one person from the hand-picked group ever misses a class. Not a Coleman class. And no matter which bed they crawl out of each morning, he can pick up the scent of their adoration like a hungry bloodhound.

Of course, a school of Fine Art as prestigious as his, will always attract some weirdos. Take today for example. He had only just finished his last class, sat down in his office, when there was a knock at the door. Thinking it was a student, he called 'Come in'. He had no idea it would be a complete stranger. (And how he'd found his way past Trudy at reception he has still not worked out.) The man looked like a cross-between a Jesus freak and some ancient European relic. A navy beret covered some of his thick white hair. He had a long white beard, and weatherbeaten skin. Jack sat back in his chair and blinked, as this character, in his old worn trousers, rough cream shirt and leather sandals opened the door, and then pushed it open further with a gnarled, wooden walking stick.

'Can I help you?' he enquired. The old man stared at him with bright blue eyes for quite some time, before answering 'Yes'. His voice was thin and raspy and foreign. Then very slowly he sat down. Equally slowly, he asked how his granddaughter could enrol at the school. Jake was well-accustomed to dealing with parents who held inflated opinions of their child's talents. They drove expensive cars, wore fine jewellery and bought their children expensive educations. They were nothing like this man, who looked as though he had just flown in on some hessian carpet.

'I'm afraid the school is already full this year, and most likely for next year too. She will have to apply next year.'

'Please, would you just have a look at her work before you decide,' he had asked.

'No, I'm afraid we're already oversubscribed, with a long waiting list as it is. She will have to bring me her portfolio, and then if she complies with the regulations and has sufficient talent, she can go on next year's waiting list.'

Whether the old foreigner understood him or not, or whether he was just being stubborn he still can't work out.

'Tomorrow then.' He leaned heavily on his stick, rising. His hands knotted with history, like the branches of an oak. In his smoky voice, he repeated, 'Tomorrow. She will be here tomorrow.'

He started to explain that tomorrow would be impossible, with classes all day, but the old man simply tipped his beret, and left.

As he lies here now it suddenly strikes him that he should have told him what the fees were. Silly old git probably has no idea what tertiary education fees run at in 2001.

There were other places she could go. The Jake Coleman International School of Fine Art is aimed at a niche market. He should have explained that to him.

He is still awake when the birds begin their morning chant. Watches Maria draining the dregs of sleep from the night, before slowly stirring. Sees her stumble sleepily to the bathroom. Hears the bath running, the toilet flushing, Maria opening cupboards, no doubt to find her latest range of aromatherapy bath salts. A while later she reappears. He peers at her through heavy lids as she marches towards the mirror, swaddled in bathgown, a tiny mascara wand in her large, jewelled hand. Watches her assess the well-coiffed hair from one side, then the other, as it glints expensively in the morning light. With her right hand she ruffles it just the slightest bit, so that it looks natural. Then leans forward and pulls her lips over her teeth to scrape away some over-generous lipstick from her mouth, before blotting it with a tissue. The mouth he once found sexy, full of humour. She seems withdrawn. Almost unaware of him. She rises from the dressing table with a sigh, lets the luxurious bathrobe fall to the floor and digs in her underwear drawer. How sturdy she is. And how buxom and high her breasts after the little operation she had last year. If he weren't so tired he would definitely try to entice her back to bed. He remembers a time when exquisite French underwear such as those would have lasted all of three seconds on her, before he whipped them off. She picks out a dress in peach Irish linen. Natural fabric of course.

'Morning,' he offers.

'Morning,' she clips, walking back to the dressing table.

'Off so quickly this morning?'

'I have a meeting first thing at the gallery with that foreigner.' She squints whilst removing with a little brush any errant clumps of mascara from the rather coarse lashes.

She is talking. A good sign. He smiles.

'Is that the Hungarian?'

'Yes, Mátyás is his name. I haven't met him yet. But Cecily tells me his pottery is really something. This is the second time I've arranged to meet him. He didn't pitch the first time. Silly man, doesn't realise how much publicity I could get him. Honestly, I don't know how half these people eat.'

'I feel awful,' he says in a small voice. 'Didn't sleep again.'

'You should get up, Jake, you'll be late.'

She has not forgotten.

He grunts. Normally she would have brought him tea if she were up first. In fact, it is unusual for Maria to be up this early. For her, a meeting "first thing" usually means a cup of steaming Turkish coffee in an avant-garde mug with a colleague, or aspiring artist, at the avant-garde coffee shop next to her avant-garde art gallery in Constantia. Sitting amongst the likes of those who have either just booked their annual skiing holiday or bought first class plane tickets to Cannes from the travel agency close by.

'Lunch?' he suggests sweetly. That should do it. Maria is such a pushover when it comes to food.

'Call me,' she says, grabbing her gym bag, and walking through the door, trailing a haze of Calvin Klein's *Obsession* like a jet stream behind her.

She has not kissed him goodbye.

Chapter Two

It is one of those forgotten little patches of earth. An overgrown hedge hides the overgrown garden. A few stones lead to a tiny cottage, no more than a tin-roof hut. If you were to walk up this pathway, to its thick, vine-covered whitewashed walls and peer through the window you would see a tiny room. An old rug on the wooden slatted floor. Three battered leather chairs, a blanket folded on one of them. A lamp perched on the shelf above the fireplace. An old coal stove and sink in the far corner. The walls are covered with a child's drawings, unframed, stuck on with sticky tape. Two doors, both open, lead into two little nooks, each with a wooden bed, a piece of mirror on the wall, and more unframed drawings.

Zara has woken early. Slips out carefully from under the sheet so as not to wake Maman. Leica, the Labrador-cross pup, follows her into the living room, and lies alongside her where she sprawls on the rug. Pappi, her grand-papa, has given her a new colouring book and a new box of wax crayons with a sharpener. A present from the horses, he said. She has coloured every page already, and is going back to add more detail when she hears the rustle of leaves outside. Ah, she thinks. She has been expecting this. She climbs up on the chair, pulls the muslin curtain aside and looks out of the window. Something is moving in the hedge. She *knew* it... She tiptoes over the wooden floors to the door, reaches up on her toes and strains to undo the latch. Too heavy. She tiptoes back across the slats, and returns carrying some books, which she stacks one on top of the other. She steps up onto the books and with brows furrowed and arms straining, finally manages to turn the key. She opens the door very slowly, stops to make sure she can still hear Pappi snoring in his room, then steps barefoot out onto the stoep.

Even though the sun is barely up, it is hot. She pulls her nightdress over her head and drops it on the step. Stands naked, peering at the hedge. No movement. She feels the wet muzzle of the dog against the back of her leg. 'Shhhhhh Leica...' The two of them tread gingerly across the uneven, coarse grass, past the oak tree with the swing, towards the hedge. Zara parts the branches, and finds herself face to face with a little brown girl, even smaller than herself. The two stare at one another, wide-eyed,

without smiling. Eventually Zara leans forward, raises a very straight eyebrow and whispers, 'I knew you'd come. Are you a fairy?'

The brown girl stares back. 'Wat?'

'Are you a fairy?'

The brown girl does not blink. She has heard English before. Repeats what she knows.

'Issa hotnot.'

'Is that a kind of fairy?'

Unsure of the question, she says the second thing she knows in English.

'My name is Blom September.'

Then, at a loss at what to do next, and as a token of solidarity, she whips off her little dress too.

A little later, Camille wakes at the sound of a dog barking. She pats the bed, calls out for her daughter in her low sleepy voice 'Zara...? Leica...?' When she receives no response, she sits up and stretches to look out the window. Sees a brown child and a white child, both naked, playing on the swing. The higher they go, with their legs straight out, the louder the dog barks.

Blom is back again the next day. And the day after. Camille tries to find out where she comes from, but the child speaks Afrikaans and does not understand English very well. At first all questions are met either with 'Issa Hotnot', or 'My name is Blom September', the latter uttered with utmost seriousness and something of an imperious accent.

The language of play seems unconfined by words. Both children chatter on in their own tongue, nodding and pointing, whether they are drawing, climbing the oak tree or playing on the swing. Of the two, Blom is the more insistent communicator, often taking Zara's hand and repeating herself over and again until she is certain Zara has understood her. In spite of Camille's curiosity, she cannot help being a little relieved that Zara finally has a playmate; especially one that seems to bring her out of her shell. Things have not been easy since they arrived in the valley a few years ago. Especially with Zara being such a quiet, serious child.

Very soon the children play daily. Blom is picking up English very quickly, and Zara some Afrikaans. This, added to the French she knows from listening to her mother and Grandfather, is making for some very interesting combinations. Whilst Camille has made a considerable effort to speak English to Zara in this non-French speaking country, she cannot help noticing that it is not the language her child elects to use when she needs some colour. Camille may be unfamiliar with Afrikaans herself, but knows her usually contained child well enough to pick up the emotional nuances of 'Quelle horreur! Jou Bliksem,' when Blom breaks one of her crayons. Grand-papa is no longer only 'Pappi', but 'Ou Pappi' too. And only last week, after supper, when Zara spilt chocolate milk all over a drawing, Camille overheard her mutter 'O fok' under her breath.

And then one morning everything changes. Camille, Zara and her grandfather are about to have breakfast, when Leica starts barking, as though to herald the start of what sounds like a terrible commotion outside. They run to the window to see Blom being beaten by a woman. Blom is screaming while the older woman shouts, 'Ek het jou hoeveel keer gesê... jy moenie by wit mense gaan nie... wil jy hê dat ons van die farm weggegooi word? Huh? Wil jy? Wil jy?'

Camille runs down the steps, the old man close behind her. The older woman looks up, holds off another blow with an explanation.

'Askies Merrem, I'm sorrie about this chile of mine. I told her before not to go wondering all fancy-like into white people's houses. But you think she listens? Nee wat. She got her own fancy ideas. She says she's going to play by the river, and today, I follow her, jus to make sure, and then I see her coming here. She won't come here again, I promise you. Jus, please don't tell Meneer. It won't happen again. I promise. I'm sorrie, Merrem.'

'Wait...' Camille walks right up to her. 'I don't understand. Are you Blom's mother?'

'Ja, Merrem.'

'What is your name?'

'Leah September, Merrem.'

'I'm Camille. Camille Pascoe.' She holds out her hand. Leah looks embarrassed and pretends not to notice.

'Who don't you want me to tell?'

'Isn't yous not part of Meneer Smit's farm, Merrem?'

'No, this little piece of land and the cottage are ours. We bought it from Meneer Smit five years ago when we came from France. We have nothing to do with Meneer Smit, or his wine farm.'

'Oh.' The relief falls like light over her face. 'My husband and I is working for Meneer Smit. My husband onner farm, your know, with the grapes. Me inna house. But meneer doesn't like it when the kinders come up to the house. He doesn't like it. And things is tough enough as it is...' Her voice trails off. 'Anyways,' she continues. 'My chile mustn't bother you again anyways.'

'She's no bother, Mrs September. We're very fond of Blom. She's welcome here anytime. Please, come inside, would you like some coffee?'

Leah September actually jumps.

'No, dankie, ek kannie. I mus go back to the big house.'

But Blom September is allowed to stay and play.

Chapter Three

‘And then of course, painting is also process,’ he explains to the class. ‘A bridge across the chasm of our unknowing. It is about creating our own meaning. To use the old cliché, it is a journey. Our interpretation of the journey. And our paintbrushes are the little integrators, finding some balance between light and shadow, the synthesis of ideas, or of a moment. There is a rather lovely image for this: the poet Rilke likens artistic balance to a ‘folding of hands’. Through medium and colour we create the texture, the flavour of an emotion. And there are often surprises on the way. Little truths that you never even knew, that find their way onto the canvas.’

It is a small class. They do not know each other well yet. And although their quest for individual expression makes them unlikely ever to become a team, he usually finds that a comfortable cohesion develops as the year progresses. He watches a girl with a strappy sundress lean over to pick up her pencil. The strap falls away from the roundness of her shoulder onto her suntanned arm. She does not bother to adjust it. Looks up at him with bright green eyes. Just behind her, another girl with short blonde curls and enormous breasts leans back, puts her arms behind her head. A libidinous bunch, he reckons. As if reading his mind, a boy with sleepy eyes raises his hand.

‘Yes?’

‘Painting is also desire.’

‘I don’t know about painting *being* desire. It can certainly be an expression of desire. It can capture a facet, a moment of desire. And it can be extremely intimate. The relationship between a painter and his work...’

‘But what can be more intimate than desire?’ The sleepy boy interrupts.

‘Fulfilling desire may be intimate. But intimacy and desire are not always bedfellows, so to speak. In fact I’m sure you can all think of many examples of intimacy that do not necessarily include desire. And if any of you have had a one-night stand, you’ll already know that desire need not include intimacy.’

He enjoys debating these issues with his students. It adds dimension to their work.

And it breaks the ice on a day like today, when the year is still new.

‘Let’s throw it open to the floor,’ he suggests. ‘Think of some examples of intimacy that do not include the obvious.’

The boy lowers his heavy lids in contemplation. The rest of the class follow Jake with their eyes.

'Intimacy is the smell of a slept-in t-shirt,' the girl with the breasts offers.

'It's having a really honest conversation,' says another.

'It's the first light of morning on a sleeping person's face.'

'It's his hands, curled like a child, while sleeping.'

'I suppose the idea of slippers in the cupboard is still getting bad press?'

The class laughs.

'Or maybe it's just acceptance,' says the girl with the strappy dress.

'Yes, tolerance! It's the new South Africa,' someone sniggers.

A good time to end the lecture.

'This may be a good subject for our next painting assignment. The good thing about asking questions like these, is that for each of us, the answer may be different. Which means each of us has a unique opportunity to express our own truth as best we can.'

As he leaves the lecture room, he shakes his head. All this head knowledge and still no answers for himself. Perhaps it is simply a matter of finding the right question... He rubs his eyes. If only he could just get one decent night's sleep! He passes the secretary's office, runs an appreciative glance over Trudy, standing at the filing cabinet in a knee-length floral dress and high-heeled sandals. Great ankles. She turns, smiles, holds his eye for a split second.

Trudy does not warn him. In fact she does not even know that he is in for a surprise. Had she known, she may have tried to prevent it from ever happening, right there and then. Instead, she watches fondly from her office as he continues on his way, down the passage to his office. Sees him open his office door and step inside before the wind closes it with a bang behind him. Trudy has no idea that standing by the window, behind his desk, is a young woman looking out. Trudy could never imagine the amazed look on Jake's face as he gapes at the intruder. In spite of the sound of the door banging, the visitor does not turn around immediately. She simply stands there in a dark green oversized T-shirt and a long, shapeless skirt gazing out into space. Not until he says, 'Can I help you?'

Then slowly, as if in a dream, she turns and faces him.

If this had been a man he would probably have asked him to leave. And pretty curtly too. But this isn't a man. It is a woman, dirty and unkempt. Young. Or maybe not, it's hard to say. Her eyes, big and black, are completely opaque. She has long hair, dark and matted, that falls to her waist. With her pale, dirty skin, hollowed out eyes and angular features, she reminds him of a rather grubby ghost. He blinks, runs his hand through his hair and clears his throat. He can feel his cheeks growing warmer.

'Who are you and how did you get in here?' This is the second day in a row that Trudy has allowed a stranger to simply waltz into his office. He must speak to her about it.

She looks directly at him. She seems neither embarrassed nor apologetic.

'Would you like to sit down?' he tries eventually, and clears his throat again.

She moves from the window towards the chair. Sits down. In *his* seat. He stares at her in open-mouthed amazement. Then slowly settles down in what should be her chair, perching uncomfortably on the edge of it. She meets his stare very directly, with dense ebony eyes. She neither speaks nor smiles. She hands him the folder in her hands. He finds it all very disconcerting and shifts in his seat and clears his throat, taking the folder from her as a welcome escape from her gaze. It is not that she is staring at him. He would be fairly comfortable with that; it is the fact that she appears to be looking straight through him, as though he did not exist.

Suddenly a thought strikes him. 'Are you perhaps related to the elderly gentleman who came to see me yesterday?'

She gives something between a nod and a shrug.

He really should send her away right now. There is no space for another student. It's not as though he didn't say all that yesterday to the old man.

And then he opens the folder.

In years to come this will remain one of the most significant points in his memory. The moment he first saw the paintings of Zara Pascoe. It is not that they show any particular excellence of style. In truth her style is inconsistent and difficult to fathom. But the sheer impact of the subject, the total lack of indecision when it comes to colour, the raw intensity of her pieces are so powerful that they bypass the critical faculties, penetrating something dark within like a flaming arrow. Each painting is of a wild animal in savage attack. In each painting an animal has been killed or is doing the killing. It is as though she has painted the first convulsive shock of death from the

inside, the movement of the musculature, the gleam of blood and teeth and claws, the raging mix of elation and terror in their eyes. In each case it is the precision of that death moment, captured in yellow-reds and violet-purples that creates such terrifying impact. He would never forget a single one of them.

This time he looks up at her, really looks. But he cannot make the connection. The relationship between this expressionless young woman and the raw violence of her art is quite beyond him.

Words fall from his mouth before he can change his mind. As though something else is speaking through him.

‘Would you come back tomorrow?’ he says. ‘We start classes at nine.’

Immediately after he has said this, he shakes his head. He should be sending her away. How can he just back down like that? But then she may never return; and frankly that is not a risk he is prepared to take.

‘And would you leave your portfolio with me? I’d like to take a proper look when I have time.’ Her face remains blank. Then as simply as she had sat down, she gets up and walks out of the door empty-handed, without uttering a word.

Later that night, once Maria has fallen asleep, he gets up and sits for a long time in the lounge. Maria’s book, *The Dalai Lama Pocketbook*, lies open on the coffee table next to the couch where she had been chatting on the phone. Underneath it, between some travel brochures, lies another book she has recently bought, *Abundance: A Lifestyle You Deserve*. Beneath that his battered version of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Zara. Thustra. He had pulled it out only last week. Funny how things like that happen. The name on the young woman’s portfolio today was Zara Pascoe. He pops a cd of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* into the player, returns to the sofa thinking how strange she was. But her paintings were extraordinary. He cannot get them out of his mind. Their violence lingers on the psyche; he can almost smell the warm, sweet pungency of blood. Who is she? And why does he find her so disturbing? Is it because he cannot find a category for her? Doesn’t know how to label her? Her face is still very young – she cannot be more than twenty. But her eyes are not the eyes of a young woman. There is nothing of the innocence of youth in them. No naivety. They tell you nothing; give nothing away.

Chapter Four

Behind the cottage, beyond the vines, the two children have discovered the vague hint of a path. They already know that if you follow it carefully a short way, it will take you over the coarse mountain grass, till you reach a clear, shallow pool of water; the base of a small waterfall. This haven for rock rabbits, tadpoles and the occasional wildcat, hidden amongst trees and boulders, has become their secret; close enough to the cottage for them to hear Camille calling, yet far enough from things too ordinary for the serious business of make-believe.

Now that several months of playing have elapsed, and Blom finally grasps her friend's expectations of her as a fairy, she is determined to live up to them. The two spend considerable time pivoting on rocks, flapping their arms while Blom shouts flying commands with the vigour of a sergeant major. At the sound of Leica's enthusiastic barking, Camille often walks up to check on them, treading cautiously to ensure she is never seen.

'She's teaching me to fly,' she tells Camille that night. 'She's a fairy, you know.'

'I know,' says Camille. 'I can see that. Did you hear that Papa? Zara is having flying lessons. With a real fairy.'

'Wonderful,' says Pappi absent-mindedly, reading the newspaper. Only wings evade death. Neruda says so.' As he turned the page he looks at Zara and makes his bright blue eyes big. 'And Neruda knows.'

Zara stares at him for some time. 'Was he a friend of God?'

'Who? Neruda?'

'Yes.'

'He may have been, I'm not sure, petite. For all we know he may even have been God.'

Or they play with mud. This involves gathering up as much wet, oozing river sand and smearing it all over their tiny bodies, delighting at the pinkness of their mouths, the sudden white contrast of their eyes and the uniformity of their colour.

'Now we're the same,' says Blom. 'Brown as mud.'

'Hotnots,' says Zara.

They are terribly proud of their secret hide-out. Blom is already making grandiose plans to live there permanently.

'You can live here too, *as jy wil*,' she suggests.

'And Leica and Maman and Papa'tjie too?'

'No. No grown-ups.'

Zara cannot imagine climbing into a bed at night that does not have her mother in it.

'Fairies have mothers,' she ventures.

'Issie. No mothers en no fathers. Jus' other fairies.'

'Just other fairies?' Zara is surprised. For the first time she starts to feel sorry for them.

'Well, not the Hotnot kind, anyways,' says Blom confidently.

'We could invite them here, for a party,' she says hoping to change Blom's mind.

'No. No grown-ups.' Blom is firm. 'Unless...'

'What?'

'Unless, we make a concert.'

'A concert?'

'Ja. A concert. Fairies is verrie good at concerts. Singing en dancing.'

'And flying,' adds Zara.

'Ja, en flying,' agrees Blom optimistically. 'We can stan' op daai rock,' she says pointing to one of the favoured flying pedestals. 'En they can sit oppie gras.'

And so rehearsals begin.

They have no idea that all this time they are being watched. The brown eyes of a small boy with short spiky hair follow their every movement. He has a number of hiding places: the enormous tree with convoluted branches that spreads its leafy carapace over the pool, the murky, moss-filled cave behind the waterfall and in the little troughs between the huge granite boulders. He does not dare speak to them. He cannot understand what they are saying half the time, anyway. He simply waits and watches, every day.

He hears Zara teach Blom 'Au Clair de la Lune'. Over and over she repeats

each line, with Blom stopping and starting and repeating, her voice rising clear and uninhibited into the sky. He watches Blom teach Zara to 'jive', swaying her hips, all the while singing and clicking her small fingers, for rhythm. The two are trying to keep in time; a struggle with Blom forever inventing new steps and losing the sequence.

At the end of the day, he follows them back to the cottage, before making his way home. He keeps a distance behind them, stopping and waiting, ducking behind rocks and bushes. And then they disappear behind the stable door. Sometimes a pretty lady with dark hair comes out to meet them and hoses them down, both squealing and squirming, to get rid of the mud. Often an old man sits on the stoep smoking a pipe. Then usually a little later the brown girl reappears, closing the door behind her with a bang before slipping into the late afternoon shadows.

He longs to know what happens inside the cottage; what they talk about, what they eat. Even after he has been put to bed at night, he imagines them sitting in that very small house, and wishes he could be there too. (Had he been able to see Zara right then, he would be intrigued: she is on the floor with her crayons, creating a poster for the concert and making invitations. There are to be five invitees: Maman, Pappi, Leica, and Blom's parents, Goiya and Leah September. The poster is a drawing of a white girl, a brown girl and a dog - all with wings.)

And then he almost ruins it all. A few weeks after the start of the concert preparations, rehearsals are interrupted by the appearance of a mongoose. The girls stalk it quietly and slowly. The boy readjusts himself on the branch so that he can keep them in view. And suddenly, without so much as a warning wobble, he loses balance. With a thud he falls out the tree. The two girls stop in their tracks, their eyes wide. They are unsure whether to be frightened or impressed.

'Jisssslaik!' says Blom.

He jumps to his feet, dusts the dirt from his khaki shorts.

'En nou? Wie die fok is jy?' enquires Blom, her head at an angle, her tiny hands on her hips.

The boy blinks.

‘Was die matter? Don’t you *parle die taal*?’ she continues, glancing at Zara knowingly.

He does not understand a word. But he can tell by her clenched fingers and burning glare that the spritely brown girl is angry with him. He feels desperate. What a mistake to make! Now they would always check to see whether he is there.

‘So boy, as jy kannie talk, kan jy sing?’ demands Blom.

At last, a sentence he thinks he understands. And an opportunity to redeem himself.

‘Sing?’

‘Ja, sing!’

So deep is his longing to be accepted by the two, so strong his admiration for them, that, in the smallest voice, focusing on a yellow beetle on the ground, he starts to sing the song he has learnt best by watching and listening:

Au clair de la lune

Mon ami Pierrot

Prête-moi ta plume

Pour écrire un mot

When he has finished, he looks up, the awkward glow of embarrassment still burning in his cheeks. Blom is about to reprimand him, when she is interrupted.

‘That’s very good,’ says Zara. And then, to her friend’s indignation and disgust, she walks over to where he is standing awkwardly and puts a muddy hand in his. ‘What’s your name?’

Many years from now when he thinks back to these first secret months and that first moment when he had replied ‘Pieter’, in a soft whisper, he will recognise that even then he hadn’t known what to say to her, or who to be. Even then he had felt clumsy and uncouth in her world. Her other world.

**

The day of the concert brings the first rains of autumn. With renewed vigour and braced by howling winds, drops like glassy needles pound an earth exhausted by summer. Dust dissolves into little rivulets and pools. And all over the valley, in the rain-softened air, the fragrance of newly-soaked soil is a welcome reminder that this year’s heat is finally over.

Zara is not impressed. She sits glaring out the window, with the rain pelting down onto the tin roof and dripping into a bucket in the corner of the room. Why did it have to rain today, just when they were due to give their concert this afternoon to both families? She sees an inky figure darting first between the bushes, then along the pathway, holding a plastic packet over her head. Blom.

Camille opens the door.

‘What are we going to do?’ Zara asks the sodden figure.

On cue, Blom bursts into tears.

‘Come petite, take off your wet clothes.’ says Camille, motioning the old man to bring the blanket from the chair.

‘Now what are all these tears about?’ she asks, wrapping the worn blanket around the shivering child. ‘Why don’t we have the concert tomorrow?’

‘What if it rains again?’ Zara interjects.

‘Well, if it rains tomorrow, we can have the concert here. Tomorrow is Sunday, it’s still the weekend. Blom, your mother and father, they will be able to come?’

Blom remains silent, except for the occasional sniff.

‘Why don’t we spend the day making new invitations? On the back, I’ll write a letter to your mother asking her and your father to come over.’

No response. How could they know, Camille and her father, that the little girl had tossed the previous invitation into the bushes? The old man repeats the suggestion in his deep, thick-accented voice, as Camille goes to find a tissue for Blom to blow her nose.

‘Come Blom, we light a fire, yes?’ he says.

‘Yes!’ says Zara. ‘Blom and me will put the wood. Will you help me, Blom?’

‘Awraait,’ comes the despondent reply.

As she kneels down in front of the fireplace, the blanket falls from her tiny shoulders. From across the room both Camille and her father cannot fail to notice an enormous bruise and three bleeding stripes across her back.

**

From Saturday, at one o’ clock in the afternoon, till six o’ clock on Monday morning, Leah September is off work. Occasionally when Meneer and the Missus have a party on Saturday night, she is asked to come in the next day to clean up. To mop up the

spilt wine and snacks, clear the tables and wash, dry and put away an endless array of wine glasses and food-encrusted plates. Sometimes, if they have change on them and are feeling generous, they give her a few rand. But mostly the aftermath of the parties leaves them hungover and irritable, giving her the impression that they resent the fact that she is there at all. Luckily, there have been no parties this weekend. Like most Saturdays, she tells the children to go and play somewhere else, and uses her free afternoon to clean her own home.

The Septembers' home is the last in a string of six one-roomed cottages, separated by walls. The white paint is peeling from the façade, and a little way in front of their doors, a wire suspended along the length of the cottages is used as a washing line. Outside, on weekends, the men sit on large upturned cans, smoking, drinking and playing dominoes, while children play naked in the sand. When it rains the men take their 4.5 litre bottle of *Oom Tas* and pick whichever cottage has a table. The children, bored and frustrated, run in and out in the wet.

It is dark by the time she has finished dusting, wiping, washing clothes and scrubbing the floor and is arranging the few wet garments over the basin to dry. She can hear the men shouting and arguing next door. Any minute now someone will pick a fight. Probably Goiya. She only hopes he passes out as soon as he comes back home. She picks up the bag of dust and dirt to place it outside the door, squinting to see whether she can make out the small child and an old man approaching, under an umbrella.

This child of hers has been trouble from the start, she thinks. What now?

'Ja?' She is tired. Demoralised. It is dark, but she does not light a candle.

'I bring Blom home,' he says. 'We have a letter for you.'

'Hey?' she asks, struggling to understand his accent. 'Come again?'

He hands her the letter, then tips his beret, and leaves.

She lights a candle before opening the letter and pulling out the single page. On the one side is a child's drawing. On the back a few lines neatly written:

Dear Leah

We invite you and your husband to come tomorrow afternoon. The children will show us their concert. It will be good to see you again.

Yours,

Camille

P.S. I put some lotion on Blom's back. I hope you don't mind.

She sighs, and sits heavily on the mattress. That's all she needs. White people now trying to play God. She doesn't trust them one bit.

'Mine your own blerrie business,' she says under her breath. Then hoists herself up, and holding the candle up to her face looks in the piece of mirror she has stuck to the wall. Her right eye is swollen shut.

She turns to Blom and with a bitter, exaggerated English accent asks,

'And what do you suppose we do about *this* tomorrow, dahling?'

University of Cape Town

Chapter Five

He stands before the bathroom mirror, a maroon towel tucked tightly around his waist, his shoulder-length sand-coloured hair still wet from the shower. He dries it off with a handtowel, and leans forward towards the mirror. He suspects his hairline has receded a little further. With concentration, he examines his face first from one side, then the other: fair skin and round pale eyes accentuated by dark half moons beneath them. A very straight nose, with a small dent at the top where his glasses sit. He shaves with intent; his beard has always been too patchy for the unshaven look. Then brushes his teeth and tests his smile (he has always considered that his 'feature'). After drying his hair with Maria's turbo hairdryer, he ties it back. Then stretches up as tall as his five feet seven inches will allow, breathing in, to observe with interest what he may look like were his girth not quite so generous. He holds this pose for a while, before releasing his breath and watching his middle swell once more.

He switches on his cell-phone. While looking out at a grey, blustery day, he retrieves two missed messages: one from Trudy, to remind him about their lunch date that afternoon, the second from Maria to remind him about a dinner engagement with the Bryants that evening. He steps into black linen pants and soft Italian leather shoes, stretches a high-necked black T-shirt over his head, grabs the black linen jacket and Armani sunglasses, takes one final look in the mirror, then leaves.

Negotiating the traffic en route to the School, he considers the day ahead. The Bryants: Roland Bryant is a successful business tycoon who has inherited money. With his round, rosy cheeks and unruly hair, he effuses the kind of bonhomie that comes with never having suffered a day's worry in his life. There is nothing money has not bought him: status, friends, security and entertainment. He is both animated and laminated by wealth. His wife, the manicured and sleek Cecily Charlston-Bryant does not work and as far as he knows, has no education. She did however attend a finishing school in Switzerland, which has equipped her with an over-enunciated elocution and a passion for French champagne and travel.

'Wouldn't you simply *die* without Sienna?' she swoons, tipping the remainder of her Laurent Perrier from the fluted glass into her pouty little mouth. She reminds him of a

Chihuahua. He half expects that one day one of these emphatic statements will be punctuated with an eye popping out.

But the couple own several of his paintings, which they hang all over their marble-floored Camps Bay home. And they seem to enjoy having a celebrated artist at their dinner table. Maria is so good that way. Networking is possibly what she does best.

Maria. What has happened to the generous, sensual woman he first met ten years ago? Nothing? Is that the problem? Perhaps her consistency, her predictable adoration and perpetual forgiveness have become boring. As though through sheer excess (exactly the generosity he first found appealing) the senses have been numbed. Where does it go to, the love, when it has died?

Maria. Suspicious of his every move. Silently suffering. Struggling to 'make it work', whatever that means. She has taken to trying to surprise him in bed, confessing coyly that she had read in *Cosmopolitan* that sex becomes more interesting when you do something that makes you blush when you remember it the following morning.

That is the thing about Maria: she does everything by the book. And yet he can never deny that ten years ago meeting Maria was the turning point of his life. She was thirty-five – a year younger than himself – with a love of life like a *tour de force*. At that time, he was only recently divorced, it seemed to him that she really knew how to *live*. With relish. With indulgence. And a sensual urgency that rippled into everything. And she could afford to do so. At the time, her business was import/export. Curios, artefacts, South African Art. She left on planes on Mondays and returned on Fridays with deals and restaurant slips and foreign shoes and pieces of fabric for cushions. She was extravagant and generous and as passionate about him as all the other things she enjoyed.

Before he met her he had been scraping together a living, selling pieces during the season, doing some teaching. But it was Maria, larger than life and fabulously wealthy who had truly held the mirror up to his talent. Her response to his work was almost sexual. She moved and sighed and caught her breath and held his arm. Sometimes she even had tears in her eyes. She established a name for him in parts of America,

Portugal and the Riviera, playing buyers in one country up against the others, hiking his prices up 500% so that people were forced to stop and look.

The school too was her idea; initially a marketing ploy, particularly the name. The 'Jake Coleman International School of Fine Art' gave it immediate prestige, which they instantly ratified by awarding a few scholarships to foreign students with talent. The timing was perfect; they were able to jump on the bandwagon of the supposedly newly-liberated South Africa, and the brand kept growing. Luckily he has always loved teaching. And the students seem to feel it and thrive.

**

The class is quieter than usual when he walks in out of the howling wind. A couple of students, here and there are talking in low voices. But he can sense something: Resistance? Apprehension? It is as though the air has been pulled taut. He stands at the table in the front of the classroom for a moment and casts his eye over the group, trying to work it out. And then he sees her sitting in the back row, alone. She has come back then, the strange one. She stares straight ahead, her black eyes hardly blinking. Her face is as grimy as it was the day before and she is wearing the same bottle-green T-shirt and shapeless skirt. Her hair drops lank and lifeless onto her shoulders.

At the end of the lecture he watches the class separate and reform, coagulating into little clots, before disappearing down the corridor. Zara waits for them all to leave before she stands.

'Did you manage to sort everything out with your late registration?' he asks.

She nods, drops her head, and hurriedly makes her way to the door.

'Welcome to the class,' he calls out. But she is already shutting the door behind her.

He has always had a fascination for uncontrived eccentricity. It was a little like uncontrived sensuality: raw and authentic. Something in him feels strangely flattered that someone like her would elect to attend his lectures, his school. The class will have to get used to her, that's all; she has clearly altered the equilibrium.

And then an incident. The first he hears of it is in an e-mail from a parent. The mother of the girl with big breasts complains that the school is unhygienic, and that she is not forking out astronomically high fees for her child to attend a cockroach-infested haven. Nonplussed he calls the girl in and asks her to explain. It appears that the class had been waiting for him one morning, when they noticed a cockroach running across the floor. The girls had lifted their feet. One of the boys had jumped up to kill it. Zara had pushed him away. When the boy asked her what she was doing, she replied, 'It's cleaner than you.' The boy sat down again, and a few minutes later Zara had reached into her bag and thrown a bit of crust to the cockroach.

'She *fed* the cockroach?' he says.

'Yes.'

'I see.'

There is something about the girl's shocked earnestness, her sense of *outrage* – he can imagine the dinnertime conversation – that strikes him as rather hilarious. He stifles his amusement.

'Thank you. That will be all.' He cannot resist one quick glance at her chest.

In time the class forget about the incident, and do, in fact, get used to her. Some continue to avoid speaking to her at all, or even sitting anywhere near her, as though repelled. She acts as if none of them exists. She ignores them all – even those who watch her with something akin to morbid fascination. Sometimes he notices her lips moving, as though she is talking to herself. Or commenting on something. But mostly she remains silent. What he cannot help noticing is that each and every one of them, whether through active avoidance or secret observance, is acutely aware of her presence at all times. Especially when she paints.

There is something hypnotic about her when she paints. He finds himself watching so intently that he has to jerk himself back to reality. It is as though the paintbrush becomes a little magic wand, enabling her to transcend her blank gaze. As though by holding it, she learns the secret password into another world to which she alone has access. There is a rhythm in her movement and a relaxed absorption in her subject that creates a seamlessness between the two. A symbiotic relationship.

And then there are the paintings themselves. This is becoming a bit of a puzzle. She seems completely unpredictable in her interpretation of the subject. If it is a still life, she renders a quick sketch, before taking another sheet of paper and drawing something completely different; usually an animal. If it is a model, she can be captivated for hours, translating the pose into something extraordinary, as though she is able to identify the emotion signified in the model's stance - be it arrogance, moodiness, melancholy - and can push it past its limit into another dimension. While her strokes are broad and deft, she understands the power of detail, working quickly and intuitively to recreate not only what lies before her, but what exists in her mind's eye, far, far beyond. As though she understands innately what Proust meant when he said: 'Don't be afraid of going too far - that is where the truth resides.'

But there are not always models. And her refusal to tackle the still life is a problem. He decides not to discuss it with her in class in front of everybody else. There is no telling the effect it may have, either on her or on the all-too-interested group.

'Zara, would you stop by my office this afternoon? I need to discuss some aspects of the curriculum with you.'

She looks blank.

'About two o'clock? After lunch?'

She gives an imperceptible nod.

'Is that a yes?' he asks gently, the way one would coax a shy child.

She nods again.

The class ends a few minutes early, just before lunch. Time for one of the pleasures of his week: lunch with his secretary. Trudy arrived at the school a couple of years ago. At the time, she was married to a professional golfer and new in the Cape. Her husband, when not practising his swing on the golf course, was invariably on tour. After several bouts of tears, he and his pretty little wife decided she should get a job to help her pass the time. She applied for the job at the Jake Coleman International School of Fine Art, and started work the day after her interview. A short while later she was sleeping with her boss. A year later her husband left her for a Brazilian air hostess. Today, thanks to a generous guilt-edged settlement, she can still afford not to work. But that would mean she would never see Jake. Which of course, is out of the question.

Jake likes her. He really does. She is perfect for the job. She has an undemanding, sweet and compliant nature. Not to mention a body handcrafted for sin, and the wardrobe to match. Deep down he believes that every man deserves a Trudy.

Someone who organises the details of his life, while dressing for him, laughing at his jokes and generally relieving the tension. Trudy is a lady of many talents, no doubt about that. If only he could think of a tactful way to get her to stop calling his house. Shouldn't be too difficult. Jake has always prided himself on being particularly good at lying to women. He only tells them what they want to hear. Is that wrong? It's an act of kindness really. Their ears exquisitely crafted to hear only what their sweet romantic souls can digest. Their ears. He sighs. He loves a woman's beautiful ear.

Today she looks particularly attractive: svelte and sophisticated. Even coming in from the wind, her cropped ash-blonde hair accentuates her fine features and compliments her olive skin and green-apple eyes. Everything about Trudy is precise. Her Virgoan eye for detail and her crispness soothes and neatens the often-frayed edges of his unpredictable creative world.

And yet it was none of these things that attracted him to her in the first place. It was finding her one afternoon, her square, black-framed reading glasses halfway down her straight little nose, reading a Belgian art magazine, one of the selection he keeps scattered on coffee tables at reception. Her head was bent – her neck a perfect curve, a small pearl in the soft lobe of her perfect ear, the finest baby hair glowing delicate as dust in the afternoon light. Her lips were slightly parted, her brows slightly tensed. He could see from where he was watching that she was focused on an article written about him on page seventy-three.

She had been so shy at first. Averting her green eyes whenever he looked at her. And sincere. She hardly knew anything about painting, but she longed to learn. She would ask him question after question, and then suddenly blush. 'You must think me so ignorant.'

And then later their lovemaking. The 'Please don't leave me', whispered like a prayer as he lies spent, still inside her.

With pleasure he watches her walk towards him. Outwardly, she has a powerful womanly confidence. She knows the difference shoes with a little heel make to the swing of her gait. She knows the right shade of lipstick to apply, and now that she has learnt the ropes, she knows how to look at him in a way that could set his blood alight. She also has the finest ankles he has ever seen.

Lunches are usually a kind of foreplay. They would sit sipping white wine and swapping food, their fingers intermittently interlacing. They would make suggestive innuendos in low voices, whilst under the table she would move her insistent stocking-clad toes up his legs. He does not remember ever having a real conversation with her about anything, but that is hardly the point. If he ever were to get so far as to think about it, he would inevitably come to the conclusion that Trudy is not supposed to be about anything real. She is fantasy at its least complicated. A concept.

Not that he doesn't think about her. He does. There are occasions, when climbing into bed at night, he imagines her slipping between her crisp cotton sheets, a magazine sliding to the floor long after she has fallen asleep. But not that often. It is not his business. On the odd occasion when he does become the victim of her frustration, he ascribes it to PMT and keeps a low profile until she is over it. Till she comes quietly, sweetly, swollen-eyed, like a soft animal wanting to be held.

Today she will be picking a friend up at the airport, so any lazy afternoon dalliance will have to be put on hold. He takes her back to the school to pick up her car and lock his office.

It is only after he has given her one last pat on the bottom, and walks towards his office that he suddenly remembers his appointment with Zara. *Shit!* He looks at his watch; he is an hour and a half late. She must have left ages ago. He is about to lock his office door and leave, all the while shaking his head at his own forgetfulness, when something, some curious instinct, causes him to stop, and quickly check inside. He turns the handle and without entering the room, surveys the desk, the two writing chairs and the armchair. In a shaft of late afternoon light, a figure lies curled up on the large chair, asleep.

Perhaps he can attribute it to the excesses of lunch, but there is no telling how long he stares at this vision. Perhaps again, it is the wine, or even the coffee, but he feels a strange sensation pass through his body; a shortage of breath, a shudder of blood to the chest. Eventually he enters the room, and checking that nobody is approaching, carefully closes the door behind him. Treading as softly as possible he stands before her. He must wake her. Yes, he surely must wake her. And yet when he opens his mouth, no words will come. His body feels slow and disconnected. Heavy, as in dream state. The computer drones quietly in the corner. Outside, the wind screams. A starling hops onto the windowsill, but he does not see it. Flapping its wings it calls raucously to its mate, but he does not hear it. With brows bent, his sole focus has converged on this: this mirage before him.

Her body, as tall as he is when she is standing, is curled with feline grace into a surprisingly compact little ball. The shapeless skirt has fallen to the side, revealing the length of her legs. He hardly dares breathe. His eyes assimilate every last detail: a battered shoe hanging from the smooth arch of her foot. The tiny soft hairs on her legs. The gentle curve of her shoulder, where the oversized bottle-green T-shirt has fallen away. The outlined arc of a breast. And then her face. That sleep can be so revealing. That it can have pulled back the covers of her savage impenetrability to show this deep serenity, this translucence beneath the grime. He kneels down in front of her. Leans forward and inhales: she smells like the rain. To touch her, just once. Should he dare? Closing his eyes, he puts out his hand, curling his fingers in front of her face to feel the warm vapour of her breath between his fingers.

‘Zara’, he whispers.

And then her scream.

He jumps back, but already her nails have moved like fire through his skin. Already the chair is knocked over. And before he can get to his feet, she has fled. He runs to the balcony, calling, but she has gone. He puts a hand to his burning cheek, feeling the blood flow warm and sticky over his fingers.

‘Zara!’ he shouts. ‘Zara!’

But as though to confirm that it is a dream, only the word rushes back along the empty corridors.

Chapter Six

Leah September is always early to rise. Even on the weekends, through sheer force of habit, she is up and active by six 'o clock. This morning, Sunday, is no different.

Goiya had staggered into bed in the early hours of the morning, shouting invectives intermingled with odd lines of song, before lying back, folding his hands on his chest and snoring with conviction within seconds.

'Bastard,' she mumbled, half-asleep. There was a time when, under similar circumstances, a small hint of a smile may have twisted one side of the yin-yang mouth. But not anymore.

Hours later, as she stands in the first light before the broken piece of mirror, and notes that the black eye has turned a grotesque yellow, the bile of resentment burns in her throat. Raindrops like stones sting the tin roof and batter the window pane; a low cloud obscures the mountain. With grim determination she digs in a patched bag for some old, caked make-up and with a small sponge and some water sets about repairing the damage.

It's not that she wants to impress these people – these fokken mad people who insist on interfering with her life. God himself must know, that's all she needs right now. White do-gooders. It's all a blerry nonsense. (She becomes more vigorous with the make-up, slapping it on thicker and thicker, wincing every now and then.) But what can she do? If she refuses to go she will be rude. Not to mention the movie-star performance Blom will throw. She sighs and shakes her head at the thought. But if she must go, she will not have them feeling sorry for her. She will accept their hospitality for a few hours. But over her dead body will she accept their pity.

In the cottage where she will visit in a few hours' time, the mother lies awake next to her child. Again Zara's nightmares have rent the night. Again she has woken to the sound of her daughter's breath becoming increasingly laboured, turning into short, dry gasps, her small hands tensed and flailing. Again she has taken the child in her arms

and softly asked, 'What is it? Zara, Zara... *ce n'est qu'un rêve*. It's a dream *ma petite*. Come, what is it? Tell me.'

Above the hammering of rain on the roof, she can only just make out the single response: 'Dead birds.'

'Dead birds? What dead birds?' she would probe.

But inevitably there was no answer. The child was still caught in the dark clutches of sleep. And in the morning, she would not remember.

And then there were the other nights, when turning in her sleep she would instinctively feel Zara's absence. Lifting the weight of her head from the pillow, she would see her at the window, staring up at the stars, her long hair almost touching the hem of her nightie.

'What are you doing?' she would whisper. Leica's tail would thump lazily on the wooden floor, to indicate his inclusion.

But there was never any reply. Quite soon she realised that Zara, transfixed by the night sky, was not awake.

She had started to realise that she must be very careful which stories she read Zara: her identification with the story was so marked that she often couldn't sleep for fear. She drew witches with claws and blood dripping from their fingers. She drew death without even understanding what it really meant, muttering inaudibly to herself, her eyes dark and intense. But the worst was always if she had seen a dead animal that day. A cat run-over, a bird with its neck broken. This seemed to break her heart as though she had lost a family member.

She had been convinced that Zara's over-empathetic attachment to animals was due to the lack of friends of her own age. She had even tried sending Zara to the local pre-school. What a disaster *that* had been

It had only lasted a week. The school had Valleyland Junior Primary in brown and gold on the metal sign on the gate. And VJP on the pocket of Zara's brown and white uniform. The uniform with the tunic which hung oversized and stiff, with a huge hem, over her knee caps.

'Do I have to wear it every day?' Zara had asked.

‘Yes,’ she had replied.

‘*Every day?*’ Zara could not believe it. She hated it! Out of the corner of her eye, Camille watched her thinking it through, brows furrowed, muttering under her breath. The same brown tunic with white shirt. Every brown and white school day. For the rest of her life.

From the first week things had gone badly. From what she could piece together, at recess a band of pig-tailed conspirators had circled Zara, waving tiny fingers at her in knowing reprehension, gathering up their accusations in an evil little clump.

“You have no Dad...,” the ringleader seemed to have chanted. The others had apparently copied her, “And you never *did* have either... which my big brother says means you’re a bastard.”

“What’s a bastard?” Zara had later asked her. ‘Does it have to wear a uniform?’

But what Zara did understand soon enough, from the superior giggles of this miniature coven, was that she was excluded. So whilst the other children at the school would play on the jungle gyms and slides, pairing off and holding hands with newly made best friends, she would head for a grassy corner close to the staffroom, where she would sit cross-legged, drawing. That was until she was found out.

Ah, Mrs Meijer, Camille remembers wryly. The teacher with a beetle-shaped body and a nose for delinquency. A sharp one like a triangle. The teacher who believed that bad behaviour could be stamped out if caught early enough. The same one who had found somewhere in the bible that the heart was evil. And had been known to say that nowhere was this more clearly seen than in the behaviour of children. Apparently her views were well-known in the Christian community: She believed the evil heart could be redeemed only by the Saviour and by discipline. Especially the latter. That was her special calling. The one she would have to answer for one day, when she stood before the Almighty. No doubt she was thinking about this very thing, about this enormous responsibility and duty that rested on her ample shoulders, when her sin-detecting radar must have tuned in to the disrespectful lilt of Zara’s voice singing its way into the staffroom window.

‘What song were you singing?’ Camille had been curious to know later.

'An English one. The one from the records. Pappi's record with the English songs:

Now Ebenezer

Thought he was Julia Seizure

So they sent him to a ho-oh-home...

The teacher, obedient to the voice of the Lord, conscientiously tracked its owner down. And found Zara modelling a cow from a piece of blue plasticine.

And so they gave him

Medicinal compounds

Now he's the empah-rah

Of Rome...

'This is out of bounds, little girl. Now move it. Go to the playground where you belong.'

Zara had blatantly ignored her, the teacher later told Camille.

'Is that true Zara?' she later asked.

'No,' said Zara. 'I just didn't answer her, that's all. I just went away.'

It seems she had walked apprehensively back to the playground, trying to find a tree, a bush, somewhere she could hide. But they had found her again, and the jeering had continued.

'They said I was bad because I didn't believe in God.'

'So what did you do?' Camille wanted to know.

'I said I did believe in God. I even know his name. His name is Neruda.'

But the children had scorned her even further.

'So then I went to the toilet,' she said.

'And then?'

'And then I went back to where the teacher found me. I thought if I didn't sing she wouldn't mind.'

But the teacher did mind. And viewed the matter as gross insubordination.

The mother would have to be called in.

'Your child has interactive problems,' she had told Camille. 'She does not mix with other children. Refuses to participate. And is blatantly disobedient.'

'Refuses? Er, that is a strong word, Mrs Meijer. Zara is not that kind of child. It's possible she just chooses to do something else, yes?'

Mrs Meijer was clearly not in the habit of being questioned. Or disagreed with. And, Camille felt, took particular exception that the heathen woman doing so spoke in a foreign accent. Camille could tell that differences made her feel unsure and uncomfortable. She seemed quick to condemn anything she did not understand with the full force of her godly judgement.

Camille watched her fold baguette-shaped arms across her torso, take a deep breath through a tiny vein-spattered nose and take a step forward. "'Refuses... Chooses"... What's the difference? She's being stubborn and naughty. And seeing as she has no father to take the matter in hand, it's up to you. I'm afraid, Miss Pascoe.'

'Ah! About this, we agree then, Mrs Meijer.' Camille's voice, usually so melodic, was imperceptibly clipped. Like music from a waltz played slightly staccato. 'It is my job. And it must stay this way.'

Beneath her composure, Camille burned hot ice. For the first time since she had arrived in the Cape, she did not notice the grandeur of the mountain shimmering in the heat of the day as she walked back to the cottage. Was unaware of the sun throwing warmth into her dark hair, touching the prominence of her high cheekbones. She found her lips moving and tightening with each word that had been said. And more so, with those that had not been said. Her smooth, slightly swaying gait swung into a march.

And that was the school. Zara had never gone back. She had stayed with her mother, and her grandfather, and her dog, and her world of make-belief and animals, right up until Blom had dropped out the sky, a gift. And yet still Camille worried. She seemed so full of paradoxes, even at this young age. Even with Blom she would sing and play with childlike abandon, but never give too much of herself away. Already she has developed an extraordinary sense of privacy. It lends her dignity, a composure even,

way beyond her years. And the fact that she seems oblivious to it, makes it all the more fascinating to watch.

Only in one respect does this change. When it comes to drawing and painting Zara is quite different. She can keep herself busy for hours, confidently creating worlds of wonder, worlds of terror. Safe and content in a fabulous freedom that is drawn from a talent so innate she herself neither questions nor marvels at it. Her drawings could be softer than rain; violent as lightning. They were always of animals.

How beautiful things are when they sleep, especially children. Zara's nightmare must have ended; now she floats on a pillow of slow and sweet breath, her purposeful little fingers curled. She can remember being that age. *Was she too that small and precise?* And meeting her half-brother, Juergen, her only other sibling, for the first time. He was twenty-one. Had lived in Argentina with his mother since he was fifteen. They shared a father, their Papa, who he came out to France to visit for ten days for the first time in seven years. The day they brought him home from the airport, she became ill, probably from excitement. Only hours before he was due to arrive she came down with a terrible fever. But they brought him straight back to the house, where she was lying in bed, only her eyes peering above the sheets, watching and waiting, for her brother. When he came through the door, olive-skinned and beaming, she pulled the sheets over her head. And Juergen laughed and said what was this all about, this being sick on the day her brother comes all the way from Argentina to meet her for the first time. And she didn't move. She couldn't look at him. She just kept those sheets right over her head. So he said let's make a deal. You don't have to show me your face, if you stick out your hand from under the sheet. Not both hands, just one. This seemed like a fair compromise, and quite soon her small clammy fist was being held in her brother's warm grip. Juergen. Now married with five children and farming in Argentina. She followed him relentlessly during those ten days. He carried her on his shoulders. Sat her on his lap. Told her marvellous stories. Taught her how to make *tortillas*. And then ten days later, he left. She remembers the trip to the airport. He was wearing a red shirt, soft. He smelled like pink musk sweets. And she could not speak, all the way in the train, for fear she would cry. And she could not hold his hand, nor catch his eye. She had simply to concentrate very hard and keep swallowing even though it made her twitch and her head sore. And all the way she kept it up. All

the way. Even when they reached the airport and a calm woman's voice came over the loudspeaker calling passengers for their flight. Juergen shook his father's hand, then hugged him, then kissed him on both cheeks, then hugged him again. But before he could drop to his haunches to look his little sister in the eyes one last time, she had gone. As though something in her chest had snapped and she had been catapulted to the other side of the building, to somewhere in the crowds, *anywhere*, away from the soft shirt. She hid amongst the arms and legs and handbags and elbows at the window, and watched him walking away. Watched him turning to look back once or twice, as though he had a question, his red shirt billowing in the wind, then toss his old backpack over his shoulder and walk on. Could he see her, a small convulsive child beating her hands against the thick airport window panes, feeling their dull, separating force. Could he hear her cry? Is that why he began walking faster, to escape from her pain? Till the fat white stair tube had swallowed him into the giant, squat whirring machine?

And so it is with loss; absence is only half the pain, complete powerlessness the rest. How was he to know, her big half-brother Juergen, that the man she would later love would leave the same way? The grand themes of our lives a wheel ever turning.

**

At ten 'o clock, Leah September walks silently down the road and across the field till she reaches the cottage on the lower side of Meneer Smit's farm. Her child's fist gripped in one hand, in the other an umbrella with two bent tines, making it collapse on the one side. The child's mother is standing at the door.

'Hello,' she calls.

'Hello...' Leah is about to add 'Merrem', but stops.

Zara suddenly appears at her mother's side, staring silently at the arrival of Blom and her mother. Unblinking, she eyes the web of frosty raindrops twinkling on Blom's buoyant curls. A fairy crown. Must be.

'Come inside. Come out of the rain.' Camille Pascoe holds the door open.

The room is warm. A fire hisses and fusses in the grate. The smell of baking fills every corner. Blom tears away from her mother's grip and races across to the stove.

'What's cooking?' she demands to know.

‘Cakes,’ Zara replies. ‘Fairy cakes; *you* should know.’

Without the child’s hand in hers, Leah stands awkwardly, the toes of her right foot slightly turned in. She watches Camille move towards the old oven, the bright blue^S apron wrapped tightly around her small waist.

‘Take a seat,’ Camille smiles and motions with her arm, as she bends and removes the cup cakes from the stove.

Leah bites her cheek. She moves stiffly to the old leather chair. Suddenly notices the old man in the other, asleep with his chin on his chest, and gives a little jump.

‘It’s okay,’ says Camille. ‘That’s my father. He often falls asleep when we have a fire.’

Leah gives a little nod. She sits at the end corner of the chair, with her knees together and her feet slightly apart.

‘Can I help?’ she asks Camille.

‘Yes, I’m going to bring the cakes over there, and we can all ice them.’

Leah watches Camille closely: Haai, that way she has of walking; the sway of her hips mos, like there’s a hundred men in the room. Even the way she wears her clothes, that red skirt and long-sleeve black jersey, it’s all put together to show off her body like nobody’s business! She feels the gap in her own front teeth with her tongue, unconsciously tries to stretch her dress over her dark and dimpled knees.

‘When do you want to see the concert?’ Blom wants to know. Her mother does not answer.

‘Let’s ice these first,’ says Camille, setting down a tray of fairy cakes and a bowl of icing with spatulas and spoons on the little table in the middle of the floor.

Enticed by the warm vanilla smell, the dog rises from his spot in front of the fire, shakes the sleep out, then comes over to look, wagging his tail.

‘No, Leica. Not now.’ Camille has to push him firmly away.

After Camille has iced the first fairy cake, Leah takes a spatula and ices another. The children each try to ice one, but before long jam the cake and a spoonful of icing into their mouths.

‘Blom!’ hisses Leah.

‘Listen to that rain on the roof,’ says Camille.

‘Sounds like popcorn,’ says Zara.

‘Why don’t you two go and get ready for the concert?’ suggests Camille, rising to fetch a pot of coffee.

The two disappear into the alcove where Camille and Zara sleep.

'How are things at the farm?' Camille calls across to Leah.

'Oh, s'fine. Same old, same old, you know.' She gives a small smile, without opening her mouth.

Camille pours her a cup of strong coffee into a pottery mug and passes the sugar.

The children reappear wearing Camille's lipstick. Zara shakes Pappi's arm till he grunts and wakes, and the concert begins.

Out of the corner of her good eye, Leah watches Camille. What the hell is this woman doing encouraging friendship with a coloured family? It's asking for trouble, that's what.

Suddenly the children stop. 'At the window,' says Zara to Blom. 'It's Pieter.'

Pappi stretches and makes his way over to the window, to find a small boy crouching under the eaves. He undoes the latch and with a push releases the rain-soaked wood.

'Tell him to fokoff,' says Blom.

'Blom...' Her mother winces; shakes her head.

'Tell him to come inside!' insists Zara. 'He knows *Au Clair de la Lune*. He must sing.'

The old man opens the door and greets the small boy in the green corduroys and the navy sweater. 'Allo,' he says.

'Hello Meneer,' the reply is muffled. The boy watches him from deep under his eyebrows.

'Can you sing *Au Clair de la Lune*?' the old man asks. His face is masked with the gravity of a judge.

'Hey?' Pieter does not understand the accent.

The old man repeats himself slowly.

'No Meneer. I mean, I don't know Meneer.'

'He's lying,' Zara calls out. 'He can. Tell him to come.'

'Tell him to fokoff!' insists Blom

Come, young man,' the old man offers. Then, more insistent: 'Come *petit*. It's raining.'

The boy scuttles inside, his velskoens bringing with them ample evidence of the soft, muddy earth.

Leah's mouth is tight. This has turned from bad to worse.

'Haai Tannie,' he greets her softly.

'What are you doing here, Pieter?' Leah is shaking her head. This is really asking for trouble. If his parents knew... Jesus, that snooty bitch mother of his would go *ballies*!

'You want trouble, Pieter?'

'No, Tannie.' He looks down.

Zara takes his hand. 'First sing like we showed you. Otherwise no cake.'

'It's *our* cake,' glares Blom, before taking her place in front of the fireplace to sing.

Leah clasps tense fingers.

Blom looks first at Zara, then at Pieter, then gives the count of three to lead them into song. This is repeated several times. Each time one child misses the cue, until finally Camille steps in.

'Let me count to three, okay? One, two, three...'

The children launch into the song. Zara stares ahead unabashedly, her clear voice repeating the words of the song she has grown up singing. Blom sings with exaggerated concentration, taking deep breaths between lines and swaying her body in time to the song. And Pieter sings very softly, looking down at this velskoens all the while.

At the end of the song, the old man starts to clap.

'Bravo! Magnifique. Bravo!'

Camille lifts her hands and claps as noisily as she can, and Leah, releasing her grip politely joins in.

The children descend on the fairy cakes and start arguing about who got the song wrong. Camille leans towards Leah.

'What's the matter?' she asks Leah quietly. 'Why shouldn't the boy be here?'

Leah pretends not to hear. She clasps her hands in front of her again, digging her fingertips so clawingly into the back of the opposite hands that her scuffed nails dig into her brown skin showing milky pink indentations.

'Leah,' repeats Camille. 'What is wrong with the boy being here?'

Leah shifts her torso in discomfort, then shakes her head, and sighs.

‘His parents don’t like it. His mother’s a funny one.’

‘Don’t like what?’

Leah gives a little laugh, without moving her lips too much so as not to show the gap in her front teeth, and shifts in her seat.

‘You haven’t been here long, have you?’

‘Not too long, why?’

‘You come from where?’ Leah is curious to know.

‘France.’

‘Ah. I never been. But here is not like France.’ She enjoys the authority that this small knowledge affords. ‘Here, people like the Smits – Meneer Smit? The owner of the farm?’

Camille nods.

‘People like them like to keep their washing separate. Or at least when it suits them.’

Her eyes harden. ‘And you don’t mix white with coloured washing, if you unnerstand.’

Camille listens quietly, pouring out more coffee into each of the pottery mugs, while Leah continues.

‘But that kid is lonely. I see him all day long on his bicycle, up en down the street, while the mother is out at one of her bridge parties or lunches or whatever. And the father doesn’t pitch up at home in the day either.’

Suddenly Blom gives a loud wail.

‘What’s the matter?’ Camille turns to ask.

‘She says I’m not a fairy,’ sobs Blom.

Zara stares at them. Her dark eyes, resolute and opaque. She does not say a word.

‘Zara?’ Camille repeats with intent.

‘And now she doesn’t want to be my friend,’ howls Blom with renewed dramatic devastation.

‘Oh, I’m sure that’s not true. Zara! That’s not true, is it?’

Zara nods. ‘I want a fairy. Not a friend,’ comes the reply. ‘She can’t fly.’ And with that she leaves the room.

The rain has stopped for a moment. Even so, rainwater still drips like a metronome into the plastic green bucket in the corner. Leah shuffles her feet, then shifts

awkwardly in her seat. Blom sniffs, and Pieter stares at his shoes. Eventually, the old man stands up. 'I think I take Leica for a walk. You come too?' he asks Pieter and Blom. Like the dog, wagging its tail at the mention of his name, the children do not need to be asked twice.

Camille puts her head into their tiny bedroom. As expected, Zara is sprawled out on the bed, her crayons all about her, drawing. She thinks about encouraging her to join the other children for the walk, then thinks better of it, and returns to the stove to boil some more water for tea.

She glances across at Leah, who is unconsciously touching the swelling around her eye.

'That looks painful.' Camille's voice is soft. The longing to be a part of the healing process again rises in her chest. When she arrived here a few years ago, she vowed she would find a nursing job here as soon as Zara was settled. But that was proving to take longer than expected.

Leah does not answer.

'Can I make you a little cold pack for that, while everyone is out? It will bring down the swelling. I can add some mint too; that often helps.'

'Moenie worry nie. It's okay.' Leah's eyes grow darker.

'I won't hurt you, really. I'm a nurse...'

Leah suddenly stands up. For a second she feels an urge to violate the perfection of this woman; her softness, her serenity. She wants to demand to know whether she has the first idea *what* she is talking about. With her little walk and her little cakes and her accent and her daughter; everything so *sweet*. She may be a little lonely, away from her fancy foreign country, but what does she really know about hardship? What does she know about what helps, and what doesn't help? After all, hers is hardly a face that has ever had a fist through it!

'“Help”?’ That will take more than mint,' her lips are tight. 'Or a nurse. I must get home. Thank you for having me.'

The cottage suddenly feels very empty. Camille sinks into a chair. Why did she ever do this? Bring everything across to this country of angry, misplaced strangers? Had she really felt *that* desperate that she had to pack it all in a few suitcases and leave her

country and her job in the French country hospital for good? Little Zara struggling to get along, to fit in. The little boy that has come over not allowed to ease his loneliness because his mother deems the company 'inappropriate'. At least there is this: they need never feel alone in their isolation (if that can be considered a consolation). Not here in this land of the walking wounded. Not here where the wound seems to have so many faces. Of course, she must concede, the French are not particularly friendly to strangers either. But in France the unfriendliness has its roots in their perceptions of superiority, not inferiority. In perfection - or at least perceived perfection - not brokenness. It is a strange form of patriotism. She smiles ruefully. How welcome that arrogance would be right now.

An hour later the old man can be seen slowly making his way up the pathway. Pieter is riding his red bicycle and Blom is holding the old man's hand. They do not ask about Zara at first, and cram a few more fairy cakes into their mouths. It is Pieter who quietly takes the last cake into the bedroom, before he and Blom leave, scattering like dice in different directions. As promised, they do not mention that they have learnt words like 'jockey', and 'trifecta'.

Chapter Seven

They are already late. Maria glances at her gold watch.

'Come *on* Jake! They're going to be waiting. What's the matter with you?'

He has lost track of time in the bath. In fact, he has lost track of time, period.

'Huh?' he appears, pink and dishevelled, tucking his shirt in.

'Comb your hair Jake,' Maria scolds. 'My God! What happened to your face?'

This time, he cannot think of an answer at all.

'Hmm,' is all he can muster, returning to the bedroom to find a comb, a brush, whatever. She bustles in behind him, her face growing flushed.

'Jake, answer me, what happened to your face?'

'I dunno,' he mumbles.

'Don't give me that. What's got into you all of a sudden? Answer me, goddammit.'

'Maria, give me a break,' he says with measured patience. 'I've had an awful day. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to go tonight. I'm only going for you. Now leave me alone.'

'I won't stand for it, Jake. You can't arrive home with scratches all over your face and not give me an explanation. I suppose it was some woman...' She starts gathering steam.

But it is he who explodes, picking up the car-keys and hurling them to the ground with such force that a piece of one of the keys splinters off.

'Jesus, Maria! Will you lay off?'

They arrive at the Bryants in silence. The meal, impeccably presented as always, will no doubt follow the usual pattern: cocktails in the drawing room before dinner, light classics filtering through as the guests arrange themselves, like chess pieces, in advantageous positions in the room. Hand-picked for utmost effect, there are usually at least two or three celebrities to garnish the affair. 'Just a sprinkling, darling,' gushes Cecily Charlston-Bryant to Maria. 'Never hurts to network.'

Jake is never without a small circle that manages to manoeuvre itself according to some unspoken politics of looks and glances within his ambit.

'Jake Coleman. The painter,' people confirm in hushed whispers behind their fluted glasses. Jake usually pretends not to hear.

The low hum of conversation just above the music. An occasional laugh. The clink of ice and glass. A typical *soirée* at Cecily's. So why does it feel so different suddenly to him all of a sudden? Surreal. As though he is an observer, not a participant. With whiskey tumbler in hand, he circles the room absent-mindedly, ignoring the recognition, the smiles, the eyes following him. Several of his paintings hang in different parts of the room. He stops in front of each one, looking at them as though he has just seen them for the first time. He touches the scratches on his face. *What if she doesn't come back?*

At the far end of the room he stares at a painting he had done ten years ago. A painting called Malay woman with fishes. He had taken the photo at first light in Kalk Bay, when the first fishing boats come back with their catch. First light and the sticky salt-thickened air and the wind bringing the smell of fish. Leathery men hauling nets of snoek, still slithering and thrashing onto plastic crates waiting gaping on the shore. And women there to meet them. The one he photographed middle-aged. Swaddled in poverty. Colourful rags about her head. A makeshift skirt and top and a shawl to cover her upper body and sprawling bosom. She was not drunk. Yet she did not walk, she staggered, her brown feet flip-flapping in old takkies, no shoe-laces, along the rough stones and glinting broken glass and lilac mussel shells. Once she had negotiated her fee amidst a windmill of arms and toothless shouting, she staggered back towards him, holding two fish, long and silver by the tail, one in each hand. It was then he took the snap. Captured her face, ochre and purple, contorted with the raw struggle of living. And painted it the same day.

He had only just met Maria. Was still struggling to make ends meet. And yet if he thinks about her response to the painting it seems ludicrous now.

'Love the colours!' she said. 'It's so *moving*. You've really captured the *feel*.'

But when she flogged it to Cecily Charlston-Bryant for R10 000 he forgave her. And painted an entire Malay series. His bank balance was growing for the first time. He had a new confidence and it showed. He took risks too, trying new styles, borrowing ideas from other painters: the dreamscapes of Klee, the floating lovers of Chagall,

whatever seemed popular at the time. His enthusiasm was contagious. *Everybody loves a winner.*

Maria cannot believe it. In public Jake has always elected to show a disaffected nonchalance about his work. Compliments are usually received with a shrug and a smile, as though his talent were a slight embarrassment; one he would prefer not to discuss. But tonight he does not seem to care at all about 'his audience'. In fact, he is behaving as though he is the only one in the room. Had they been on speaking terms she could have adjusted his behaviour. As it is, she can merely observe with seething disapproval.

'Paintings look vaguely familiar Jake?' Cecily oozes, trying to catch his eye.

Whether he chooses not to hear, or really does not hear, is hard to say.

'Jake!' Maria hisses. 'Cecily is talking to you.'

'Hmm? Really. Oh, hello Cecily.' His smile is automatic. 'How are you?'

But before she can launch into an answer he has glided past her.

Maria is apologetic. 'He hasn't been himself lately.'

'What happened to his face?'

'His face? Oh, that. Cat.'

'Never knew you had one.'

'Dr Coleman! Damn good to see you. How you doing, sport?'

Patrick le Roux, the gynaecologist is more difficult to avoid. Two minutes of his company - his beaming, booming, back-slapping camaraderie - is like finding yourself in the hall of horrors, with no escape except to nod your head as though it is loose, smile, try to say something amusing, and then excuse yourself to go to the men's room. Patrick le Roux owns several of his paintings, and is the quintessential cultural *parvenue*. He is frequently seen in the social pages of social magazines pictured with various kinds of artists, writers, poets, painters, musicians. He name-drops whenever he can, and considers himself a man of distinctive exotic tastes and expansive political sensibilities because he has a girlfriend 'of colour'. Lily, with her chiselled features, caramel skin and modulated voice, is a television presenter, and in Jake's opinion, Patrick's sole redeeming feature.

'How are you, Jake?'

'Ah, the lovely Lily.' He kisses her on the cheek. For a moment he almost feels his old self again.

'What happened to your cheek, old boy?' This, with a resounding backslap, and suddenly an evening that can't become worse, does.

'Oh, I really don't know. Cut myself shaving I suppose.'

Perhaps it is his natural elevation, but when Patrick le Roux roars with laughter, it is always louder and longer-lasting than anyone else.

'Cut yourself shaving? What kind of razor is that then? Shaped like a knitting needle?' More laughter and backslapping.

'Meet Arnie McKenzie,' he says. 'Arnie's a surgeon. Spends six months here and six months in Santa Barbara.'

He shakes hands with Arnie. 'Sounds like the best of both worlds.'

'Oh God yeah tell me about it. And best part is I earn in dollars, so with your economy I end up getting an increase almost every week!'

Patrick and Arnie appear to find this hilarious. Once they have wiped the tears from their cheeks, Patrick takes his arm.

'Now listen, old boy, off to Switzerland in a few months. Skiing with some French writers and popping in to see good old Henri.'

'Good old Henri' is a well-known Swiss philosopher, according to Patrick. And (again according to Patrick) a long-standing friend of the family. Patrick mentions 'good old Henri' as often as he can.

'So I was thinking, sport, how about knocking up a quick masterpiece for us to take over as a gift?' (More laughter at his own excellent wit.)

Jake smiles politely.

'No seriously, old chap, I mean it. It would be *wonderful* to take over a recent Coleman. We travel First Class you know. It would be dead easy to take it on the plane. Come now, what are you working on? Spill the beans.'

'What did you have in mind?' Jack redirects the conversation.

'Oh, really I don't care what it is. As long as it's a Coleman it doesn't matter, does it?

No really, I don't care a bean! Why not do something like... that?' He points to the nearest of Jake's paintings. An abstract blue vase with flowers and various geometric shapes. He had taken the idea from a painting he'd seen in a restaurant in San Francisco. It had strong overtones of Matisse.

'I'll see what I can do,' Jake mutters and moves on.

He wanders across to the mantelpiece over the opulent fireplace. Rests his drink on an antique gold coaster, and picks up a rather unusual piece of pottery and examines it closely.

'It's a tea bowl. Lovely, isn't it?' Maria appears to be following him. As though he can't be trusted not to make a fool of himself.

He continues to turn the piece over in his hands. 'Yes, I like it. Can't say why for sure, but it does have a certain charm.'

'Cecily and Roland have quite a bit of this stuff. Apparently the man who makes it has been invited tonight. Not sure who he is.' She swivels her eyes around the room.

'You should get him to give you some samples for consignment. For the gallery.'

'Good idea.' Now she knows he's not himself. Jake never recommends anyone else's work for the gallery.

'I'll see what I can do. Oh God, there's Juanita. Try to be polite, Jake.'

There are three things Juanita le Grange feels compelled to tell all she meets: the first is that she has a PhD; the second, that she is a Communist, and the third that she married a man who had died in 'the struggle'. Jake has often noted that her strictly communist lifestyle seems to include a few minor incongruencies: a ten-bedroom mansion overlooking Camps Bay; a black Mercedes sports car and several First Class trips overseas each year. Not to mention a number of his paintings; she is always first on Maria's list when there is an exhibition.

It somehow doesn't bother her that she is known as 'the cashmere communist' in many circles, or that she has been quoted saying 'I hate capitalism but there's nothing wrong with capital,' in *Style* magazine. She is known to support any cause providing the right publicity is at hand. She could easily have been a politician, he thinks.

'Jake, how are you?' She extends a gloved paw towards him, her fat little body swaddled in folds of silk. She has peroxided her very short hair. It does not suit her.

'Juanita,' he cannot even attempt a smile. Such a pity that such a pretty name is worn by such a woman. He doubts that it's real.

'When are you going to have another exhibition? I'm redoing my guest suite, and I'm looking for something stunning in green. As you know, I have many visiting

academics staying with me, and occasionally the odd revolutionary. Time to upgrade their accommodation. It's the least I can do.'

'Of course.'

Maria sweeps in to the rescue.

'Juanita! How lovely to see you.' She deposits a noisy kiss on her fat, powdery cheek.

'Did I hear you asking Jake when we're having another exhibition? Isn't it funny, *everybody's* been asking the same question. Hear that Jake? Everybody wants you, darling.' She turns back to Juanita. 'The truth is, we simply cannot keep up with the orders. And they are flowing in from overseas too. Collectors in Germany, France, even some royalty from Russia, believe it or not, all wanting a Coleman. Jake is so exhausted. He needs a break. It really takes it out of him. He's been painting morning, noon and night. But as soon as he has a break, and does something extra special, we will give you a call.' She touches Juanita lightly on the arm, and lowers her voice.

'You know you are always on the top of our list when something special is in the offing. Very few people in this country know true talent and art when they see it; the rest just pretend, and follow trends. But you are one of those few. And we treasure you dearly.'

She's good! Jake thinks as he walks away, trying not to smile. And this will get them all clamouring for more. If only he could paint a single stroke he felt happy with.

'Thank you,' he mouths to Maria with the smallest hint of a grin. The whiskey is smoothing the edges of his mood. He is starting to find the evening rather amusing. He wanders into an adjacent room, a study, and starts looking at the books.

'Good evening.' It is a man's voice, deep and measured and foreign.

Jake turns to find a large man of indeterminate age sitting in a chair, with a book in his hands.

'Good evening,' he replies. And then, taken off guard a little, adds, 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you. I didn't know anyone was in here.'

'It's okay,' the hefty blonde man smiled. 'It is not my house. You are free, like me, to be here.'

'Jake Coleman', Jake holds out his hand.

'Mátyás,' he replies, putting his book on the table, and standing up to shake hands.

'Escaping the throng?' Jake asks.

'I'm no good at parties,' the large man smiles.

He is far taller and broader than Jake, dressed in an old cobalt blue shirt and a pair of navy trousers.

‘What is the accent?’ Jake asks, squeezing his hand very firmly to compensate for the size discrepancy.

‘Hungary originally. But I have lived here for some time. What about you? Are you from here?’

‘Yes.’

Just then, the bell rings for dinner.

‘Ah, to the table,’ says Jake.

The large man follows him in.

The table seats sixteen. People are carefully arranged and each place meticulously laid. Jake is relieved to find himself between Lily and Cecily, and even more relieved that Maria is at the other end. He can feel her watching him out of the corner of her eye; she probably senses how attractive he finds Lily. Although she too is starting to thaw, and say things are ‘fabulous’. A good sign. She only says ‘fabulous’ when she’s very happy or a little drunk. The large Hungarian in the blue shirt is seated alongside her. He does not appear to be a man of many words.

Candles, classical music and Cabernet, he notes. It’s always the same. But the alcohol is slowly blunting his critical faculties, and comforted as always by the presence of beauty and praise, he relaxes into the ritual clink of glasses and the warm hum of conversation.

By the time they get into the car to drive home, his mood has shifted. He is gentle now. Subdued. He takes Maria’s hand in the car, and listens to at least every third word.

‘Turns out *he’s* the potter who keeps missing appointments with me,’ she says.

‘Hmmm. Who?’

‘Mátyás. That big, blonde man with the dark eyes, sitting next to me. He didn’t pitch up for the appointment the other day either. The one I woke up particularly early for. He lives in Scarborough. I suppose it’s quite a drive. But I’ve asked him to bring some work to the gallery, like you said. Did you see how casually he was dressed?’

‘Maria?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you remember when you first met me, the people who showed interest in my paintings were down-to-earth? Normal. They often came to exhibitions on their own, because they wanted to see the work, not because it was the thing to do. Sometimes they brought a sketchpad and made notes, there were no trophy partners. Sometimes the women wore make-up, sometimes not. Sometimes shoes, sometimes not. What happened to them?’

‘I don’t know. They probably never had any money. Sweet as they were, of course. You would never have survived like that. You outgrew them.’

‘Maybe they just liked what they saw then. And don’t anymore. Maybe they outgrew me?’

University of Cape Town

Chapter Eight

The knocking must have gone on for quite a while before she hears it. The night is wild; wind tugs at the tin roof first from this direction, then that. The knocking simply becoming part of the weather, rattling and desperate. It is the sob between gusts that makes Leica lift her head and Camille get out of the bed where Zara lies warm and curled and go to the door.

'Who is it?' she whispers through the slats.

'It's Blom, Auntie.'

As she releases the latch, the wind blows open the door, and the hunched child rushes inside.

'Blom. What time is it? What are you doing here, petite?'

'Please, can Tannie come...' Blom is out of breath. 'Please come. My mother is... my father, he hit my mother, and now, my mother is lying on the floor and doesn't move.'

Camille takes a sharp breath. 'Okay. I'm coming. Wait for me, Blom. I'm coming now.' She tiptoes into the room where Pappi lies snoring, and takes his thick dressing gown from the end of his bed and puts it on. From the bathroom she throws into a plastic bag some antiseptic, bandages and the scissors Pappi very occasionally uses for trimming his beard.

'Let's go,' she says to Blom. Then, noticing how the little girl is shaking, she grabs an old blanket lying on the chair. 'Here, wrap this round you. Quick. Let's go.'

How silent she is as she drags her along through the coarse grass, hedges and thickets in this starless, moonless night. The wind blows in powerful waves, wildly tossing about their clothes, the blanket, the plastic bag. The air smells of rain. Blom's hand grips hers very tightly. Through puddles, mud and sludge they make their way, snapping twigs underfoot and pushing branches away from their faces, until finally Camille finds herself in front of a row of tiny cottages, one or two still dimly lit with the cold blue light of paraffin lamps. The wind screams and somewhere in the distance a dog is barking. She shudders.

'Come. Tannie must come over here.' Blom pulls her to the end of the row, and pushes open the door. The room is silent. In the dark Camille picks up the sour smell of vomit.

'Have you a torch, or a candle, Blom?' She finds herself whispering, instinctively.

'Wait,' says Blom. 'I'll check by the stove.'

She hears Blom scuffling and swearing under her breath, an owl hooting through the wind. She pulls the nightgown tighter around her and refastens the cord. There is the sound of a match striking. Between Blom's tiny fingers the flickering light throws shadows in streaks across the room. And then Leah, collapsed open-mouthed in a small pool of blood on the floor.

Her first convulsive thought is that she must be dead. She drops onto her knees and taking the wrist in her hand, finds her pulse with her fingers. Yes, it is there.

'Leah,' she says.

No response. A gash on her head still oozes blood.

'Blom. Go next door. We need help.'

Blom scuttles off. She can hear the knock, someone shouting 'Fokoff', the knock again and her little cry hollow and desperate: 'Asseblief!'

Eventually, she drags a naked man from next door into the room.

'Ja? Wat soek jy?' he says.

'We need to get this woman to hospital.'

'*Ag nee wat*. She'll be all right. She's always all right. Daai's geen hospital here my lady. Not for miles. And even then, is mos a white hospitaal. They's not interested in us there. Where's Goiya?'

'Who?'

'Goiya. Seems he got a bit of a fright mos, and bugged off. Haai, must have given his missus one moerse klap this time. Kyk hoe bloei sy. Foeitog.' He whistles. 'It's the alcohol my lady. Puts the devil in us mos.'

'What do you mean there's no hospital? What about a doctor?'

'Nee wat. Nothing. A clinic on Tuesdays and Fridays. And they's not interested in our stories. Another klap from Oom Tas. So fokken what?'

'Well would you help me carry her home?'

'Now?' he scratches his head. 'Where the hell is that?'

'There is never a convenient time to die, Mister. If we leave her here, she will die. Do you understand me? I do not live too far from the big house. Mr Smit's house.'

The man gives another long whistle and shakes his head in disapproval.

Blom stifles a little sob. 'Asseblief!'

‘What kind of man are you?’ Camille says between her teeth.

‘All right, keep your hair on. Let me just put some pants on mos. A man’s got his decency, you know.’ He leaves the room muttering: ‘Dis mos ‘n klap. Daai blerry ⁸ Goyia. I’m gonna *klap* that bastard too. I’m gonna *moer* hom.’

While Camille and Blom wait for him to return, Camille bandages the wound on Leah’s head. Blom holds a candle, fetches a little water from the tap, bends down close to her mother’s face while Camille works. At the sting of the antiseptic, Leah jolts. For a second her eyes open, then again, before closing. In the streaky dimness, Camille cannot tell whether there is any flicker of recognition. Her eye falls on Leah’s left arm, bent back at the elbow, broken like a toy doll. By the time the man next door returns, she has wrapped an extra sheet around her, binding her tightly, like an Egyptian mummy, and they prop her up between them, their arms around her waist. ‘Show us the way, Blom,’ she says. ‘Little night fairy. Show us the way.’

By the time the first blades of light cut through the night’s violent secrets and conspiracies, Leah has been laid on a makeshift bed of a few cushions and blankets. She has been cleaned and all her wounds are dressed. Camille has torn up an old pillow case and with some elastic made a sling for her arm, which for now has been tightly bound; it will need to be set as soon as possible. Blom has collapsed in a blanketed heap on the chair. Camille fires up the stove and boils some water.

As she sinks into the other chair, slowly sipping her tea, she feels something wet and warm at her ankles. Leica’s nose and soft wet tongue. A moment later Zara crawls onto her lap, rubbing her eyes.

‘Where were you?’ she croaks.

‘There was an accident. Blom’s mother is hurt. And Blom came all the way to find me in the middle of the night.’

As Zara slowly starts to focus, she realises that there are others in the room.

‘Is that Blom in the blanket?’

‘That’s Blom, yes,’ she strokes Zara’s face. Then remembering the concert, lowers her voice: ‘The night fairy.’

Zara stares first at her mother, then at the bundle on the chair alongside them, her black eyes stretching and widening as she silently absorbs this new piece of information.

The day unfolds in a peculiar peristalsis, the smallest events propelling it forward: Pappi waking and washing and coming to find out first where his dressing gown has gone, and then discovering what has happened. Blom waking and, somewhat quieter than usual, asking for something to eat. Camille getting Zara and Blom to help make a big breakfast; anything to distract them. And yet all their activities and conversations are quieter and more restrained than usual. Even the dog seems a little subdued. Although they avoid discussing it, each one of them is poised and waiting for Leah to move or to speak or to cry.

In a low voice Camille relays the conversation about the hospital to her father.

‘She needs to have her arm set, and soon. And she should be checked by a doctor.’

‘Can you do it?’

‘Set her arm?’

‘Yes.’

‘I could try, if I had some plaster of Paris. Don’t you think she needs to see someone?’

‘I think she is seeing someone. I think you are the best one for the job. Particularly if the hospitals aren’t helpful.’

‘Perhaps I’ll go up and speak to the Smits. They will need to know that Leah won’t be coming to work for a while anyway. I just don’t want to go too far in case she wakes.’

‘I’ll watch her and the children. Go if you think you should.’

Camille closes the door behind her and squints in the sun. She rubs her burning eyes and tries to put some energy in her step. Halfway up the sweeping gravel driveway to their home, she realises that she has not even brushed her hair.

The driveway ends at a gargantuan front door, made from thick wood. A small red bicycle is propped up against a wall, handle-bars falling disconsolately to one side. She lifts the thick brass knocker and lets it fall, hearing the bang reverberate through the high-ceilinged house. A while later a woman releases the door.

‘Yes. Can I help you?’ The woman has a clipped Colonial accent. Her white blouse is stiffly starched.

‘My name is Camille Pascoe. I am your neighbour, in the cottage.’

‘Ah, yes.’ She peers at Camille through gold-rimmed bifocals. ‘Do come in.’

Camille follows her into the enormous quarry-tiled reception room, and into an equally large sitting room that smells of furniture polish. A Persian carpet sprawls across the length of the room. The sofa looks newly-upholstered. Floral. A mahogany desk stands stiffly at an angle in the corner of the room.

‘Please take a seat. I would offer you some tea, but I’m afraid our maid hasn’t shown up today.’

‘That’s why I’m here,’ says Camille.

‘Oh. You know Leah?’

‘In a way, yes. Her little girl is my daughter’s friend.’

‘I see.’

‘There seems to have been some trouble. She’s hurt. She has a bad cut on her forehead and I think she’s broken her arm. I would like to get her to a doctor.’

‘Oh, dear me,’ Mrs Smit says slowly. ‘She’ll have to go to the clinic. There’s a nurse there, twice a week or so, I’m not sure when it is.’

‘I am a nurse. She needs a doctor.’

‘Look, Mrs...’

‘Camille. Camille Pascoe.’

‘Pascoe. Let me put it to you this way. You are not from these parts. If you were, you would know that this kind of thing happens all the time. The Coloureds are a violent lot. And they drink far too much, which of course only makes it worse. If doctors were to get busy here, they’d be busy all the time. And the blighters would never pay them. It’s really not worth their while; you can surely see their point. My advice to you? Stay out of it. They’re a bad lot.’ She rises from the overstuffed floral chair, as if to mark the end of the appointment.

Camille takes her cue, and stands up. Before she makes her way to the giant door, past the antique dresser with the china figurines, she says, ‘I see. Thank you for your time. In the meanwhile, Leah will be away from work for a while.’

‘Oh, I’m sure she’ll be fine soon. As I say,’ she gives a little laugh, ‘this is hardly the first time this has happened, and it certainly won’t be the last either.’

As the enormous door slams behind her, Camille exhales. Then, staring fixedly ahead she crunches over the gravel and back into the long grass. She is completely unaware that a man is watching her from an upstairs window of the big house. Watching and swallowing and sweating. In fact, she is completely unaware that he has been watching her and her daughter whenever he can, for quite some time.

University of Cape Town

Chapter Nine

He arrives uncharacteristically early at the school. Even Trudy is not in yet. He paces in his office for half an hour, absent-mindedly checking timetables, and going over his notes for today's seminar. When the time finally comes for class to begin, he walks a little more quickly than usual down the corridor, giving a brisk wave to Trudy, who has just arrived. Entering the room, he steals a glance at her usual place at the back of the class. She is there. Sitting with head bent, matted hair falling across her cheek, working some scrap paper with a piece of charcoal in her left hand while the other students talk amongst themselves. The tightness in his chest gives way.

Today's class follows a workshop format: he teaches a little, the students take notes, work through some exercises, before feedback and discussion. He is a little flushed. He forces himself to concentrate. He must be getting ill, he thinks. Or perhaps it is low blood sugar; no breakfast this morning. A fly keeps buzzing around the light.

He feels very aware of wanting to look at her, but resists. Now and again he casts a sidelong look; she looks so peaceful. Or is it passive? Now and again her lips move, as though to whisper or say something. She seems to show no shame for scratching his face (she must see he still has the marks on his cheek). It's hard to believe that this is the same young woman who had torn at his face like a savage animal. In her world laminated by silence, mirrored in her void-filled eyes, she is the most isolated being he has ever come across.

Perhaps it is he who should apologise to her; for frightening her. But how? How could he explain to her that in that split second she had completely mesmerised him. It's ridiculous. Everything about this is quite ridiculous. Snap out of it, Jake, he tells himself. He can hear Maria echoing the phrase. Women may be powerful creatures, but this girl-woman - she must be what, eighteen? nineteen at most - is not even clean! He gives a little snort. Some students look up, exchange glances. She does not. Her head is still bent, her hand still sketching in long, smooth strokes.

How does he tell her that in that instant, seeing her curled up in the chair, he had been overcome by longing. That he had ached simply to touch her. To penetrate her

silence. That he had drunk too much wine at lunchtime. It's unthinkable. Instinctively he raises the back of his hand to his forehead, where small beads of perspiration break on his forehead. He must be ill. He should go home to bed.

The class discussion is brief and dry. He knows it is his fault: the class must sense his complete lack of animation and involvement. Only the relentless buzzing of the fly bridges the gaps of silence. He wishes he could scream. At the end of the period, the students file past him, dropping their exercises on his desk for marking. She walks with her head down. Then, as she leaves her contribution on his desk she looks up at him. Anxious not to let her go, he says impulsively: 'Wait!'

She stops.

'Would you see me in my office some time, shall we say tomorrow morning?'

She nods. He continues, speaking a little quicker and a little softer than usual.

'Anytime. Tomorrow is a prac day, so anytime. I'll make sure I'm there this time.'

She nods again, then drops her head and walks away.

There is nothing in her face that gives him any clue what she is thinking. No trace of anger or apprehension or joy. No smile, no frown. Her large black eyes are as remote as a night sky.

Trudy follows him down the corridor and into his office.

'Hello,' she says. 'You walked straight past me!'

'Did I? Sorry.' He sinks into his chair.

'No kiss?' She looks surprised.

'Kiss,' he repeats automatically. 'Kiss. Ah... kiss!' He conjures up a smile. 'You know I'm really not feeling well.'

'What's the matter?' She walks over to his side, and leans against his desk, a tiny suede mini skirt brushing the top of her tanned, toned thighs.

'Don't know.' He jumps up, moving to the window, looking out.

'What is it?' She runs her hand up his spine. 'Why so edgy? Can I help?'

'Just not feeling well.' He gives a thin smile. 'Actually, Trude, be a love and give me a few minutes, will you. I need to do some marking and then I think I'm going home.'

She stares at him for a few seconds. 'Okay. Suit yourself.'

She closes the door, a little more firmly than usual, but he is too relieved to notice. As it clicks shut, he leans forward onto his desk and puts his head in his hands, spreading the perspiration across his forehead. Is this it then? Is this a breakdown? He stares across at the chair, now hers, where he found her curled asleep. Then picks up the pile of marking and his keys and heads for home.

When Maria returns from the gallery, he is still lying on his back staring at the ceiling, the pile of marking on the bed next to him.

‘Rough day?’ she asks, pulling off her shoes and flouncing onto the bed.

‘Something like that.’

‘What happened?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Hmmm. Sounds stressful. What are these?’ She toys with the pile of papers on the bed.

‘Marking.’

Half absent-mindedly, she starts rifling through the pages. The private detective in her can never resist any raw material.

‘Nice,’ she says, stopping at one or two neat sketches. Then, ‘This kid can draw.’ She holds up a charcoal sketch of an owl clutching a rat. ‘What did you use for a model for this?’

‘Nothing. She does it herself.’

‘She drew this from memory?’

‘Yes. She does it all the time. Mostly when she’s supposed to be drawing something else. It’s bloody irritating.’

‘What else does she draw?’

‘Animals. Death. Violence in nature.’

‘Hmmm. Bit of a weirdo. But good, huh?’

‘Most of my students are good at line drawing.’

‘Come on, Jake.’

‘What? They are.’ She notices his voice is slightly higher than usual.

‘This is not ‘most’ students.’

‘Please leave me alone Maria. I have a headache and you’re getting on my nerves.’

His cell-phone buzzes. The discreet ring-tone he has selected suddenly seems even more telling than the usual shrill alternatives. He clamps his jaw. Maria is watching him. The owl swooping in on the rat.

'Your phone,' she clips.

'I have a headache. I'm not answering. They can leave a message.'

'And you can rush off into the bushes when you think I'm not looking and return the call.'

But he does not return the call. He forgets all about it. Not until the following morning when Trudy knocks like a police officer at his office door and demands to know what has got into him, does he give it another thought.

'Close the door,' he says. 'Come now. Sit down.'

She flounces into a chair, crosses her legs, her neat little chin defiantly pointing upwards. He turns the key in the lock, just in case, before returning to where she is sitting. He wishes she had chosen the other chair. Not that chair. Trudy looks so different, so sophisticated in it. It doesn't suit her. He pats her on the leg, and returns to his desk.

'I'm not well, Trudy. Please try to understand.'

'What's the matter?'

'I wish I knew. I can't sleep. I can't paint. I'm forgetting things. And it's getting worse. Please don't be angry with me. I'm doing my best. You were always so supportive...' He allows his voice to trail away towards the faintest edges of reproach.

'I want to support you. I really do,' her voice swells with emotion. 'It's just that I don't know how much longer I can go on like this, Jake.' She stares insistently at her foot, now tapping; an attempt to postpone the tears she knows are gathering force. He watches quietly, carefully. And then he rises from his seat, and kneels before her, taking her hand and stroking it. 'I understand. I really understand.' He looks down. Time enough to sharpen the knife: 'If you need to end it how could I blame you?' 'End it? No! Not end it. I'm not ready for that.' She gives a little laugh. 'Why, do you...?'

'Of course not,' he whispers soothingly. 'You're the only good thing in my life.' He can see her chest relax a little and her spine loosen as she sits fractionally back in the seat. 'But I'm not well, Trude. I need to think about that. I can't be worrying about all

the small things that may or may not be upsetting you. For your sake, for *our* sake. I need to work on my healing.'

He remembers the whispered plea, her legs still wrapped around him: *Please don't leave me.*

'I didn't realise,' she says quickly. 'I'm sorry. I really didn't realise. Jake, I haven't been supportive, I've been selfish, I'm so sorry.'

'That's okay. We all have our shadows. And you've always been so good at accommodating mine.'

'And now I haven't. Just when you most needed me. How awful!'

'Don't be so hard on yourself.'

'I'm just so glad we could talk. I feel so much better.'

'I'm glad too.'

'Thank you,' she whispers.

Someone tries the handle. Pushes against the locked door. Then knocks.

He jumps to his feet, knocking a book over. 'I have to see students. Can I call you later?'

'Yes, of course.' She quickly adds. 'But if you don't get to it, I do understand. Be good to yourself, Jake.'

'Yes, I will.' His tone is brisk; an unconscious attempt to change the energy in the room. A light kiss on her cheek serves as the full stop marking the end of the interlude. Then he straightens up, turns the key and opens the door.

'Ah, Zara. Come inside.' His voice is jarringly jovial. He gives a cheery wave as Trudy moves into the passage. 'Thank you Trudy. Bye.' Then turning to Zara he smiles politely. 'Come inside.'

As she brushes past him into his office, he inhales: yes, she smells like the rain. She settles herself into her chair. It must still be warm from Trudy. He takes his seat behind his desk.

'Look, uh, sorry about the other day. We seem to have got off on the wrong footing. Just wanted to explain some things to you. Now, I know you prefer to sketch and paint live models, and don't particularly like still life, but it's good exercise for you and part of the course anyway, and, yes.' He finds himself sucked into a vortex of words; his voice suddenly unnaturally high. He takes a quick gasp of air. She stares back at him. The inescapable gravitational pull of the black hole.

'Such black eyes,' he finds himself mumbling. 'You have very black eyes.' He tries a little laugh, as though he is making a joke. 'Not a colour, black is not a colour.'

'Black is all colours,' she says.

This voice, heard now for the first time breaks into his composure. It is as though he has been caught in a sudden cloudburst. He stares back at her.

'I'm sorry, what did you say?'

She does not answer immediately. Then serenely, 'When you die your pupils take up your entire eye. You see everything when you die.'

Last night, when he had planned how he would deal with this situation, he had decided to take the avuncular approach; the 'I'm here to help' concerned teacher approach. But he suddenly feels stripped. Left standing naked in the rain. None of the rôles he has played in his life has equipped him for this.

'I see. Sorry, you threw me a little there. You... you don't talk much, do you?'

She stares back at him. 'I paint.'

'Yes, I know. You have a very powerful style. Who taught you to paint?'

'My father.'

'Oh? What does he do?'

'He's dead.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. What did he do before he died?'

'He painted.'

'So you learned by example then. Often the best way.'

'I never met him.'

Impenetrable. Quite mad. So why, *why* is it so strong? This desire to possess her, to subdue her? To mark this uncharted territory irredeemably and irrevocably. To dig in the flag and conquer.

'Is your mother alive?'

'No. Is there anything else?' She leans forward to rise.

He wants to shout 'Stay!'

'No, that should be fine.'

His body feels like lead as he watches her dissolve into the student mass.

Chapter Ten

She is waiting at the window for her mother to return from the big house. She had wanted to go with, but Maman said no. She had tried to follow but Pappi had called her back with elastic-band arms. And a man with a hat and a mouth like a mulberry had come to call for Leah and Pappi had asked him to come back later. And Blom is asleep again. And Leica keeps thumping his tail. She blows vapour onto the pane, and draws a swirl with her fingertip. Feels cold. And where is Maman? Has she had an accident on the way? Has a car come from nowhere and run her over? Is she lying somewhere? What will happen if she dies? What will happen to her and to Pappi and to Leica? She hears Leah moan and say something. She turns and sees Pappi taking her a glass of water with his big, slow steps. Blom is all curled up like a shell, and maybe she is a fairy and maybe she isn't, and how can she know unless Maman tells her for sure? She spins round to the window again. Is that her? Is that her maman coming down the pathway like she always does? Not dead, looking fine, no accident. Not even a smudge. Just fine, fine, fine.

'Maman!' She bangs on the window. Camille waves back. She has never quite understood why it is that Zara, usually so quiet, gets so excited, so relieved to see her, when she has been away only a few minutes. In this case only three quarters of an hour at most. But already she knows that there will be a great reunion; all arms and legs and dog before silence and detachment return.

'How is she?' she asks Pappi while disentangling the child from her legs and lifting her onto her hip. 'Ah Zara. You're getting so big to carry these days.'

'She's awake. She had some water. The little one is asleep again.'

She sets Zara on her own feet again and makes her way across to the makeshift bed where Leah is tentatively touching her head with her hand.

'How are you feeling?'

'S' fine.'

'You have a nasty cut on your head. And I think your arm may be broken. You should see a doctor.'

'S'fine.' She tries to lift herself from the bed, winces and drops back onto her good elbow.

'Then I'm going to have to try to set your arm myself.'

'Must go home,' she says. She hoists herself up once again.

'Please, at least let me look at your arm.'

She fetches some bandage and a couple of wooden spoons to use as splints and sets Leah's arm tight and neat. It hangs stiffly at her side, like a prop, inanimate.

Only then does she glance across at the blanketed heap, and realise that Blom has been watching them, wide-eyed.

'Good sleep?' asks Camille.

'Hullo mommy,' says Blom.

Camille disappears to wash her hands. When she returns, both Leah and Blom are gone.

'A man came looking for her,' Pappi says.

'Her husband?'

'Yes. I think so.'

'Now?'

'No, earlier, while you were up at the big house.'

'Did you give him a piece of your mind?'

'I was going to. But when I opened the door and saw him standing there like a bent stick, hat in his shaking hands, eyes pulled down with shame, his overalls hanging from him like an apology, I changed my mind. When a man is doing such a good job of punishing himself, it is best not to interfere.'

'Not interfere? He deserves to die for what he has done! Before he kills her.'

'Maybe death has come for him already. It's only the breathing that's still there.'

'You're too soft, Papa.'

'And you are hot-headed. You are not going to change this place single-handedly overnight. No matter how hard you want to.'

'I do want to.'

'I know. But it's going to take time, Camille. For your own sake and theirs. Give it time.'

And then they started coming. First one or two a week, then after a month, one or two a day. Henry Davids. Willie Solomons. Esmerelda Marais. Marietjie Philander. Those who had cut themselves on pruning shears and needed a wound cleaned and bound. Those with colds and flu. Many of the women had bladder infections and needed antibiotics. Many were pregnant and did not even know. Or did not want to know. Papa has to drive Camille to Cape Town, to Groote Schuur, (the hospital there), to get supplies.

But Mondays are the worst. Mondays are hangover days. Camille soon discovers that many labourers never show up to work on Mondays, ever. They are too busy sleeping it off, or throwing up, or shouting at their families and their God or somebody's mother's private parts. She also soon learns that by Monday it is all too evident which women have been beaten over the weekend.

'It's the ones that don't drink that fetch a klap,' one young Coloured woman tells her.

'They make trouble for the men: Where were you? Why didn't you come home?

Ensovoorts. The men throw them with a klap. They don't like the woman to ask them questions they don't like the answers for.'

'Like where is this week's wages and how am I supposed to feed the children?' says another woman, nursing a black eye.

'It's the alcohol, Miss Camille. The alcohol puts the devil in them.'

'And the blerry winefarmers don't help.'

'Why?' asks Camille.

'Dopstelsel. They pay the workers almost nooit. And what do they do to keep them quiet, and dronk and dependent? They give them wine, mos. Jugs and cans, full, every night. And more on the weekend.'

'Something must be done, Papa,' she says. If she could only do something, perhaps she could start making sense of her decision to come here.

'Something is being done. You're already making a difference.'

'But that's just symptomatic. Something must be done to change the system.'

'I agree with you, Camille. But it's tough. It seems to suit both parties.'

'Not the women.'

'No, not the women.'

'And there's stories of children having foetal alcohol syndrome too.'

‘Those that aren’t destined for alcoholism themselves.’

‘I wonder if they even know the damage they are doing?’

‘Who?’

‘Both of them! The wine farmers for dishing it out. And the workers for taking it.

Surely somebody, somewhere, agrees with us, Papa?’

‘That I don’t know. I wonder. There’s a strange torpidness here. Local people seem to prefer to turn a blind eye.’

‘Well we are not local people!’

‘Which is why they most likely won’t listen to us.’

‘We need to speak to the mayor, or the police. And the Smits, again. Perhaps Mr Smit is a little more reasonable than his wife. Perhaps if he knows what wine does to Leah’s husband, he will help to protect her?’

‘You can try, but I don’t hold out much hope.’

‘I can try.’

‘Camille?’

‘Yes, Papa.’

‘Don’t hope too much. You don’t want to be disappointed.’

‘I want to be useful, Papa. What else is there for me?’

The boy too comes almost every day now. Camille and Zara have learnt to recognise the soft knock. The first time it happened, she opened the top half of the ranch door and looked out. Nobody.

‘Hello,’ the voice came from below.

‘Pieter. I didn’t see you.’ His head was below door level.

‘Does Zara want to ride my bike?’

How the two interact without Blom is difficult to say. Camille watches them in the garden playing - silent as flowers. When Blom does arrive, there is more noise. And sometimes tears. When Blom is not there, Pieter allows Nina to ride his bike. He even brings fairy wheels over at first, so that she can try it out without falling, his concern for her always touchingly fatherly.

On one occasion, she is spreading some sheets out to dry over a bush out the back when she finds Pieter kicking a stone with his velskoen. His bike is propped up

against the wall. He tries not to look at her as she pegs the edges of the sheets to a branch.

‘What is it, petit?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Why are you not playing with the others?’

‘Don’t want to.’

‘What a pity. It’s such a lovely day not to play.’

‘I don’t like playing with Blom. She’s unfair.’

‘Unfair? Come here, hold these pegs for me while I do this.’

The little boy takes the container of pegs from her, still looking down.

‘You know, petit, I want to tell you a secret. Would you like that?’

‘Yes.’

She takes a peg from her mouth. ‘Many times things are not fair. And it’s hard! You want to say, “Wait! How can that be? I deserve better!” But you know, that’s really not the point.’

He stares at her, his brows furrowed.

‘The secret is...’ She lowers her voice. Looks around. ‘Do you want to know the secret?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes!’

‘The secret is not whether anybody else is fair. But whether *you* are fair. That’s all you have to worry about.’

‘But I *am* fair. I play fair with Zara and Blom.’

‘Then you have nothing to worry about, *n’est ce pas?* Yes?’

He looks mistrustful.

‘Now come with me. We’re going to have some juice, and see if we can find some zoo biscuits. We’ll soon see who gets called unfair.’

Much to Zara and Blom’s surprise, he chooses to spend the rest of the afternoon with Camille, potting seedlings. Even when Zara comes quietly to his side and takes his hand and says, ‘Come.’

‘When I’m finished,’ he says. ‘I’m busy now.’

Camille has given him the job of taking the paper off some empty tomato tins. Together they scoop up some soil and drop it in, before securing the fragrant seedlings with their fingers: sweet basil, mint and rosemary.

And then, a few weeks later, he stops coming. Blom is delighted. She talks faster than ever, her voice intermittently squeaking with pure joy as she speculates what is keeping him away.

'Fleas,' she says, nodding her head. 'Whole family got terrible fleas. My mommy says so.'

'Fleas! Are you sure Blom?' Camille asks. She cannot imagine the Smits, with their immaculate home, even owning an animal. Certainly not one that would be allowed indoors.

'Ja, s'true. *Vreeslike vlooië*. Verry fierce fleas. Go *pienk, pienk, pienk*.

With every 'pienk' she pinches Zara on the arm to indicate the jumping flea.

'Don't,' says Zara.

Blom squeals with laughter.

'*Pienk, pienk, pienk*.'

But it is only when Leah arrives to have her arm looked at again, that they discover the truth.

'They beat him with a *sjambok* mos. Three times. And he doesn't cry.'

'Pieter? They beat their own son?'

'Three times. And he hold his mouth tight like this,' she tucks her lips in and pushes together. 'But he don't cry.'

'But why?'

'I told you she's a funny one. Hard bitch, that's what. Thinks she's so fancy.' This is the most Camille has ever heard Leah say. Usually she is so contained. And now this.

'She say he must be punished, and make him fetch the *sjambok* for that fat poephol to klap him.'

'Leah, *why*?'

'Because he come here.'

'Here? You mean to play?'

'Ja, here. She say... she say, now wait a minute, lemme say it exactly like her.' In an affected tone she says: 'I've told you before Pieter, not to mingle with *those* people.'

They behave like gypsies. Vagrants. And they're *dirty!*' And then the poephoh, all pink and sweating by his armpits, klaps him.'

Camille resets Leah's arm in silence. She struggles to adjust to Leah's change in behaviour. This usually reserved woman, now so animated with anger. Could it be that she felt they were all now reduced to the same level? Co-victims. Less than. Insulted. Or is it because she knows Camille may well have saved her life?

With Mrs Smit's opinion she does not concern herself. It is, after all, only her opinion. But the treatment of the boy is appalling. That serious, unhappy little boy means no harm. And she knows that Zara really likes him. It also now means that the Smits are out of the question in terms of trying to change the dopstelsel.

As Blom disappears with her mother, Zara goes to the door to look out.

'Pieter won't be coming today, petite.'

'Did they hit him?' Her eyes seem old and grave. She must have overheard then.

'That's what Leah says. Yes. His father hit him.'

Zara nods, then falls silent. A while later she looks up. 'No fleas then.'

'No fleas.'

'What's a sjambok?'

'I don't know. I don't think I want to know either. Come, let's take Leica for a walk.

Let's walk to the lake, it will make us feel better.'

She takes her daughter's hand and they fall into the silent rhythms of walking. As they thread their way along the paths that leads to the lake, they walk past a field of vines. A barbed wire fence separates them from the Smits' vineyard, but the two will not look sideways. Were they to do so, they may catch sight of an overweight man with a ruddy face stop and watch them pass. They may see him put down his belongings and follow them, keeping a little way behind, until they reach the lake. But they do not. Instead, Zara lifts her dress over her head and climbs out of her knickers. And Camille loosens and removes her skirt, keeping only her T-shirt and underwear on. She sinks into the cool water and closes her eyes, imagining that the water is cleansing them from sin.

Chapter Eleven

And then Maria starts showing up at the school. She sails past Trudy with a disparaging glare - a 'don't even *try* to stop me' look - and flounces into Jake's office. She doesn't know anything for sure. But she has her hunches.

'What are you doing here?'

'Nothing in particular. Just wanted to say hello.'

'I see. How nice.'

On one occasion, after waiting an annoying amount of time in his office, she eventually slides into the back of a classroom. To observe.

She sees Jake look at her briefly, unflinching and continue with his lecture. History. Sculpture. Rodin.

'Whilst Rodin was never considered good enough to be admitted into the prestigious *Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, he was a graduate of the National School of Decorative Arts. At the age of forty-three he had a marketable skill: he was able to keep himself alive doing decorative pieces and working as an assistant to well-connected sculptors. He also knew some well-connected Parisians, and had been welcomed into artistic, literary and political salons. Let's face it, Rodin knew only too well about what today we would call 'networking' and the politics of self-promotion. He managed to do portrait busts of many influential men, and thus link his name with theirs, including Victor Hugo.'

She leans forward, elbows on the desk, chin on her hands. She has always enjoyed Jake's mind. His ability to pick out details that bring his subject matter home. It's been so long since they've had a decent discussion about anything. Jake seems to save his brain for others, or the media, or crowds or groups of people like this. She scans the class. Are they listening?

Art students: the avant-garde, the pierced, those with oxygenated hair, others with oxygenated brains. Leather, studs, crocheted multi-coloured skirts. Black. Orange. Acid green. North African garb. Her eye falls on a tall girl at the back of the class. Greasy hair, shapeless clothes. Mind seems to be elsewhere. Is she doodling with that pencil, or drawing? She's not listening to Jake, that's for sure.

Even though some of them seem to go out of their way to make themselves as unattractive as possible, she admires the careless beauty of the young. The boys with their long shorts and sunglasses possessing their bodies with exaggerated pride. The girls, young women really, smooth and firm and unsure, flirting with their own charm. It can only be the wisdom of the gods to infuse women with rare glimpses of their own power only once they are past this force of nubile volatility.

At that age she had completed an expensive cookery course at one of the finest schools in the country and was heading for London for a gap year with some old school friends. They were all over-eager and under-experienced, with too strong a 'safety net' in the form of parentally-enthused subsidies to ever fret much about anything. They hadn't a clue what they wanted to do with their lives, but they were out to find out.

In search of 'culture' she had spent weekends traipsing through art galleries and exhibition halls. She loved the feeling of awe that permeated their spaces like an invisible fog. A dense silence. There was something transcendent about art. It was the domain of the gods. From the perfection of the Classics she started a tentative investigation into modern art. A realm of quirkier gods. Each painting a secret, evanescent. A code of colour and texture that kept its core cohesion from her. What did it *mean*? How to unlock it? Who was the key?

She treasured these questions. On her return, she considered them of far greater value than any of the souvenirs and bad photographs taken by intoxicated friends at parties. It was questions like these, she felt, that shape a life. That act as signposts on the journey. She had enrolled at university to study art appreciation, but had not completed the course. A wealthy boyfriend talked her into the far more practical world of art buying, selling, importing and exporting. Her family hoped they would marry – his family were sugar barons like themselves - and instead of persuading her to continue her studies, encouraged her to follow him into the business. By the time he left her for a model, she was starting to develop a name for herself in the import/export industry, and decided to prove to herself and everyone else that she

could make it on her own. And she did. She smiles to herself. Nobody saw or knew what it cost her. Thank God.

But at the end of the day, her job was more about catching aeroplanes, sleeping in strange hotels, selling and administration than it was about art. She remembers it well. Endless runways. Remembers realising that she still had questions to unlock. Artists to discover. And then of course, she met Jake, who instantly became not only the key, but the creator.

That was ten years ago. She was thirty-five and slim. A novice in the art world trying to learn as much as she could. And trying to convince people that she knew her 'stuff'. Her parents lent her the money to buy the gallery in Constantia. Tucked between a popular coffee shop and a travel agency that promoted exotic holidays to Machu Picchu and fabulous round-the-world cruises, she felt she couldn't go wrong. She persuaded them it was an investment. In herself, in the perpetuation of artistic talent, in the future of art in this country. She was buying stock, selling too, and suddenly found herself the recipient of dozens of invitations to exhibition openings and lunches. Artists were paying attention to her. She liked it.

She met him at an opening of a sculpture exhibition. He too was trimmer then. And a little scruffy if truth be told. Boyish, with haphazard hair and warm blue eyes. (Eyes that could slice through you too. Eyes that blazed and sharpened.) He had walked over to her with a cut-glass champagne flute, handed it to her and said: 'I'm Jake Coleman. Who are you?'

At thirty-six Jake had earned himself a decent reputation in certain circles. But what he needed was a dynamite campaign to catapult him to the stars. She couldn't think of anyone better suited for the job.

'Maria Golding. I've heard of you.'

He smiled. And later came home with her.

And that was ten years ago. Jake had dazzled her. Amused her. Fascinated her. She loved to watch the creative process in action. The growing pensiveness, a swelling and breaking of ideas, then the quick sketch, sometimes in the middle of the night, and ultimately the hours of focused intent in the studio. A new painting born.

'You have a fabulous voice,' she remembers whispering as he lay alongside her that first night.

But he did not hear her, already snoring softly towards his future. She lay watching him for some time. The tousled hair. Eyelids soft as a baby. The patchy stubble around the chin. The slightly cruel mouth that looked like it had been cut in one quick knifestroke.

For a long time they could hardly keep their hands off each other. A force like greed seemed to bound between them like an unstoppable child. There was no mood that could not be expressed in bed. Joy, sadness, even anger were simply the background music for what she always believed was a deeper drive. Only indifference finds nothing to celebrate at the banquet of pleasure.

And now the endless slippery grapple to get back to that euphoric launch platform where all that is new and eternal is the opiate for any uncomfortable reality. Where the fuel of hormones, the *frisson*, propels each to believe that the other is the vital ingredient. The fear that without it, the magic expired, there would be only her left. Exposed. Insufficient.

She cannot remember when the suspicions began. Perhaps they had always been there, masked at the start by passion-induced inviolability. The silent shadow in the pause of every conversation. An ever-present subterranean question.

Jake has always noticed women. At first she convinced and consoled herself that his appreciation was not only natural, but honest. At least he wasn't gay. But there are times when she feels diminished. Times when walking with her he will spin right round to stare at a beauty. The split-second connection with another. Who is she in that moment?

She busies herself reading popular books on psychology and spirituality. Endless case studies of those who have loved - and won! - thanks to a philosophy or an epiphany or an affirmation repeated often enough. She attends wellness workshops, goes to yoga on the days when she doesn't have aerobics. Tries to understand the Kama Sutra.

She learns about wardrobe planning, aromatherapy, detoxing and colonic irrigation. Magazine articles, astrology, numerology, the Tarot. She tries them all. But still it remains a mystery; that ineluctable 'principle' that will change everything. Make her good enough for Jake to realise how lucky he is. Get him to make that commitment, to finally marry her and settle down.

He is winding down his lecture. Some of the students have their hands up for questions.

'Wasn't one of Rodin's lovers a sculptor?' A boy asks.

'Camille Claudel. Yes. A very good one. It's a tragic story.'

'Don't some people think she may even have been better than him?' The boy asks again.

'Only those that don't know,' he answers.

She examines each one closely again. How sad that she can no longer appreciate another woman's loveliness or talent without immediately feeling threatened by it. What happened to her big-heartedness? Has her spirit been so corroded that every woman becomes a danger? It is a compulsion. She cannot help herself, even now. Each young lady here scrutinised. But no, she finally concludes. None of the students, young and nubile as they may be, seems to be Jake's 'type'. But that waspish secretary in the tiny skirt, she's bad news.

Jake is very polite to her on these visits. But not warm. She will need to find a way to validate her reason for visiting.

'So,' she says, playing for time.

'What?'

'I was thinking.'

'Yes?'

'What about an exhibition for your students at the gallery?'

'Think so?'

'Why not? It would give them something to work towards. It would be a fresh slant for the gallery.'

'It's very non-you.'

'I don't agree. I'm all for new ideas for the gallery.'

‘Not when it involves amateurs.’

‘Yes, I know. I do have to be careful. But this is a bit different.’

‘How so?’

‘Well, let’s see. It can be positioned as supporting the youth, the artists of tomorrow, that kind of thing. We can give the school a good punt too.’

‘It doesn’t need a ‘good punt’ Maria. We have a waiting list.’

‘Well, then we can make sure it gets longer!’

‘I don’t know. Let me think about it.’

She looks large and out of place here. He cannot put his finger on it. Too old? Too overdressed? Too bejewelled? He wishes she would leave.

The following morning he tries to walk past the school office without being speared by one of Trudy’s sullen stares. Since Maria has been sweeping in unannounced, she has grown very quiet, and he suspects very angry. But he cannot think about that now. He cannot worry about everybody. Not when he himself is struggling so.

He shuffles into the lecture theatre, absorbing the chatter of students as he walks towards the lectern. He swings around and faces the students. She is not there. Maybe late. He shuffles his papers, looks at his watch. Give it another minute. And then another minute. *What if she doesn’t come back?* After ten minutes, the class growing steadily noisier, he begins, glancing across at the doorway at each pause. But she does not arrive.

The next day is no different. She is absent.

Later, in his office, he attempts marking essays. He feels intolerably hot. Jumps up and opens a window, standing there for a moment as the stiff breeze cools his face. *What if she doesn’t come back?* The droning of the computer in the far corner of his desk suddenly seems very loud. He reaches across and switches it off, feeling himself start to tremble. His heartbeat steps up. He takes a deep breath, but his breath seems stuck somewhere in his throat. He cannot get it any further down. He must be having a heart attack. Or losing his mind. Or both. He picks up the black telephone and dials the front office.

‘Trudy, come here quickly.’

‘What?’

‘Quickly goddammit! I’m in trouble. I need to get to hospital.’

‘What you have described is an anxiety attack,’ says the doctor.

‘A what?’

‘A panic attack. I’ll prescribe some low-dose Valium for you, to take when you feel you need to take the edge off. But otherwise you may want to think about taking a break sometime.’

He is silent in the car on the way back to the school. It was not a heart attack. Nor is he losing his mind. Not yet. Only as they drive in does he turn to Trudy and speak.

‘Trudy, I need you to find the contact details of one of the students.’

‘Sure. Which one?’

‘Zara Pascoe.’

‘The grubby one? Why?’

‘She’s been away, and I need to get hold of her. For an exhibition.’

‘Sure. Are you sure you’re okay now, baby?’

‘Quite sure. Thanks.’

There is no phone number. No e-mail. Only a physical address. He might have guessed; she lives miles away. When she has not appeared for over a week, he takes an afternoon off and drives into the valley. It is always like that; you drive forever on tarred roads through varied vegetation and wealth, turn to navigate a mountain pass, and round the next bend, like a precious jewel held with both hands, the fertile valleys of the Cape. Stopping at the petrol station he asks for directions. He is pointed to the local store: a dusty shop filled with bric-a-brac, brass and odd tables and chairs. Amongst the paraphernalia his eye passes over some decrepit pieces of wooden furniture, mahogany, teak, which would need only the smallest bit of attention to be transformed.

‘Like a drink?’ the owner asks. An overhead fan wobbles and whirrs, making a clicking ticking sound with each revolution. From an old gramophone comes the croon of the saxophone. Some honky tonk.

‘No. Thanks. I’m looking for the home of the Pascoe family. Do you know where I can find them?’

‘Pascoe? The crazy ones? They live over there, off the winefarm Three Oaks. Just take the dust road, and turn left at the sign that says Smit and then left again. It’s a rondavel. Tin roof.’

‘Thank you.’ Jake is about to leave when suddenly he turns.

‘Excuse me. Why do you call them ‘the crazy ones’?’

‘Everybody calls them that.’ He taps his temple vigorously with the tip of his index finger. ‘They’re mad, that girl and her grandfather. *Bossies*. But at least they keep to themselves these days.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Girl’s mother was a bit of a busybody. Good looking, mind you. But she made trouble for herself. It was a nasty business. Ah, looks who’s here! Good morning, Danie.’

Another customer has grabbed his attention - a regular by the looks of it. A cup of muddy coffee is immediately produced and the two sit squarely down, their elbows propped on a dusty table.

He drives slowly away from the store, repeating the instructions in his head: winefarm, dust road, Smit, rondavel. Crazy people. He called them Crazy people. Something must have happened, *Winefarm, dust road, sign, sign*. Ah, he peers through the dust at a dark green board with the words Three Oaks written on it. Beneath it, the customary family name; in this case, yes: Smit. He turns down into the road that leads to the farm. After a while he sees another road veer left into what appears to be a thicket of trees, wild flowers and brush. His BMW does not have a high chassis, and now and then scrapes and bangs the dirt and stones beneath it. He drives past what must be labourers’ lodgings, where cracks bite into loose plaster walls and wide pavements of dust are broken by only the occasional splash of colour – wild cannas, red and orange. Tin roofs are held in place by branches, stones and even the occasional pumpkin. Now and again a dog on a rope. Old lace inside a kitchen window. He pulls over to one side for a sky blue tractor with a brick red trailer, carrying bales of hay like shredded wheat. Eventually he reaches a rondavel with a tin roof. A dirty old Citroën, cream-coloured, like a helmet, stands beneath an old oak tree. He stops alongside it and switches the engine off. Then takes a deep breath, opens the car door and gets out.

It is silent. So accustomed is he to the hum of the suburbs and the endless bustle of restless Cape winds that he feels self-conscious in this vast stillness. Exposed. He scratches under his chin and makes his way to the front door. He knocks and clears his throat. It strikes him that he has not planned what he is going to say. *What is he doing here? It's not as though he even knows!*

When the door remains unanswered he wanders around to the back. Finding the back door open he sticks his head inside what must be the kitchen. The old man with the long white beard stands like a genie in a pink and yellow checked shirt, his jeans held up by lime green braces, his back to the door, washing potatoes at the sink. He seems thinner than before. Jake clears his throat. No reaction. He must be deaf. That must be why he did not listen when he visited the school. He clears it again.

Whether he is deaf or not, is unclear. After a while he turns around and without so much as a flinch points out the window. In a voice dry as dust, he says 'Over there. Walk on the pathway till you start to hear water.' He pauses to wait for air. Then takes another breath. 'Climb up a level and wait for a dog to bark. Follow the barking and you will find her.'

Jake stares at him. 'I see,' he says. 'Thank you.'

He finds her under a tree sitting on a fallen log, a sketchpad on her lap, a handful of stubby chalk pastels, oily paper peeling from them, at her feet. She does not look up. He stands some paces away, the distance one might keep when admiring a sculpture, his head tilted to one side, watching. A dog flops at her feet, lifting its head now and then to give the odd bark; a reprimand. Still she does not look up.

'Hello,' he says.

She continues drawing, occasionally bending to consider another colour, her hair falling in a dark tangle before her face. She examines the pastel in her hand, then changes her mind and picks up another. Her hands are smudged with colour. There is something, crayon or pastel or dirt, wedged beneath her nails. He scratches the back of his head and clears his throat.

After a while she stops, rests the pastel on the drawing and looks up. 'Wild daisies,' she says. 'Orange and yellow. Did you see them on your way up the path?'

He blinks and swallows. 'Yes.' He feels as though he has been given the password. Allowed entrance to a world beyond. He knows now, he does not know how, that he need not explain why he is there. It is as if she has always known he would come.

He takes a step forward to peer at the picture. 'What are you working on?'

The dog growls without lifting his head. He takes another step forward.

The dog growls again, his eyes swivelling to white to follow the intruder without moving his head.

Then he is behind her, looking over her shoulder at her picture, large and bold, of a bushman whose brains are exposed. From his cranium spreading outward like a halo are lightning bolts. From the lightning bolts are little drops, red like blood dripping. And a wolf howling at the moon.

'You draw like that without a model?' he voices.

'I have a model.'

'Where?'

'My dreams.'

'A bushmen with lightning from his brains?'

'I often dream of bushmen. And wolves.'

He walks around her and the dog and seats himself on a large rock near her, aware of the crackle his polished Italian shoes make on the twigs and bracken. The faint sound of water in the background.

'And blood. There's always blood in your pictures. Why?'

'Because that is how I see it.'

'See what?'

'My dreams.'

She sits the drawing down alongside her, then folds her stained hands on her lap and faces him.

'Are you scared of blood?' she asks evenly.

'No. Of course not. It's just a little... sinister, that's all.'

'Blood? Do you think so? That's interesting.'

'Why is it interesting?' He starts to smile. He wants to wrap himself around her and absorb her. To encapsulate her 'otherness' and own it. He wants to kneel before her and place his head in her lap.

'That you should think of it as something dirty,' she says.

'Not dirty. Just sinister.'

She looks away. In her black eyes the sky is mirrored. Then turns to him again; now it is his reflection that he sees. 'It is blood that moves the heart. It is blood that moves the hand to draw. Blood is about life. And love. Not about death.'

'How did your mother die?' he asks.

'I don't remember.'

She rises from the broken log and walks towards him. The dog too stands and shakes himself out. She takes his hand. 'Would you like to see the waterfall?'

He walks with her obediently like the dog. Their shoulders are the same height, brushing. She guides him along the path, then pulls him up till they reach a flat area, a mangle of trees and rocks. They follow the pathway, dipping under the thorny branches till they reach a small pool of water, surrounded by rocks, green and foaming with moss and algae. Within the mud and rock enclave, a waterfall clear and spumescent, cascades forcefully down one side. She releases his hand. 'Swim?' What surprises him most is that he is not surprised. Here in this other country, this land inhabited by one, where he has been allowed a visitor's permit for this time, and maybe this time only, he watches the customs with awe and fascination. Surrendering himself to the willing suspension of disbelief.

'Not just yet. You go ahead.'

'There. That's a good rock for sitting.' She points to a large, dry ochre mass on the other side of the pool. He makes his way over and, in spite of its size, wrestles with it a little to test for firmness. By the time he sits down she has removed her clothes, and is sliding naked into the pool. In one smooth underwater stroke she emerges on his side. For a moment she lies back and floats, light and water snaking and blinking over her skin. Then lifts herself half out the water, her hair - that grimy hair - pulled black and sleek away from her face. It hangs down like a wet leaf, covering her breast on one side, but not quite on the other, exposing its contours and shadows, the dark nipple hard and puckering with cold. With her eyes closed and her face pointed upward, he realises that this is the closest he has come to seeing her smile. He leans forward instinctively, his hands outstretched. The way one might try to win the confidence of a wild animal. 'Come,' he says above the drama of the waterfall, slowly rising. 'Come to me.'

She rises out of the pool fluid and liquid as a fish, the water coursing down her back and her front and her thighs, gleaming like scales as it catches the broken light.

She is as tall as he. He does not have to bend as she leans forward to kiss him, softly at first. Then with the full force of her power, she bites his bottom lip as hard as she can. Blood spurts hot and salty into his mouth and down his chin. In her blank eyes he sees the reflection of a man crying out in anger and pain, before they close and crinkle into the gurgle of a girlish laugh.

‘To love is to bleed,’ she says. Then sinks back into the pool and swims away.

University of Cape Town

Chapter Twelve

After a week of tending the ailments and listening to the complaints of the workers in the area, Camille asks about the clinic that is available to workers twice a week.

'It's two hours twice a week. Tuesdays and Fridays. Sometimes we can't time our accidents so good to fit in with them,' says Willie Solomons.

'They treat us like children mos, Miss Camille. Like we're naughty boys and girls,' says Marietjie Philander. 'Always a big sigh and shaking their big heads.'

'I think it's time I went across and introduced myself,' she says. 'Maybe I can help, who knows.' A little seed of hope. Perhaps a fresh start. If they could only get to know her a little better, maybe they would accept her one day too. And allow her to be part of the healing process. It would be healthier for Zara.

She gives it a few days' thought. After her unsuccessful visit to the Smits, she can only deduce that simply walking in to 'talk' to people does not work here. She must think it through carefully before she introduces herself at the clinic. She must not offend them. She takes a long look at herself in the small piece of mirror in the bathroom. She does not look like the people who live here. Perhaps it is this that offends them. She does not set her hair in rollers, and her clothes are not always functional or sensible. She does not wear jeans very often, nor tracksuits. She is definitely thinner too. A few days later she asks Papa to take her in the Citroën through the pass, to the town on the other side of the mountain, where there is a women's clothing store. After examining each item in the store, and even trying one dress on, she leaves heavy-hearted and empty-handed, except for a pair of sensible court shoes.

On the Friday she wakes early to wash her hair so that she would have time to dry it in the sun before tying it back with a neat scarf. She chooses an old French print dress, navy blue and white, with simple lines and digs around for an old compact of compressed powder. Finally the shoes. Zara watches every move.

'Are you going to wear *those* shoes?' she asks.

'Yes.'

‘Why?’

‘Well, I don’t know. I thought I should get some decent shoes. Why? What’s wrong with them?’

‘They’re *brown!*’

‘They’re not brown, they’re beige. It a good colour with all this dust.’

But Zara’s face speaks pure contempt as she glares at the shoes.

Her eyes follow her mother as Camille lifts an old leather suitcase from the top of the cupboard, drops it onto the crumpled bed and unclips it. Inside there are two things: an old concertina file and a bundle of papers in a pumpkin-coloured folder, tied with a piece of string.

‘What’s that?’ Zara points to the orange folder.

‘Oh, just letters. Nothing really.’

‘What do they say?’

‘Nothing. Really,’ she repeats. She is flustered, rifling through the concertina file.

Finally she pulls out some papers, a little wavy at the edges, and smiles. ‘Ah, here they are. My nursing qualification and some references. They’re in French, but still.’

She places the papers carefully in a bag, closes the suitcase and snaps it shut.

‘I’ll leave it here for now. I’ll need to put these back later.’

‘Can I come too?’

‘Stay with Pappi for now, Zara. Okay? Maman has to speak to some people and it will be boring. When I get back we’ll go swimming.’

‘Then will you take those shoes off?’

‘Yes.’

‘Will you be away for a long time?’

‘No, of course not. I’ll be back soon. Look after Pappi and Leica for me.’

Zara stares back at her, her black eyes large and luminous.

She watches her mother leave, then takes her place at the window until she sees her grow smaller and smaller, no bigger than a crayon, in the distance. Pappi is sitting at the table pretending to be reading the newspaper, but really he is finding out about the horses and making notes in the margin. She trots back to the big leather suitcase lying on their bed, and the pumpkin folder with the string. With both hands she presses on the rusty clips, first one then the other, until they pop open. The pumpkin folder is smooth and a little faded in parts, and the string is tied in a double bow. She fiddles

with it for some time, her tiny fingers trying to prize it loose, but her nails are either too short, or too soft, and she cannot get a grip. 'Fok,' she mutters. Finally, she hops off the bed and walks to the kitchen drawer where she knows she will find a pair of scissors with chipped red handles.

'Everything okay, petite?' Pappi asks without looking up from his sums.

'Yes. Just need a scissors.'

'Be careful.' He is peering through his glasses as though they are very far down his nose, and using a soft pencil with an eraser at the top.

'I know.'

She hops back onto the bed and snips the string. The folder releases its contents: several pages with blue writing on it. She wishes she could read. She knows how to write her own name. And maman's. She can see her maman's name, 'Camille', now and again. But nowhere does she read her own name. The writing is pretty with its long strokes and letters with tails. She lifts the pages to her face; paper smells like Pappi's pipe.

'Zara?' Pappi calls. 'Come. Let's make tea.'

She drops the letters, scattered about like dry leaves, on the bed.

The clinic is in a prefabricated room behind the post office. The black wrought iron security gate is open. Inside, the floors are grey cement and people sit on two long rows of hard benches. On the walls are posters in red and white promoting family planning. There is a resigned quietude. Camille takes her place on the bench, and waits. She sees two nurses enter and exit the second room. The first, a middle-aged woman, short and efficient. The second a young colt of a girl, smiling and anxious to help. The two appear to work together. One by one, at irregular intervals, the patients stand up and follow them meekly into the second room, emerging with packets of pills, or clutching the place where a needle has punctured their skin.

At the end of the two-hour shift, there are still four people and Camille waiting to be seen. The short nurse with the short hair looks down at the watch hanging like a claw from her pale green uniform and announces that they are now closed.

'What about us?' Camille turns to ask a young woman sitting next to her with a sick baby.

'Tough luck. Better show up earlier next time,' the young woman replies with a sigh, before picking up her bag and swinging her baby onto her hip. Wait,' Camille whispers. 'Your baby is sick. It shouldn't have to wait till Tuesday. Come and see me. I'm a nurse. I may be able to help.' She scribbles directions on a piece of scrap paper before walking across to the nurses, now packing their things to leave. She holds out her hand to the older woman in the flat black lace-up shoes.

'Hello. I've come to introduce myself. I am Camille Pascoe.'

The woman gives her hand a curt shake. 'Yes, hello. We're closed now. You'll have to come back.'

'No, you don't understand. I'm not sick. I'm...'

'Then why are you here lady? Can't you see how busy we are?'

'I'm a nurse,' she finishes emphatically.

'Then you can treat yourself, can't you?'

'No. Well, yes, of course I can. I don't mean that. I'm here to find out if I can help, that's all. I'd like to help.'

'There's no helping these people. They never learn. Live by the bottle, die by the bottle. There's no helping them.' The younger girl, her benign smile fixed, nods her head in agreement like a toy with its head on a spring.

'But couldn't you use an extra pair of hands here? You seem understaffed. I have my papers.' She holds them out.

'We're fine, lady. Just fine. And we're closed now, so if you'll s'cuse me.'

Camille stares at the them in disbelief. 'Yes, you are closed. Very closed. I can't believe it.'

'Yes, yes, we know, we know,' the squat one says whilst ushering her out through the door. 'Goodbye.'

When she arrives home, the lady with the baby is already waiting for her.

'I's on my way home but the baby, she's getting hotter and hotter.'

Camille drops her bag on the stoep and takes the child from her. Her eyes grow wide.

'Papa! Zara! Run the bath full of cold water. Quickly!' She turns to the mother. 'She's lost consciousness. It's probably the temperature.'

She lowers the child into the cold water. A few seconds later the tiny creature begins to cry.'

'Oh, thank God,' says Camille. 'Now for some medicine.'

The baby takes the liquid in its purple rose mouth, coughs it up and cries. The whites of her crinkly eyes are veined red with fever, her soft curly eyelashes wet and gluey.

‘We need to get her to hospital,’ Camille tells the young mother.

‘What’s wrong with her?’

‘I don’t know. But we need to go now.’

‘There’s no hospital here in the valley.’

‘We’re going to have to go to Cape Town, to the Red Cross.’

The old man is already rummaging amongst the newspapers, looking for the car keys.

The baby has meningitis. It stays at the Red Cross for thirteen days. Gertie, the young mother visits her every second day. It is too far for her to travel from the valley, so she stays with a friend of hers in Lavender Hill on the Cape Flats. A provocative name, especially as there is no lavender. Nor any rise in the landscape that might possibly break the monotony of the overcrowded slum.

Each day, she pays 35 cents for a return ticket on a taxi, a mini-bus that takes her to the station in Mowbray, from where she walks to the Red Cross Hospital. Each day she meets the same elderly woman, also waiting for the taxi, who works as a seamstress in Cape Town.

‘At least the bulldozers leave us alone in the Flats,’ she says. ‘What would they want with a slum?’

‘Are you from District Six?’ asks Gertie. ‘Were you thrown out by the government?’ She grew up in the country. And finds it terribly exciting to meet someone who had actually been there when homes were razed to the ground, and truckloads of people were taken to the Cape Flats. She certainly has something to tell her friends when she returns. But from the woman’s grim grunt she knows there will be no further gruesome details.

In the evenings she visits the shebeens with her friends where there is drinking and laughing and sometimes dancing and anything to help them forget that they are outsiders. By the time the baby is well enough to go home to the valley again, she is sad to leave. She is unaware that her young brown belly will soon swell with life, once again.

'You wonder how many die, simply because there's insufficient care,' says Camille during the drive home from Cape Town.

Her father sucks on his pipe and nods. 'Who knows?'

'Or cares.' She is angry. What is wrong with this place that complacent arrogance is allowed to cost people lives.

'You know, Papa,' she thinks out loud, 'it's coming down to this: either we do something to help, to change this situation. Or we must go home.'

'To France?'

'Yes.'

'But you were so sure you didn't want to be there. You wanted a fresh start. A new life. You have to stop running away sometime, Camille.'

'It was only once. I've only run once.'

'There is the child to consider.'

'I know.' She bites her lip. 'And anyway, this is the end of the earth. There is no where else to go.'

My Love. How hard it is for me to write this letter...

Memory is the blade of a knife. How quickly you can collapse a life into a few suitcases when the need is there. At the time she did not ask herself too many questions; it was that very thing she needed to excise: the need to ask why. She looks across at Papa, driving steadily, focusing forward. He too knew not to ask too many questions. Knew full well that if he did not agree she would go on alone. The drive to protect her as strong as his own fears of loss and loneliness.

Where to go? The ends of the earth. The very tip of Africa. She had heard that there were little pockets of the Cape that the French Huguenots had loved and marked with the flavour of France. She imagined a place where it might be similar enough to feel the edge of belonging, yet different enough to assure her that she was far enough away. The end of the earth. Oceans and continents and cultures to cushion her. A place where one can be forgotten. A place where one can forget.

She turns suddenly to the old man behind the wheel, her eyes fiery. 'I'm going to start my own clinic. I'm going to speak to the hospitals, see if I can obtain some state sponsored supplies. Come Papa, what do I have to lose?'

But the old man does not answer. He simply sucks on his pipe and drives on.

University of Cape Town

Chapter Thirteen

The image in the mirror seems distorted. He moves his face closer. The hideous totem of his nonsensical pursuit pulses like a beacon; his lip is bulbous and shiny with saliva and still throbbing. He dabs the area tentatively (mistrustful) with a swab of TCP. Squeezes his eyes at the sting, takes a quick breath and swears.

Maria will ask questions. Trudy will sulk. The class may snigger. All this is bad enough. And yet it is what *she* will think when she sees his disfigured mouth that darkens his mind every few seconds. Will she find him repulsive? He had left her at the pool, swimming and treading water, quietly floating onto her back to watch him as he used his sleeve to staunch the blood. She seemed as passive as the pool itself: encapsulated in its dark, remote womb. He had not said goodbye; had simply hurried away, holding his cuff to his mouth, stopping now and again along the path to spit out blood.

He growls and shakes his head, and then in a sudden surge of rage takes the bottle of TCP and smashes it against the tiled floor of his bathroom. It is thanks to her that he now looks like a gargoyle. Thanks to her that he is losing his mind. Thanks to her. thanks to her!

But still he wants her.

'Jake?'

Maria. Like a hole in the head.

'What?'

'What was that?' He can hear her heavy tread - clip, thunk, even a horse sounds more elegant - across the tiles towards the bathroom. Before he can wipe away the antiseptic she is standing in the doorway. In her platform shoes she looks like something out of 'Equus'.

'Jesus Christ, what happened to your lip?'

'I cut it.'

'I can see that. How?'

‘On the TCP bottle.’

‘What?’

His mind races. But he is practised at this art. He can think on his feet (all four of them). He can live by his wits. He must just keep talking.

‘TCP bottle was jammed.’ He looks doleful. ‘I tried to open it with my teeth.’ She continues staring. ‘Stupid I know. You’ve told me so many times not to do that.’ *She’s not buying it.* ‘Anyway, next thing I knew I had broken it open and, well, it cut me and I dropped it on the floor.’

‘Hmmm,’ she says. ‘Well let’s clear it up.’

She is reserving judgement, he thinks. She will make up her mind later. For now, she is being practical. This is what she does.

They cook dinner in silence, moving about the kitchen like shadow dancers. This nightly ritual: cut, chop, pop open the wine, is one he once savoured. It is these simple structures that provide frameworks. Support. Rhythm. Lay the table, soften the lights, light the candles, play some music.

‘It’s the little occasions that make life meaningful,’ Maria used to say. ‘Imagine if we died tomorrow and we hadn’t used the good linen the night before?’

The notion had probably come from one of her self-help books, and yet it was one of the things he once loved about her, this sense of celebration. Tonight he wishes he could draw some comfort from its flow.

She splashes Chardonnay into two large wine glasses. It gleams golden in the candlelight.

‘Mmmm. Buttery. Delicious.’ She hands him a glass. He takes a whiff and a sip and grimaces as the acid bites into his lip. She watches him very closely, refusing to acknowledge his pain.

‘About the exhibition,’ she says.

‘What exhibition?’

‘The one I plan on having in three weeks’ time. Do you have anything for me?’

‘No.’

‘What about the one you started a few months back? It’s just sitting there. Why don’t you give it a try again Jake?’

‘It’s unresolved.’

'And I meant what I said about your students' work. I think we need to give them a taste of what it's like to go on show. Is there anything you can get to me by next week?'

'That's a ridiculous deadline Maria.'

'I know. Just send me a few pieces. I've invited Frank. It's a good opportunity for your students to get some exposure.'

'I hate Frank.'

'You're supposed to. All artists hate critics. I know he can be cruel at times. But we have to have someone there from *The Times*.'

Later in bed, as she closes her book and stretches to turn out the light, she turns to him.

'Jake?'

'Mmm.'

'What did you need the TCP for in the first place? Why were you trying to open that bottle?'

But his eyes are firmly closed. He could just as easily be asleep.

**

She returns to classes without apology, a silent spectre, unseeing, all-seeing. Whether painting, drawing or staring out the window, she carries her void with her – its aura of forgetting, its vacant density repelling students like sulphur.

But he is not repelled. And nor it seems, is the boy who stops to pick her up every afternoon. He has noticed the youngster once or twice before, waiting outside the school - only because he is rather conservatively dressed - but when he sees him open the passenger door of a white Mazda hatchback and watches Zara fold her long limbs into it, the young man takes on a new dimension of interest. Quite simply, and with almost immediate effect, he hates him.

Were the boy to have the first inclination that he has become the subject of this man's aversion, and were he then to understand why, a similar emotion would no doubt be generously returned, with increased, maybe doubled, intensity.

For he has lived in the shadows of this love since he first found her and watched her flapping her arms and singing *Au Clair de la Lune* amongst the moss and the mud and the broken branches of their secret hide-out. This is his world. His excavation. He ~~was~~ here first. First to love her, and ever since too. Surely that counts on the scales of justice? Surely History affords one a 'right'?

If he could pass through that membrane of light that separates this reality from the next, perhaps he might hear Camille speaking from that place of knowing, where the only death is of Time. Camille, who had been the only real mother figure he ever knew. So brief, so deep her mark on his young life, that he often found himself talking to her, the way one might silently pray to God or Mother Mary.

In her voice like a river, now light with insight, she might tell him not to hang his hopes too heavily on the twigs of justice or History, for politics is often just 'power tricks' said quickly. *Life is not always fair, petit*. And it is the same for love as it is for the land: often it is the one with the silver tongue who gets the vote. Whether it is the hard teeth of destruction raising your home to the ground or a line of love whispered softly down your back, the landlords and the lovelords peddle the same power. One might dispossess you of your land, another of your heart. But whether it is the possession of a nation or a single soul, the hunger is the same, and those who feed on power will dispossess and reassess until the jackal is fed. Isn't that silly, petit?, she might laugh. Don't they know that the jackal is always hungry? Because neither land nor the love of anyone but ourselves can truly be owned. And the only true 'rights' are never over anything but our own choices. *All you have to worry about, is whether you are fair*. The jackal may gorge himself on power until he is sick, but the contents of his stomach, however damaged by appetite and acid, will forever return to the earth undigested.

You must understand, petit. Neither those who have loved the longest nor the deepest, nor those whose ancestors have rooted the land with the vegetation of their dreams and dug into the soil the turned leaves of their memories are any closer by their wanting, to having rights, or to getting what they justly deserve than the lions and elephants that prowl and lurk in the hungry sun of wild country. Or the swollen-

bellied orphans that crouch in the shadow of the vulture's wing, their saucer eyes emptied by starvation.

It is not easy for you, I know, she may continue. To pass through this thin skin that separates this reality from infinity. (Although what is it but your own thorns that says you can't?) But don't worry. And she would press the furrowed indent between his brows. All you have to do is stop. Stop long enough to breathe in the hum and raw rhythms of all that moves wild and free; wild drums and acacia trees, purple thunderstorms and the churn of the ocean, the fragrant mimosa and forests of proud pines, sloe-eyed genets and the salt-edged rasp of the gulls.

For in all that is wild and free, petit, you will hear not only my voice, but all who have gone before you, a chorus of nature with one tongue singing: that we are but guests of this earth, and in the end all things are moved along by the rivers and the wind.

Chapter Fourteen

They travel the last stretch between Cape Town and the valley in silence. Camille stares at the undulating landscape, unseeing. Her father sucks on his pipe. As the Citroën curls slowly round the last bend and bumps along the grass and mud towards the cottage, she catches sight of Pieter's red bicycle propped up against the peeling wall, glinting and winking in the last spokes of daylight. Oh dear. If his mother finds out, he'll be in for another whipping. With a sigh she slides a glance towards the swing, from where Blom's squeals are dipping in and out of their open windows. They are playing in the oak tree, all three; its gnarled branches suddenly made young by their smooth and nimble limbs.

She calls a greeting to them as she treads across the stones and weeds to the sturdy wooden door. Once inside, she lights the stove and pulls the kettle onto its lilac flame. Then lifts her bag from her shoulder, and takes it to her room. She stops in the doorway. The suitcase she reinstated at the top of the wardrobe that morning is now on the floor, fallen open to one side. Papers are strewn about like fine tissue paper. Light. Flimsy. The substance of a dream, without the paperweight of memory to curb its flight. An elaborate telltale trail of pink koki pen decorates the folder that had protected them. The string that held it all together has been snipped. The perpetrator slips like a shadow into the house behind her and folds warm and dirty arms around her mother's legs.

**

Zara now understands that a secret is something that is kept in a pumpkin coloured folder in an old brown suitcase on top of the wardrobe. A secret is something that makes Maman angry and makes her eyes look like they do when she chops onions; full of big raindrop tears. A secret is a strange thing, because her Maman is never angry with her. Not her Maman. She gets angry with other people now and then, and sometimes even tells them what for. But never with her. She decides a secret cannot be a very good thing.

**

Two weeks later, when Gertie returns from Lavender Hill with her healthy baby, the news starts to spread. Women in faded print dresses with scarf-clad heads are hanging out their washing on their makeshift washlines and telling each other about it. Gummy farm labourers, holding their caps on their pounding heads while stretching out their bony backs vertebra by vertebra, are discussing it. And on Sunday at church, the lady who leads the singing says a special thank you to God that He should have seen fit to send them someone who can help heal their children, even if she does have a funny accent and it's hard to understand what she says.

But they are not the only ones. The Smits and the du Plessis - who have heard it from their servants - think it's irresponsible.

'I don't know what possessed you, Hermann,' says his wife at the dinner table. 'To sell that property to those, those... *vagrants*. I cannot stand it when foreigners interfere.'

Hermann nods his head and rolls his eyes in their veined sockets. 'The land was for sale. They wanted it. I thought they would tear down that old cottage and rebuild. I had no idea they were going to live in it.'

'I always thought it was an outhouse,' giggles Martha du Plessis.

'It practically is,' says Ann Smit.

'Not a very hygienic place for a clinic then.'

'No, quite.'

'I heard Pieter was over there quite a bit.' Martha du Plessis was never averse to the odd provocation.

'Did you? That's ridiculous.' Ann Smit tightens her lips into a thin smile. 'Why ever would a crowd of gypsies interest a bright boy like him? He's off to boarding school next year, anyway. Bishops. It's too lonely for him here. May I pass you some more fillet?'

The Oliviers from the farm stall and curio shop told the de Goedes up the road that they think it's a good idea. They cannot understand why Camille would go to so much trouble. But they believe she has the love of the Lord in her heart, it's obvious, and that is an example to us all. They were even thinking of inviting her over for a *potjie*, until they heard she could not speak Afrikaans - which must explain why she doesn't

come to church - and so didn't really see the point after all. But they smile at her all the same, which is easy to do with someone so pretty. Except for Sarel de Goede who takes his wife's arm whenever he sees Camille, and quickly looks the other way. 🐞

Camille has already spoken to a Dr Michaelson from Groote Schuur, and been to visit his department to explain her requirements. Meeting him was the luck of the draw, or the hand of the Gods, she cannot decide which. She felt sure she would be one in a long line of people wanting donations and help from this old city hospital. So she decided not to bother with writing a letter, and took it upon herself to visit them in person. Who 'them' was she did not initially know. She would start with the Registrar. He would know whom she should then speak to. On the day Papa drove her into Cape Town, the Registrar was at a conference in Bremen. His second in command was Dr Michaelson. The young doctor seemed to like her. He nodded and smiled and agreed with her as she explained the difficulties of the local people in the valley. He seemed to want to help. He asked her to come back in a few days. He would see what he could do. Perhaps they could have lunch.

Two days later on the golf course, he twisted the arms of a few pharmaceutical reps. and organised a steady supply of free generic drugs. Just the basics; contraceptives, pain-killers, antiseptics and some antibiotics. 'No antidepressants,' he said with a grin when she returned a week later. 'This isn't the southern suburbs.'

**

Within weeks the valley is full of static consternation. A newer, darker issue is brewing. Black people are moving into the surrounding area, setting up makeshift shacks, shanties. Using anything they can get their hands on; broken glass, black plastic bags, car tyres, bicycle wheels, bricks, stones, branches and mud, the squatting quarters are constructed. All around there are plastic bags stuck to bushes and barbed wire. Rubble living. An accident of civilization. And disease. The men are being employed in the fruit factories, some even on the farms. And the women are asking the white madams for domestic jobs. 'I can't believe nobody is *doing* anything about it,' says Ann Smit. 'It's iniquitous. Next thing they'll be running the bloody country!' But the ones who really despise the idea are the Coloureds.

'Was daai kaffir doing here?' Leah wants to know, after a young black woman, a baby wrapped snugly onto her back, has knocked on the door looking for a job.

Ann Smit gives a little laugh. 'You Coloureds are such racists. It's so funny.'

Leah gives a knowing nod and hurls out the dirty water from the bucket.

'You mark my words. They're looking for trouble mos. Bringing their sickness en children en wanting our jobs. Haai.'

Doing something about it means building a wall around it, to stop the eyesore, until further steps can be taken. Overnight the wall is awash with colour; graffiti art. And sprayed in black the words *Work for All*.

There is news of violence. A clash on the weekend. A Black man knifed the first time. A Coloured man the second. Both dead.

'They're a bunch of drunken savages, the lot of them,' says Ann Smit. 'With a bit of luck the bad element from each side will kill each other off.'

Nobody knows how they heard, the people now living in shacks. But quite soon they too are visiting Camille. A steady trickle of indigents, the sick ones shuffling, oozing, sweating, bringing their ailments to her with the trust of children.

Most of it she finds she can treat. Even the stitching up she does herself. But at least once a week there is a trip into Cape Town, to the hospital. At first they go in the Citroën. But after a while, Dr Michaelson persuades the members of the Board at Groote Schuur to send a driver in one of the hospital Hi-Aces. And as this means the patients are no longer accompanied by Camille, Dr Michaelson often comes to pick them up himself.

Chapter Fifteen

The exhibition date is fixed. So, it seems, is Maria's determination to involve his students. He mentions it to them cautiously, at the end of a lecture. From the immediate murmuring that this provokes, sticking their heads together with the hum of bees, he realises that this idea is welcome motivation. A chance for them to gauge their talent. To stretch their abilities. To gather together the forces of inspiration and make honey. He glances at Zara. No heads tilt forward to conspire with hers. She simply sits staring straight back at him. But as he looks away, he thinks he sees her smile. Is it at him? Or the exhibition idea? He looks back. She looks down. But the vaguest memory of the smile, soft at the corners, still lingers.

'We'll begin working on the exhibition contributions tomorrow then,' he says, looking away. 'Please come with ideas.' And snapping his note file closed, he marches out of the room.

A while later he is checking e-mail in his office: invitations to book launches, to lunch at a wine estate, adverts for some online art publications, a note from Trudy downstairs at reception: 'Miss you. When?'

The door handle turns. He looks up sharply; his small, round spectacles drop onto the bridge of his nose.

'Yes?'

But she is already inside. Placid as ever.

'I came to say goodbye.'

'Why? Where are you going?' He jumps to his feet. His car keys fall to the floor.

'Home.'

'Oh, yes. Home. Of course. Sorry, I thought for a minute you meant... thank you.

Thank you for letting me know.' For a mad moment he had thought she might mean she was leaving the school. Unthinkable. Why would she? His breath is becoming shorter. Another panic attack. *No, please! Surely not now?*

Yes, now.

It gets worse; his breath clenches, his lungs a fist of iron in his ribcage.

Death, dying, he is surely going to die! To suffocate.

'Please don't leave just yet,' he says. Even he can hear his voice is higher than usual.

‘Why?’

‘Just stay. Please. A few minutes. I don’t feel well. I have these... attacks. It would help me enormously if you just... stayed.’

She walks over to the window and looks out.

‘Okay. Just a few minutes. Till my lift gets here.’ Then she climbs into her chair, folds her legs up and closes her eyes. He sits down, his hand on his heart. Blood gone mad. Racing. Erratic. Death or insanity squeezing his ribcage. *Breathe!* He reaches into his wallet for the small pack of white pills, the size of milk teeth, breaks one free and throws it into his mouth. Why doesn’t she help him? Then with his head in his hands, he breathes as slowly and as deeply as he can for several minutes.

As the panic eases he looks up. Why didn’t she help him? Didn’t she know how he needed her? Couldn’t she see? He stares at her. She is asleep. Sound asleep. He is envious! The gift of living so exquisitely in the moment. The freedom of surrender into it. She looks so peaceful, eternal. Is that what sleep is: what we do each night for a lifetime to prepare us for death? In both, a residue of purity returns to the face. As though the soul in leaving the body - for a night or forever - takes with it the clots of memory and in exchange returns our infant hearts.

He stands as quietly as he can. Through the window he can see the white Mazda grinding to a halt. He turns and watches her for a while longer.

‘Zara,’ he says gently, after some time. He does not want to repeat what happened last time he woke her. She opens her eyes, yawns, then uncurls her legs and moves to the window, acknowledging the white Mazda with a silent nod to herself.

‘I’m okay now,’ he says.

‘I know.’ Then she bends to where he sits again on his chair, brushes her warm mouth against his cheek, and leaves.

**

All week the students work on their submissions. Work late into the evening, leaving a trail of cigarette butts and polystyrene cups, the dregs of turbid coffee still separating at the bottom. There is the low sound of music; they bring cd’s, he brings an old player, a buzz of contented activity. And each day, all day long, he waits and

watches for Zara to arrive. He replays the last afternoon he saw her in his office a hundred times: *I came to say goodbye*. She came especially to say goodbye. Does that mean something? Was it forever? Perhaps she didn't want to contribute anything to the exhibition. Then why didn't she say anything? *That is not her way*. Well why not? Why the hell not?

He paces the floor between the easels. The clean smell of paint. Brushes bobbing. Paint stains everywhere. Where is she? Is she coming back? Every now and then, a student will put down a brush, stand back and ponder. Sometimes looking across to him, beckoning. 'Dr Coleman, would you mind giving me your opinion?'

By Wednesday he cannot bear it any longer. Tomorrow then. If she is not here tomorrow, he will go and find her. This resolution cheers him up a little. Having a plan. People need to have plans, or what is living for? Of course, it suddenly strikes him, he need not wait till tomorrow. Why should he in fact? The idea gathers momentum, and at lunchtime he leaves the students painting, with the promise of returning later.

This time the drive there is easier. Even the bumps and potholes seem less obtrusive. He parks his car a little way from the Citroën. He has already decided not to bother the old man; he feels sure he will find her up the pathway, somewhere there. If truth be told, the wiry old bugger makes him feel downright uncomfortable. Something in the way his wraithlike body turned to face him the last time he was here. Something about the intense blue of his eyes, folded into his leathery, whiskery face. It makes him feel unusually young and silly.

He climbs the pathway, his good Italian shoes kicking up little puffs of dust. As he reaches the top of the bank, he sees her in the distance, sprawled on the grass under a tree. There is another woman too, a Coloured girl. He waits for her to see him. The dog barks, and they swing their heads in his direction, but do not beckon nor wave. He hesitates. Then he makes his way over nonetheless.

'Hello,' he says.

'Hello,' says the Coloured girl. 'Who are you?'

'Jake,' he says, sitting down on the grass. 'And who are you?'

'Blom. I'm Blom September. What are you doing here?'

He smiles at her forthright manner. She is rather pretty.

'I've come to shout at your friend. She's been bunking class.'

Zara has neither moved nor acknowledged his presence.

'Well then you can jus' bugger off to where you came from,' says Blom. But before he can take offence she gives a squeal of delight, her small teeth white and straight against her brown skin.

'Jus' pulling your leg, man. I have to go anyways. I've just come back here after being away, so I wanted to see my friend. My sister.' She grins at Zara. 'But I promised my ma I'd help her with some washing. She's like Hitler's own soul sister that one, always giving me work.' She rises to her small bare feet. 'So bye.'

'Bye.' He cannot help smiling. Watches her skip along the path, her short red skirt bouncing as she walks. Halfway along she stops, turns around and shouts, 'Zara, see you later. Your house. With Pieter.' Then gives a little wave before disappearing down the bank. He turns to Zara, still spread-eagled on the grass, her head lazily resting on her arms, the dog resting his head on her buttocks.

Pieter?

'What's this about,' he says. 'Why are you not at class?'

'What for?'

'Well, the rest of them are preparing for the exhibition. Don't you want to be a part of that?'

'Yes.'

'Well then? I don't understand.'

'I have something to submit already. Two pieces. I prefer to work on my own. It's better that way.'

'I wish you'd told me.' He tries to sound firm.

She remains silent. He changes tack.

'I was worried.'

He stretches himself out alongside her on the grass, lying on his side, his hand propping up his head. Through the leaves he watches clouds coagulate into little clusters. An egg-box sky.

'Would you like to swim?'

'Not after last time, quite frankly, no.'

'Still scared of blood then?' He detects a spot of sympathy in her tone. Or is she mocking him?

'Maybe we should avoid that topic this time. It's a beautiful day.'

She stares directly at him for some time. Motionless.

'Zara, what happened to your mother?'

'She died.'

'Was she ill?'

'I don't remember.'

'Were you very young?'

'I don't know. I suppose so.'

He adjusts his head on his hand. She looks up.

'Death is the mother of Beauty. I read that somewhere,' she says.

'Do you agree?'

She does not answer.

'Give me your hand,' she says after a while, rolling over with the easy suppleness of a cat. She lifts her T-shirt, unfolds his fingers, then moves them slowly over her belly.

'Blood temperature,' she whispers. 'Life.'

Her warm skin against his hand. Is this an invitation? An initiation? Or simply her idea of conversation? He tries not to shake. 'Life,' he repeats, anxious not to lose the connection. *Does he dare?* With the flat of his hand barely touching her skin, he can just perceive the soft indentations pressed into her from the grass. Then her hand falls away and he continues the crossing unguided. Slowly. Softly. Half expecting her to attack him. Stopping now and then to make sure. Each second of his tentative exploration is as fragile as the last. Each tiny tremor of response a victory. The subtlety with which her body dips and rises and curves and folds and flows. To be won over and worshipped first with his fingertips, with the awe of a child. *May I touch?* Then with his mouth, his teeth, his cheek, his tongue. And later - when their bodies have become less separate, more fluid - with the firmness of a man. Deeper and deeper into her light he enters. Into her otherness; the world across the great divide.

She abandons herself to pleasure with the same ease as she gives herself over to sleep, he reflects as he drives home. And yet there is something troubling him. Something incomplete. Something in her eyes. Or something not in her eyes, something missing.

Yes, it is this: in spite of her blood-warm body, her eyes, even in lovemaking, remain devoid of emotion. It is this about the afternoon that disturbs him. Unnerves him. Even unmans him. When he unmasks his shallow victory, he is left knowing that ~~only~~ when he can possess this, the hollow in her eyes, ignite that soul's life spark, that the true surrender, with all her sweet foreignness will be his. All else is mockery.

**

The old man is cooking a big stew with a bag of vegetables he has bought from the Coloured vendors who sell them dirt cheap off the main road. The women get them each day from the big market in the next village, leaving early in the morning in an old bakkie to stock up. The produce is often misshapen and still caked with earth. This pleases him; he completely mistrusts the more perfect supermarket options packed in polystyrene and cellophane. There is something too contrived about their obvious symmetry, compelling him to declare them flavourless on principle. He hands Zara some carrots and a knife, then throws the crumbs from the breadboard out of the window before handing it to her.

'We cook for Blom and Pieter also?' he asks, waiting for her nod.

Blom who has been away for four years. To the Karoo, to an aunt, where she looked after the children. She had left quite suddenly, leaving an unfamiliar silence in her wake. Like a little bird that has taken its incessant chatter elsewhere for the summer and decided, against the laws of nature, not to return. Blom with her springy childhood hair and fingernails like little monkey nuts, now suddenly back, not fourteen but eighteen. The sharp edges of adolescence rounded. Her humour intact.

And Pieter. The man-child with the square face and chin stubble, who has never left. Not even when he was sent away to boarding school as a child. Not even when he was forbidden to come over to play and beaten savagely. Somehow, like a stray dog, he always manages to find his way back to the cottage with the peeling plaster walls. To Zara.

There they are now, bumping into each other again for the first time in four years. He can see them from the window. Blom gives him a kiss. He scratches his head and

nods, unsure what to do. His short hair still sticks up at the crown even though he now shaves every day. And his shoulders have grown broader, from the sport, from rugby. If she were to look closely, she might see a few strands of chest hair curl around the neck of his T-shirt. They come walking towards the cottage, Pieter carrying his discomfort in long loping strides, the pretty young brown woman bobbing at his side oblivious. The old man smiles to himself, then yawns. He thinks he'll turn in early tonight. As soon as the youngsters leave. He has been feeling a little tired of late.

University of Cape Town

Chapter Sixteen

Summer is slowly slipping away. The morning sun has grown milky and the cool fingers of autumn rest on cheeks and hands before you rise. Camille must wake an hour earlier than usual to scrub the cottage before patients arrive. They tend to be here early; in fact she now hangs a sign up on the front door: *Clinic open after 8am*. By then, some of them will have been up and about for four hours already. She uncurls herself from Zara. In cold weather like this they sleep tucked into each other. Like quotation marks. *Dors, ma petite*. Sleep on.

She lights the stove and lifts the kettle onto its purple tongue. Papa's newspaper is on the table. Zara's crayons on the floor. The cottage is not big enough for this. Not for a family and a clinic. It really isn't fair to either one. When Dr Michaelson arrives unexpectedly a little later that morning with supplies (the second time this week) she mentions her concern.

'If I'm going to do this properly, I'll need to do something about space. Build a little room next to the cottage or something.'

'You could do a prefab. They're not as expensive.'

'I would still need to raise the funds.'

'What about the wine farmers? You're doing them a huge favour. It would be nothing for them. They could claim it from tax.'

'Yes, but which wine farmers? I don't know any.'

'Isn't there an organisation? Some monthly meeting amongst them?'

'I can find out. Leah will know.'

Leah now takes a shortcut past the back of the cottage on her way to work. Camille goes out to meet her the following day.

'It's called the Wynboerevereniging. They all sit round a moerse big table and discuss their staff like we're a troop of baboons. I know. When it's Meneer Smit's turn to host, I have to go along and serve bobotie and stuff for the poephols. They won't listen to you. They just won't.'

'They might. If they think they are getting something out of it.'

'And what exactly are they getting out of it?'

'Healthy workers. Higher productivity.'

‘Pffff. Ja. Okay, you give it a try. But don’t be disappointed. They’re befok in die kop. Fucked in the head. And another thing...’

‘Yes?’

‘Pieter. Blom says he’s coming to your house again.’ She presses her hands together. Tensed. Thick veins branch up into her wrists.

‘Yes, he was here the other day. I was in Cape Town. I didn’t know.’

‘Well that mother of his will make sure that fat pig sjamboks the Jesus out of him if she knows. I heard her telling him he mustn’t go near hotnots. When he asks why she says we’ll give him some disease. I think it’s better he doesn’t come over.’

‘What a charming woman.’ She sighs. ‘Leah? Your eye. Is it okay?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It looks bruised. Did he hit you again?’

‘If I want help I’ll ask for it. I got a tongue in my head haven’t I?’

When she returns to the front of the house she finds Zara still in her pyjamas up against the wall, a Coloured man in torn overalls cornering her, sneering at her, only a few feet away. Leica is snapping at his heels, making him jump. He pretends it is part of a dance, then gives Leica a good kick, sending him whimpering to Zara.

‘What on earth are you doing?’ says Camille.

‘Haai Lady.’ The man lifts his cap, then drops it with a little plop onto his head. He runs bloodshot eyes appreciatively over her body, grinning at her with his gums. ‘Jy’t a figure like a trigger.’

‘Get out. Now!’

‘But I’m sick. Isn’t this where to come if I’m sick?’ The drunken man grins at her, deliberately acting simple. In three strides she marches directly up to him and pushes him as hard as she can. He reels and starts retching, looking up to see an old man coming from the house with a stick. ‘Jislaaik!’

‘Get out!’ Camille orders, picking up a nearby rock. ‘Before I damage you.’

They watch him sway and turn and zigzag his way out. At the gate he lifts his cap and drops it onto his head again. Then holding it on his head with one hand he turns and gives an elaborate bow, loses his balance and falls, before disappearing from their view. Zara is still stiff against the wall.

‘What happened Zara? Tell maman!’

‘Wait. Leica. He kicked Leica.’ She drops down to wrap herself around the dog.

'Leica's okay. I promise. Now come, Zara, you must tell me what happened.'

'He said he wanted to see my broekies. Broekies, like what Blom calls them. My panties. I said no. I said these are my pyjamas and I don't wear broekies with my pyjamas. And then he started to come closer. I don't know why.'

Drunk at seven o'clock in the morning. That may be his business. But inflicting it on Zara is quite another. The shock is such that at first Camille has no way of knowing how to contain herself. Nor how to keep her anger and her fear from Zara. When she mentions it to Leah, she simply shrugs. 'It could have been worse,' is all she has to say.

'Exactly!' says Camille. 'So what am I supposed to do? Wait until something does happen before I do anything about it?'

'It's life. You'll get over it.'

'It is *not* life. Not life as I know it anyway.'

'Well, if you want to stay here you better get used to it. What makes you think you so special? Here everybody pays sometime or another.'

She spends the day pacing, muttering to herself. She has to force herself to be gentle with her patients, and is still fuming at dinner time.

'Let it go, Camille,' says her father when Zara goes to take a bath. 'It's going to make you sick if you don't. I don't think he'll be back. He's just a drunken fool.'

'Will you watch Zara for me?' she responds. 'I need to go for a walk. I think I may go for a swim at the lake. Maybe that will help.'

**

Die Wynboerevereniging is scheduled to meet that Thursday evening. Leah knows that Meneer Smit keeps his appointments in a big diary, in the study. The host: Meneer Anton du Plessis. The time: 7pm. She will walk with Camille to show her where Anton du Plessis's farm is. They plan to get there a little early so that Camille can speak to Meneer du Plessis first.

'Most probably they'll meet in the tasting room,' she says. 'Bit of luck they'll get a bit sozzled and then you can tell them anything you like and they'll agree.'

Meneer du Plessis is not a small man. He has a sleek look of wealth rather like a well-groomed, well-fed domestic animal. 'Carries his money in his stomach,' Leah said before leaving her there. But in spite of his size, Camille finds him disarmingly gentle.

'How can I help you, Madam?'

She explains about the clinic. 'I would like an opportunity to tell you about what I am doing, and why. It would be wonderful if I could have the support of the community.'

'The agenda has already been typed up,' he says. 'But seeing as you have come all this way, and on foot, I'm sure we can give you a chance to speak. May I get you something to drink while you wait?'

There is still a pocket of time before the others arrive; she had not expected to find the farm so easily. She toys with her wine glass. A Coloured woman arrives with a big pot of bredie. Camille smiles at her. It is not returned. She thinks again of the man who taunted Zara and turns to Meneer du Pless, who is filling a glass of wine for himself.

'Maybe you can help me; I'm unfamiliar with customs here. What is this *dopstelsel*?'

'Dopstelsel? It's an old Afrikaans term for 'tot system'. It used to be a way of paying labourers, but it shot us in the foot in the end.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, nobody seems to know what came first, the tot system or the dependency. All we know is that our Coloured workforce are mad about wine. They'll do anything for it. Some would actually *prefer* to be paid in wine, if you can believe that. And if you don't give it to them, they'll pinch it, or buy it in jerry cans from the shebeens down the road. So in some ways, we prefer to give it to them; at least we know they're not drinking *witblits* or paraffin. And they only get it after a day's work, so it keeps them sober during the day.'

'I suppose it's naïve to think there could be some kind of rehabilitation programmes introduced.'

Meneer du Plessis smiles at this thought. A broad, honest smile.

'This is wine country. Somehow I can't see *anybody* in this industry, whether they are black, brown, white or purple, standing up in front of their friends, neighbours and colleagues and saying "My name is Anton du Plessis and I'm an alcoholic.'" He gives a deep laugh. Gently tries to explain it to her. 'You see, Miss Camille, here wine is a

way of life. It's part of our identity. But I do understand your concern, naturally. We must worry about these things and keep an eye on it, of course.'

In clouds of dust they arrive. Some in big trucks with big tyres. Some in Mercedes Benzes and BMWs. There is handshaking and laughter and wine poured from bottles without labels. She remains seated. At various points each of the men walk across to her and introduce themselves. They are friendly and kind. Each of them asks whether she has some wine. A few want to know whether she is comfortable on the hard tasting bench. One even fetches a pillow from his car. She recognises Pieter's father, who nods his head in greeting, before returning to his conversations, casting sly glances in her direction when he thinks she's not looking.

At 7.30pm Meneer du Plessis motions everybody to sit down and charge their glasses for the meeting. He introduces Camille and tells them that she will be speaking to them at the end of the meeting, apologises for not having it on the agenda.

'Can I not get it over with quickly and leave you men to your meeting?' she asks.

'No madam, because somebody needs to take you home. You can't walk around at night here anymore. Not with all these new blacks about.'

The meeting is interminably long. Most of it is in Afrikaans, which she does not understand. She listens to the sound of its guttural, earthy flow. It is a language with emotion, that seems to bend in tone to the nature of the man uttering it. In the mouth of a soft-spoken man with a low timbred voice it resonates beyond the ear, words running smoothly into each other, like poetry. From the mouth of another farmer it sounds like a rough weapon. A blunt implement. Something from which you would want to escape. Even though she does not follow it, she cannot imagine these large-boned men, their powerful frames, their strong jaws speaking anything else. It would be hard to imagine them speaking in a tongue as delicate, as *yin* as French. It is a masculine language, no doubt very precise. Handcrafted for the people by the people. With special phrases and words that you would need to be Afrikaans to appreciate fully. She watches them nod, or disagree with gusto. Speakers of the code unite. It seems some new ideas are welcomed with slaps on the back, others with jolly laughter. A man takes notes. When it is her turn to talk she stands. Grips her hands in front of her and explains why she has set about opening a clinic, and that she needs

funds to build another room on her property for this purpose. She has gathered some quotes for each suggested option.

'But we already have a clinic. It's very good, I'm told,' someone says.

'I'm sure it is very good. But it's not enough any more,' she says. She can feel the heat fanning into her cheeks. 'The needs of the local people far exceed the current commitment of the clinic. Most accidents, if you want to look at them that way, happen outside of clinic hours. We need something more immediate.'

'Always used to be enough,' the same man says. 'Trouble is they breed like flies. Don't see why it should be our problem.'

'There's also people going to the clinic who shouldn't be here,' says another. 'I don't think we should increase facilities at all. It will only encourage them.'

'Not only that,' says a third farmer. 'But I've heard rumours that those bloody natives in their shacks are coming to you too. The last thing I want is to give them any reason to stay. Pardon my language.'

'But as long as they are here, surely it is better for everybody if they are healthy,' she says.

'Is it? It's Nature's way of keeping the population down. We shouldn't interfere.'

'I don't think we should just write it off,' says Meneer du Plessis. 'You know, wine farming is not a quick career choice for any of us, Miss Camille. We've been here generations. And so have our workers. They are born here. They die here. They are like our family, we try to look after them.'

'Then I don't understand?' she says.

'You're not from here. It can't be easy to learn our ways.' He smiles at her kindly.

'They're a bit like children,' explains another. 'They look to us like we're their parents. We look after their families, feed them, house them, bury them. It's not an easy job. But there's no getting away from the fact that sometimes they can act like savages. And they love wine. That's just how it is. If we don't give it to them they'll either steal it, or have to buy it. And then their families will never see the money. So what do you do?'

'Pay them more?' It falls out her mouth before she can stop herself. The men stare at her, amazed.

'They'll only buy more wine. We have to be responsible. We give them housing, educate them, medicate them. If we give them too much rope, they'll hang themselves. If you had been here as long as we have you would understand that.'

Camille sits down.

Meneer du Plessis looks concerned. 'Listen gentlemen, the lady has come across specially to tell us all about it. Least we can do is think about it. We'll put it on the agenda to talk about next month. Okay? Leave the figures with us.' He hands the paper with the carefully-tabulated numbers to the man who is taking notes. 'Now, tonight's meeting is adjourned. Who can give the lady a lift home?'

'It's fine. Really. I'll walk.'

'I'll take her,' says Mr Smit. 'I live nearby.' He puts his hand on her back as she walks out into the dark, the way a gentleman would guide a lady out of a room to his car. She can feel his palm hot and sweaty through her shirt. In the ambiguous dark he slides his fat fingers under her armpits and digs them into her breast. Before he knows it, she spins around like a whip, the *thwack* of her backhand cutting through the night. Two of the men framed by the doorway of the tasting room stop and stare. Watch as she slips, like a doubt, into the dark shadows. Hear him swear, slam his car door and drive off at speed.

Chapter Seventeen

There is only a week left before the exhibition. Some of the students are fretting and fussing. Others are relaxing deeper and deeper into their inspiration, mining the depths of their ability with passion and joy. He himself alternates between feeling confused and frustrated. The memory of his afternoon with Zara creeps into every thought. Normally a conquest such as this would leave him feeling buoyant. Elated even. Not more frustrated than before, with a hundred gnawing doubts clawing at his mind. And worst of all, completely at a loss as to what to do next. There is the obvious drive, the need to repeat the afternoon in the hope that at some point he will truly engage her. But there is also a nagging suspicion that she is mocking him. Exactly how he can't be sure. He can't figure it out. The only good news – and he hopes it *is* good news – is that he too has started a painting. A new one. He thinks he may even like it. With a bit of luck it will be ready for the exhibition. A drawcard for the public.

Maria will have to liase with Trudy directly in the week to come, to arrange transportation of the paintings to the gallery. That should be interesting. Two jealous women. He rather likes the idea. Although it could be dangerous. He doesn't think he'll get involved. He has enough on his plate, and tells her as much.

'I trust you are arranging transport for the paintings.'

'Yes, of course. But I am going to need some information beforehand. For the pamphlets and the press.'

'Speak to Trudy.'

'Can't wait.'

Maria knows that she is taking a big risk. Her reputation is at stake each time she holds an exhibition; although in this case, she is hoping that the political gain from hosting a student exhibition and promoting the undiscovered will outweigh the potential negative impact of any artistic immaturity. But the bigger risk goes far beyond reputation. The bigger risk is that by taking her suspicions and holding them under the spotlight, she may glean far more than she is ready to know.

Is one ever ready to find out whether one's worst suspicions are true? Or that a dream has died, long, long before it was born? A dead foetus cannot remain in the womb for very long before it poisons the bearer. Nor a dead dream in the heart.

Unbeknown to Jake, she has spoken to Trudy about the exhibition already. In her professional capacity she has the confidence to handle matters like these with ease. Trudy was cool and clipped and equally professional. Very helpful, but distant. The real test will come at the exhibition itself. Trudy will have to attend, to facilitate and help organise. Then she will be able to see them together. She doesn't know what she is looking for. But she knows that she will recognise it like an old enemy when she sees it.

**

Towards the end of the week Zara returns to class. She brings two paintings with her, plus some wood and a small drawstring bag of tools. At the end of the lecture when the group return to their own paintings, she sets about making frames. He walks past her again and again. She gives him no recognition whatsoever. It is as though he does not exist. She simply sets about measuring and cutting, pursing her lips to hold one or two sharp nails as she sets about constructing the frames. And yet there is something different about her. For the first time since he has known her – such a short time forever – she has brushed her hair, and tied it back, away from her face with some coarse string. The absence of expression from her face now more accentuated than ever. After some time she removes her baggy shirt and works in what appears to be a man's vest. He finds himself staring at the skin on her shoulders brown and smooth, the top of her back, her nipples brushing the front of the fabric. At the end of the day, when he can stand it no more, he says in a low voice, 'See me in my office, okay?' She does not respond. He tells himself not to panic. This is how she is, that's all. He will go and sit quietly in his office and wait.

He leaves the door slightly ajar. In case she gets the wrong impression and thinks he's not there. Switches on his computer and absent-mindedly checks his e-mails. After a few minutes he checks his watch. Then the door. A green fly perched in a triangle of sunlight rubs its feet together in glee. He stands up and begins to pace. As he glances

out the window, he sees the white Mazda hatchback driving away. She has left then. And God alone knows when she'll be back. He wants to scream. Picks up the 'stress ball' Maria had bought him and throws it as hard as he can against the wall. 

There is a small knock at the door. Trudy. For the first time, Trudy too is becoming complicated. To date he could always rely on her to add levity to any situation. To smooth the rough edges and warm the cold ones. And yet she seems to have changed lately. He doesn't know what's got into her. She keeps leaving cryptic messages on his voice-mail. *'Call me. Remember me?'* And lurking around his office waiting to grab hold of him on his way in or out. And she's not looking good either. He finds it amazing how quickly women can lose their looks if they don't pay attention. He can't help feeling a little disappointed. Trudy has always been one of the best-groomed women he has ever met. But she appears to have lost weight; her flesh doesn't seem to fit her, or something. She has a haggard look. Most annoying of all, she keeps crying. He was going to ask her out for lunch yesterday, but when he saw the rings under her eyes and her silly attempt at blinking back tears he changed his mind. What he needs right now is positive reinforcement. Not a guilt trip.

'Yes Love,' he says. He wishes she would just leave him alone.

'Just wanted to tell you that some people called from Holland, she says. She is unusually pale.

'What about?'

'They want to come and see you next Tuesday. They spoke about commissioning you, something about an exhibition. It wasn't a good line and I couldn't work out their accents too well.'

'Did you set up a time?'

'Yes. Nine 'o clock.'

'Fine. Thank you.'

This could be something. Maria must tell the press. Send a photographer. Maybe with that kind of goal, the muse will return.

'I haven't seen you in a while,' she says. 'Is there something wrong?'

'You've seen me. I've been around. Don't be silly, you've seen me every day!'

'You know what I mean.'

'Trudy, you of all people should know how busy I've been.'

'That's never got in the way before.' She seems so small suddenly. Like a hurt animal. Her eyes blister with tears. Shit! He rises out of his chair and takes her by the shoulders.

'You look tired. You've been working too hard too. And you're right. I'm sorry. I've just been so snowed under. But I'll make it up to you soon as the exhibition is over. Okay?'

'Okay.' She tries to smile.

'Maybe we can go away some place and relax?'

'That would be nice.'

'I have to go now. I'll think of something and let you know.'

He takes his keys, kisses her and holds her tightly, her petite frame suddenly so delicate against him.

'Tomorrow,' he says as she turns to leave. He will think about what to say tomorrow. Right now he needs a stiff drink.

**

In a quiet pub he nurses a single malt whiskey and stares glumly at the floor. This cannot continue. Zara has addled his brain. Worse than that, she is toying with him. He cannot allow it. Will not allow it. Not from any woman. And especially not from somebody no more than eighteen or nineteen. Besides, it is now spilling over to his other relationships, and hurting people. Imagine if people got to hear about it! He would be the laughing stock. It must stop. How silly he has been. Funny how everything people say about midlife rings true one time or another. Must be that. Must be his way of buying a sports car. He pays for the drink and leaves. On his way home he phones Maria.

'Let's go out for a bite.'

'That'd be nice. Where?'

'Don't know. You choose. Something you'd really like.'

He is starting to feel better. He may even do some painting later.

**

The following morning he is in his office collecting notes when she walks in.

‘Yes Zara.’

‘You wanted to see me?’

‘That was yesterday.’ He can feel his new resolve slipping from him like water. 

‘Oh. Okay,’ she moves to leave.

‘Wait!’ It’s an automatic reflex. His eyes dart from her to the door and back to her.

She stops.

‘I do need to see you. Will you come to my office at lunchtime?’

‘Okay.’

She walks away. A few hours later she is back. He walks towards her as she walks in, reaching one arm out to push the door shut behind her. He moves closer to her. She does not move away, or adjust the space between them. That is one of the little things he notices about lovemaking; it eradicates the magic circles surrounding people. As though there has been some universal adjustment of sacred space. He leans forward to kiss her. She does not respond.

‘Zara,’ he whispers. ‘Don’t you want to kiss me today?’

‘No,’ she replies.

He is taken aback. ‘No? Why?’

‘Not here.’

‘Why?’

She shrugs.

He sighs. ‘Then where? *When?*’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Tomorrow? In your neck of the woods?’

‘Okay.’

‘Beyond rightdoing and wrongdoing, there is a field. Meet me there.’ One of my favourite quotes. Rumi.’

But she does not respond. ‘Is that all?’

‘*All?*’ He is amazed. Belittled. ‘Yes, I suppose so.’

As she turns to walk away he doesn’t know whether he wants to sing or to cry.

Chapter Eighteen

There is little time to ponder. Each day brings with it new faces, new challenges, new illnesses. And worries. Three patients she has seen she suspects have TB. She worries about sending them back to their shacks clutching their little bottles of pills. Worries that if she tells them to return so that she can take them to hospital for tests they may not. She worries about the germs coming into the tiny cottage. Twice a day she scrubs the cottage with disinfectant. It makes her hands swollen and chapped. She encourages Zara to play outside. But since the incident with the drunk at seven in the morning, she feels uneasy about Zara going too far from her sight.

A large black woman with undulating hips and enormous sagging breasts limps in with a gash on her foot. It is too late for stitches; the wound has already knit itself coarsely together, seeping and weeping, infected.

'The Sangoma, he give me things to put on, but they not working.' She has a powerful voice. The kind one can already hear singing.

'Sangoma?'

'Witchdoctor. He throw bones and spirits tell him what is wrong.'

'I see. Well the spirits should have told him that you need an antiseptic. You should have had stitches, but it's too late for that now. Sit here while I clean the wound and inject you.'

The foot is cracked and filthy with toughened toenails caked with clay, mud and blood. She scrubs it in a bowl of Dettol. Then injects antibiotic into the wound. The woman screams ferociously and rolls her eyes like a crazed bull. Camille bandages it up and asks her to come back in a few days.

The black woman does not return in a few days. Instead, two black men arrive at the cottage; the first tall and angular, with wide eyes and nose, and skin pulled tight over strong bones. The second shorter with narrow eyes and a prominent mouth. She is busy dispensing a packet of contraceptives to a young Coloured woman.

'Wait on the bench,' she calls. 'I won't be long.'

Perhaps they do not understand, or do not hear, but they continue to stand, looking through the windows now and again.

After some instructions and explanation to the young woman, who shifts from one leg to the other, pulling the skin on the back of her arm with her fingers, she is free to speak to them. She washes her hands and appears at the door, wiping them on a small towel.

‘Yes?’

‘Want work,’ the shorter one says.

‘What kind of work?’ *Where is Zara?*

‘Any work. Painting. Garden. Building.’

‘Do you know how to build? I mean, if I wanted a room built, would you know how to do it?’

‘I work for builder in Cape Town. He go oversea. I know building.’

‘I might need some building done. I’m waiting to hear if I’m getting some money.

Can you come back?’

He nods.

‘In a couple of weeks, or so?’

‘Yes ma’am,’ he dips his head then mumbles something in Xhosa to his mate, and starts to move away. The second man does not move.

‘Thank you,’ says Camille, an attempt at closing the interaction.

‘Food. I hungry,’ says the taller man.

‘Wait. I’ll make you sandwich,’ she says, disappearing into the cottage.

Where is Zara? Leica?

She quickly assembles the peanut butter sandwich and grabs an apple.

When she turns around the tall man is in the house. She gives a cry and jumps. At this point she hears the welcome groan of the Citroën, the rasp of the handbrake. The tall man looks towards the source of the sound, before taking his sandwich and walking out. He leaves the apple behind.

At the sound of the car, Zara too reappears from behind the house followed by Leica, tail-wagging and held high to greet the old man.

‘You’re covered in paint,’ says Camille, trying to hide her relief. ‘Papa, just look at her. She’s covered in paint!’

Her heart is still beating too powerfully to note the edges of guilt spreading across the child’s face.

‘Who was that?’ The old man enquires. ‘Patients?’

‘No. They were looking for work. Hungry.’ She does not want to infect him with her fear.

‘Ah. Zara, what are you painting?’

‘Nothing.’

‘I see nothing has a lot of colours. Where are you painting this colourful nothing?’

She pulls at her plait with smudgy fingers.

‘Maybe round the back of the house? Can I come and have a look at this nothing that needs so much paint?’

‘No.’

‘No? Why not?’

‘I’m busy. It’s not finished.’

‘That’s okay. Sometimes it’s good to see “work-in-progress”’ He tries to engage her eyes, but they will not meet his. He cannot swap a twinkle.

‘Come, let’s make some tea,’ says Camille. Her relief at seeing Zara safe outweighs any small crime she may be in the process of committing. ‘Zara, would you like some juice?’

‘We’ll be inside now,’ the old man says, taking Zara by the hand. ‘But first, young lady, take me to your leader.’

The back of the house is a riot of colour. Indefinite shapes and squiggles and dots stretch from the one end to the other.

‘Hmmm,’ he says. ‘Very nice.’

‘Can you see the birds?’ she asks.

‘Birds? Let me see. Is this a bird?’

‘It’s flying.’

‘Ah, yes. And this one too?’

‘It’s eating.’

‘And the spots?’

‘That’s the food that Maman gives them. I want them to know that we give them food. That they mustn’t be hungry.’

‘I see. Like a billboard.’

‘What?’

‘An advertisement. For birds.’

‘It’s a letter. A bird letter.’

‘Ah, naturally. A much better way of looking at it. Now let’s go inside and try to explain this to your mother.’

Two weeks later, the woman with the cut foot returns. Staggers in, propped between two friends who sigh and sweat under the weight of her. The foot is no longer bandaged, and from the door Camille can see it is septic.

‘Why did you not come back like I told you?’

The woman rolls her eyes.

‘How am I to help you if you won’t listen to me?’

‘Sangoma put spell on me if I come to this house.’

‘What?’

‘Sangoma say white people they know nothing. White woman is worse. Know nothing. Is bad. Sangoma take off bandage and give me this to put on.’ She hands Camille a closed jar with some dark paste inside. As Camille opens the jar the smell of stinking animal blood fouls the air, catching convulsively in her throat and nose. She closes it immediately and tosses it into a large black garbage bag.

‘Look. I don’t know if I can save your foot. You’re going to have to wait here and I’ll see if I can get you into Cape Town to see a doctor later this afternoon. What the Sangoma said to you was more than stupid. It might mean you have to have your foot cut off.’

‘Hawul!’ She says. ‘Oh my God.’ She rolls her eyes, the whites veined and creamy. The other two women, their heads wrapped in scarves shake their heads like chorus members in a Greek tragedy, making clicking sounds of disapproval.

Dr Michaelson works late into the night operating on the foot he tries to save. But when he sees how deeply the rot has eaten away the flesh, he is left with no choice but to amputate, before the infection spreads any further.

‘She’s going to have to stay here for a few days. In hospital, where nobody will interfere with the healing process.’

‘Just when you think it can’t get more bizarre, it does,’ she says the following day to Dr Michaelson, pushing the hair away from her face. ‘It started out as a bad cut. If she’d listened – to me, not a witchdoctor! – she’d have been all right.’

'This country is not for the faint-hearted,' he says. 'For its beauty we pay an enormous price. But we need people like you. I think you are incredibly brave.'

'There's a saying, "What's the use of being Irish if you don't know that sooner or later the world will break your heart." I often think it's the same for South Africans.'

'But you are neither Irish nor South African,' he observes.

'No. Which does sometimes have me wondering what I'm doing here!'

'Well,' he smiles. 'I can't pretend I don't sometimes wonder the same thing. What are you doing here?'

'I'm not sure. Committing suicide? Only without the relief of death.'

Even now, facing the first person who has come the closest to being a friend, she doesn't tell him. Does not explain the letter with the words that are never far from her, their refrain as lovely and as hollow as the death rattle of stars:

My love, how hard it is for me to write this letter. I must tell you what has happened. When I returned I found my wife was very ill. I know. You did not know, how could you? And who knows why I never told you I was married. Perhaps because I could not bear to break the spell and ruin our magic? I couldn't run the risk of losing you. Can you understand? And because my wife and I had been apart so long, I didn't think it would need to touch us. I had planned to tell you later. How much later. I do not know. How weak I must seem to you right now. And how I wish I had told you, my love, for now I fear you will feel betrayed forever.

I need to stay with her. And you must be free. And be happy. But never forget that not a minute passes that I do not ache for you. All I can do to make myself feel normal is paint you, from the memory in my hands, my mouth, my skin.

*To love is to bleed with longing
to arch one's cry to the fist of the night,
and hope is a stone
falling, falling
from the tongue of a dream
through the sky*

Part II

'A plant dies and is buried again
man's feet return to the terrain,
only wings evade death.' - Neruda

University of Cape Town

Chapter Nineteen

They eat dinner on their laps. A hearty vegetable stew with big chunks of fresh bread. The old man refills their wine glasses. Pieter shakes his head as his turn comes, but the old man fills it anyway.

'I have to drive tonight,' Pieter says.

'A little more is not going to do any harm. And anyway, tonight is a special night.

Tonight Blom is home.'

Blom raises her glass and grins. Then turns to Pieter. 'Where are you going?' she asks.

'Back into Cape Town. Some of the guys from my class are getting together. I thought I'd go along.'

'That's nice,' she says. 'I love the city at night.'

'Take her with you,' the old man says.

'Would you like to?' he offers. Not what he had in mind. Unless of course Zara came along too. 'Zara? What about you? We could all go.'

Zara shakes her head.

'I'll come,' says Blom. 'Jus' give me five minutes to get ready. Soon as I'm finished dinner I'll run home.'

'Are you back for good?' he asks her in the car. She has returned in a very pretty, very short dress, with high sandals. In sitting position the dress creeps up her brown thighs.

'I hope not,' she says.

'Why?'

'Because I hate this place.'

'Prefer the Karoo?'

'Any place so long as it's not here.'

'I thought you liked it. You always seem so happy.'

'No point dropping your lip.'

'I suppose so.'

He does not press her. With Leah as the family domestic, and knowing Blom as a child, he knows quite enough about her family to understand how difficult it must be

for her to live here. As a child, she had no choice. But suddenly, now, it seems she has left childhood behind. Certainly her body is no longer that of a child.

He wonders if she knows of the plans afoot to give some land and vines to the labourers. Goiya has a fairly senior position amongst the labourers, and would be sure to be selected as part of the team, maybe even as the leader. He hopes so. It could mean more money for him. A sense of dignity.

His father has been in meetings all week with neighbouring wine farmers to discuss the nuts and bolts of this new scheme: how much land to give them, how much control, how much time off. He catches snippets of it in passing. His father would never discuss it with him, of course. He made that quite clear when he decided to study engineering rather than viticulture. And in some ways, he feels relieved. But he cannot help hearing him droning on at endless meetings, many of which are held in their home. When he first heard of the scheme, his suspicions were raised. Something is afoot. He wouldn't want to speak for the others, but giving land away – giving *anything* away - is most unlike his father. He must be up to something. And then last night, he overheard the answer. He was lying on his bed reading, his bedroom directly above the dining room where the meeting was taking place.

'We're asking for trouble, Hermann,' said Kobus Fouché.

'Look, it's going to be a bloody mess, that's for sure,' agreed his father. 'But the money's overseas now, Kobie. The money's overseas and this is helluva good for marketing. Bloody foreigners get all bleary-eyed about that sort of thing. They'll buy the wine from the okes who are seen to be giving the darkies a share of the pie, I'm telling you.'

He took up his book again, smiled and shook his head. He might have guessed.

It takes an hour to reach Cape Town. He has always enjoyed the drive. But there are times when he wishes it weren't quite so far. His friends are meeting at the Waterfront. His friends? Not really. Friendly, yes. And funny. And necessary. But not friends for life. Not like Zara.

And yet lately he has felt something inside him changing. Moving. A restlessness he cannot define is taking hold. A need to belong to something. Something beyond the

valley and his father. Beyond the magnificent estate and the lush vegetation. A longing for something completely his. Not inherited.

He knows his parents are disappointed in him. He was expected to continue the tradition and take over the farm.

'That's what the de Goede boy is doing. And Japie du Plessis,' his father said when he told him he wanted to study electronic engineering.

'Viticulture. That's what you'll study if I'm paying for it. What's the matter with you? This farm not good enough for you? Electronic engineering? Forget it!'

He knew better than to argue with his father. But he did not forget it. Why should he? Instead, with increased determination, he attached his straight A report card and a letter from his teacher to a bursary application. He will never forget the elation when he discovered that he had been awarded a substantial amount to cover fees, accommodation plus a little extra to defray expenses. Or the freedom he felt when he used some of it to buy the old Mazda. Especially after his father had said he could walk to varsity for all he cared.

His mother, who opened the letter, had apparently boasted to every woman in her bridge club. Leah had actually chuckled when she gave him the details.

'Pieter won a scholarship, you know. Not that we wouldn't have sent him anyway. He's extraordinarily bright. Not sure where he gets it from.' And then that little laugh of hers. As though she knows something nobody else ever will.

By the time the news reached his father that evening, it was a fait accompli.

'Bloody fool,' was all he had to say about it, slamming the door and walking back out of the house.

He had not responded. Simply took his letter and headed for the bedroom. Closed the door and sat on his bed, reading the letter again and again. Holding it up to the light.

With the bursary money he could have rented a room closer to campus. Become part of the 'scene'. He still says he will. As soon as he finds the right place. As soon as he gets time to look. As soon as something comes up.

Deep down he knows it is something else. For while the longing for beyond grows deeper each day, he cannot think of leaving Zara. How much longer Pappi will be there for her, who can tell? He seems to have lost weight recently; his wiriness now almost bordering on frailty. Besides, that is what he had promised Camille, silently, at her funeral.

'I'll look after her forever, Tannie,' he remembers whispering into the rain.

He always wished she were his mother too. The colourful scarves in her hair were like flags. Secret symbols of a far-off world, a little piece of which they had brought with them here. Worlds where children played the best games, returning at any point to capable arms and stories and food. She was so gentle. He remembers arriving at the cottage one windy afternoon. Blom and Zara were playing on the swings and had not seen him. He called out to them but the wind seemed to take his words and wrap them like a turban around his head. Or maybe Zara and Blom were just ignoring him. He decided to get their attention by cycling nonchalantly past them. But he underestimated the power of Blom's tiny calves to propel herself ever higher on the swing. With an astonished shriek her foot caught his shoulder and sent him with all his dignity flying from his bike onto the gravel. Zara had walked across, crouched down on her haunches and stared at him.

'I'll call Maman,' she said, vanishing indoors.

His left arm stung and thick red blood oozed through his T-shirt sleeve. To cry would mean total surrender. But the pain. The humiliation! And what would his mother say if she knew he'd been here? All he could do was press his brows together as firmly as possible and suck his lips in.

Camille came from the house with a small bowl of tepid water and a cloth.

'Come, petit,' she said. 'Sit next to me on the steps and let me have a look.'

Slowly and carefully she had cleaned the graze and dabbed on some mercurochrome, humming to herself all the time, while Blom bounced around them and Zara stood quietly watching.

'You'll have a big bruise tomorrow,' she said. And then she pressed her thumb between his brows to ease the furrows. 'But no need to worry so. What about some juice?'

It was different when he fell at home. Usually his mother would scold him for being clumsy.

'Look where you're going, Pieter,' she would say. 'You're not a Mongol.' Then he would be sent to Leah who would take him tightly by the hand and haul him off to the bathroom, where she would wash the graze and douse it with vigour and stinging antiseptic.

On his mother's urging, his father had beaten him when he discovered he was visiting the small cottage. The sjambok's leather strips burning into him; in the bathroom mirror his back like a braai grill. He could not bath for two weeks, the hot water stung him so.

And each night when he climbed into bed he wished he had a dog like Leica to curl up with. He wished he lived not here, in this house with high ceilings and airy rooms where he suffocated from rigidity and structure. But there, cramped and warm in a magical realm of herb seedlings potted in old tin cans and children's drawings on the walls. A world filled with possibilities and imagination.

The beatings taught him not obedience, but how to lie. And instead of dampening his ardour to visit the cottage, it sharpened it. He persuaded Leah to cover for him.

'Yes Merrem, I saw him. He's on his bike. He's around.' Although she reprimanded him fiercely whenever she could.

'You want to get me fired?'

'No, Leah.'

'Then stop going over there all the time and thinking I'm going to protect you.'

But she could see in his face she was fighting a losing battle. The child was bewitched by friendship and who could blame him, the poor little bastard?

She too had niggling feelings of doubt about the setup. She could see that Blom had flourished in just a few months. She cried less, was less demanding, was happier. But was she not allowing her child to set herself up for terrible disappointments? When the dice fell later in life, Zara would have opportunities. Blom would not. Zara might go to university. Travel back to Europe. Leaving Blom, who would probably get a job as a domestic (providing the blerry blacks didn't get there first). Whereas if she

played with her own kind, she might not enjoy it as much now, but later on she'd be more content. Marry a local boy. Have her own family.

And then Pieter. Was it a good idea for them to get too close? She clenches her jaw. Is *that* the reason the pig beat the daylights out of him when they found he'd been playing over there? Bastard. Was it really Zara they were keeping him from? Or Blom? She feels with her tongue for the ridge in the gap between her teeth and the comfort of its faintly metallic taste. Runs a rough hand over the lump on her head. Had she bumped herself, or was that Goiya? It is hard to keep track.

**

The crowd sit outside on bucket chairs, seasoned here and there by gulls and boats and legs and laughter. It is a warm evening. Salt-infused.

'This is Blom,' he says.

There are murmurs of greetings. As they find themselves seats, one or two of the crowd turn to look at Blom again.

'What can I get you?' a boy called Jaco asks them on his way to the bar.

'A beer,' he says. He would prefer wine.

'A coke,' says Blom. 'Ag nee, a glassie wyn.' She turns to the person next to her and grins.

'Glad you made it, Piet,' says one of the guys on the other side of the table. 'What did you make of today's test?'

When he turns around she is chatting effortlessly. He starts to relax.

As the evening progresses classmates he has never spoken to wander over to him to chat. At first he cannot understand it. Why all of a sudden? They've had all year to befriend him, why now? But after catching a few of their stolen glances at Blom, he starts to understand and a strange warm feeling creeps through him. He sits up straight in his chair, stretches his shoulders back and orders another beer. The glow of the lamps glide like honey on the water.

'Hey Piet? What are you and Blom doing on Saturday? We're having a braai, why don't you join us?'

On the drive home they slip into a comfortable silence. Now and again her fresh smell. Something crushed. A spice. His face slightly tilted as he looks across at her now and then, watching her stare out into the night, softly singing. He wonders where she is. And with whom.

'How do you feel about Saturday? The braai?' he asks when they reach the valley.

'I love the city,' she says, half to herself. 'Yes. Let's go.'

They say it is darkest before the dawn. As the night spins slowly away from itself the stillness in the valley is a mirror of the sky. He falls asleep, his mind a swirl. Dreams of a spiral staircase. He is stuck on a landing and must choose whether to go up or down. He has no idea where either direction will lead. Further down the road in quarters where the sour smell of stale alcohol is the only reminder of the violence a few hours before, Blom too sighs in her sleep. She dreams she is sitting on Table Mountain at night, the fairy lights of the city below her and a red bicycle lying at her side.

Chapter Twenty

Frank Rosen hangs up the telephone, puts out his Gauloise and settles down to read the paper once again. He notices a spelling mistake in the third line of his art review column. Swears, then grins, showing brown nicotine stains on his teeth. He planned to write that the artist's impressionist style suggests the faintest influence of Monet. But in print, a 'y' has replaced the 't', making it 'Money' instead. 'The artist's impressionist style suggests the faintest influence of Money.' How Freudian. And so often the case these days: there seems to be an infinite well of cleverly-marketed crap. He sniffs and lights another Gauloise. At least his pending retirement after what seems a lifetime of judging and weighing the value of art, will provide him with a complete change. He will spend more time at home tending his tomatoes and fixing the house. He will have some of his favourite paintings reframed, and will bother to attend only the exhibitions of those painters he admires and respects. Good painters unencumbered by the undulating challenges of their egos. 'Isn't that right, Fellini?' He strokes the triangular head of the oriental black cat who is settling himself down on the main section of the newspaper in the sun. 'What do you say?' Fellini flicks his tail.

Maybe he wouldn't be feeling quite so acid had he not just spoken to Maria. That social climber has invited him to another of her dreadful exhibitions, the purpose of which, no doubt, will be to punt her egotistical boyfriend's latest artistic aspirations.

Not that the man is without some talent. But unfortunately the House of Art has too many mansions, offering space to too many squatters and exploiters. Their driving force the measles of red spots at an exhibition. And an increasingly gullible public, uneducated in art, with ever more money to spend. A coterie of sycophants. Where Jake Coleman fits into all this, Frank cannot say. There is such a fine line between the genuine and the fake, the authenticity of passion and the whirlpool of spin and marketing and gimmicks. Jake has had his moments, his flashes of brilliance, no doubt about that. But not for a very long time.

He sniffs, then draws on the Gauloise. Turns to the cat again. 'Ah, Fellini... it seems the *nouveaux riches* have inherited the earth. And art – or no, wait, *creativity* – is replacing tennis parties as the favoured hobby of this little troop of bored bourgeois plutocrats.'

Still, he reasons, he can always use this exhibition to his own advantage. Several overseas art publications have been pestering him for an article; something on new trends in art at the southern tip of Africa. Hopefully there will be some students 'of colour' in the mix. Which means he could comment on the exhibition and include something with an ethnic flavour. He finds it wryly amusing that African ethnicity has such exotic appeal and nobility. Especially if it is an artist who has survived the struggle. Still, he could always use the same article for his column in the local papers. That would save him time and effort. And it would be one article closer to freedom.

Maria hangs up the phone and pauses. Frank is always so unfriendly and negative. Often downright unpleasant if it comes down to it. He should be grateful to her. Not rude. Without people like her he wouldn't have a job! She lights a cigarette and phones the coffee shop next door to ask them to deliver a *latte* and a fruit tartlet. She'll go to gym later. She'll work it off.

Personally she doesn't know why people hold Frank Rosen's opinion in such regard. He's acerbic and unkempt. One would think he'd need some finesse for a job such as his, but if he does have any, he certainly doesn't seem to let on. Perhaps it's because he's been with the papers so long? she muses. A dirty old hack who knows how to manipulate himself into a cushy job. He's never even bought a single painting from her.

She walks outside to see whether the *latte* is on its way. Browses through the extravagant holidays on offer in the window of the travel agency. Perhaps she could persuade Jake to take a trip. She'd love to go on a cruise. Something special. Perhaps *then* things might improve between them. Just then, a jackhammer starts up. They appear to be fixing a pothole. She moves inside as her drink arrives, the noise gnawing at her skull. She picks up the latest copy of *Odyssey* magazine and flicks through an article on Feng Shui. Perhaps she could get a consultant in, not only to the

shop but to her home as well. Perhaps that would help shift the bad energy. Her eye catches an advertisement in the corner of the page: TAROT READINGS, Constantia. She circles it with a pen. Now that would be an interesting experience. She has only been once before, and found it astonishingly accurate. Not a bad idea to see whether her instincts are on track. She is a firm believer in trusting one's instincts. But has often wondered where instinct ends and paranoia begins.

The door sensor rings. She leaves her pen inside the magazine to mark her place, and looks up. She recognises the Hungarian potter.

'Mátyás! What a surprise. What are you doing here?'

'I've been driving and driving. I couldn't find you,' he beams.

'Do we have a meeting?' she says.

'I thought we did,' he scratches his blonde head. 'Am I wrong again?'

'We had one last week. When I didn't see you, I thought perhaps you couldn't make it.'

'Ah. So I'm a week late. That's okay.' He sits down in front of her, and delves into a plastic bag. 'Here, I brought you this.' From the bag he produces a potted cactus.

'Isn't he beautiful?' he grins.

'Well, yes. Yes! Stunning. Nobody has ever given me a cactus before.'

'This is what I was thinking. So, I am the first. That's beautiful.'

'Would you like some coffee, Mátyás? Can I order you a *latte*, a cappuccino, an espresso? And what about a fruit tartlet? The people next door make the most ambrosial food.'

'Only if you have some too.' He is still smiling.

'Oh, I've just had. But... okay. It's not every day we get together.'

She is suddenly delighted to see him. His simple affection is contagious. A celebration.

'I also brought you these,' he says. And from the bag he produces some exquisite pottery tea-bowls.

'Oh, Mátyás. I *love* those. Will you leave them with me for the shop? Let's see if we can make you rich?'

'Yes. Then you would be giving *me* something for the first time.'

She cannot know that in a valley near a rock pool, her partner has just made love to a woman half her age. And that at this moment he is watching the young woman who lies quietly alongside him, staring up at a darkening sky. Perhaps if he waits long enough, he will make sense of her contradictions, he thinks. Her sensuality and her silence. Find some pattern in her behaviour. A rhythm. The wind runs fingers through the leaves. It is getting cold. A large raindrop breaks onto her forehead.

She is the rain cycle. The swollen wave as it rises to lick the moon. The dew on a leaf, pulling, pulling, tugged by a force outside itself until it breaks free, transformed into one cloud, then the next, arched against eternity. And as the lightning tears the landscape, she gives herself away with the rain, falling first in hard steady beats, subsiding later into gentle pulses. At the heart of each cycle, an impenetrable desolation.

He must just be patient, he tells himself. It will come, the light.

Chapter Twenty-one

For Pieter, the engineering course is sometimes an uncomfortably masculine affair. Mechanical. Full of angles. The lecturers progress through the course systematically and with meticulous precision. He must concentrate. He cannot afford to miss anything. He cannot afford to fail. And yet this has become difficult of late. Before he can stop himself a thought has enticed him and pulled him all the way down its path by the time he realises that he has missed half the lecture.

During coffee breaks the students thaw in the sun. They seem to include him more since the evening at the Waterfront.

'Are you coming over on Saturday night?' Jaco asks.

'Sure,' says Pieter.

'With Blom?' Jaco enquires. Is he reading his mind?

'Ja,' he says, trying to sound careless. 'Sure.'

The feelings collide; on the one hand he enjoys the new respect this perception has afforded him. And on the other, he feels annoyed about their interest in her. In some ways Blom is like family. He's known her almost all his life. It's inappropriate for callow engineering students to be noticing her so obviously. They must leave her alone.

But mostly there is a lightness in him, a sweetness to living, that he has not known before. A strange relief. Since he was five years old he has known two things: that there is only Zara. And that he would never have her. And in some ways that has not changed. Cannot change. *Who would he be if that were no longer true?* And yet he feels as though he is on holiday from the weight of that knowledge.

Late that afternoon he stops at the labourers' cottages. Leah is wringing out some washing. She looks at him questioningly, her face twisting with every squeeze.

'Hello, Leah,' he says. After all these years he is still wary of her.

'Ja?' she replies.

'I'm looking for Blom.'

'Ja, so?'

'Well, is she here?'

'Maybe.'

Hearing his voice Blom appears at the door.

'Hi,' she grins.

'Feel like a walk?' he says suddenly, trying his best to ignore Leah's glare. 'It's such a beautiful evening.'

'I'll just get my *jas*,' she says. 'Wait.'

'Your mother doesn't look impressed,' he says as they disappear down the dust road.

'Ja, I dunno what's her problem,' says Blom. 'Never mind.'

'Are you sure?' He asks quietly. He is never certain what Blom must endure from her parents. He would hate for them to take it out on her.

'Ja, relax man!' She gives a grin and a playful slap on the arm. 'Now tell me about the party.'

The party begins as a braai. Pieter has brought meat for both himself and Blom. He went that morning to the supermarket. Spent a good while at the meat counter, wondering what she would prefer. In the end he decided to err on the side of plenty: sosaties, wors, chicken breasts and steaks. Other people could always help themselves to what they couldn't manage themselves. When he put the meat in the fridge at home, his father raised his bushy eyebrows.

'Somebody obviously has too much money to spend. What do you think you're feeding, a bloody army?'

'It's my money, Pa,' he said.

He has also taken a bottle of good white wine from the cellar. Hidden it in a cooler bag under his sweaters, and smuggled it out of the house in a rucksack. His father watches him leave, a thick scowl smeared across his face.

By the time they arrive the music and voices and laughter are already very loud. They are playing grunge rock. Pearl Jam. Plastic bowls of chips and saucers of oily peanuts adorn the tables and a large bucket of yellow punch with the occasional chunk of fruit is spilt with gusto into various glasses. He tries to appear relaxed, nodding his head in time to the music and smiling. Smacks back some of the oversweet punch with Blom before opening the wine. But still he feels self-conscious. Everybody must know it's

just an act. One or two people sing along with Pearl Jam: *I wish I were the verb to trust, and never let you down.* Already some people are dancing. He envies their abandon. Their complete surrender to the music. Blom too moves effortlessly with the rhythm. Her narrow hips swaying, her pretty shoulders moving forward and back. It reminds him of when he first saw her all those years ago, with Zara, practising for their concert. Even then he realised that some people were born to dance with flair and fire. He wishes he could have been one of them. He drinks his wine as quickly as he can and tops up his glass. For reasons beyond him, it is not having the effect he desired. Instead of becoming more relaxed he is starting to feel more and more isolated, instead of numbing the senses it seems to be making them more acute.

I wish I were an alien, at home behind the sun.

Right before his eyes, Jaco asks Blom to dance.

‘Later,’ says Blom. He could kiss her.

‘Come,’ she says, taking his hand. ‘Let’s have something to eat.’

After they have eaten, he stands up bravely. He must ask her to dance, there is no way around it. If he doesn’t, somebody else will, that’s for sure, and then he will be left on his own all night. Worse still, they will think she has left him for someone else!

‘Shall we dance?’ He tries to look careless, even though he has no clue what he will do with his long, unco-ordinated legs.

‘Ja,’ she says. ‘Good idea.’

To begin with he finds that the less he moves, the better. He just shuffles his shoulders a little this way, then that. His best bet is to mirror Blom, to copy her as best he can.

On no account must he reveal how hard he is concentrating. He must feign nonchalance at all costs. In spite of his efforts, Blom quickly comes to the rescue, taking his arms and lightly guiding him. He follows her lead, trying one or two steps, tentatively at first, and repeats them over and again, first in his mind, and then in his body. Not bad. It’s a bit like working out a mathematical formula. Not too bad at all. His stiffness starts to dissolve, and soon the music starts creeping into him. Soon he finds himself imagining he must look all right. He is dancing. Really dancing! Just like the others. Every now and again he even mouths the words of the song.

When she eventually drags him off the dance floor for a rest she is laughing.

‘Haai! You naughty boy, you never told me you liked dancing so much.’

She never said he was any good, mind you. But he is too happy to care. People seem to be smiling at him, and he smiles back, feeling the collective joy. He puts his arm around Blom and feels the light warmth of her smooth arm against his back in return.

The evening falls away from them all too soon. There is more dancing, more wine, somebody passes a joint around, and driving home in the car, both sing, *I wish I were a Christmas tree, the star that went on top*. When he stalls the car outside the Septembers' cottage they both start to giggle.

He gets out of the car with her.

'Haai! What are you doing?'

'I don't know. I don't want to go home yet,' he says. 'It's boring.'

She stifles a delighted snort. 'Well, you can't stay here.' Quite suddenly she looks worried.

'I know. Shall we go to the lake?'

In the still conspiracy of the night they fall silent. When they reach the lake he stops and looks up at the new moon and wonders what he must look like from up there: a young man peering upwards, balanced precariously at the edge of his universe, at the very point in his life when the future is peeling away from the past, and the present is so dense that he hardly dares to breathe. He turns to Blom and releases her small hand.

'The bushes look like they're moving,' she says.

'I don't want to look at the bushes. I want to look at you.' In the blackness he feels the contours of her face with his hands. Then very tentatively he drops his mouth onto hers. In the cool of the night the soft warmth of this action makes him catch his breath, and the evening is suddenly seamed with magic. 'Thank you,' he whispers.

'Thank you,' returns the echo.

**

They walk back to the cottages very slowly. When he finally drives away she pauses a while before the front door before meticulously turning the handle and creeping in. Something is moving in the shadows.

'Who's there?' she whispers.

No reply. 'Who's there?' she repeats. 'Mommy?'

'What.'

'Where's Pa?'

'He's passed out next door. What else is new?'

'Are you okay?'

Again no reply.

'Are you okay, Mommy?' Her mother's silence frightens her.

'Has he hit you, Mommy? Are you okay? Tell me!'

She hears a sniff. 'No. He didn't hit me. This time it's you.'

'Me? What've I done?'

'Blom, I'm asking you once. Please don't see that boy again.'

'Pieter? Pieter's not *that* boy. He's Pieter. He's like your son, how can you call him *that* boy?'

'Don't make me ask you again, Blom. I'm asking you now.'

'Well you can't expect me to listen unless you have a fokken good reason.' She is growing angry. Has her mother been drinking?

'Okay girl, you asked for it.' Leah smooths her hands on her lap and takes a deep breath. 'When that fat pig had his way with you, and we sent you off quickly to the Karoo?'

'Ja.'

'Well, you were lucky.'

'I didn't feel very lucky. What do you mean?'

'I was also pretty once, you know. I didn't always look like this. And when I was your age, it was me.'

'He raped you too?'

'Not once. Not twice. A lot of times.' Leah starts to heave.

'Jesus,' whispers Blom, putting her arm awkwardly around her mother. 'It's all right Mommy,' she says. 'Come now.'

As her mother's sobs subside she asks, more to herself than Leah, 'But what made you think about it all now? Pieter is not like his father. We all know that.'

In the dark she can just see her mother lift her head and face her.

In the dark is where her answer belongs.

'He is your father too.'

**

Before his son has even climbed out of the car, he has pulled him out by the arm and sunk his knuckles into the boy's gut.

'Think I brought you up to fuck Hotnots?' he hisses.

He does not expect the boy's reaction. Doesn't even duck as the knockout punch fuelled by a lifetime of rage knocks him senseless against the wall.

'That's the last time, Pa,' he says, before getting back into the car and driving away.

University of Cape Town

Chapter Twenty-two

To avoid Maria he stays in his studio. Some of the time he spends paging through ~~an~~ journals, although he never seems to find the articles he's looking for. When he does, he becomes irritated with them, questioning why he ever considered them to be of any value at all. Some of the time he spends preparing lectures. Although the content seems fragmented to him. He cannot ever seem to find the one cohesive thread that ties a brilliant lecture together. And some of the time he paints. His painting is coming along tortuously. He has redone parts of it - certain parts will not be resolved - and he has even begun dreaming about it at night, waking in a panic, confused and angry.

That is when he can sleep. Mostly he lies awake night after night, falling asleep only when the birds begin the business of their day. Then often he wakes a short while later, gripped with irrational fear. Sometimes of insanity, sometimes death, sometimes both. *Why is he pursuing her? Is he mad? Will he ever paint again? What if Maria leaves him? Who is Pieter? Is he dying?* He gives up coffee in a vague attempt to soothe a heartbeat speeding out of control.

And then he misses his appointment with the Dutch visitors. Trudy had sent him an e-mail reminder, which he received the previous day; he had even written it into his filofax. But after a night of tossing and turning, he longs to have the house to himself, to sleep a little, have a relaxed breakfast and ease slowly into the day. He knows he doesn't really have to be in until later, with students working on their exhibition submissions. He has already asked Maria to disconnect the telephone. And the appointment with the Dutch people sails cleanly out of his head.

When he switches on his cell-phone at ten o' clock, there are three strained messages from Trudy; the last indicating that the Dutch men had gone. They had not left a number. They said if they still needed him at all they might call.

He drives to the school. Only three more days to the exhibition. The press has been alerted; already there are write-ups, small articles in the Arts' section of various media. He switches on the radio to catch the tail-end of a talk-show. The host ending off with '....not to be missed. Jake Coleman will be releasing a new work. The first in

some time. A breakthrough, his agent says. That, plus all the newest talent on the block. See you there!’ A breakthrough? Sometimes he hates Maria. Is this revenge? He trudges into the school. The students don’t need this kind of pressure either. It’s so ludicrous.

The simple frames Zara has made for her paintings are remarkably effective. So much so that the rest of the class take silent note. He watches them pretend to walk idly past, try to catch a glimpse, then become pensive. She ignores them and him, although now and again he notices her lips moving. He has established that she is not in fact talking to herself as he originally thought. She is singing.

He has a headache. The exhibition is making him ill. What if he doesn’t have anything to show? It has the students worried too. He can tell by their silence. They seem tired and strained. It can’t be easy for them either, poor kids. This is their first real opportunity. All of them desperate not to blow it. Only Zara is unconcerned. It is not natural.

‘Here are my paintings,’ she says dropping them off in his office and turning to leave.

‘Wait.’

She stops.

‘Zara, you have to stop doing your own thing all the time.’

Silence.

‘You put me in a very difficult position. I don’t want to chastise you. But I haven’t even seen your paintings. That’s not how we work here.’

‘See them now.’

‘That’s not the point. What if they’re not right? Not good enough. Then what?’

She shrugs. He feels the blood flood his face.

‘You can’t just shrug it off. Either you want to be a student like everyone else, or you don’t.’ He stops. He can’t believe he is shouting

‘Okay.’

What a stupid thing to say. Stupid! What if she were decide to leave? Why give her a way out like that?

‘Okay, let’s take a look at the paintings,’ he says. He tries to smile. To breathe.

She props them up against the wall.

‘Hmmm.’

She waits. After a short while she says, ‘Can I go now?’

He pauses. He cannot think of anything to say. He feels the blood drain from his face.

‘I suppose so.’ Then, ‘Zara, wait. The opening. It’s at 7pm on Saturday night. I’ll see you there.’

When he looks up she is gone. He takes one further glance at the two paintings, before turning them to face the wall and sinking into his chair.

There is nothing he can teach this girl. Where the fuck does talent like this come from? And why does he have to have it shoved down his throat now?

Some students have already finished their pieces. Some of them have even sent their work off for framing and are enjoying a day or so of respite, strolling around and smoking whilst their fellow students frown and fret over the wisdom of last minute alterations.

‘When does one know if it’s finished?’ they agonise.

‘When it starts to sing. Matisse talks about painting until the hand sings.’

But mostly there is an air of unspoken anticipation. And a new cohesion in the class. A sense of joint focus and quiet victory over their own dark vulnerabilities. After the exhibition there is only one more week left of term, before they have a month’s break. They deserve their holiday.

He envies them.

Last night he worked into the early hours of the morning. But still his painting remains unresolved. If he is going to stand any chance of making this ridiculous deadline, he will need to apply himself completely for the next three days. He arranges to meet students for an hour each day, for questions, to soothe their agitation, setting aside Friday afternoon for last minute arrangements and leaves Trudy in charge.

Maria cannot reach him on the telephone; he has disconnected it. And when she returns in the afternoon she dares not disturb him. When she knocks on the door at seven to ask if he wants dinner, she finds him not painting, but pacing. Sometimes even reading! He wants his dinner there. He does not wish to be disturbed.

She does not know when he sleeps. But she knows better than to ask. Besides, she too is apprehensive herself. This is the first time she has involved Jake's students. The first time she is asserting herself at the school. On no account can she allow the smallest thing to go wrong. Her position must be made clear, in the most professional manner possible. It is the dignified way to handle matters. She also feels sure that if there is something to uncover, this is the evening it will be revealed.

At 4am on the morning of the exhibition Jake crawls onto the bed. He still has paint on his hands and a smear on his cheek and is too tired to even pull back the covers on his side. At last he is satisfied. Now he will sleep and tomorrow he will have 'the painting' for the exhibition.

It is quite different from his usual style. Far more detailed. Obscure. Called 'Man-Rope' it depicts a man unnaturally contorted, limbs unnaturally threaded and stretched across an abyss. On the one side, Bosch-like demons with oversized heads and enormous mouths. On the other, if you look carefully, the image of a woman, long-limbed and naked, holding a bowl of fruit. The inspiration came from Nietzsche. From *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Zara. Thustra.

*'Man is a rope tied between beast and overman - a rope over an abyss...
What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved
in man is that he is an overture and a going under.'*

As he sleeps in the splendour of his home and the comfort of a job well-done, Zara is wakened by the smallest of whines in her cottage. 'What is it, Leica?' she whispers. The dog is sitting in the entrance to the alcove where she sleeps. The cottage is quiet except for the hum of the fridge. As she turns over to sleep, the dog whines again.

'Come, Leica. Come to bed.' When the old dog does not move she rises and walks into the living area, looks out the window. 'There's nobody there. It's fine.'

Pappi must be awake, she cannot hear him snoring. She tilts her head round his door. 'Everything okay, Pappi?' In the faint light she can just see his outline, he is lying on his back. The blanket has fallen off him, he must be cold. She tiptoes inside. Lifts the blanket from the floor and covers him. He does not wake. She sits softly beside him and watches him for a while while Leica whines. He is not snoring. Not moving. She strokes his forehead. He is so still. As she leans across him to hear if he is breathing, she slowly starts to understand that his tired blue eyes will not open again.

'Pappi,' she whispers, stroking his hand, watching him for some time. "'Only wings evade death". Neruda. Remember?'

In the morning she feeds Leica very early.

'We must bury him today,' she tells him. 'But first we must tell Pieter and Blom. Before they go out.'

The two head off first to the Smit's farm. This is the first time that Zara has ever walked up their pathway to the big wooden door with the brass knocker.

'Is Pieter here?' she asks Mrs Smit.

'No,' Mrs Smit seems angry. Her top lip is tight and pale. 'He doesn't live here anymore.' And then she closes the door.

They walk back past their cottage and on to the labourers' cottages. Small children in black and white school uniforms are bobbing around the cottages, and women are leaving for work. When she reaches the end of the row, she knocks at the door of the Septembers' cottage. No answer. Only after she has knocked again, does someone open the door. Goiya. With a long gash on his cheek.

'Is Blom here?' she asks.

'Blom's gone, my lady,' says Goiya.

'When will she be back?'

'She's not coming back. Her mother says she's gone for good.'

Zara stares at him.

'Is Leah here?'

'No, she's left for work. I'm waiting to go to the clinic.'

'My grandfather died this morning. I need to bury him.'

The bony Coloured man looks at her with large bloodshot eyes and hollow cheeks.

‘Wait,’ he says, after some time. ‘I’ll come.’

There is a plot of land that labourers have been given to bury their families. Plastic flowers and decorations adorn each grave with a cheerfulness that belies the sadness of each passing. After they have found an empty spot, one with enough shade, enough light, Goiya tells her to go home. This is a man’s business. He needs to obtain permission for the burial. Ask Leah to phone the undertakers. He also needs to dig the grave.

Back at the cottage, she struggles to sit still. The Race Section of the newspaper lies curled on the table, with Pappi’s pipe and a half-full packet of tobacco. She folds the newspaper. Then walks to her bedroom and lifts the brown suitcase off the top of the wardrobe, brings it through to the living area and unclips it. She places the newspaper inside it, with the pumpkin folder. Lifts the tobacco to her nose, then places that inside the suitcase too. Then she walks into his room where he lies, now smooth and serene, and takes the book of Neruda poems from his side table. That too is placed inside the suitcase. A longing to preserve the texture of his life. For remembering.

A while later, a man arrives to take the body away.

‘We’ll bring it back later, Miss,’ the driver assures her. ‘Please fill in these forms.’

Goiya returns later that afternoon, followed by another two labourers. Just then the hearse crawls up the gravel driveway. He has a quick word with the driver, and the car pulls away again for the graveyard.

Once there, he whistles through the gap in his teeth, jerking his head in the direction of the black car. The two labourers quickly make their way to the vehicle. They ease the simple wooden coffin slowly out into the daylight and carry it carefully to the freshly-dug grave.

The funeral is over in minutes. Goiya has asked an old Coloured man to read a prayer. This he does very slowly, articulating each word as though his own salvation depends upon it. Leah is there too, her head covered with an old lace scarf, holding a small

posy of flowers. She does not look up at anybody. Stands staring at the grave as though in it she can see another world.

'Blom would have liked to be here,' she says quietly. 'She loved the old bugger.' Goiya stands alongside her, thin and intent, wearing his old red cap. The two labourers also stay to pay respects, leaning forward and bobbing every now and again. After the prayer, on Goiya's command, they pick up their spades and fill the grave. Leah throws her posy in with the coffin. Zara drops to her haunches and holds the dog. When they empty the last spadeful of earth to seal up the fissure Leica immediately breaks free, jumps onto the freshly-turned soil and starts frantically digging.

'Come Leica,' says Zara. 'We're going home now.' But the dog will not budge. 'Come *on*, Leica,' she repeats, trying to pull him at first, before giving up. When she looks up at Goiya, he is blowing his nose and clearing his throat, his red eyes redder than before. 'Time for a dop,' he says under his breath.

**

They hold elegant glasses at waist level and gabble and poke their necks forward towards the paintings and squint. His students stand in small groups or lean against the wall and watch. They avoid the eyes of the public, nervous in case people think they are paying too much attention to their own paintings.

Maria has done an incredible job. The lighting is perfect. The placing of each painting ideal. She has Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* playing in the background. And excellent bubbly to ease and enthuse the guests.

Zara's paintings, both of them, are against the back wall. His painting is with two others at the entrance, visible from the foyer where people are queuing for programmes. It is now half an hour into the evening, and Zara has not yet arrived. He drains his glass and replaces it from a tray carried by a spotty teenager in a tuxedo. Then starts to navigate the obligatory mingle.

'Good evening, Frank,' he says a little too brightly. How he despises Frank Rosen. Vindictive son-of-a-bitch.

'Hello,' says Frank, brushing past him. You'd think he could clean himself a little for a function like this. The man has no respect. He looks like a mechanic. He moves on. Oh God. Patrick le Roux. The overbearing gynaecologist. How do women *cope* with him?

'Hello, Patrick,' he says.

'Sport!' Marvellous show you have here. Great talent. You'll be out of a job soon if you have too many more of these *soirées*. He roars with laughter. Slaps him on the back, spilling champagne.

'Nice to see you,' says Jake, moving away. A caramel hand touches him softly on the sleeve. Lily. Serene as ever.

'But Jake,' she says. 'I haven't seen anything of yours? I thought there was going to be at least one?'

'There is. In front.'

'Oh. I'm sorry. I must have missed it.'

He is sure he can hear Frank Rosen snigger as he walks by.

'You may not have recognised my style immediately,' he says. 'This one's a little different.'

Zara is not here.

He glances at the door. He should be used to it by now. The girl does exactly as she pleases. Then quite suddenly he sees her in his mind's eye. her skin in the sun. her nipples tight against his tongue. the sweet fit of her sex as he moves inside her. her thighs still wet from their swim. Maybe she couldn't get here.

'Jake!' This is the second time Maria has called him. 'Where are you? I'm talking to you.'

Trudy, holding a tray of neat, triangular sandwiches steals a look as she passes. Maria deliberately takes his hand.

'Come. I want to show you how well it's going so far.'

She leads him to the table in the corner, and continuing to hold his hand. shows him a list of all the paintings, where she has marked with an 'S' those that have sold.

'Have you seen all the red stickers? Isn't it wonderful?'

He notices that his painting has not sold yet and feels his gut contract. Must be the price. It was obviously, naturally, ten times more expensive than anything else. That

does make folk think twice. He shakes his hand free from Maria and scours the list.

Many of the students have sold; they'll be overjoyed. Zara too. Both paintings.

'Who bought them?' S.

'Which ones?' she asks.

'These two. Pascoe.'

'Frank. Can you believe it? Frank, in all the time I've known him has never bought a single painting from me. It's fabulous!'

'Bastard,' says Jake through his teeth, feeling his enthusiasm drain from him. 'What is there to drink, Maria?'

'Bubbly? Let me catch the steward.'

'No, I'm tired of it. Surely there's something else?'

'Jake! Maria! Isn't it wonderful?'

'Cecily,' says Jake, monotone.

'I must have it of course,' she says.

'Of course you must,' says Maria. 'Which one?'

'I can't believe you're asking me that! Jake's of course. It's marvellous.'

'Yes it is fabulous, isn't it? Do you hear that, Jake?' She threads her hand through his arm, perusing the crowd to see who notices. One or two students smile politely at her.

'Cecily's buying your painting.' A big 'S' gets added to the list in a fat black felt-tip.

'Glad you like it,' he clips. Then he turns to Maria. 'Maria, I know this is bad form, but I think I'm ill. I'm going home.'

Before she can argue he walks out into the night. Maria watches as Trudy crosses the room briskly, sets the tray of sandwiches down on the counter and in her stylish heels heads for the door after him.

Cecily is hovering around her like a hornet, waving a cheque.

'I'll leave this with you now and pick it up later in the week.' Maria takes the cheque automatically, but has not heard a word.

The group suddenly seem so noisy. Must be the alcohol. Such a din. She sits down behind her desk. Stares long and hard at the list of paintings without seeing anything. Then lights a cigarette and gets up again, making her way over to the window.

She can see them. She can see it all. Jake standing next to his car, his arms around Trudy who has her hands over her eyes. Probably crying. She takes a long drag of her cigarette and moves away.

Some of the students are leaving. Those with the little red dot the size of a fingertip next to their painting make a special effort to say goodbye to her.

'Thanks, Miss.' A boy and a girl smile and nod their bandanna-clad heads.

'It's a pleasure,' she says. 'Did you enjoy it?'

'Yes, it was rad,' says the boy. 'Totally.'

'Way cool,' smiles the girl. 'When do we, like, get the money?'

'I'll arrange that with Dr Coleman,' she says. 'Probably next week.'

'Cool,' says the girl. 'Later.' The two lift their hands stiffly in a waist-level waive, nod their heads once again and leave.

She looks at her watch. Eight-thirty. It suddenly feels like the longest night of her life.

'We're leaving now, Maria,' says Lily, kissing her on the cheek. 'Thanks so much for inviting us. Very interesting. Such talent.'

'Off to dinner,' says Patrick with a nonsensical wink.

'Where is Jake?' asks Lily.

'Oh, he had to help someone with their car,' she says.

'Is this a new line for him then?' says Patrick, exploding with mirth. 'Car maintenance?'

'Let's go,' says Lily, guiding him firmly out the door.

**

What had she hoped? That Jake would fight off his secretary with declarations of love and commitment to herself? She can just see it:

'No Trudy, I can't possibly have an affair with you. I am in love with the most wonderful woman in the world.' Imagine that. Or even: 'No Trudy, Maria and I may have our ups and downs, but basically we're pretty strong. Now run along home and let's not talk about this again.' Deep down she has always known that she had two chances of that happening: fat and slim.

Once the last person has left, she starts to tidy up. There will be someone coming in the morning to do it. But tonight she is in no hurry to go home. She wishes she never needed to go there again. She stacks all the champagne glasses in their crates and begins to sweep. Once that is finished she sits down and writes out the name of each young artist, and what is owing to them. Then pulls out her chequebook and carefully writes each one a cheque, slides it into an envelope, writes a name on the front and closes it. This done, she closes all the windows, flicks off the lights and makes her way to her car. She drives home slowly. There is an accident on the highway, sirens, noise, but she sticks to the left-hand lane staring straight ahead and eventually crawls up the driveway. She hopes he is asleep.

What a waste of ten years.

He is not asleep. He is drunk.

'Fucking imbeciles,' he slurs as she walks in. She goes past him and into the bathroom where she runs a bath.

'Stupid fucking idiots. Don't know anything.' When she does not respond he follows her into the bathroom. 'And of all the fucking idiots, the fuckiest of all is Frank Rosen.' He gives a little grin and repeats it. 'Fuckiest of all. Hasn't a clue.'

Previously she would have encouraged him to get undressed, given him some Disprin and some Prohep and put him to bed.

'I hate Frank, d'you know that Maria? Frank is... Frank is the devil.'

He follows her back into the bedroom, stands behind her as she throws her shoes into the wardrobe, unclips her necklace and removes her earrings.

'I need a break, you know, Maria. I need to get away.' He follows her back into the bathroom. As she starts to unbutton her blouse, she is suddenly aware of wanting to shield her nakedness from him.

'Get out, Jake. I need to bath.'

He flops onto the bed. Within seconds he is snoring. When he wakes she will be gone.

Chapter Twenty-three

It is the last week of term. And yet, instead of winding down, the exhibition seems to have stirred his students up. They have many questions; why do some paintings sell and not others? Is it the luck of the draw? To what extent should you cater for your 'market'? Zara does not bother to attend. Infuriating girl. This time he's not running after her. Besides, he has more important things to think about; Maria has left home. He can't decide what to do about it. Bloody inconvenient, her timing, that's all he can say. Trudy has mentioned that Frank Rosen had called to find out Zara's address. Apparently he wants to see more paintings. Idiot. The man is unspeakably narrow-minded. They should get on well together, Frank and Zara, he muses acidly. Both are dirty and have no manners.

**

A car grinds to a halt on the gravel outside. She hears a man's heavy tread, and then the knock on the door. Leica sniffs under the door and barks. She opens the door as far as the security latch will allow. An unshaven man is standing on the stoep holding a cigarette and a business card.

'Are you Zara?' he asks. 'Frank Rosen,' he adds, before she has time to nod. He hands her the business card. 'May I come in?'

He walks around the tiny room, looking at the etchings, the drawings and paintings that are either hanging on the wall, or stacked against it.

'I bought your paintings the other night,' he says, walking across to the window to flick the ash from his cigarette. 'Both of them.'

She does not respond. He does not seem to mind.

'They were the only ones worth buying. Thought I'd like to look at more.'

She sits down, the dog guarding her feet, while he rummages amongst the paintings.

'Oh, hope you don't mind if I look at these?' he asks after a while, not waiting for a reply. 'Is this your best work?'

'I don't know,' she says.

'Do you have anything else?'

'I have a portfolio of paintings. They're at the school.'

'Coleman's school?'

'Yes.'

'God. Why?'

Again, she does not answer.

'No, seriously,' he probes. 'What made you go to his school? What can he teach you?'

'My grandfather thought I should go. He thought it would be good for me.'

'And you?'

'I don't mind. I like it sometimes.'

'What if I told you that you don't need art school? At least, not that one.'

She shrugs.

'What if I told you that I'm pretty sure you can earn a living without them?'

Again she does not respond.

'Naturally nothing is certain. But I reckon I could get you an income of sorts, if you were prepared to paint full-time.'

She shrugs and looks out the window.

'Think about it,' he says.

**

He gets the class going with informal discussion. A post-exhibition forum for feedback and questions. So far these have been lively with some probing issues raised. One of the quieter students puts up her hand.

'What if we are inspired by the style of another painter, say Kentridge for example? Is it okay to copy some of the elements from his work, to borrow aspects of style from other painters?'

'Well,' he says with a smile. 'You must know what Picasso says about that: Small artists borrow. Great artists steal.'

A scruffy youth - one of considerable talent - shakes his head slowly, as though shaking ideas from the dreadlocks, and answers: 'I dunno. I don't think that's like too cool, to use too much of other painters' stuff. It should like, come from you don't you think?'

'Maybe it can be, like, a bit of both? I dunno,' says another.

They all look questioningly at him. Trusting him, the oracle, to tell them the correct answer. He begins slowly. 'I think it's both and.'

They wait expectantly for him to explain. He pauses, thinking. And then suddenly it becomes clear.

'In some ways, we are the sum total of all that has moved us, affected us and touched us. The sum total of all of our experiences.'

Some of them nod.

'And whether we are painters or writers or poets - artists of any kind, we are collectors and creators, of, of *meaning*. If you'll pardon the cliché.'

'And of Beauty,' the quiet girl adds.

'Sure. But that lends itself to another conversation. Let's stick with copying other artists' work. It's not that simple, you see. I believe that every painter, whether consciously or sub-consciously, is born into a tradition. Many are shaped by a particular style or movement, even if only to rebel against it later. It provides a framework within which to comply or rebel. It defines you by its presence or its reaction away from it. Cubism, for instance is both a reaction against and a development from Impressionism. But as for copying, that is something else. That is ultimately betraying yourself. By all means, allow a work or a canon of work, to affect you on different levels. But make sure it is integrated into your entire being. Only when it becomes part of your substance, your flesh, absorbed into your bone marrow, your *blood*, are you free to use it responsibly. Because you will be painting from *your* core, not from someone else's. From the atom-splitting centre of your *own* consciousness. Anything else is simply cutting and pasting. Window-dressing. Repackaging and selling. A magpie collage of other peoples' inspiration.'

The class disperse and settle at their easels. He sits down. He knows that somewhere over the last few years, as long as a decade even, he has stopped practising what he has just preached. He has borrowed and adapted and painted what *works*. Decoration. Pleasing pieces for those with a wealth of money but a poverty of substance. Perpetuating the 'con' in contemporary art. Riding the gravy train to its life-clogging destination.

The realisation is both damning and liberating. The immediate implications branch and split off like lightning; he feels slightly ill. He is a fake. And not only is he a fake,

but he has somehow, miraculously, managed to build a reputation on it. The old demons lift their heads and rub their eyes, getting ready for the dance. The mad dance of panic. He feels his chest tighten. Catches his breath. It's coming again.

'Excuse me,' he says. 'Excuse me, I'm not feeling well.'

He walks as quickly as he can to his office.

'Jake!' Trudy has been waiting for him to come out of his office. Follows him down the corridor.'

'Leave me alone,' he snarls. He is not up to interrogation.

'Wait! I need to talk to you.'

'Leave me alone, goddammit! Are you deaf?'

She shrinks back, too shocked to know how to react. Too horrified to find an immediate excuse for him. 'Okay,' she whispers as his office door slams, deciding that she'll give him a few minutes, then go and see whether she can help.

He slumps onto the chair. His heart is tearing away inside his chest. This time. This time surely he is going to die. And he will die a fake. A life wasted. His meagre talent prostituted. And nobody to blame but himself. The handle of his door turns.

Zara.

'Don't you ever bloody knock?'

She stands there looking at him. Suddenly her blank gaze seems insolent. Mocking.

'What's the matter with you? Who do you think you are? You never knock. You never answer when you're spoken to.'

'I have left some paintings here,' she says. 'My portfolio. I need to pick it up.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Frank Rosen came to see me. He wants to see more paintings.'

He feels the blood rise thick in his throat. Can it turn to hate so quickly?

'Zara, please,' he tries to gather himself, to rein in the runaway wild creature. 'Please go away. I'm not feeling well. Okay?' He attempts a smile.

But she ignores him, moving across the room to his desk, where her portfolio lies.

Before she can get past him he takes hold of her, turns her around, seizes her hair in his hand and holds her face in a vice-like grip, upturned to his. He does not hear the soft knocking at the door. With his other hand he squeezes her mouth, before parting her lips with his fingers and possessing her mouth with his own. She gives a little cry.

'Am I hurting you?' he murmurs.

‘Yes.’

‘Good.’

He stops and looks at her. Perhaps if he cannot elicit love, he can at least provoke fear. But her eyes are shut. He will never know. He releases her. Just in time to see Trudy close the door again. He can hear her heels slapping down the corridor as she runs away. Shit!

‘Get out,’ he says. ‘Now! Get out.’

But she does not leave. She simply stands there looking him directly in the eye. She is mocking him. He feels sure of it. She probably knows. Knows he’s a fake. That is why she has no respect at all for him.

‘I’m not coming back next term,’ she says. ‘I am going to have to paint from home. I need the money. I wanted to tell you.’

How dare she! Nobody, not a single soul has ever, *ever*, attended his school and found it wanting. As she lifts her hand to touch his face (Sympathy? Derision?) some dark, webbed creature inside his chest breaks loose, a wild bird, all claws and hooked beak and wings flapping. He catches her hand and throws it down, before taking her by the shoulders, turning her around and pushing her in the direction of the door.

In weeks to come when he runs it through his mind time and again, he will still not fathom exactly what happened at this point. He pushed her firmly, he concedes. But not roughly. Not forcefully enough for her to fall. She is not a small girl. All he can think is that she refused budge, refused to move her feet, and the push knocked her off balance. Much later, he wonders if she didn’t perhaps faint?

To see Zara collapsed on the floor seems incongruent. If he didn’t know better, he would think she was looking for attention. She lies huddled awkwardly, unmoving, her skirt hitched up. Her face does not move. She says nothing. As he stares at her, nonplussed, he notices a line of blood spreading into a puddle beneath her.

‘Zara.’ He drops to his knees.

But she does not answer.

‘Zara.’ She doesn’t hear.

‘It was a tiny push. I couldn’t have hurt you. Are you sick?’

When she doesn't answer again, he grabs his car keys, and scooping her up in his arms, manoeuvres her out of the door, kicking it shut with his foot. Then down the passage, down the stairs, to the car, to the hospital.

He carries her into the hospital through the automatic doors. His breath is getting shorter and faster. He feels light-headed. Suddenly she raises her head.

'Stop,' she says.

'What?'

'Stop. Let me walk. Put me down.'

He lowers her legs to the ground.

'I'm okay,' she says.

'You were bleeding, Zara. Please. For once in your life don't be so bloody stubborn. We must get you checked.'

He sits in the waiting room while Zara is examined by a doctor from the Emergency Ward. Remembers the Valium in his wallet and asks a nurse for a glass of water. He cannot think this all through now. One step at a time. Just one step at a time is all he need worry about. After some time the doctor reappears and calls Jake into his office. Zara is sitting quietly in a chair.

'Is she okay?'

'She is probably going to lose a baby. She tells me she was not aware that she is pregnant.'

'What?'

'Is this your wife? Your girlfriend? Mr...?'

'Coleman. Doctor. Doctor Jake Coleman.'

'The painter. Look it's none of my business what your relationship is. But I suggest you go away and discuss whether you want this baby or not. If not, you're welcome to come back here, or leave her here overnight, and the gynaecologist, Dr le Roux, should be able to help her in the morning.'

'Patrick le Roux?'

'Yes. Do you know him?'

'Er, no. Heard of him. Look I'd rather not wait until then, she was bleeding, there may be a problem. Is there any other gynaecologist perhaps? Someone who could help us now? Besides, tomorrow is awkward for me. Impossible in fact.'

‘The bleeding has stopped. It is quite possible that she could go full term without any further complications.’

‘I’d rather not take the chance,’ says Jake. ‘It’s out of the question. It must be removed.’

‘What about you?’ The doctor turns to Zara.

She stares back at him without a sound.

‘Well, I believe the Elizabeth Scott Clinics are... functional. It may be your best bet if discretion is an issue.’

‘Elizabeth Scott?’

‘They do terminations. It’s a similar procedure. Quite above board. Done by a gynaecologist. It’s cheaper too, of course. Personally I would prefer it if she stayed here, but she’s not very far gone. It should be okay.’

‘That sounds better. The Clinic. Do you have an address?’

She walks with him down a busy street. They stop at an ATM and he draws a thick wad of money. He is still holding the piece of paper in his hand with the address, looking up at the names of the side streets till he finds the right one. She follows him. Past the big clothing stores, the stores selling African artwork and a fish shop that has ‘wind-dried snoek’ written on a blackboard outside the door. She has not said a word since they left the hospital. She is unusually meek, he thinks. Perhaps she is in shock. Trucks block the traffic, cars hoot, hawkers shout, people walk with purpose, crossing the road, looking right to left.

The sun is bright and cheery. Just like any other day. The door to the Elizabeth Scott clinic just like any other door. But then, what did he expect? A big X marked in oxblood? He stops at the door. Crams the wad of money into her hand, before awkwardly moving away.

‘I’ll be back later. Good luck.’

She walks into the room. There are Aids posters on the walls. Carpet tiles. Plastic orange bucket chairs. The receptionist gives a cheery grin and hands her a form. Everything seems surreal. Once she has completed it, the woman smiles, takes a happy slurp of her coffee and beckons. ‘Come on then, let me give you your gown.’

She changes into the polycotton nightgown with small purple flowers, removes her panties as instructed, and is led into a room with several other women, heads cast down, all dressed in the same faded fabric. Somehow the outfit seems bizarre, too pretty, too fresh. The airconditioning hums and outside people are innocently going about the business of the day. Such an ordinary day to do such a thing.

The waiting is eternal. A squat girl who sits with her legs apart starts to giggle raucously. Nerves. The rest look down. A pretty girl with long brown hair wiggles her painted toes. A large fat redhead sits traumatised, her head in her hands. Still the airconditioning hums and a coloured man outside shouts something to a friend across the street.

Eventually a tall, big-boned nurse opens the door and calls her name. She follows her meekly down the passage into a cramped room. She tries to think of something peaceful. But everything is confused. She keeps forgetting why she is here. Strange pictures are forming in her mind.

**

She is playing by the waterfall with Leica. It is a Saturday and Blom and Pieter are at home with their families. Pappi has gone to Cape Town to get some provisions although everybody knows that Saturday is a horses day, and nobody asks questions. She and Leica are swimming and rescuing bugs. She fishes out a beautiful yellow beetle, and puts it on a leaf in the sun. Then they lie down in the warm mud and watch the male weavers deftly threading their hanging house baskets before their disapproving mates arrive and pull it all down. In time the wind picks up and it grows cold. 'Come Leica, let's go back and get a jersey.'

**

There is a bed with stirrups attached with clamps. And a fat and freckled man squashing a long lock of ginger hair down over his ruddy, bald patch. 'C'mon luvvie', he says a little too cheerily. 'Jump up then, there's a good girl.' In his hand is something glinting silver. 'C'mon now,' he pats the bed.

**

She pushes open the front door. There is a funny smell. Sour. Leica drops down, his belly scuffing the floor. He begins to growl. Something is happening in the bedroom. Muffled noises. 'Maman?'

**

She lies on the bed. 'Feet in the stirrups then, there you go,' he says. But she does not hear him. 'C'mon luv, we don't have all day, let's get the show on the road, shall we? Feet in the stirrups.' *Saturday is horses day*. When she does not respond, he gives a big sigh, and squashes the errant lock of ginger hair over his bald patch once again. 'It's easier with stirrups, Luv. Come on then, play the game.' He asks the nurse to help him. While forcing her knees apart, the two make congenial noises, as though she is six years old. As though they are encouraging her to ride a bicycle the first time without fairy wheels.

**

She rounds the door of the bedroom to find Maman lying on the bed, her clothes ripped. Blood. A man stands over her, his trousers by his ankles, a knife glinting in one hand, his other hand over her mouth. Whether it is because Leica starts barking and snarling and snapping at the man, or because seeing her child suddenly gives her superhuman strength, who can say? But at that moment Maman only just manages to raise her knees and kick her attacker away with sufficient force to free her mouth and scream:

'Leave my baby, for God sake leave my baby!'

**

Out of the corner of her eye she can see the shiny implement he is holding, as sharp and clear as the memory that is gathering momentum. *The knife. Her mother. Blood.* As he tries to insert it into her, from the depths of her silence rips a primeval scream.

And as she screams she too kicks with the full force of her being, with both feet, knocking him into the wall.

'No! I don't want you to! I say *no*. Leave my baby!'



**

Maddened further by pain, he lunges at Maman with the knife. Only time enough for her to shout: 'Run, Zara. Run!' before he stabs her repeatedly in the head and chest. When he turns to Zara, she has fled. A blood-flecked speck, running as fast as she can into the mountains.

It is Pieter who finds her the following day, lost in the mountains, wide-eyed, huddled by some rocks. It is Leica who shows him where she is. Leica who has followed her every step of the way, and who barks and barks till someone hears. It is Pieter who watches her being driven away by Dr Michaelson to the big hospital in Cape Town, where she is treated for shock. He already knows that Camille is dead. Everybody in the valley is talking about it, phoning one another and shaking their heads. When he rides across to find Zara, there are policemen wanting to ask questions, but Pappi sends them away. There is no point anyway. Zara does not remember a thing.

When he returns the following day, the policemen are back again in yellow vans. Taking fingerprints. Trying to pick up clues. Talking to Pappi. He feels scared. Hides behind the big oak tree.

'Are you sure your granddaughter doesn't remember anything?' he hears them ask.

'Quite sure.' Pappi answers.

'Have you asked her recently?'

'Listen, you idiot, I'm her grandfather. I know. Have a look at that face for yourself. Have a look at those eyes. They are the emptied-out eyes of the living dead. There is no memory there. Nothing. Now leave us alone.'

But they ignore Pappi and keep pressing on. He wishes they would listen. He wishes they would go away. But mostly he wishes that Camille would appear in the doorway, call him in for some juice, press the indent between his eyebrows and tell him not to worry. That everything would be fine.

'Are you sure you have no clue who may have done this, Mr Pascoe? There are a lot of natives around lately. They're a savage bunch. Have any been hanging around here?'

Pappi tries not to lose his patience.

'The people who came to the clinic were ill. They came because they needed help, not because they wanted to rape and murder my daughter.'

'But maybe they were just pretending to be ill. They wanted to case the joint out, you know? They do that.'

'You know, inspector, I have not lived here for very long. But this much I do know: in this country it could have been anybody. Nobody of any colour, shape or creed seems to escape the dry brain rot here. A psychopath would be quite comfortable in any environment you choose. Yes, it could have been one of the labourers, blind drunk and violent after a night's drinking. Or one of the black people, erupting out of the mire of repression. Or the witch-doctor, angry with her for interfering with his power. Or one of you! It could even have been one of you. After all, nobody seems to sin quite as expertly as you Calvinists. Pah!' He spits on the ground next to them.

'I see,' says the Inspector. After that, they do not return.

**

'The patient is still very upset,' the receptionist at the Elizabeth Scott clinic tells Jake when he returns.

'That's understandable, I suppose.' He knows he should not have returned. This is sordid. He does not belong here.

'I'm afraid we're going to have to hospitalise her for a while. Are you her boyfriend?'

'Boyfriend? No.' What a ridiculous term.

'Friend?'

He pauses to think. It is a good question. 'Actually, I hardly know her,' he finally answers.

'Does she have any relatives?'

'I don't know,' says Jake, edging towards the door. It is not his place to get involved in the details. 'I don't know. Really, if I have to be honest, I hardly know her at all.'

Then he escapes into the street outside and closes the door behind him.

The gynaecologist from the Elizabeth Scott clinic has been knocked unconscious. Not too serious, doctors say. He'll be round soon enough with nothing much more than a headache. But the patient is clearly unstable. Who are her family?

'She doesn't seem to have any,' says the nurse. 'The guy who brought her here seems a bit of a weirdo.'

'In that case, mental ward, Groote Schuur or Valkenberg. Observation.'

'She's still pregnant.'

'Try to get her a separate ward. You never know what can happen in those places.

Once she's stabilised, we'll handle the baby issue.'

University of Cape Town

Chapter Twenty-four



Icy wind drives rain like little shards of glass into the heart and soul of both city and country. The Cape winter seems to have arrived overnight. People in raincoats scurry, shoulders hunched, under soaking umbrellas, held at forty-five degree angles as they dash from their cars to the shop, anxious to get the day's chores done so that they can return to dry homes and log fires. The gallery has been quiet for days. Maria sits, elbows on the counter and takes a long drag from her cigarette. Smoke curls upward. Still no news from Jake. The strain of waiting for his voice at the other end of the line increases hourly, and as the implications set in, pain turns to fear. He might never phone again. Then what? She cannot sleep at night, and when she does, it is the sleep of the sick, pocked with dreams. The same dreams. Dreams of being lost in a deserted town on a desolate Sunday afternoon, driving the wrong way up one way streets, calling, searching, hearing only echoes. And the anger. *The anger*. Acid in her chest. How Jake has rustled with secrets all these years. The master of discretion. Which may or may not be the better part of valour, but certainly is also the convenient little brother of deceit.

And yet all her events and achievements seem such a hollow celebration without him. And the future so long and dry.

She had ended up going for that Tarot reading advertised in *Odyssey* magazine. She hoped it might clarify things. The woman reading the cards was getting on in years. She had papery white skin and very black hair. And an exaggerated air of knowing. She sliced and diced the cards, swooshed them across the table and had Maria pick and choose. She begun with three cards, to indicate past, present and future. Then went on to do a six-month forecast in a Celtic cross. But all Maria can really remember are two cards: The Hanged Man and the Devil Card. The Hanged Man, when appearing the right way up, the woman explained, meant that everything is not as it seems on the surface. She gave Maria a long knowing look. And then produced the Devil Card. This, she said slowly, whilst nodding her head and narrowing her

eyes, indicated wilful blindness and misconception. A willingness to be bound by half-truths. Maria couldn't wait to leave.

Nothing new. So why can't she just cut her losses - God knows there are many - and move on? She needs to do something completely different. Perhaps she should get away. Take a good long break, and reassess her life. Ten years of her life she has poured into making his life a success. She almost doesn't know how to do the same for herself. What she needs is a big idea. If only she could think of one.

It would be fine if she didn't still miss him. But love is a tough habit to break. Especially after all these years. Since she met Jake, her life has become one long dialogue with him, whether spoken or silent. And now, nobody on the other end of the line. She lifts herself wearily off the counter stool to switch on the kettle when the phone rings. Shaking slightly she lifts the receiver. 'Hello'.

'Is that Maria?' It's not him. The voice on the other side is warm. Foreign.

'Yes, speaking.'

'It doesn't sound like you. Are you all right?'

'Yes.' Her voice falters in the face of this unexpected tenderness, then quickly regroups. 'Mátyás! How could I not recognise your voice? Thanks for returning my call. I wanted to tell you that I have sold quite a bit of your pottery. I have a cheque for you. And some orders for more.'

'Really? Thank you, Maria. Thanks for your hard work. What do I need to do now, come in and collect the items that didn't sell?'

'No, I think I'll just keep them in the gallery for a while. Maybe now that you've generated some interest, they'll sell too. In the meantime, I'll pop a cheque in the post for you.'

'Great. Then we'll have lunch to celebrate.'

'What a good idea. Actually... Mátyás?'

'Yes'.

'Would you mind terribly if I dropped the cheque off with you and grabbed a cup of coffee? I could really use the company.'

'All the way out to Scarborough? In the rain? Yes of course! What a good idea. I may even try making us some food.'

She puts the cheque in an envelope, licks it closed and puts it in her handbag. Then hurriedly scrawls a 'Be Back Later' notice and tapes it to the door, grabs her large beige raincoat and dashes for the car.

In the wet, the drive to Scarborough is a little treacherous in parts, roads glassy, traffic backed up here and there. But inside the plush interior of her car she feels cocooned, the rhythmic tap of the windscreen wipers comfortingly hypnotic.

By the time she reaches Scarborough and the small wooden A-frame, she is nursing a strong sense of relief at having escaped the oppressive tyranny of the telephone that does not ring. Mátyás stands at the door. She catches the pungent aroma of coffee.

'Hello Maria. Welcome. Did you find it okay?'

'Yes. Thank you. I'm so happy to be here.'

'Yes? You've brought some colour into this muted day. I thank you. I've just made some coffee. Would you like some?'

She sits on the bench at the rough wooden table, while he fills two pottery mugs with the dark brew.

'Aren't you lonely here, Mátyás?'

'I've got used to it, I suppose. You can be more lonely surrounded by people you don't care for, and who don't care for you.'

'Do you think so?'

'Yes. Anyway, I am not alone. I have my memories for company.'

'A woman?' she probes.

He smiles. 'Isn't it always?'

'Was she beautiful?'

'They usually are, the ones you love. And even if they're not, memory makes them so.'

'I don't know,' she says. She knows full well that Jake does not think her beautiful. Not any more. 'Tell me about her.'

'Oh, it was a long, long time ago. You don't want to hear my little stories.'

'Oh, but I do. At this moment, there is nothing I would like more. Please, tell me.'

'Yes?' He looks a little embarrassed.

'Yes,' she nods with enthusiasm.

‘Well, let’s see. It all started with a broken leg, about twenty years ago. I was in France for a friend’s exhibition. One lunchtime, I had too much red wine, and next thing *Poef!* I came off my *velocette* in the rain. It wasn’t very bad, but due to the nature of the break I had to lie still, in traction, for some weeks. Naturally I had books, magazines, even a sketchpad, but I couldn’t really sit up long enough to draw. So for most of the day, and long stretches of the night, I was very bored. I would sing. The man in the bed opposite said I had a voice like a badly-oiled steam locomotive. But I didn’t care. Anything to break the predictable patterns and routines. The nurses would tell me to *Tais-toi!* To shut up. But I didn’t care. They were bossy little women. Except for one.’ His dark eyes twinkle. ‘She was a night nurse. Came on at seven. She was different from the other nurses; soft and soothing like the sound of water. I would wait for her all day, just to watch her move across the floor in her thick starched white uniform. She worked very hard and took no nonsense when we tried to flirt with her, but now and again she would catch my eye and quickly look away.

‘One night I asked her whether she would bring me a writing pad so that I could write letters during the day. The next day she handed me a folder of fine onion skin paper and some envelopes. Beautiful. And then I started writing. Every day I wrote a letter. I wrote of all the little things I could think of that had ever made me happy or sad. Every day I would try to remember a new one. About the village where I grew up in Hungary. About sitting in the basket of my father’s bicycle. About my fear of the dark. I started to remember more and more, and the more I wrote the more I remembered. How bad my first kiss was. How the girl had run off laughing at me and told all her friends! The first time I saw the sea.

‘Of course, she could not know at first, but the letters were for her. I told her almost everything, and especially all my ‘first times’. My first hiding, my first fight, the first time I felt jealous, and even the first time I made love. Because you see, every night I saw her, was like reliving the thrill of all the first times I had ever had. It was like seeing in colour all over again. Just watching her walk across the ward and waiting for that quick wingflap of recognition.

‘In time, I did let her know that the letters were for her. She would come for it only once she was sure I was asleep. I never saw her reading them, and she never stayed to

talk. She gave no feedback at all. Very professional. But the night before I was due to be discharged, it was she who left an envelope in the folder.'

'A letter?'

'Yes. A long letter of just these two words: *I know.*' And her address.' He laughs.

'After that we were together every afternoon and weekend for three weeks. She was still working nightshift; I don't know when she slept.' He shakes his head. 'And then of course, I had to go back to Hungary. I told her I'd be back.' He picks up the wine bottle, refills Maria's glass and sighs.

'You never came back?'

'I came back.' His voice is measured. 'But it was too late, she had gone.'

'Too late? How long were you?'

'A year. I had some trouble. I sent a letter. But she didn't wait.'

'I don't understand.'

'I was married at the time.'

'Ah.' Maria's eyes widen. She takes a slug wine. 'I suppose that can do it.'

'Separated from my wife for some time when I met her. But Hanke - my wife - and I had almost grown up together. And when I returned to finalise the divorce, we discovered she had cancer.' He sighs. 'So I had to write and tell my night-nurse.'

'In hospital, all those letters you wrote and left in the folder each night for her, you never told her you were married?'

'No.'

'So how did you come to South Africa? To Scarborough, of all places.'

'Well, after my wife died, I returned to France. It was only then that I discovered she had left, seemingly without trace. The neighbours didn't seem to know. The hospital told me they were not prepared to disclose private information. Eventually after pleading with several different members and levels of staff, I left my address with one of the other nurses and returned to Hungary. Some years later I received a letter from this nurse, to tell me that she had died in South Africa, in the Cape, and that was all she knew.'

'God. And you still came?'

'Yes. Just because a relationship stops, doesn't mean it ends. Besides, my wife had died. She had died. It was winter and icy in Hungary. I gave up my studio apartment, actually I gave up painting altogether, and moved here. Maybe I hoped to meet her

ghost. Maybe I hoped to find my bearings.' He leans forward and smiles. 'Do you know that one of the thirteenth century interpretations of the word 'desire' comes from the Latin *de sidos*, which means to have lost one's navigational star?' 

'You gave up *painting*? I never knew you painted.'

'Yes. After all that it was just too painful. Pottery, clay, was, is, so wonderfully earthy. It grounds one so.'

'Do you have any paintings? Anything I could see?' Already her eyes are sweeping across the walls, looking for a clue, a relic. But there is nothing. Mátyás studies the empty glass, as though reading the lees, moves his heavy body on the bench and finally shakes his head.

'No, not really.'

They lapse into a heavy silence. Eventually it is Maria who looks up, reaches across the table and takes his hand.

'Thanks for telling me that. It couldn't have been easy. You helped take my mind off things.'

'You are the first one I've ever told. I should thank you.'

'I'm sure you don't have to tell anybody to keep a memory like that alive.'

'Yes, memories are easy. It is forgetting one must learn. But listen to me! I'm getting maudlin. Can we blame the wine? Let's have some food, yes?'

'At least you do have beautiful memories.' She says it more to herself than to him.

'But Mátyás, aren't you ever angry? Don't you think she should have waited, if she really loved you? Don't you think she should have tried to understand a little?'

'Memories, like dreams, are funny things. They don't stand too much poking.'

She sighs. 'I suppose time heals all things eventually.'

'No, not really. Only love can do that, yes?'

He fetches two plates from the dresser and dishes up for her. 'Some pasta and salad?'

'It smells wonderful. What is it?'

'Aubergine and olives and some nuts.'

'This is the first time I've felt like eating for a while.'

'Your heart must be sore. When the heart is sore, the stomach closes shop.'

She blinks and tries to smile.

'Don't be so brave,' he says. 'It's okay if you cry. I won't run out of the door into the rain.'

She digs into her food. He watches her before he begins himself.

‘You need something to look forward to, Maria. A plan, just for you.’

‘It sounds lonely.’

‘It doesn’t have to be. It can be a plan that includes many people. I’m sure if you think about it, and allow yourself to think big, the right one will come, yes?’

‘I keep thinking I should go away, but I really don’t know where to go.’

‘You’re not listening well enough,’ he says. ‘But you need silence in your mind before you can hear.’

‘There is always so much noise,’ she says. ‘Everywhere I go, there seems to be people banging and building, or playing blaring music. So much noise.’ She rises from her seat and looks around. ‘Where is your bathroom?’

‘It’s through the bedroom,’ he says pointing. ‘Straight through there.’

As she walks into the room with the roughly made bed, an enormous painting hanging above the bed catches her eye. A painting of a woman. Intriguing face. She looks familiar. Behind her are words, roughly painted, hardly legible. She leans forward to make them out. It is from a poem by C. Day Lewis:

Move then with new desires.

For where we used to build and love

Is no-man’s land, and only ghosts can live

Between two fires

‘Is that your painting?’ she asks when she returns the living room. ‘Did you paint the work in your bedroom?’

‘Yes, that’s mine.’

‘Is that the woman?’

‘Yes.’

‘What was her name?’

‘Camille. Camille Pascoe.’

‘Pascoe. Unusual name. There is a Zara Pascoe in Jake’s class. Unbelievably odd, Jake says, but very talented. Frank Rosen bought two of her paintings at an exhibition recently. He’s never done *that* before.’ She stands to leave. ‘Maybe she’s a relation to Camille? You never know. Why don’t you try to find out?’

As she drives home his words come back to her: *You need something to look forward to, Maria. A plan just for you.* The devil Tarot card suggested that the bonds that tie her are of her own volition. If she could only think of an idea big enough to propel her through her own self-doubts and beyond.

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The hospital is large and convoluted. Eventually he finds himself in the right ward. A young brown nurse guides him through the maze of corridors and wards. He cannot believe that it is now so close. The last few days have been a challenge; like climbing a mountain and finding there is another behind it, and then yet another and another. He is still unsure why he is pursuing this. To dig up this memory, now so perfected, seems foolish, he knows. But the thirst to touch her once again, even if only through the remembered words of others, is bigger than anything he has known for some time. Zara Pascoe. He called the school to find out her address, but the office was closed for a month's holiday. He called Maria again and she gave him Jake's cell-phone number. Jake was abrupt - he never did like the man - told him he didn't have a clue, but Frank Rosen might be able to help. Frank Rosen eventually gave him directions, which he followed, but when he reached the vine-covered cottage with an old swing in the garden, it was locked up. Only an old white dog whined at the door. He waited at the cottage for hours, but nobody returned.

Eventually he drove all the way home to Scarborough. The following morning he returned very early. The dog was still there. It rushed to meet him. But when it realised that he had not brought anybody with him, it started to whine. Poor thing was probably ravenous. He knocked on the door. But still there was no sign of human life. 'Who are you waiting for?' he questioned the dog. 'Who lives here? Ghosts?' Eventually he put the dog in the car and drove slowly down the road. He approached a string of labourer's cottages and with much gesticulation gleaned that the person who could answer the question was a woman called Leah September who worked for some winefarmers called Smit.

Mrs Smit was rather curt, glared at the dog, and looked horrified when he asked whether he could have some water for it, and perhaps a slice of bread. At that point a brown woman was summoned.

'That's not your dog,' was the first thing she said.

'I know,' he smiled. 'I'm just going to feed it and find it's owner. I'm looking for Zara Pascoe. Is this her dog?'

Leah glared at him. 'Who wants to know?'

'A friend of the family,' he said. 'Why were they so touchy?'

'Family? She doesn't have any family left,' said Leah. 'Funeral for the old man was jus' last week. Now I don't know where she's gone. I'm sorrie. I can't help you.'

As he walked towards his bakkie, she followed him outside, away from Mrs Smit's earshot.

'My daughter could have tol' you, but she's gone. Gone! God alone knows where.

And Pieter, Mevrou Smit's son could also have helped maybe, but he's buggered off to live in Cape Town with some friends from his college. Good job too.'

And then the comment that sent him to the police: 'But something must have happened for her to leave that dog. She's in trouble that's for sure.'

The police contacted the hospitals, and found that a Zara Pascoe had been admitted into a mental ward for observation. As far as the hospital knew, there was no immediate family he could speak to. At that point, he considered letting the idea go. What was the point of speaking to somebody struggling with their sanity? What would they remember? The only problem was that now he was stuck with the white dog. 'Look what you've got yourself into, Mátyás,' he muttered to himself, with the dog flopped forlornly at his feet. 'Okay. I'll see what happens. For the sake of the dog.'

The brown nurse is still chatting on at his side, oblivious to the fact that he has not been listening. As they walk into the lift he pays more attention.

'She's such a sweetie, this one. Seems fine to me. Haven't a clue why they still keeping her here. It's only when they tried to take her baby that she got so *woes*, and I don't blame her. *Jislaiik*, a woman has a choice about these things these days! But she's a real peach. She's only been here such a short time and already she's made

gorgeous colouring-in books for our children. All birds. Really *oulik*.' They enter a room. 'Someone here to see you, Miss Zara.'

She is sitting at the window. He jumps. Her profile is Camille. Achingly so. But when she turns to face him he can see that her eyes are her own: big and dark. The colour of bitter chocolate. The colour of sadness. Of seeing and knowing. Of remembering.

'Do I know you?' she says.

'I'm not sure,' he says slowly. Then at a loss for what to say or do or how to hide his emotions, he kneels before her, his hefty body facing her, looking at her, staring.

'I knew your mother.'

'Maman?'

'Camille.'

She looks at him carefully. 'Are you the man who rode in the basket of your father's bicycle? The one who had the very bad first kiss?'

'Did she tell you that?'

'The man who wrote her letters when he was in hospital?'

'Yes. Did she tell you?'

'No. She never told me. But she kept the letters in a pumpkin-coloured folder in an old suitcase on top of the wardrobe. After she died I couldn't remember her. No matter how hard I tried, it all went blank. I used to read the letters often, hoping I could find something that would make me remember something, anything of her. But it never worked. I knew all about you. But until very recently, I couldn't recall a thing about Maman.' Her voice trails off. Then she faces him. 'I still have the letters.'

'If you have read the letters, then you know me,' he says. 'You know me. Because nothing has changed in all this time. Nothing.' He takes her hand. 'I feel exactly the same way about her now as I did then.'

Chapter Twenty-five

Jake returns to the school a day before term begins again. He looks up at the building as though he were seeing it again for the first time after a very long journey away. The front entrance, the coffee table with the imported art magazines, the corridors, the staircase. He knows every corner; it has the familiarity of an old lover. He climbs the stairs to his office, unlocks the door and looks around. Everything as it was. Everything disarmingly the same. This is his world. His reality. His kingdom. This is where he belongs, in the realms of beauty and learning. Everything else, everything that has happened in the last few weeks, has been a dream. A bad dream. He hopes he can forget about it soon. He notices a crisp white envelope on the floor. Someone must have pushed it under the door. He picks it up then sits at his desk. While he waits for his computer to boot up, he slits open the letter.

Dear Jake,

I tender my resignation with immediate effect.

Yours faithfully,

Trudy

He sighs. It is time. In fact, it is a little overdue. So much of a relationship is knowing when to leave. And she left it a little late, he feels. In fact, come to think of it, just as people tend to be remembered by their last job, ninety percent of a memory is in the ending. He feels a wave of pity. Poor little kitten. All her illusions bitten open by light. It is never an easy lesson to learn that light has teeth. Ah, where, where does it go, the love when it has died? Is that a song? He digs in his drawer for a business card for an employment agency he has always found helpful.

‘Yes of course we’d love to help, Dr Coleman. We can send some candidates over very soon. Maybe even later this morning.’

In his e-mail inbox, there is a note from the Dutch gallery owners who had been out to see him. They had returned to Holland after a good trip, they said. Sorry that they missed him. And would he be interested in being part of an exhibition in Amsterdam in three months’ time?

His reply is short.

Dear Sirs,

Thank you for thinking of me for your exhibition. It would have been an honour to accept your invitation. However, I have decided to take an extended sabbatical from painting to recharge the batteries and nourish the soul. In the meantime I will be concentrating on building the international profile of my art school. I wish you everything of the best in your venture.

Yours truly

Jake Coleman (Dr)

What relief. The decision had come to him overnight after weeks of mind-mangling wrestling. He would take a break. God knows he deserves one after all he's been through. And then Maria would help him relaunch his career when he was ready.

Maria. He wants Maria, he has decided. Capable, dependable Maria. He has really missed her these last few weeks. Especially in the early hours of the morning. When he woke this morning, the thought suddenly struck him that she might never return. Usually she would have contacted him by now.

He called her immediately.

'Can I come and have coffee with you this afternoon?' he asked in a small voice.

There was the slightest of pauses.

'Okay.' Maria is usually so welcoming, but there is briskness to her tone. Defensive.

But she has agreed. The rest should be easy.

He watches her walk towards him. She has lost a considerable amount of weight, yet still has 'body'. In fact she looks rather appealing. He has expected her to fall to pieces without him; in some ways he feels a little offended that she hasn't. But then, Maria is a remarkable woman. She has always had her own identity. And a thirst for living that nobody could quench. How could he have forgotten that? He smiles. How attractive she appears. Is there anything in the world as desirable as a woman who is only just out of reach, even if sometimes he has to put her there himself? The eternal illusory quest for the perfect mirror can only be sustained from a distance.

He slowly stirs in his spoon of brown sugar, watching her all the while.

‘I’ve missed you,’ he says.

‘Why?’ she says.

‘Because I love you.’

‘Please. You don’t honestly expect me to believe that.’

‘No, I don’t expect anything. But at least allow me my self-recriminations.’

She stares at him for a while, exhaling a stream of cigarette smoke to one side.

‘Don’t make me grovel, Maria.’

‘For what? What do you want, Jake?’

He looks at her. She can sense him retract. The scales revert. He pushes his coffee away. Makes as if to stand up.

‘Okay. This was a bad idea. I always thought you a generous woman, Maria. A kind and tolerant woman. Big-hearted. Clearly I was wrong. When are you coming to get the rest of your things?’

‘Jake, wait. Please. You must see it’s not easy for me. How do you expect me to feel? For months, maybe years, I don’t know, you’ve been screwing your secretary. Do you honestly just expect me to put up with that?’

‘I haven’t been screwing my secretary. And in any case, she’s leaving.’

‘Jake, I saw you. At the exhibition, by the car. You can’t deny it.’

‘I don’t believe you!’ he snaps back. ‘After knowing me for ten years you choose to make up some paranoid story just because you see me comforting someone. That’s all I was doing. Comforting her. And for that you kick up all this fuss? And all this right now, when I needed you the most. Does the word “integrity” mean anything to you at all, Maria?’ He makes as if to leave again.

‘Wait, Jake! Let’s finish this conversation.’ Her voice is pleading.

Then suddenly she sees it: She’s *fallen* for it. Again! The fear of him leaving has always been larger than anything. Larger than herself. And nobody knows it better than he. That he who can walk away the easiest calls the shots.

Mátyás’ words return to her yet again: *You need something to look forward to, Maria. A plan, just for you.*

She lifts her large suede handbag from the floor and puts it on her lap.

‘She’s leaving?’ she repeats more calmly. She feels inside the handbag slowly, taking care that he does not notice. Touches the sides of the signed sale papers for the gallery. They are still there. A totem.

‘Yes. I decided if she were upsetting you that much, she must go. And this is the thanks I get.’

She slides her hand further into the bag till she feels a smoother surface. The Cunard brochure with her single round-the-world ticket on the QE 2 already inside.

‘Have you found a replacement?’ she asks. Her fingertips glide over the glossy brochure cover like a secret caress. Just a few more days before she flies to Spain to catch up with the ship.

‘The employment agency sent a girl across this morning.’

‘Any good?’

As he drains the coffee from the avant-garde mug he thinks of the young lady he interviewed that morning. Raven-haired with a perfect little widow’s peak, accentuating her already heart-shaped face. A full, sensuous mouth that smiled every time he spoke to her. Eager to please. She asked for his autograph.

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘I think she will do perfectly.’

Afterword

She is running. The Scarborough beach sweeps and swirls all around her. A shroud of fine rain gusts across her face. A small child runs alongside her on chubby legs, squealing with delight at the clap of the waves. Foamy high-fives. A brittle white dog, thin as a ghost, barks from the dunes. From the A-frame in the background a man watches, enthralled. In spite of the fact that they spend most of their time here with him, the wild magic of the sea seems eternally new for the little one, even in the wet. Zara stops and clasps her child's hands. *Hold tight!* Then swings her round and around just above the water. They collapse into a dizzy whorl on the sand. The man decides to join them. Walks carefully down the steps of the A-frame onto the bone-coloured shore and into the wind and the rain. The child's laughter rises, like a memory, far above the dark green undertones of the ocean and the wet wingflap of gulls. She lifts the child into the air once again. 'To love is to fly, Camille.' *Only wings evade death.* 'To love is to fly. To be free.'

They are unaware that some distance from the beach another man is hunched in his car, his large bulk squashed into the driver's seat. Each time, he parks in the same space, half-hidden in the brush. From this vantage point, he can always recognise her shape as soon as she steps onto the sand. It gets his breath going. With one hand, he lifts his binoculars to his bloated face, revealing a broad half-moon of sweat beneath his armpits. With the other, his thick fingers fondle the exquisitely keen blade-tip of a knife.

-ends-