

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

KHAKI OLIVES

BY DIANNE STEWART : HYXDIA001 1

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
MA in Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities
University of Cape Town
2008

Compulsory Declaration

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.

Signature _____

Date: 15 January 2008

Signed by candidate

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to thank my supervisor, Professor Geoffrey Haresnape, for his guidance with this dissertation.

University of Cape Town

KHAKI OLIVES

'You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. What you'll discover will be wonderful. What you'll discover is yourself.'

Alan Alda.

University of Cape Town

To become a travel writer one has to travel.

I am on an Italian train. A breeze creeps down my neck through a window that is stuck open, so I change my seat in the carriage to face Genoa, rather than Pisa, on the other side of the aisle.

As we move unsteadily at first as the train gathers strength for the journey, I notice that trains do not usually take the most scenic route to their destinations. They depart from the seedier sides of town, ambling past parking lots and unkept backyards before they gain momentum through bleak industrial areas. Then for a short while they offer respite to passengers as they speed through rural terrain. But before long they reach the outskirts of the next town, only to follow the same predictable procedure again.

I am on an express train with few stops. It has just given me a glimpse of the Arno River and the outskirts of the city of Pisa. Along the way, I try to find our exact location on my map of the Ligurian coastline, but when I do, I realize all too soon that the train has left the station in its wake. That is how I see the yards of Carrara that provided the marble for Michelangelo's 'David.'

The sun forces its entry through watery clouds into our crowded compartment that is filled with Italians, mostly families on holiday. Weary parents try to read while children race up and down the carriage like wild horses. My anonymity allows me to take liberties with my eyes as I try to imagine the destinations and home situations of my travelling companions.

I glance surreptitiously at one of the two young guys in cycling gear that are seated opposite me in the train. The tall, lean, sallow-skinned male with chiselled facial features reminds me of my housemate at university, Cameron, who is now nearly an accountant. I suddenly drown in feelings of nostalgia for the carefree existence of student life that I have left behind. But I do not permit myself the indulgence for too long. I want to allow the new landscape to wash over me like the moody sweeps of ocean that I glimpse from the train as we journey along the coast. On this early summer day, they are a reminder to me that I will always feel most at home beside the sea.

Our arrival at Monterosso al Mare lulls me out of my complacency. The hotel courtesy bus is not at the station to meet me as arranged. I panic. I do not have international roaming on my cell phone and the instructions for the pay phones are in Italian. Tears,

desperate gesticulations with my hands and my pocket Italian dictionary eventually reward me with directions to the hotel. But oh what a slog! I soon discover for myself that it is a long, steep walk up a windy hill, that is made worse by having to drag my suitcase behind me.

My calves ache as I climb the hill that is littered with pine-needles. The fine drizzle that blurs the trees and rugged mountains all around me, plays havoc with my hair, twisting straight strands into corkscrew curls. Then a sharp shower, that hits me like splinters of glass, chills me to the bone. I quicken my pace but as I walk towards the hotel entrance, crunching gravel under my feet, I feel like a laundry maid.

Georgina Dermatt?

Yes.

Let me show you around. You are rather late...I thought you said that you'd be here this morning.

I know, but the plane was delay...

Never mind, follow me.

I quickly glance at the foyer as we pass through it. It is vibrant and voluptuous, like the stuffed cushions that rest on the chairs. I am not shown the lavish sitting and dining rooms of this country hotel that swarms with British and European tourists. I am shown the skeletal system of the place: the kitchen, scullery, laundry and linen room. At this point I am left on my own to explore my surroundings as Mrs Knowles, the housekeeper, is suddenly summoned by the hotel manager.

The light in the linen room illuminates piles of neatly folded white percale sheets and pillowcases that are orderly arranged at eye level. Each item is embroidered with a beige satin pine cone in the corner: an apt emblem for this hotel, that is surrounded by rustling, pencil-stemmed pine trees.

On the shelves above, almost out of reach, sandalwood-scented beige blankets have been placed out of sight, out of mind, for the summer. As I breathe in the antiseptic, yet aromatic air that filters through the linen room, I run my fingers over the finely washed linen that is stiff to the touch. Then my eyes are drawn to the shelf below that houses rows of perfectly arranged soaps in marble-patterned wrappers and bottles of herbal shampoo and conditioner.

The irony of the storage is not lost on me. I quickly discern that the well-ordered state of the bed linen and towels reflects not only the austere, disciplined attitude of the hotel management, but the order and stability that I long for in my own life. Emotionally I feel as though I am at sea, in a small rudderless wooden boat that is being tossed about by the winds of change. I do not feel as though I am heading in any definite direction.

Back in my small room in the bowels of the building that overlooks the washing line and the pine forest behind the hotel, I unpack my meagre belongings and the books that have filled my suitcase with lead. There is a small wooden table in my room, with an aluminium bedside lamp on which to put my books: Strindberg's *By the Open Sea*, which I brought with me for inspiration, as I once read that travel writer, Bruce Chatwin, took it with him on one of his journeys. Next to that I place Paul Theroux's *Dark Star Safari : Overland from Cairo to Cape Town*, a gift to me from my father when I left South Africa. Ever since I read *The Mosquito Coast*, a set work book at school, I have been inspired by Theroux's writing. I take courage in the fact that he once travelled two continents to get a story!

It's stuffy in my confined space. I throw open the windows to let in the fresh, salty air and I'm surprised by the loud drone of cicadas that penetrates my room. Tired from my early start in London and the delay at Gatwick airport that robbed me of sightseeing time in Pisa, I climb onto my bed and rest my back against the hard headboard behind me. It is good to watch the glide of my roller ball pen across the first page of my journal, capturing the indelible memory of a turbulent flight across France, the sight of the choppy Mediterranean Sea and my first impressions of the hotel.

CHAPTER TWO

Mrs Knowles briefs me on how to service a room.

The linen is changed daily, unless otherwise requested.

That will be so much work. I'm shocked by Mrs Knowles's statement, but I do not verbalize my thoughts.

Some nature nut may not want his sheets and towels changed every day, but there aren't too many of those around!

I nod in agreement, but I am so disappointed by Mrs Knowles' observation.

You may not watch television while working in the room.

Are we not allowed any distractions I wonder?

Georgina, you'll need to do three rooms between breakfast and morning tea...

I almost keel over when faced with the demands of the job. Mrs Knowles continues unabated.

And three more before lunch. They are all on the first floor.

The task sounds daunting. My tight, white shirt-waister uniform threatens to burst its buttons as I push the heavy, steel cleaning trolley along the varnished pine floors to my first room. The wheels are sticking and it's far too warm to be wearing pantyhose. I make a mental note to request white socks to wear with my cross trainers.

When the master key unlocks the first room, which is sea-facing, I am surprised by what I see. The bedclothes are in disarray. The top sheet looks like a crumpled parachute on the floor and the under blanket has slipped its moorings to expose the dark blue mattress. Most of the pillows have been grounded as well. Has this guest slept on the floor all night? Does he have a back problem? Perhaps he's just a restless sleeper?

Turning the brass handles of the wood and glass doors that lead to the balcony, I force them open to let out the stale, acrid smell of smoke that taints everything. Ugh! This room should be a smoke-free zone! I immediately put a non-smoking sign in the room to remind the occupant of the status of the room.

The small balcony with its black wrought-iron railings, offers an amazing view of the restless sea down below. It immediately puts me in holiday mode and I linger outside. The wind whips up the water but I just stand there and gaze at the scene. In the distance

houses climb up steep mountain slopes and are surrounded by vineyards that cling tenaciously to the rocky hills. From up here, I am almost level with wispy clouds that haphazardly streak a clear blue sky.

Down below I catch a glimpse of the ferry, riding the waves like a seahorse, as it approaches Monterosso al Mare from one of the other towns on the coast. I imagine that I am on it, seeing the old fishing village for the first time as the ferry approaches the land.

Suddenly my conscience plagues me. I whisk away a smudged glass and empty bottle of Sciacchetta wine from the wrought iron table outside. As I place it in a bin on my trolley, I imagine the occupant of this room sitting alone on the balcony the previous night. He must have been watching the swirling ocean under the light of the same half moon that I glimpsed, just as I was going to bed in my back room, with a comfort mug of hot chocolate.

As I dust the bedside tables, scattering ash, my eye is drawn to a laptop in hibernation mode on the desk. A scattered assortment of books, both fiction and non-fiction, are lying next to it, displaced like a fallen pack of cards. I'm curious, but I keep dusting. A dried cuttlefish, like the ones we found as children on the Indian Ocean beach near our home, is balanced on a book of poetry. I see that it is written by Eugenio Montale. I have not heard of the poet before. I am about to take a closer look at the book when I hear footsteps down the passage. I quickly retreat to the bathroom, skidding on the wet floor. As I flush the toilet, the footsteps subside. I sigh and try to feel positive about restoring order to this messy space.

I then lift the soggy towels off the floor that have left a watermark in the shape of a lake and drop them into the cavernous bag on my trolley. A disposable razor still bears evidence of today's shave and the lid of the shaving gel is missing. A quick search reveals it lying in the bin, almost hidden by layers of cigarette stubs.

There is no evidence of an aftershave and I notice that the occupant of Room 7 has used the hotel shampoo and conditioner, which I replace with new ones from my trolley. I sigh as I turn off the tap that has been left trickling. Is it true that the water swirls down the drain in a different direction in the northern hemisphere from what it does in the southern?

My fingers fumble over the slippery surface of the china hand basin as I clean it. I am not used to working in industrial gloves and I find them cumbersome. This is clearly not the job that I envisaged for myself! Suddenly I glance at my watch and break out into a sweat. It has already taken me more than an hour to service this room.

As I fold the limp legs of the occupant's Levi jeans that I find lying across the armchair near the desk, I estimate the owner to be about 187 cm. The red label sewn into the neck of his red tee-shirt indicates that he has a medium sized chest. Then I notice a small *New York University* insignia on the left sleeve, which arouses my curiosity. I am just about to put the tee-shirt into a hotel washing bag, when I realize just in time, that unlike bath towels, sending laundry away is the room occupant's prerogative.

Then suddenly I notice a pair of black Abercrombie and Fitch slops that lie upside down under the desk. I quickly place them in the cupboard.

I debate whether or not to tidy the books that are strewn across the desk. There are two poetry books by Montale. One is *Satura (Poems)* translated by William Arrowsmith, with a Tuscan scene on the cover. It is said that one shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but a cover so often sells the book. In this instance the marketers have chosen well. On the cover is an impressionist painting of a cluster of sienna houses with terracotta roofs, clinging to the top of an undulating, green hill. It looks both poetic and inspiring.

I quickly turn a page and discover both the original Italian and an English translation of the poem next to each other. I try to make sense of the first Italian poem, but suddenly I fear being caught snooping, so I quickly just dust the other books without taking much notice of their titles. As I finally close the door behind me, the landline in Room 7 rings. I am about to answer it, when I realize that it is not part of my job description.

The occupants of the sea-facing Room 8 have already vacated the premises. The remnants of a room service meal gather dust on the tray. Chocolate wrappers, empty soft drink cans, brochures and discarded train tickets litter the room. I want to heave as I scoop up the rubbish into empty shopping bags that lie around the room. In my hurry to dispose of them on the trolley, I almost walk into the cupboard doors that swing open as I pass by. Already I am finding this job stressful. Then I notice that wooden hangers are missing from the cupboard and I make a note to report this to the housekeeping department.

As I strip the bed and remake it with fresh sheets, releasing grains of beach sand, I battle to get the sides even (a double bed is a lot more difficult to make than two singles). Charging from one side of the bed to the other leaves me a little out of breath. This is such a new experience to me! I recall my grandmother showing me how to make a bed when I was ten years old. I can still recall her patient voice: *The sheet ends need to be evenly and neatly tucked in to form right angles. Imagine that the bed sheet is like an envelope, Georgina.*

Those were the days when a woman's reputation depended on her housekeeping skills! What I'm doing now is far removed from pulling up a duvet and straightening the pillows on the bed in my university digs, which is where I gained experience 'servicing' a room. At home, I even made my mother discard the top sheet so that it would be less trouble to make my bed!

The carpet cleaner picks up a trail of sand that resembles ants and I give the curtains a quick vacuum with the extension. Phew! My arms ache. I'm not that tall and I cannot reach the curtain rail, even with the extension! Then I'm suddenly distracted by a lawn mower that starts up outside. Like hospitals, hotels are no place for guests to rest!

I discover that the shower cap, soap and shampoo are all missing from the bathroom. As I bounce into the passage to find replacements, I see the profile of a medium-sized guy step into the first room that I have cleaned. I try to work out if the occupant of that first room is how I visualized him. I definitely thought of him as having blonde hair, but his is actually medium-brown and gelled.

I suddenly remember that I have not closed the balcony doors in Room 7. After completing Room 8 I return to the room and ask the occupant's permission to do so, but he tells me not to bother. I notice that he is wearing black jeans and a white tee-shirt and he is barefoot. Then he says distractedly:

Could you get me a beach towel?

You'll have to organize that at reception.

He looks surprised.

Oh! Okay.

I want to ask him more about the books he is reading, but I remember Mrs Knowles' reminder that it is taboo to fraternize with the guests.

CHAPTER THREE

I lie motionless on the sand. The ocean pounds in my ears. The sunlight is blinding. I'm disorientated, shipwrecked after a storm. It's not the Mediterranean Sea on which I've been sailing all night, but the swirling Indian Ocean, fighting the currents in a flimsy lifeboat of turbulent emotions.

It's summer. I've just left university and Tim is staying with us. We are walking across the dunes, clothes flapping as we fight a strong south-easter that blows sand in our eyes. I am telling him about the Southern Right Whales that I saw close to the shore during the October vacation, but he is uninterested. Distant and distracted. Our relationship is not the same anymore. I desperately want it to be. If it worked in Grahamstown, why can't it work here?

The images do not fade as I wake, but remain with me as I try to process them. My dreams have transported me home and I have to remind myself that I am in Italy. Because I have overslept, there is no time for breakfast and hunger gnaws at my stomach.

Mid-morning Mrs Knowles complains about my bed making skills.

Whoever trained you dear? They didn't have a clue! No clue at all! It's all so unprofessional.

I remain silent. Silence is the best form of defense. I am not surprised by my employer's rebuke. In the area of bed making, I am semi-skilled. In fact I'm quite untidy. Mrs Knowles removes her hands from her hips and beckons me to follow her into one of the east-facing rooms. I am like a child about to be scolded by a teacher.

Look, this is how it is done, Georgina Dermatt!!!

Her exasperation steams out of her body like smoke from a volcano.

The overlap of the sheet must be exactly the same on either side. Try and measure the distance with a ruler if you're not sure!

Yes, Mrs Knowles.

It's all very unprofessional.

As Mrs Knowles turns to leave, a gust of wind rushes in through the open balcony door and the room door bangs shut behind her. I sigh, close the balcony doors and return to my trolley in the passage.

I've just completed my second room for the day, when Sarah asks me to do two extra rooms for her so that she can go off early. I want to help her out but I can hardly cope with my own load. However, I cannot refuse, even though it will take me well into the afternoon to finish my work.

Then as I clean the bathroom in Room 9, the detergent bottle slips through my fingers and it lands on my feet, soaking my cross trainers. I wonder what else can go wrong. Mrs Knowles has missed this episode, but it is not long before she seeks me out.

I'd like you to work in the kitchen after lunch, Georgina.

That is not part of my job description. Reading the horror on my face, Mrs Knowles offers an explanation, but she is already walking away from me when I hear her say:

Melissa has had to go to Levanto to fetch supplies. Dominic is off sick so I need your help.

I fiddle nervously with my belt. It is pointless to explain that I am already doing extra rooms for Sarah.

At 2.30 then...

Her words stun me.

Later, as I pack a mound of food-smearred crockery into the large industrial dishwasher, I feel a pang of pain in my lower back. I straighten up, rise on to my toes and stretch my arms towards the fluted ceiling, with fingers splayed. This at least wards off a back spasm. Bending over beds has caused a twinge in my lower back.

Then, as I look out of the window at the swaying pines, I decide that I need to get out. I need to be far away. Hiking through the orchards in the hills or swimming in the sea.

Late afternoon, I manage to escape from the hotel.

In fact, I find an interesting person to profile. My subject arrives unexpectedly, in the form of a local character in the old town of Monterosso al Mare. She is setting up her cart in the deep shadows of an ancient Ligurian-Gothic style building. As she moves awkwardly, an odorous fish smell trails behind her. I'm tempted to walk on the other side of the road, but I follow her as I'm intrigued. More specifically by her dress. She is wearing the colours of the sea on a misty day. The white cap that projects down over her face, displays only a little of her narrow forehead above her thick, black rimmed glasses.

Her flimsy dress is a pale aquamarine-and-white wave that tumbles over her white rubber boots.

I approach her tentatively.

You speak English?

Y...e...s?! She gesticulates uncertainty with her hands that are encased in transparent gloves. As she pushes back her peaked cap slightly I see more of her red, blemished face and her dark, greasy hair that is caught up in a fine, white net. But she is not interested in me. She turns her back on me while arranging the ice on which her wares are displayed.

You want fish?

No... Actually... She turns around and continues straightening her silver line fish that glint in the fading afternoon light.

Excuse me... Sorry...

I am tentative in my approach towards her.

I'm a travel writer and I'd like to do a feature on you...

I?

I hand her my card.

What for?

A seabird flies low overhead, then screeches, before settling down on the ledge of a building nearby. The fish monger gazes suspiciously at it.

For a magazine.

Which one?

Not sure yet.

She shakes her head as she quickly puts on a scale-encrusted white apron.

Okay. I'm Nicoletta Rossi.

Can I ask you a few questions?

She looks surprised but I proceed anyway.

What fish are you selling? I peer into the cart at the variety of fish that are draped over the ice. Nicoletta takes a while to answer.

It's the mormora, the orata, le cozze... As I make notes, Nicoletta's attention is diverted by a customer who is fingering prawns at the back of her cart. She strides over

and addresses the old woman in a formal, polite manner. When she has served the customer, she returns to my side of the cart.

You're still here.

Yes.

I quickly take a photograph of Nicoletta and her cart.

You don't mind?

It's okay!

Where do you come from?

South Africa.

Africa?

Actually South Africa, but I'm working here for the summer.

But you have an English accent.

I shrug my shoulders. Nicoletta continues, using her hands to assist her with our conversation.

I spent one summer in England. At the Billingsgate Market with my cousin.

It draws a blank with me, but I show interest anyway

It was busy. Long hours.

Oh.

I nod knowingly, yet do not even know where the fish market is situated. In fact I've never heard of it. But I'm intrigued. At home most people buy fish from a supermarket. I've also always thought that fish mongering was the domain of men. What makes a woman take up this profession, I wonder.

Nicoletta, when did you become a fish monger?

I have taken over when my father died... He lived here all his life. Look! He used to have one of the boats over there. With the lamp on it.

My eye follows her long arm into the distance until I see small boats sheltered in the bay by a rocky outcrop.

They go fishing at night. Anchovies...

So they're a local speciality?

Speciality?

A food that is eaten in this region.

Oh! Yes. We love to eat them here. In winter, they go to deep waters, but in Spring, they come back to warm water here.

I'm interrupted again by a small man with a protruding stomach who urgently seeks Nicoletta's attention. She sweeps up calamari pieces with a large metal scoop and weighs the fish on the scale at the back of her cart. The man and Nicoletta laugh heartily and I notice that she is blushing.

After the war there were fifty boats in Monterosso. Now there are five.

Why is that?

She shrugs her shoulders and tries to lure passers-by to her stall. She is obviously well known to the locals whom she greets enthusiastically.

I make a mental note to research the decline of anchovy fishing on the coast.

Then I take a few more photos of Nicoletta's portable fish shop as the setting sun slides behind the hills and the seabirds swoop low as they return to the shore. I'm fascinated by the fish on her cart but I'd hate to be handling them myself.

As I wander through the alleyways that form a maze in the old town, I study the menus at a number of sidewalk restaurants where eager tourists have already settled down for the night. There seems to be a sense of urgency to secure a seat, so I quickly choose a restaurant nearby and position myself at a two-seater table that is sheltered by a faded, green canvas awning. Why do most restaurants never provide a table for a person on her own? They are mostly set for even numbers.

As I sit waiting for service, I notice the green shutters of the buildings around me that frame windows and offer people privacy, despite the fact that their lives are visible to the public through their washing that hangs from their windows, suspended above the alleys. It is possible to gauge the ages and tastes of the occupants of the apartments, by the nature of their clothing hanging on the lines.

The ebullient waiter tries to tempt me with fresh sea bass. But after a time of indecision, during which he almost forgets about me, I decide on a starter as a main course. I am not disappointed by the salt-encrusted anchovies that arrive some time later with chunks of garlic-soaked crusty bread. The house wine is beyond my reach so I order a glass of water.

My thoughts return to Nicoletta. I wonder about her job satisfaction and how many of the small restaurants in the old town she supplies with fish.

Suddenly, thunder appears unannounced, drowning the voices around me, followed by a heavy downpour. The rain sends people scurrying into adjacent shops. Those eating under the stars on the sidewalk scramble for cover under the awning that drips water down my neck.

Rain *sounds* like rain anywhere in the world, but its smell depends on where you are. Right now, in my mind, I am on our sugar cane farm in South Africa. The cane is the colour of dry wheat. Suddenly a long, severe drought is broken by thudding rain that emits an earthy smell as it penetrates the thirsty ground. I see the soil desperately sucking in all it can, without stopping to catch its breath. And then sometime later, the flying ants appear.

I had planned to stretch out my meal, to slowly savour the anchovies in front of me, but I have no umbrella and so I decide to head home early. The tunnel through the rocky outcrop that separates the old town from the new, offers me some protection from the rain, but soon I'm exposed to the elements again. By the time I reach the square, where the hotel courtesy bus waits on the hour, every hour, my cold clothes are clinging to my skin.

As we leave the town and climb slowly towards our hotel in the hills, I notice that everyone has shut up shop early for the night. As the hotel vehicle's lights illuminate the parking area in front of our two storey hotel, I notice the rain-drenched palm trees that lash out at the night sky as they stand vigil like night watchmen outside the building, witnessing the comings and goings of the hotel guests.

I'm amazed by the versatility of nature. The same palm trees that grow on the edge of the waters of the Mediterranean also grow at home, in our sub-tropical climate.

Unfortunately, the kitchen is closed for the night. I would have liked some hot coffee. As the rain thuds against my small window and causes the pine trees to creak in protest, I manage to scribble a few lines in my journal. I imagine it to feel like the finger-worn, well travelled diaries of Impressionist painter, Matisse, and travel writer, Bruce Chatwin, who once commented that losing his Moleskine journal was more serious than losing his passport.

CHAPTER FOUR

I slowly turn the pages of the hotel register when the receptionist's back is turned. The guest in Room 7 is Nicholas Chiavarri. His occupation is listed as a student and his place of origin is Greenwich Village, New York City.

Under the column 'dietary requirements' he is listed as vegetarian. His date of departure is blank and a discreet enquiry informs me that he has already been staying at the hotel for one and a half weeks.

Mrs Knowles suddenly appears, dressed in a beige pants suit. I've noticed that even when off duty, she favours pants over skirts, which probably suit her boyish figure better.

Georgina, you ought to be servicing rooms by now.

It's a little early. The guests aren't out their rooms for breakfast yet, ma'am.

Some are!

Oh!

Get to it anyway, Georgina. You know that the public rooms are out of bounds to you.

Yes, ma'am.

Mrs Knowles is not as I imagined her to be. People's voices are often misleading. During our telephone interview when I was in London, I thought her firm, but reasonable. Possibly kind. But her obsession with efficiency makes her inflexible and irritable. I'd say that she is handsome, rather than attractive; of medium height and in her mid to late forties. I imagine that she is definitely on her own.

Room 7, my starting point, has a *Do not disturb* sign draped over the handle so I bypass it. My heavy trolley threatens to scar the varnished pine floor as I shove it further along the passage. The wheels definitely need oiling.

I knock tentatively on the heavy pine door of Room 12.

Come in.

Sorry. I'll come back. I didn't realize...

Do come in. I'm not going anywhere.

Let me rather come back later.

No, stay. I've ordered room service for breakfast.

Should I phone down for your breakfast?

No. It'll come.

This hotel guest hides behind glasses that are as thick as the base of a glass Coca-Cola bottle. She runs her fingers, which are like twisted, gnarled branches, through her tangled, shoulder-length grey hair, almost apologetically.

I haven't even brushed my hair yet. What time is it?

Nine.

Sorry. I've had a late start today. I didn't sleep that well. You'd think with the sea air...

I throw back the covers of the double bed that is rumped on one side only. This occupant is one of the guests who does not require new linen every day.

Could you put on an extra blanket, please, dear? I was so cold last night.

Sure. It was a cool night.

There was quite a storm, dear. I could hear the rain beating on the roof.

I was caught in it.

Where were you?

Having supper in the old town.

Oh! I remember the old town so well. Did you have a good meal?

I did. Anchovies!

I'm suddenly mindful of the fraternizing clause in my contract so I rush off to retrieve another blanket. When I return, I notice that this hotel guest is sitting outside on the balcony eating breakfast. She has the sun on her legs, the skin of which is so thin that it reveals the veins that form road-maps beneath it.

'It's warm today. But tell me, what does the sea look like?'

I'm surprised by her comment but I venture out onto the balcony to look.

It's a clear day after the rain. The water is deep blue and calm. In the distance, down below, I can see people walking along the promenade, already flocking to the beach.

She smiles and speaks slowly, weighting each word with nostalgia.

It seems so inviting. I used to love to bathe in the sea.

I suddenly realize that she is severely sight-impaired, so I add more details.

The ferry from the other towns on the coast, is approaching Monterosso, leaving a wake of spray behind it and there is a luxury yacht at anchor just outside the harbour, not

far from that concrete sculpture of Neptune that looks as though it is carved out of the rocks.

Oh I know it! It's il gigante, the giant. I remember it from last time I was here. Go on!

The morning light is just catching the rocky cliffs and I can see the vineyards and orchards as they creep up the mountain terraces towards the sky.

The gracious old lady sits forward in her chair.

Ooh! I hear a breeze now, whistling through the pines. I hope the day won't deteriorate. It's so warm sitting in the sun.

Her contentment amazes me. I cannot imagine how difficult life must be when one is visually impaired. Then I'm suddenly reminded of the task at hand.

Excuse me please. I have to work.

The bathroom is in disarray. I almost slip on the soap that is no longer in its cradle on top of the hand basin. On the floor are blobs of body lotion and the wet towels have been placed haphazardly over the rail. A faded, blue striped dressing gown is draped over the shower cubicle. When I hang it in the cupboard, the elderly guest seizes the opportunity to talk.

You're English?

Yes, but I'm actually from South Africa.

Where exactly?

KwaZulu-Natal. North of Durban.

Oh! My husband wanted to do a tour of the Battle-fields of Natal, but somehow we didn't make it.

I see.

What brings you to Cinque Terre?

It's a long story. Basically I needed a job.

As I dust the bedside table, I find the occupant's engagement ring. I'm intrigued by the setting which I study carefully before offering it to her.

You should put it on.

Sorry, I forgot.

I help the old lady slide the gold diamond ring over her swollen knuckle.

It's a beautiful setting.

Thank you. It's an antique ring.

I smile.

I have just lost my husband, you know.

I'm sorry. When?

She continues to talk while I return her slippers to the cupboard.

A year ago. We were married for fifty-five years.

You must be lonely now. That was a long time to be married.

She smiles broadly showing worn teeth as she recalls her husband.

It's difficult without him at times.

Do you have a family?

I realize that I am acting in defiance of the fraternizing clause, but I continue anyway.

No, we never had children. I suppose it's a great pity.

Yes.

Although Simon is often so irritating, I cannot imagine life without my brother. If it weren't for the sleeper couch in the lounge of his digs in London, I would not have had a place to stay.

My husband was in the Royal navy, based in Gibraltar during the war. You probably don't even know anything about the Second World War. But your parents or rather grandparents would remember.

I'm about to reply that I do, when the lady says:

It was long before your time.

I do not argue. The wind bangs one of the balcony doors shut and I quickly fasten it back against the wall.

Under Somerville, they bombarded Genoa, that beautiful city. What devastation!

Why is she telling me this and yes, I do remember learning about the war in history classes at school. Who has not heard about the devastation caused by Hitler and the Nazis and the horrors of the Holocaust?

It was a terrible time for us, especially in England.

I nod in agreement, easing my way backwards to the door.

My husband, Dick loved the sea and when he retired, we visited Genoa and then spent time here at Riomaggiore.

That's great.

We had such a good time. That's why I wanted to come back.

I notice a food stain as I am retreating. I fetch the carpet cleaner from my trolley outside and dab it on the mark. I find myself continuing the conversation.

How did you find this hotel?

Word of mouth. Someone in England recommended it. I couldn't believe that they still had a room for me. People book years in advance.

I see. Sorry about the noise now, but I have to do my job.

As I manoeuvre the vacuum cleaner past the edge of the bed, I glance at this dignified, courageous woman. Her paper-thin hands rest in her hollow lap and her well-pressed, floral shirt-waister dress does little to conceal her thin, fragile frame. With such poor vision, it must take her so long to bath and dress. I wonder how she moves around, until I see a white wooden stick in the corner.

I push open the heavy door, struggling to exit with the vacuum cleaner.

If I can get anything for you in Monterossa, please let me know. It must be difficult for you to shop.

After a long silence, she says: *A couple of small pebbles from the beach would be wonderful.*

Strange, I think.

I am well behind in my schedule now. I have to hurry to make up the time. While I am cleaning rooms, the holiday traffic that surges down below in the town, provides background noise. Then there is the grating sound of train wheels on metal tracks as the train negotiates its way down the coast at regular intervals throughout the morning. I do not hear the trains at night as my room faces the other way.

When I dust the wrought-iron tables on the balconies of the rooms on my beat, I linger far longer than I should. I cannot help noticing the mass of blue and white striped umbrellas on the paying beach near the tunnel. On this warm, sun-drenched day, I long to be on one of the loungers on the beach, reading in the shade of one of those hired umbrellas.

I am on edge when I clean Nicholas's room. He could arrive back at any moment and I'm curious to examine what is left lying around the room so that I can discover more

about him. I start with the bathroom and it's the same drill. Cigarette stubs litter the bin and the shaving gel lid is missing. This time it has slipped behind the hand basin. Automatically, I return to my trolley in the passage to replace the empty shampoo and conditioner bottles. Doesn't he prefer his own shampoo? Then I spray pine-scented linen spray on the pillows and sheets to eradicate the acrid smell of smoke.

Again, I retrieve the 'no smoking' sign from the bin and reinstall it in the bedroom. As I empty the waste bin a slip of paper falls to the ground. From the bill I notice that Nicholas had seafood risotto at a restaurant in the old town the night before, not far from where I had supper.

As I'm hoovering the carpet in the room, with the balcony doors wide open, I notice photos of Cinque Terre on Nicholas's laptop. A cursory glance shows the sea in all its seasons; as it laps against the shore on a calm day and as it thrashes against the cliffs when angry. Beside the computer is a yellow, black-lined A4 notepad that has a few scribbled sentences on it. To the right of the pad is a book held open by plastic arms. I turn the book upside down to dust it and read the title: *Satura*, written by Eugenio Montale.

I glance quickly at the chosen poem, *Words* that is held open by the arm and I notice that the Italian version of the poem, *Les Parole*, is on the left page. I start reading the poem, but discretion causes me to move on. My timing is perfect. As I am checking the tie-backs for the curtains, the door opens.

Hi there. Are you done yet?

Y..e..s I am... almost.

My heart pounds as I hurry to get out of the room.

Suddenly Nicholas raises his digital camera and gestures for me to have a closer look at the image in front of him. Through a foreground of palm tree trunks and fronds, I see the sun casting its light on an impressive two storey house that is painted in tones of sienna. I'm quick to respond.

That's a beautiful house. I really like the arched windows on the first floor?

Nicholas explains that they are a feature of the whole house.

Whose house is it?

I probably shouldn't be asking questions, but I'm intrigued.

This was Montale's house.

Montale? You mean the poet whose work you are reading?

I suddenly realize that I have overstepped my boundaries. I should not be commenting on his personal life.

Yeah! This is where he lived and wrote some of his poetry, right here on the coast.

I've not heard of Montale before.

Nicholas is quick to explain.

Eugenio Montale was an Italian poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature...

Okay. Are you saying that his house is still here in Monterosso Al Mare?

Nicholas nods. *Yeah!*

Is it a tourist attraction or literary museum?

No. I guess it is still privately owned by someone. I'm not sure.

That's amazing. Tell me more about Montale's poetry. I should try to read it.

It's kinda difficult to know where to start. His first book of poetry was called OSSA DI SEPPIA which means the bones of the cuttlefish...

That explains the cuttlefish in his room. I'm about to comment on it when I hear familiar-sounding footsteps climbing the stairs at the end of the passage.

Have to go.

I exit very quickly. By the time Mrs Knowles has rounded the corner, I am half way down the passage.

Afternoon, Mrs Knowles.

CHAPTER FIVE

It's my Sunday off. From the hotel I can just see the town of Manarola in the distance, clinging precariously to high, wind-swept cliffs. A strong, cold wind whips through the pine trees down below and ominous rain clouds hang low over the restless, metallic-grey sea.

I drink sweet café latte at the coffee shop opposite the station while waiting for a mid-morning train. There aren't many people walking the promenade and only a few in the sea. Church bells peal slowly and melodiously.

The train is almost full. Tourists mingle with local Italians, who seem more formally dressed than usual. I have just settled in the carriage upstairs, which offers me magnificent views of the sea, when the train slows down to allow passengers to disembark at Vernazza, the next stop.

As I climb out of the train, I notice how the town tumbles down from the station towards the sea, taking the visitors with it. I follow the cobbled stone walkway as it leads me past old fuchsia-pink, sienna and dark beige buildings, built between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, according to my guidebook. I long to explore the steep narrow stairways between the buildings and houses, but a well-stocked deli reminds me of my hunger.

I buy olive bread rolls, a few slices of paper-thin ham and a small bottle of Genoese pesto and eat my brunch on a bench at the town square, near the Church of St. Margaret of Antioch, that watches over the sheltered bay. I marvel at a few children splashing in the cold water or chasing seabirds. I'm suddenly conscious of how alone I am and I wish that I was sharing this time with Tim. He would have been intrigued by the medieval history of this area that became more accessible to people when the railway line was built about a hundred years ago.

I walk further. Around the square, the restaurants are preparing for Sunday lunch. I photograph close-up, baskets of glinting spoons, knives and forks that are waiting to be placed on tables that will be covered with starched cotton cloths. Further along in the town, I photograph baskets of freshly baked bread, ripe red tomatoes and deep purple blackberries on a fruit stall.

I feel sluggish after my meal but decide to do the coastal walk from Vernazza to Corniglia, the next town on the coast. As I wander through the town I struggle to find the route and my almost non-existent Italian does not help me. Eventually an arrow painted on one of the walls beckons me to follow it. As I climb the steep, stone steps that lead vertically upwards out of the town, my right calf cramps. I think the pain will never subside. With difficulty I tear off my hiking shoe and my tight-fitting sock and try to flex the muscles in my leg and foot. It is so painful.

But later, as I resume my climb and turn around to find my bearings, I see a panoramic view of the coastline that I would never have seen, had I continued upwards without looking back. To the north, the ocean zig-zags around mountainous cliffs before reaching Monterosso (that is just visible in the distance) then it continues north along the coast and on to Genoa. Below me are clusters of tightly-packed houses, each vying for vertical space, as they flee the crashing waves below and reach for the overarching grey sky.

The trail takes me higher above the town than I'd anticipated, along a steep, roughly hewn path that climbs higher and higher up the mountains before leveling out amongst vineyards and orchards. My eyes are mostly on my feet and the uneven terrain beneath them, but after about half an hour, I decide to take a breather. I stop beside a grove of olive trees that bear small khaki-coloured fruit.

The dark stems of the trees are gnarled and spindly. On this overcast day they offer a great composition against the light grey sky. I am standing in the middle of the olive grove, raising my camera to my eye, framing my shot, when suddenly I am distracted.

Hey! What are you doing?

I jump, thinking that I am trespassing on private property. I grab my camera bag and start to retreat quickly.

The young man laughs.

Oh! It's you... Nicholas! You gave me such a fright.

He looks indignant.

Nicholas?

I quickly look down at my feet.

How do you know my name?

I have no answer. Embarrassment flushes my face.

I'm curious. How did you find out my name?

I was just looking in the guest register at the hotel when I saw it. We're assigned certain rooms to service and...

He nods knowingly.

Is that where I've seen you? You're from the hotel.

Yes. I do work there.

You look different.

When I work I'm in disguise.

Nicholas laughs. I hope he will not notice my embarrassment. I speak without thinking and the words tumble out of my mouth.

It's just a holiday job. I'm actually a journalist. That's why I'm taking photos.

Defensive too.

I kick the soil nervously with the end of my boot.

Hey! Would you like some water? You look hot!

I have my own, thanks.

Independent too!

Nicholas smiles. Despite his caustic remarks, I am enjoying conversing in English. Suddenly I realize that I have to say something or Nicholas will just continue walking on to Vernazza.

Corniglia? Is it worth a visit?

Sure.

Nicholas looks at me enquiringly.

How much further is it from here?

You're about half way now and it is worth a visit.

I move off the path to let a group of hikers through. I rub my calf that still aches. An aftermath of the cramp.

Hey! I'm just thinking...

What Nicholas?

I can keep on walking to Vernazza, which is mostly down hill, or walk back with you to Corniglia and take the train back. What do you think?

I take a long swig of water before trying to put my backpack on again.

It's your choice Nicholas.

I'm sure you could do with some company?

I smile. He reads this as an affirmative response and without further debate he turns around and leads the way along the narrow, single file path that winds round the crest of the hill. From time to time it opens out onto sites that offer superb views of the sea crashing against the rocks down below. But Nicholas bypasses most of them. He seems to be in a hurry.

As he walks ahead of me, I study him from behind. His narrow shoulders slope downwards like a coat hangar, his butt is firm and he has well-shaped, slightly hairy legs. He is wearing a red tee-shirt (does he have a couple of them?) loose long beige shorts and he is walking in his Abercrombie and Fitch slops. His inappropriate choice of walking shoes confirms for me that he is obviously not a mountain goat like myself.

This is a far better way of getting to Corniglia.

Do you think so?

Yeah! If you go by train you have to climb 365 steps from the station to reach the town. That's a killer. Hey! What's your name? I forgot to ask.

I'm indignant. Nicholas's seeming arrogance is really off-putting, but I respond to him anyway.

Georgina... Dermatt...

I wonder why it didn't occur to him to ask me that before.

Eventually the town unfolds in front of us. At first the houses are sparsely located and then they cling together, as though protecting themselves against the elements. I wonder what it must be like to live permanently in this place that clings to the hilltops. In winter it must be so exposed.

I really need to sit down for a while, Nicholas.

Keep going a little, Georgina. There's a restaurant not far from here.

I follow him through a narrow alley that opens up into the square. The sun has broken through the clouds and we sit in the shade of a yellow umbrella.

Let's eat.

I won't. Thanks.

Nicholas looks surprised.

I had lunch at Vernazza earlier.

The waiter eventually arrives to take his order.

Vernazza's one of my favourite towns.

Yeah!

Nicholas fiddles nervously with the cutlery, identifying a smudge on his knife. Then he lights a cigarette. I restrain myself from commenting. I'm embarrassed when I think of the 'no smoking' sign that I retrieve daily from his bin and place on the table next to his bed. He does not respond further to my comment on Vernazza but as I am desperate to keep the conversation flowing I say:

What brings you to Cinque Terre Nicholas?

I'm expecting him to open up, but he is guarded.

A good place for a vacation.

So you're on holiday?

I guess so. How about you?

I'm trying to break into travel writing and I thought this place would give me a few good stories.

Has it?

Not yet.

I'm too embarrassed to mention my interview with Nicoletta Rossi. I also refrain from mentioning that despite a few travel articles that I have placed in a weekend newspaper back home that were written when I was in London, I have found life as a travel writer very precarious.

I have some really good photographs.

Like the one in the olive grove, Georgina!

For the first time I see evidence of Nicholas's sense of humour, but he does not pursue the subject and his humour quickly dissipates into sarcasm! He stubs out his cigarette and is silent. My eyes wander to children who are playing catches in the square and people who are walking their dogs. I eventually find myself breaking the silence.

That photograph of Eugenio Montale's house that you showed me at the hotel... Why is it so important to you?

It's a neat house.

Come on!

I giggle nervously. Nicholas sits back in his chair and spreads out his legs under the table. He's looking at me enquiringly, but my eyes are on his high cheekbones and his deeply-set eyes that are the colour of dark chocolate. I notice that he has not shaved this morning. The stubble creeps up onto his cheeks from his chin and frames his thin upper lip.

Actually, Georgina, I'm looking at Montale's poetry for my Masters degree, so I guess it's quite fun to see the house in which he lived at some point in his life. Biographical details are often insightful.

Why have you chosen Montale?

He's an interesting guy!

Come on Nicholas!

Long story. For one, he's a Nobel Prize winner for Literature!

That's a good enough reason. And two?

Nicholas laughs.

You are always one step ahead, Gina? Or do you prefer George?

Georgina, actually.

That figures...

I shrug my shoulders.

What do you mean by that?

I think that you like your life to be well organized, Georgina. It gives you security. You don't leave much to chance.

I'm stunned by his astute observation.

As a travel writer, you'll have to get used to the unknown. Life is not that orderly or predictable. How often do you rely on your intuition?

Nicholas laughs. I'm uncomfortable with the fact that he has read me so well. I quickly change the subject.

Do you write much poetry yourself?

I always have, ever since I was a kid.

Have you published any?

Is this an interrogation or what Georgina?

Suddenly I'm embarrassed. I have crossed the boundary again. Nicholas takes a long sip of his drink.

Yeah, in a couple of journals at home.

That's so amazing.

I check myself. I'm sounding far too enthusiastic.

In South Africa, the market is really small for poetry and it's tough getting a collection into print.

The waiter places a mound of spaghetti and mussels in front of Nicholas.

It's like that in the States as well.

I take a chunk of bread from the basket in front of me and dip it in olive oil.

Have some spaghetti, Georgina?

Thanks, but I'd rather not.

So where were you at College?

At Rhodes University in Grahamstown, a small educational town.

Nicholas slurps as he tries to reign in some stray pasta that is dangling from his mouth. He is clearly annoyed by his fumbling.

My apologies. For how long?

Four years.

Is that how long it takes to get a journalism degree?

Yes. In the fourth year one specializes.

When the bread basket is empty I watch Nicholas eat.

What was your speciality?

Print media.

Nicholas twirls the spaghetti round his fork and shoves it into his mouth. Then he takes another sip of wine.

Have you always wanted to write Georgina?

Yes. I was always interested in English literature at school and I often had creative writing pieces chosen for the school magazine.

I'm suddenly uneasy. It is far more comfortable talking about Nicholas.

Suddenly the woman at the table next to us knocks over her wine glass and I watch as the rich red liquid spreads over the table and drips into her lap. The waiter swoops down on her and in no time, there is a new cloth on the table. She is clearly flustered.

What is it like to live in New York City, Nicholas?

Hey! So many questions?

Sorry. I was just interested.

I really like the vibrancy and variety that New York offers. But at times it's frenetic. I try to get out of the city on weekends.

I reproach myself for prying, but what else do I speak to him about?

Hey Nicholas, what kind of books do you like reading?

Is that a pick up line?

His laugh unnerves me. I notice neighbouring diners looking in our direction.

Just thought we might have some books in common.

Again I reproach myself. Our conversation sounds so stilted.

Well in that case...as you well know-- I'm reading articles on the poetry of Montale right now. I want to have all my research done before college starts again in September. How about you?

Well here I'm reading travel books for inspiration, like Theroux's Dark Star Safari...it's about his trip through Africa. I don't get that much time to read though.

Theroux's a great writer.

He is. But tell me more about Montale...

Nicholas speaks confidently about his work. I thought he was a drifter, but he seems to be reasonably focused. As he talks, I sense that while he is eager to talk about his research, he is far less inclined to share much about his private life.

Eugenio Montale was an amazing guy. Poet, translator, editor and he also wrote prose. At one time he even wanted to be an opera singer.

Multitalented.

Yeah! He was also very interested in Italian and French literature and he read the work of philosophers like Schopenhauer and Bergson.

I'm drowning. I don't want to appear ignorant, so I change the subject.

Did he always live in this area?

He was born in Genoa. In 1896, to be exact, and he spent summers here in his villa.

I can see why Nicholas.

Yeah. It is situated so close to the sea.

Is he still alive?

No Georgina. He died in 1981!

Would you not have considered working on a north American poet? A contemporary one perhaps?

Nicholas does not respond. His attention is on the food in front of him.

This pasta was really good. Superb local mussels. Coffee, Georgina?

Actually that would be great.

Two cappuccinos.

I smile as I recall his comment about me always wanting to be in control.

Dark, ominous clouds overshadow us and the blustery wind threatens to blow the yellow umbrella inside out. Nicholas gulps down the lukewarm coffee and suggests that we leave. I want to finish my coffee first, so I down it quickly while he settles the bill.

We race down the stairs and make the train with a few minutes to spare. Nicholas climbs into the carriage ahead of me and sits against the salt-smearred window on the ocean facing side of the train. As he looks out at sea I slide into the seat next to him, but we're separated by his backpack.

Nonchalantly I consult the travel guide to discover more about Corniglia and wonder whether or not we should go our separate ways when we arrive back at the station at Monterosso al Mare. When the time comes I decide to walk with him as he heads back to the square.

CHAPTER SIX

As I float on my back, I'm dwarfed by the mountains that plunge into the sea. First I notice the vineyards that creep slowly upwards towards the pale blue sky. Then further down I see the lemon and fig trees that have taken root in dry, shallow soils. I marvel at the way in which the mountains protect the fishing village down below.

Suddenly the waters of the Mediterranean Sea start swirling beneath me, warning me that I am almost out of my depth. I have drifted. I'm now surrounded by the drone of fishing boats coming from behind me as they return to the shore and the sound of the waves ahead of me as they crash onto the rocks. I struggle against the current as I swim back to the shore.

In the bustling small town of Riomaggiore, hidden between houses and shops is a small museum that is unadvertised. Inside, the stone walls of this ancient building highlight the paintings of Telemaco Signorini, a native of this seaside town, whose best known work 'I Tetti di Riomaggiore' (Roofs of Riomaggiore) hangs in the Gallery of Modern Art in Florence.

I am almost breathless when I notice the photographs and information (in both English and Italian) on Montale on display in the small museum. The poet and his association with Monterosso al Mare are starting to arouse my interest. Imagine living and writing in this idyllic coastal resort in the summer.

The long wait at the internet café yields fruitful results. As I sit on a stone wall in the town, eating pizza slices and fresh purple figs, that I purchased from a small store in the town, I catch up on family happenings. The sugar mill near my home is not running smoothly, preventing my father from sending in his daily allocation of sugar cane. He is in a negotiation with the labour union at present, for an increase in workers' wages and the union officials have called for a day-long strike.

A typical one liner from Simon, my brother in London, informs me that he has changed banks. He sees his new job in mergers as a great step-up. I am so disappointed that there is nothing from Tim. I wonder if he has made it to London or if he has found work in Johannesburg. I'm so tempted to email him, but decide not to. The fact that he still comes to mind is proof that I'm still not over him.

It's already dusk when the train pulls into Monterosso station. The smart, striped canvas umbrellas on the paying beaches have been folded into their long narrow, vinyl cocoons. Only a few people remain on the beach opposite the station. The hotel bus is not due for half an hour, so in the long twilight I place my slops with the other shoes scattered at the water's edge, and brace my feet for the sharp stony access to the translucent water. I go beyond the waves and tread water which gives me a beautiful view of the town.

In the midst of this calm, I'm reminded of how rough the sea normally is on the farm beach where we swim in the summer. The waves are great for body-surfing but the strong currents pull one in all directions. We are often on the lookout for sharks as there are no shark nets off our beach and it's especially dangerous in the murky water after rain, when the rivers from up country flow swiftly into the sea. After rain it's not unusual to see a strip of mud-brown water hugging the coastline.

On my return to the hotel, I notice a folded sheet of yellow A4 paper on the floor in my room, just clear of the door.

Join me for a meal in the old town tonight, Georgina.

Is this an instruction or invitation? I seek advice from fellow workmates as my job could be in jeopardy.

Who will see you in the old town Georgina? Go for it! He's quite a catch! Just don't sit on the sidewalk.

Before long, my possible choices of dress are laid out on my narrow bed and Sarah is advising me what to wear.

Hair up or down Sarah?

Definitely down. You are so lucky to have straight hair.

I have to blow-wave it, or else it curls in the sea air!

You need heels, Georgina, to add height. I have a gorgeous pair of sandals for you that I bought in Florence. What size are you?

I try on a number of tops and decide on the soft, feminine satin one to wear with indigo jeans. As I gaze at myself in the mirror, I wonder how much make-up to apply. I settle for a little eyeliner on my green, almond shaped eyes. I do not want to be too smart as Nicholas is always dressed casually.

We meet at nine-forty in a crowded restaurant in the middle of the old town. I'm a few minutes late, as I do not want to appear too keen. He is sitting in the corner of a restaurant in a haze of smoke. When he sees me, he beckons to me to join him.

Wow, you look stunning Georgina!

Thanks.

That uniform that you wear around the hotel really does nothing for you. It hides your great body!

I'm a little taken aback by his comment.

I actually have no choice! It's very uncomfortable.

Nicholas already has a drink in front of him and he orders one for me. The crisp, white cotton shirt he is wearing contrasts with his tanned skin and I notice that he has shaved.

So, what did you do today Georgina?

I had a half day off so I went to Riomaggiore.

He nods. I have to admit that I'm impressed by his rugged good looks.

I had a fantastic swim.

At Riomaggiore?

Yes.

It's quite tricky swimming there. You should have been at Levanto, just north of Monterosso. It has this white sandy beach with a wide expanse of ocean. You really must see it.

I'll try to get there.

We are asked to share a menu.

What will you eat Georgina?

I scan the menu, holding the candle closer so that I can see the options. Nicholas chatters on, punctuating the silence with comments about the menu. He knows a little Italian so is trying to impress.

I missed out on lunch, Georgina. I'm starved. Should have known the shops in Levanto would be closed after one.

Siesta time?

Yeah.

The waiter hovers and I make a snap decision.

Seafood Risotto.

I take a long sip of water. The smoke is irritating my throat.

What took you to Levanto, Nicholas?

Just exploring... He widens his eyes and grins. I wonder why he is so secretive.

Ooh! There's a museum in Riomaggiore that has an exhibition on Montale. Have you seen it?

Nah! I probably have all the information I need on Montale.

I reflect on Nicholas's answer. Why is he so arrogant?

Did you find anything of interest in Levanto, apart from the beach?

Yeah...

Well what?

My great grandfather came from Levanto.

Oh! That makes sense. You have an Italian surname.

You know a lot about me Georgina... What else did you learn from the hotel register?

I hate the fact that Nicholas can read me so well. The waiter is a welcome intrusion as he places the steaming risotto in front of me. Nicholas is quick to comment.

I had that the other night.

I suppress a smile.

These regional dishes are so good...

Nicholas cuts into his linefish, samples a mouthful, then says:

You were asking about Levanto. I just wanted to walk around the town and get a feel for the place.

Searching for your roots?

I guess. But I don't think there is any family left there now.

For once, Nicholas is enthusiastic and open when chatting about his personal history.

My great grandfather, who lived there, emigrated to the United States after World War I.

At what age Nicholas?

He must have been in his mid-twenties. He thought he'd go to the States, make money and return home. He took his life savings and borrowed more money to make the passage.

That's so brave. He must have been after the proverbial American dream!

I guess. It cost nearly 100 dollars by boat in those days. That was a real fortune. They sailed from Genoa.

I find Nicholas's personal history interesting. For the first time, he is offering some real information about his family.

But... There were problems on the other side. These Italian immigrants had no money and they couldn't speak English.

It is easy to understand their predicament.

Did they remain in New York?

Yeah. There were enough of them to make a community in the city.

What kind of work did your great grandfather do then when he got to New York City?

Some blue-collar job.

How did you find out about all this Nicholas?

My grandfather.

You were obviously close to your grandfather if he has told you all this.

Nicholas nods and continues eating. I have a sense that I could be prying too much. Nicholas folds his arms tightly against his chest. In a second he has become a closed book.

How did you land up at this hotel, Georgina?

I switch tracks in my mind.

I'd been roughing it in my brother's place in London, sleeping on a couch in the lounge.

Nicholas smiles.

Actually, I felt a bit of an intruder as he shares the house with other guys. I really needed to get out, but I couldn't find suitable work in the city as a journalist.

Why didn't you freelance, Georgina?

I did try that until I saw this job advertised. I thought it would give me the opportunity to travel to Italy. I'm sure Simon was desperate to get rid of me as well! He even offered to pay for my flight to Italy!

Have you done this kind of work before? You must be quite domesticated.

I laugh.

No I'm not, but I learnt fast. The housekeeper, Mrs Knowles, takes no nonsense.

I've often seen her lurking around!

How long will you work here Georgina?

About three months. I'm here for the summer. The hotel closes during the winter. Then I'll head back to London and look for a proper job.

Nicholas smiles and when I see the smirk on his face I recall his comment when we first met about my always needing to be in control of my life, so that it can be more predictable.

Don't you leave anything to chance, Georgina? You limit your options that way!

I twirl my fingers through the curls that rest gently on my left shoulder. Defensively I say: *Or I might travel some more. How about you? How long are you going to stay in Monterosso al Mare Nicholas?*

I'll leave when my work is done.

Suddenly he rises from the table.

And we're all done. His comment sounds ominous. Have I said anything wrong? Why are we leaving so abruptly? It's as though he is fuelled by a sense of urgency.

We walk in easy rhythm through the tunnel and on towards the new town. Late night strollers amble past us along the promenade.

How about a pistachio ice cream Nicholas? Italy has the best ice cream!

Actually I'd prefer coffee Georgina.

We walk to my favourite coffee shop near the station and drink cappuccinos, staring intensely into each other's eyes as the restless ocean ebbs and flows in the background with the incoming tide.

I cannot believe that people sweep the beaches here.

The public is obviously demanding!

Nicholas invites me for a drink at the bar next door. There is a jazz musician that he'd like to hear. But I decline as I really need to get some sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sleep evades me. I throw open the window and the scent of pines drifts towards me. It transports me back to an avenue of pine trees that grow on our farm. At first, I lie facing the open window, staring at the coal black sky that shimmers with stars. Then I turn over allowing the night breeze to caress my back, but still I cannot sleep. I probably should not drink coffee at night.

My thoughts turn to Nicholas. He does not speak much about his grandfather, to whom he said he was close. He seems more interested in his great grandfather. I wonder why it is important to him to trace his roots back to Levanto? Is there any connection between his family and Eugenio Montale?

There are more questions than answers. Why would a young poet from New York City choose to write a major paper on an Italian poet, whose work he is not able to understand without translation? Although he knows a little Italian, Nicholas once commented that his knowledge of the language is far from adequate. Why is the work of Eugenio Montale, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1975, so meaningful to Nicholas? Why am I even wondering about this?

My alarm wakes me from a deep sleep. I try to dress quickly, drinking a mug of herbal tea at the same time. Mrs Knowles has finally agreed to me wearing 'sleeping socks' instead of pantyhose with my cross trainers for work. As I stock my laundry trolley with toiletries and fresh towels, I try to recover from sleep deprivation.

The first room I enter was vacant overnight, a rare occurrence in this hotel during the summer. I open the balcony doors to let in fresh air and rush around the room with a duster, cleaning the grimy surfaces caused by the sea air.

Nicholas is not present when I service his room. Suddenly I feel that I am an intruder. I close his journal that was left lying open on his bed and place it next to his laptop. From the ruffled state of his bed linen, I sense that he has had a restless night again. The number of cigarette stubs in the ashtray possibly confirms this.

Then I remove his Levi jeans from the chair and hang them in the cupboard. I can't help noting that he travels light, with more books than clothes. As I do this, I feel as

though I am trespassing on his private space. I hurriedly clean the bathroom, doing what is expected of me, and I do not linger in his bedroom for long.

Later in the afternoon, when I am officially off duty, I visit Mrs Elizabeth Morton in her hotel room, with Mrs Knowles' permission. She is seated at the wrought iron table on the balcony and the late afternoon sun falls on her stick-thin legs. She is wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat that casts a shadow across her face and a short-sleeved dress. I place the smooth, grey pebbles that she requested into her cupped hands. They clink as they meet each other in her palms. She lifts one and rolls it between her forefinger and thumb, exploring it sensitively with her twisted fingers.

You remembered to get me some pebbles, Georgina? Where are they from?

A public beach here in Monterosso.

They're so smooth.

Her words are measured.

As the elderly lady fingers the grey stones with her bent fingers, I mention that they have interesting patterns all over them, that resemble criss-cross white lines.

She nods enthusiastically. She is alive to her senses.

I used to be a sculptor, Georgina. That's why I love these stone forms.

Really? How long ago?

Our conversation is interrupted by the crunch of gravel down below as the courtesy bus pulls up in front of the hotel. A routine sound, but I am intrigued. From my position on the balcony, I see a man in rust-coloured overalls leave the bus and take a seat on the white wrought-iron garden furniture that is shaded by a large green umbrella at the edge of the yard. I see Nicholas go out to greet him, followed by the hotel receptionist who has just gone off duty.

Sorry, Mrs Morton. You were saying that you used to be a sculptor.

Yes, indeed, Georgina.

What did you do?

I loved carving stone. It's so tactile. Nothing terribly large. Organic shapes mainly.

Sounds great, Mrs Morton.

It was something I could still do when my eyes began to deteriorate.

Were you self-taught?

I went for a few lessons, but Barbara Hepworth was my great inspiration.

Can't say I have ever heard of her.

She was a well-known British sculptor, a contemporary of Henry Moore.

The old lady's voice is animated and confident when she speaks about her interest.

They were both inspired by nature, Georgina. You can see it in their abstract, organic forms.

Instinctively I glance into the distance and notice the triangular tops of the pine trees swaying in the breeze as they proceed down the hill towards the sea. I've suddenly been made aware of shapes and forms. With new eyes I notice the strong shapes of the mountains that jut out of the sea down below.

Barbara worked from her home in Cornwall, Georgina.

I see. Where exactly was it?

St. Ives. Although her Trewyn studio was damaged by the fire in which she died, her artworks were not affected. Now her sculptures are on permanent display in her garden and her restored house. I so enjoy visiting the gallery.

It sounds great.

It's really inspirational Georgina and the garden is beautifully kept.

I make a mental note to visit it some day when I am in Cornwall. Perhaps Simon and I could do a little tour of Cornwall and its fishing villages, if I can drag him away from his friends for a weekend. I try to visualize these large organic forms Mrs Morton is talking about.

The Sculpture garden has now been taken over by The Tate.

Hepworth must have been an important artist then, Mrs Morton.

She was.

My attention wanders to the people who are engaged in conversation down below.

The older man, with his matted grey eyebrows and thin, spiky, hair that matches his temperament, gesticulates profusely with his fleshy hands, trying to communicate with Nicholas. I see that the hotel receptionist is playing the role of translator. Occasionally laughter breaks out and I notice that Nicholas is taking notes as they speak.

Mrs Morton fingers the stones again.

You say these are from the beach at Monterosso? They're so smooth.

Yes. The beach is full of them. They're new to me, Mrs Morton, as it's the first time that I've swum at a pebbled beach.

Really Georgina?

Yes. Our beaches at home are mostly sand. Our farm beach has soft, gritty white sand. How wonderful child. So good for walking on!

I explain that even though the pebbles on this coast are quite smooth, I find that they really hurt your feet getting into the water.

I know. But the water feels glorious once you're in...

Mrs Morton is in a reflective mood.

There's a long silence and I am about to excuse myself when the old lady speaks again.

Young girl, could I ask something of you? You've been so kind.

I'm taken by surprise. I cannot anticipate what is to follow.

S... Sure. Mrs Morton.

Some time when you're off duty, could you read to me, please dear?

It seems a strange request.

I don't get much time off, Mrs Morton. But I'm sure that I could find some time...

I would pay you Georgina.

I don't know how to respond to that.

That's not necessary. What would you like me to read, Mrs Morton?

I do have some books in Braille, but sometimes I just love to hear the written word come alive.

I decide that Mrs Morton is lonely. She must get tired of her own company.

Georgina, could you read me something from your country?

I don't have much with me. Just travel books.

I'm sure one of those would do.

They're about Africa.

Splendid.

We make a vague arrangement. It is not really something that I want to do as I have so little free time, but I'm filled with compassion for this courageous, elderly woman.

I leave the room and encounter Nicholas on the stairs.

Would you like to meet for coffee this evening, Georgina?

I'm hesitant at first.

Sure.

My heart races.

Later, as I walk down the hill towards the town, with the light slowly fading, I pass Montale's former villa with its statuesque palm trees in the front garden. It is on a sizeable piece of property, tucked away between apartment blocks and hotels. On the left hand side of the road is a grove of olive trees, behind a fence, with ripe khaki fruit that is almost hidden by the leafy branches of the crooked trees. A long orange net, draped like a hammock links the trees. I imagine that it has been put there to catch the olives when they fall.

In my mind I am swaying gently in a hammock between two twisted olive trees, savouring the warm summer air and a book. I am basking in the solitude, so enjoying time to myself. The irony of the situation presents itself to me. Mrs Morton is suffering from too much solitude and I don't have enough. I long for time on my own, when I am not at the call of my hotel employers.

Dusk settles gently around us as Nicholas and I sit outside at a promenade table. There is a certain stillness that is reflected in the waves that form slowly and lethargically as they journey to the shore. I see two older woman in full-piece bathing costumes, reclining on the beach, rubbing their bodies against the smooth pebbles at the edge of the water. They must be using the beach as a natural spa.

I have tried to disguise myself, so that I will not be recognized in the company of a hotel guest.

Your hair looks great down, Georgina.

Thanks. I always have to wear it up for work.

I notice that Nicholas has not gelled his hair. He stares at my face and I'm almost unnerved by his gaze.

You have such attractive green eyes Georgina.

It is so good to be complimented. At work I am constantly bombarded with negative comments from Mrs Knowles.

I've inherited them from my father. At school I was often the odd man out. Most people have brown or blue eyes, but now I'm really happy with the colour except when I'm told that I have cat's eyes!

Even without much make-up, you are stunning Georgina.

I'm warmed by Nicholas's comments. It's been a while since someone has taken a personal interest in me. I respond in my mind to his comments. It's true, I don't wear much make-up these days. Fortunately I have inherited a good skin from my mother.

The waiter arrives promptly to take our order. Our café latte is served in tall glasses with elegant stems. I offer Nicholas a chunk of my pine-nut cake, but he declines.

Don't like sweet things.

I've a real craving for something sweet tonight.., I was really pushed today at work.

A half smile registers on Nicholas's face.

Why was that?

Oh! The usual routine. Mrs Knowles is such a perfectionist and control-freak. It's quite different when you're a guest Nicholas!

He smiles and then yawns, before taking a quick sip of coffee. Then he comments:

I guess I didn't sleep too well last night. I'm a little tired today. But that's okay.

As Nicholas lights a cigarette, the smoke swirls between us. I am about to make some comment about how he is compromising his health, but I realize just in time that it is not for me to pass judgement. Instead, I gaze out to sea. Unlike the roaring gale that caused havoc yesterday, there is hardly a breeze. The ocean is a translucent pond and pink-tinged clouds straddle the horizon. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Nicholas beats the wooden table with the back of his spoon and jerks his knees. His movements are rhythmic, but edgy.

Is everything okay, Nicholas?

He looks surprised.

Sure. Just caught a beat from that song that is playing next door.

Realizing that his behaviour might be a little unusual, Nicholas returns the spoon to his saucer and a long silence follows.

So, how was your day, Nicholas?

Not bad. Quite interesting, I guess.

He leans back in his chair and stretches out his legs under the table. I notice that he does this quite often. I hear his slops hit the floor as he kicks them off. I wait patiently for him to continue, but he needs prompting.

How so?

Well...Iris, the receptionist at the hotel, introduced me to a man who was once the gardener at Eugenio Montale's villa. He's really old now, quite unsteady on his feet, but his memory's not that bad. Long term, that is.

The gardener, Nicholas? How can he be of help to you?

Well, he obviously knew Eugenio personally Georgina.

Of course. Did he come up with some interesting information?

Not bad. Another perspective on the man, I guess.

What did he tell you?

That the poet was born in Genoa, which I knew. That he was the youngest of five children and that his father ran an import company. Nothing new there. Also, that the house was often filled with music! But I knew that as well. Montale was a great admirer of Debussy and Bellini.

I know so little about classical music. But I try to make an intelligent comment anyway.

Many writers listen to music when they create. I wonder if Montale did? What about you Nicholas?

Actually I need silence in order to create.

Nicholas stares distractedly at his coffee. He is deep in thought.

Actually it depends on my mood and what I'm writing. If I am song writing...

So Nicholas, tell me more about this gardener?

Oh! You mean Roberto?

Yes. He wasn't much help really. He spoke mainly about the shrubs in Montale's garden! I could've done without those, but I did get a progress report on the growth of the palm trees in Montale's front yard!

Does he live here in Monterosso, Nicholas?

Now he does. But he was born in Levanto.

Oh! Levanto. It keeps cropping up. I really must get there. Melissa drives there most days for Mrs Knowles.

It's eight minutes by train, Georgina! Hardly an expedition!

Nicholas stubs out his cigarette. There's an awkward silence between us. I glance at the people strolling by, trying to curbing their dogs or buying ice creams at the promenade shops that line the sea. Nicholas suddenly continues as though his words have only just caught up with his thoughts.

Roberto used to work in the vineyards here along the coast, but he was obviously around in 1925 when Montale published 'Ossi di sepie.' He's not into literature unfortunately, but he knew about the book because it created such public interest in Montale.

And now it's an Italian poetry classic. How would I get a translation Nicholas?

It's actually quite difficult to find. I found a copy in a used-book store in the States. I also picked up a new copy of another of his collections in an American bookstore in London, on my way through. I'll lend it to you if you're interested.

That'd be great.

It's amazing, Georgina. Montale's first collection, which he published in 1925, contained some poetry about the Ligurian coast, right here where we are now. Some people argue that writing is not autobiographical, but a creative person is often influenced by his surroundings.

That's true, Nicholas.

When I mentioned the title of the book to Roberto, hoping he'd give me some insight into the poetry, all he could talk about were cuttlefish.

All I know about cuttlefish is that they are given to caged budgies!

They're actually quite useful Georgina. The scientific name for the cuttlefish is Sepia. As in sepia ink and photographs Nicholas?

Yeah! The creature emits dark brown ink that the artists used to use. Its predators hated the dark liquid, especially when they got a mouthful of it!

Nicholas orders a large slice of foccaccio bread studded with green olives from the counter and offers me a chunk of it. When I decline his offer, he is surprised.

Oh yes! You don't eat olives. How can you survive here in Italy if you don't eat olives?

I'm doing pretty well.

I quickly change track.

What else did the gardener tell you?

First, Nicholas calls the waiter to order a beer and a refill of coffee for me.

We spoke about the visitors that came to the house after the book was published. Do you know that when my grandfather died recently, I discovered that he and Montale had corresponded for a short time.

That's really cool, Nicholas. So you actually have letters written by the poet?

Yeah. I found them in a box of letters, along with treasured books of my grandfather's.

That's so amazing, Nicholas.

I'm slowly beginning to understand the involvement that Nicholas has with Montale.

What did your grandfather do?

He taught at a college in the city.

New York City, presumably.

Yeah!

What did he teach?

Literature. But he was also a poet. A gentle, reflective man. A quiet philosopher.

Nicholas is in a reflective mood and he eagerly expresses his thoughts.

Paps also had a heart for people, Georgina. He volunteered to work at a shelter for the homeless a couple of days a week.

I'm suddenly gaining insight into Nicholas's family and his fascination with Montale. Just knowing that his grandfather was an admirer of the poet, was reason enough for Nicholas to choose Montale as the subject of his dissertation.

Your grandfather must have been much younger than Montale?

Yes. Montale was born in 1896, my great grandfather in 1900 and my grandfather was born in New York City in 1925.

Was he a good teacher Nicholas?

Paps had a really good rapport with his students and kept in touch with some of them when they left college. Many of them visited him after they left college.

They must have really respected him. Does teaching run in your family?

Not really.

Do you want to teach one day?

Not at this stage. Paps had seen first hand the struggle that my great grandfather had when he first came to the United States from Italy in the early 1920s. My Italian great grandfather got in just before the First Immigration Act in 1921. He spoke no English and for a long time, he did very menial, low-paying jobs. He was often discouraged.

Was this because the immigrants didn't speak much English Nicholas?

Sure. That was part of the reason. This 'Second Wave' of immigrants were greatly discriminated against in many ways by the locals, Georgina. It was really tough for my great grandfather. I suppose the European immigrants were such a threat to the locals. They were competition for jobs.

It must've been tough.

Yeah!

I listen intently to Nicholas's interesting personal history. Hearing more about his family circumstances, helps me to place him in some kind of context.

My grandfather grew up with this and was determined to be proficient in English and earn a better living than his father did.

I can see that Nicholas. We take education so for granted.

I don't.

Speaking of emigration... So many of us kids from South Africa are working in London because jobs are becoming more difficult at home as new Black Economic Empowerment policies are enforced. A white male is highly discriminated against these days.

So I wouldn't do very well there then?

I guess not, unless you carved a niche for yourself.

I linger over Nicholas's last comment. Does this mean that he is planning to visit South Africa? Work in South Africa?

You said the gardener came from Levanto. Did he know your great grandfather's family at all?

I asked him that, Georgina. He said that he knew the Chiavarri family, but he was vague. Usually the long term memory in an old person is better than the short term memory, so this was disappointing. But perhaps he didn't know the family very well. My

great grandfather would have left Italy when he was a very young man in his early twenties.

The waiter places the bill in the middle of the table. I offer to contribute to it, but Nicholas refuses my offer.

I'm the working woman Nicholas.

So am I, Georgina. I am just on vacation right now.

I thought you were a full time student?

Part-time student, Georgina. I work in a neighbourhood deli. Or am I a full-time student who works part-time?

Sounds interesting. What do you do there?

Jack of all trades...It's a small neighbourhood deli. Not as grand as Zabars on 80th Street, but it keeps me employed.

Night has fallen and restaurants on the promenade cast their light out onto the ocean for as far as the eye can see.

Would really like to be on that yacht out there! Wouldn't you Nicholas?

Not actually.

I guess I just like the thought of being on vacation.

Cruising isn't for me, Georgina. You get a far more interesting view on life when you rough it a little. It keeps you in touch with reality...

Would you call staying at a fine English hotel in Italy, roughing it?

No, Georgina. I wouldn't. But I'm treating myself. My grandfather left me a little inheritance...and it's being put to good use for research purposes.

We walk slowly along the promenade, arm in arm. It's a little awkward at first but we find our rhythm as our hips brush against each other. Nicholas doesn't say much. We sit on the abandoned bench at the car park and as he moves closer to me, I'm aware of the acrid smell of cigarette smoke, clinging to his clothes. I nuzzle up against him. We are about to kiss. It's a really tender moment. Then suddenly the hotel courtesy bus pulls up in front of us and offloads guests from the hotel. A real anti-climax!

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mrs Knowles's broken ankle has immobilized her. Like a ringmaster at a circus, she cracks her whip and expects us to perform. Melissa is almost a full-time driver, while Sarah has taken over many of her housekeeping roles. I am now required to sort through the linen before it goes to the laundry in town and process it on its arrival home. You cannot believe the amount of linen that is used daily in a small hotel!

It takes hours to pack the table cloths, sheets and towels back onto the wooden shelves in the linen room and it's back-breaking work. Fortunately some of my rooms have been taken over by Serena, a young girl from a nearby village, who has a school-girl knowledge of English.

I am peeved that Serena has been designated to service Room 7, Nicholas's room, but I dare not try to swop rooms as Mrs Knowles is in no mood for negotiations. The no-fraternizing clause in my employment contract really frustrates me. I long to spend more time with Nicholas. It would be so good to meet in the hotel for coffee after work. I have not seen him much recently, neither have I heard from him in a while.

Once again I face the industrial monster in the scullery, packing egg-smearred plates and coffee-stained cups into its ravenous belly. The advantages of the dishwasher doing the dirty work are quickly diminished as I'm required to pack away all the clean crockery at the other end of the cycle. At least Serena is a help in the kitchen.

By the end of the week, I am ready to quit my job.

Nicholas has been making himself scarce and on Saturday morning after breakfast, I decide to use the internal phone, risking Mrs Knowles's anger, to ask him to meet me. But he is out. I eventually only catch up with him in the late afternoon. He is reluctant to meet.

Not sure if it's such a good thing, Georgina.

Why not?

I've got quite a bit of work to do right now.

Is it urgent Nicholas?

I guess so. I'm on a bit of a roll.

But please, Nicholas, can we just talk?

I do not want to sound desperate, but I need to know what is going on between us.

Okay...

Where shall we meet Nicholas?

Perhaps we should move out of Monterosso. Let's meet at the station in Vernazza at 21.00 and we'll see what happens after that.

I turn down an invitation from Serena to have supper with her family in a village in the hills. I sleep for a few hours, wake with a devastating headache and want to call off the evening, but I know I have to make it. I take a long, soothing hot shower and dress hurriedly.

It's a warm, summer evening and I wear a brightly patterned sun-dress, with thin straps and a pashmina draped over my shoulders. I wish that I had the use of Sarah's sandals to give me height, but I settle for flat gold slops.

The hotel courtesy bus is filled with guests and there is a long queue waiting outside, so I have to give way to them. Eventually I climb into the front seat and am squeezed between the driver and a guest, battling to avoid the gear lever. I literally run from the parking lot to the station.

I only manage to catch the 21.15 train from Monterosso, just as the light is fading. I am filled with anticipation as the carriage rocks on its rails and glides into the next station.

But Nicholas is not there. I pace up and down the station impatiently before trying to make contact with him. He does not respond to my text message. Do I catch the next train back to Monterosso? How long do I wait?

Slowly I amble along the cobbled streets down to the square, peering into the alleys between the old stone buildings in the hope of seeing him. Eventually I find space on a bench and listen to a busker, playing Eric Clapton and Beatles' compositions on his guitar. I'm familiar with these old songs as they are often played at home by my mother or when we are travelling together in the car! The busker's dog that waits patiently next to his upturned hat, reminds me of Ocean. It's not a good night to be reminded of home.

Saturday night is a family night in Vernazza and the restaurants around the square are brimming with activity under the light of a bright full moon that hangs low in the sky. I scan the faces of passers-by. Some look like locals while others clearly resemble tourists. Suddenly in the distance, I recognize a familiar yellow jersey slung over sloping

shoulders. My view is blocked momentarily, but when it becomes clear again, I see Nicholas sitting in a crowded restaurant across the stone-cobbled square.

I rush over, mingling with the crowd, trying to look nonchalant. The square is so crowded that he only recognizes me when I am at his table.

Georgina!

Hello Nicholas.

I didn't see you at the station, Georgina. Where were you? I waited until 21.15.

I was late. Sorry. I had to wait for the hotel guests to take the bus first...I only left Monterosso at 21.15. I must've just missed you.

Nicholas shrugs his shoulders.

I did try to text you.

My battery was low. Would you like to join me Georgina? Better late than never.

Sure.

Nicholas is sitting at a table, set for two. When I'm seated, I can just see a row of fishing boats at anchor in the little bay of Vernazza that is just beyond the square. Under the light of the moon, the hulls of the boats dance in the reflected water.

I've just ordered. What will you have?

Not sure.

I eventually make my decision and when I place the menu down on the table, Nicholas comments on my nails. His sensitivity is almost unnerving. In response I look down at my hands and quickly retreat them. The detergents with which I've been working at the hotel have made my nails brittle.

Instinctively I look at Nicholas's hands in return. His slim fingers taper towards the ends, like long, narrow candles. As usual he wears his practical black watch low down, near his right wrist.

Are you left-handed?

Why d'you think that Georgina?

You wear your watch on your right arm?

Yes. But I'm a bit ambidextrous when it comes to sport.

I study Nicholas as he talks. Although he has strong, appealing features, he looks as vulnerable as a deer in the wilds. It's as though one has to look so deep into those

retreating eyes in order to try and read him. Tonight his brown hair is slightly gelled and he wears a collared blue shirt with his jeans, making him look more like a banker than a poet. When he excuses himself to go to the toilet I notice that he is wearing tan coloured smart-casual shoes, that I have not noticed in the room before. Perhaps they are new.

In Nicholas's absence I smell the single red rose in the little glass vase on our table. It is not perfumed. A musician with a concertina approaches our table and plays a few old Italian tunes, but he moves on when I offer him little interest. As he wanders off, Nicholas passes him and offers him a contribution for his bag.

So?

I was just wondering why I hadn't seen you Nicholas.

He smiles knowingly at me, without offering any explanation.

I've been around.

You haven't made contact in a while. Nicholas.

He half-smiles. Then putting his elbows on the table, he supports his chin with his two clenched fists.

I know. Has it bothered you?

I'm unnerved by the ease with which he analyzes my behaviour.

A little.

I immediately feel on the defensive. I'm conscious that I have made the plans to meet tonight.

I've been working really hard, Georgina. My thesis proposal has to be in by the end of the summer and before long we'll be there...I'm still deciding which way to go with it. At times I'm a little confused.

Nicholas's lemon anchovies arrive, elegantly piled in the middle of the plate on a bed of salad. He offers me a taste but I decline. I think of Nicoletta every time I see anchovies. She was right after all! Anchovies are migratory. My research shows that they swim through the Straits of Gibraltar, reaching Italy in the Spring and they are fished here on the coast until October! That is why they are a summer regional speciality.

You're so quiet, Georgina.

I shake my head, avoiding eye contact with Nicholas.

Just thinking.

There is an awkward distance between us. How can I bridge the gap? It's as though he is moving away from me, like Tim did. But I don't want this to happen. I struggle to reconnect with him.

How is your family back home, Georgina?

They're doing well.

Do you still have both parents?

Yes.

How did they meet? I'm just curious.

They met at university in Grahamstown. My father did accounting and my mother did a Social Science degree. But they've been living on our farm for about thirty years now.

That's pretty stable.

You haven't told me much about your parents Nicholas. How are they?

That's a long story.

We've got all night.

Nah! I think I'll take a rain check on that one!

Okay.

I quickly divert the conversation. Nicholas orders dessert and coffee. It's a Saturday night and the orders trickle slowly out of the overworked kitchen. It's a balmy summer evening and the full moon continues to spill out its light onto the square where some people are dancing.

Nicholas savours his hazelnut ice cream, sharing most of it with me. It reminds me of the times when we were very young and my parents took us to Durban for shopping or a movie. A stop at the beachfront ice cream shop was mandatory on the way home and I was always indecisive when faced with so many choices. But 'Rocky road' was usually my favourite flavour. I can still taste the rich, dark chocolate ice cream that hid soft, spongy marshmallows.

The Italians really know how to make ice cream!

They sure do. Let's take a walk to the end of the pier.

Okay, Nicholas.

Half way along the pier, we find an empty stone bench and look back at the town square. Yellow, pink and sienna buildings huddle close together, their green shutters

giving them uniformity. Washing that dangles out of some of the windows will probably remain there until the morning. In front of us, the gentle waters of the sheltered marina, slop against the anchored boats and the rocks. There is movement everywhere. Gulls squawk as they land on the rocks. People mill around. Children break the silence as they dash past.

I'm thinking how wonderful it is to be with Nicholas. I gently massage his neck and he responds by kissing me. A long, lingering, passionate kiss that tastes of hazelnuts.

Suddenly he announces that it is time to go.

Why are you in such a hurry to go Nicholas?

It's late.

Not that late. At least I can sleep in tomorrow!

Not everyone can!

Is something bothering you Nicholas?

No, why should there be? It's been a long day.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER NINE

Weather Conditions for Levanto: Clear.

Temperature: 22 degrees Centigrade

Winds: moderate north-easterly.

The door of the carriage bangs shut behind me. As I walk from the station towards the town centre, I'm shaded by trees that arch over the slow moving traffic. Shutters open gradually, like sleep-filled eyes, letting in the day. The pale pink and ochre stained Tuscan houses are mellow in the soft morning light. It is summer and I feel so alive.

It is a short walk to the seafront. I turn left and as I look back from the far end of the promenade, I notice the low buildings that hug the wide arc of beach. Beyond that, olive green hills rise steeply as they leave the town. In front of me are spreading, emerald-green umbrellas that resemble trees planted on the beach. Already there are runners, walkers and sunbathers, languishing on the soft sand.

Unlike the pebbled beaches of Monterosso, the smooth, soft sand allows me easy access to the water. But it chills me as I wade through the waves. I miss the lukewarm water of the Indian Ocean, even if it is less refreshing.

As I float on the water that rises every so often as a wave forms beneath me, I see a ship on the distant horizon. Did a similar sighting inspire Nicholas's great grandfather to grab his savings, impulsively make his way to the port of Genoa and head for New York City, in the hope of a more prosperous life? Perhaps he was a poor, unemployed farm worker at the time, in a struggling, impoverished democracy in Italy when the 'Great American Dream' beckoned to him. Why do my thoughts keep drifting back to Nicholas?

As I leave the warm sand I see steps leading to the hiking trail back to Monterosso. I'm tempted to walk the distance, but decide to catch the train. As I pass a large villa with meticulously kept grounds my curiosity is aroused. I long to go inside the park-like area, but there is a notice warning me that it is private property. I imagine the prominence of the landowner who has this mansion right on the beach. Does he take it for granted? I wonder how often it is occupied? As I walk past the fence, the well mowed lawns give way to an abundance of palm trees, reminding me of Montale's seaside villa.

By the time I reach the town centre, the public spaces are filled with people. Locals eat at sidewalk cafés in the sun or grab take-aways. I find a small restaurant and order a pasta dish that offers a strong, fragrant scent of fresh basil as it is placed in front of me. I never tire of pasta, especially in Italy.

I wander back to the station, only to find that the early afternoon train has been delayed. It probably would have been quicker to hike back! I'm bored, so I pace the platform. Then I settle for people-watching, my next best alternative to reading. Although European tourists and a bronzed party from California provide some interest, my patience wears thin.

Eventually I'm rewarded by the train that sweeps into the station and eight minutes later I am back in Monterosso al Mare. But I'm dismayed to discover that I will have to wait half an hour before the hotel transport arrives.

I arrive home exhausted. As I enter the hotel, I notice Mrs Morton sitting alone in the lounge as I creep past. She is not aware of me, but I'm conscience stricken that I have not read to her yet. I stop and talk to her.

Would you like me to read to you Mrs Morton? I whisper.

Is that you Georgina?

Yes.

You mean now? I thought...

I scan the horizons, hoping no one will notice me talking to a hotel guest.

Yes.

Do you have the time child?

I am not honest.

Yes. Now is a good time. But we'll have to move from here.

I see. Are you sure you have the time?

A rhetorical question.

It's a beautiful afternoon, Mrs Morton. Let's sit outside under the umbrella.

That would be splendid, Georgina.

I'll just get a book. Then I'll take you outside.

Mrs Knowles is off duty, so I do not feel like a student breaking the school rules.

I have not yet returned Nicholas' poetry book, so I decide that I will read poetry to Mrs Morton rather than a book on travel.

I escort her across the gravel and notice that she has ordered tea for both of us.

It's terribly kind of you Georgina.

It's a pleasure. I thought I'd read you some poetry, Mrs Morton.

Sounds splendid. I do like poetry.

It's written by this famous Italian poet, Eugenio Montale who spent time here in Monterosso in his youth. He was a Nobel Prize winner for Literature and his poems are amazing.

That's interesting Georgina. But would the poems not be in Italian?

This work has both the Italian and an English translation. I actually borrowed the book.

Oh!

As I pour weak, milky Earl Grey tea for both of us, Mrs Morton asks me more about the poet.

At first he wanted to become an opera singer, Mrs Morton. But when his singing teacher died, he moved to Florence where he worked for a publisher. He was also director of a research library at some stage.

A real intellectual. You are so well informed, Georgina. I'm impressed.

Not really...

I almost tell Mrs Morton about Nicholas, but decide against it.

As we drink lukewarm tea we discuss the weather. I suddenly remember that my companion is almost blind, so I describe the day to her. I cannot imagine what it must be like to miss seeing the beautiful view of the mountains at different times of the day.

Georgina, just listen to the sea pounding on the shore down below. The sound rises straight upwards. It reminds me of Cornwall. I live not far from the sea.

If you had to look in the distance, Mrs Morton, you would see Corniglia perched on the cliffs. The houses are lit by the afternoon sun and the waves down below crash against the cliffs, creating fountains of spray.

My husband and I visited Corniglia when we were last here. I can still remember my stiff calves from the hike up the steps!

You have a good memory Mrs Morton.

Ooh! The sun still feels warm on my skin, Georgina. It's so good. Our summer in England is so unpredictable.

Can you believe that the poet, Eugenio Montale, whose work I'm going to read to you would've experienced this same setting many years ago, Mrs Morton? It's as though this coastline has existed in a time capsule.

It's amazing that so little has changed. You say that his house is still here?

Yes, the wrought-iron and wooden gates of his garden open onto the promenade.

With so many changes in the world, it's comforting that some things do not change so rapidly. I'm surprised the house hasn't been knocked down to make way for a new development or been turned into a museum. Do read me some of his poetry now, Georgina.

I'm reading the poem using my first year Drama voice, adding expression for emphasis. Half way through the poem *Words*, I'm distracted by the crunching sound of gravel and a shadow at my feet.

Nicholas!

I feel the heat in my face. He stares dreamily at me.

Please continue. I was just reading on the balcony and when I heard you read the poem I couldn't stay away.

I continue blushing. I hadn't noticed Nicholas on his balcony.

Mrs Morton, this is Nicholas. Nicholas Chiavarri. One of the hotel guests.

He leans forward and shakes her fragile hand.

So pleased to meet you. Do read that poem again, Georgina. D'you mind?

I'd really like Nicholas to read it. He's a student of Montale and he would give a much better reading of the poem than I...

Nicholas tries the Italian first

Le Parole

Le parole

Se si ridestano...

but he quickly resorts to the English version.

Mrs Morton sits with her worn hands in her lap. She inclines her head so that her left ear is more receptive to the spoken words. Her grey hair, in a bob style, is lifted by a gentle breeze.

I want to discuss my trip to Levanto with Nicholas, but I read poem after poem. I cannot believe that we are having an impromptu poetry reading in the garden. One of the poems I read inspires Mrs Morton. She asks if she can recite a section of *The Waste Land* by T.S.Eliot, which she has memorized by heart.

When she has finished, Nicholas is the first to comment.

Hey Mrs Morton, that was impressive. Did you know that Montale translated that poem into Italian! In fact, some critics have even likened Montale to T.S. Eliot!

She smiles proudly at Nicholas.

Your turn now, young man!

Nicholas then recites a short poem by Ezra Pound.

You must've known that T.S. Eliot dedicated The Waste Land to Ezra Pound Nicholas?

I didn't know that Mrs Morton. It's an amazing coincidence.

It seems to me that you like the north American poets Nicholas?

Yeah! They are close to home.

I'm sure you're aware that Pound promoted the work of other poets from the States, like Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams.

Yes, I knew that.

What became of Pound in the end, Nicholas? Didn't he live in Italy for some time?

Yes. He moved to Italy and identified with the Fascist regime. In fact when he returned to the United States twenty years later in about 1945, he was in trouble with the authorities.

All very interesting, but it's getting chilly, now. I should get back to my room. Georgina could you help me?

Sure, Mrs Morton.

As I am escorting Mrs Morton across the gravel driveway, Nicholas whispers: *Let's go for a pizza, see you at the entrance to the old town at 9.*

CHAPTER TEN

Nicholas emerges from the shadows of the tunnel that links the old town with the new. As we hug, he is cool and unresponsive. I'm disappointed that his mood has changed drastically since our impromptu poetry reading a few hours earlier.

We walk in awkward silence, looking down at our feet. I wonder why Nicholas is so preoccupied and distant. A sneaky breeze rustles the leaves of the spindly olive trees that line the square. As we walk across the dusty space, I notice that for once the children's swings and roundabouts are stationary. I miss the voices of the children but welcome the splashing sound of the fountain in the middle of the square, that gushes effusively, drowning our silence.

Nicholas steers me down a narrow stone alleyway towards a sidewalk pizzeria, that is lit by overhanging lanterns that sway back and forth precariously in the gusty wind. In the distance I think I catch a glimpse of Nicoletta Rossi as she disappears into a doorway. She is still wearing her work-clothes: the protective net over her hair and her white rubber boots. But the skirt that reminds me of the sea has been replaced with a white, dirt smeared uniform.

It's cold. Can we sit inside Nicholas?

Sure.

We are seated at the back of the restaurant. Nicholas fiddles with his fork, then makes invisible patterns on the dark green table cloth with its prongs.

Are you okay Nicholas?

Yeah. I'm fine. How're you doing?

I'm okay. You seem a little edgy.

Nicholas lights a cigarette but gives up on it.

The exuberant waiter is a welcome intrusion. I'm starved and I hope that we will not wait long for our food.

At last I've been to Levanto, Nicholas.

I'm expecting an enthusiastic response from him.

Oh yeah!

The long sandy beach... The Church of Sant Andra, that's built of Carrara marble. You know, the one with the black and white Serpentine design.

Didn't see it.

I'm hitting a blank wall.

I was just wondering where your great grandfather lived in Levanto, Nicholas?

I'm not actually sure.

I suppose it was long ago anyway.

I'm conscious that I am digging deep, trying to dredge up something that will be of mutual interest to us.

I need to be honest with you about something, Georgina.

I'm filled with apprehension. I hope that I have not offended Nicholas.

Aren't you always honest with me?

Nicholas offers a half-smile. Then I look into his dark, recessed eyes that now seem like murky, deep, stagnant pools. His thin straight eyebrows are raised in the middle. He looks uneasy.

I don't quite know how to verbalize this, Georgina.

You're not often short of words...

Nicholas wipes sweat from his right eyebrow.

You're such an amazing person.

I've heard this line before. It is normally a precursor for bad news. I sit back in my chair and look searchingly at his face. I can hear myself swallow.

How do I say this?

What Nicholas?

It's just that I'm dealing with so many things right now.

I try to decipher his words. Then I quickly retort:

Aren't we all Nicholas?

Yeah! I guess so.

He probably hadn't thought of that. Most times he just seems so preoccupied with his own situation. The waiter returns with iced water and a basket of crisp baguette slices.

Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned it Georgina, but I just don't want you to have any expectations of our relationship.

Expectations?

Yeah! Expectations.

Nicholas half-smiles in his characteristic way, revealing more than a day's dark growth on his face.

I have no expectations, Nicholas.

That's cool, Georgina.

That is not altogether true. I'm really hoping to get to know Nicholas better. He's a stunning guy.

Oh Georgina!

Nicholas sighs. *It's just that...*

What?

You see... I've recently come out of a long term relationship with someone in the States.

I feel a lump forming in my throat. I avoid his eyes, but hope that Nicholas will continue.

I really don't know where I am right now. It's not fair on you...

Let me be the judge of that. I think these words, but they are not spoken.

That's okay.

I just manage to get these words out without showing much emotion. What else can I say when a blossoming relationship is nipped in the bud?

Is it? Are you sure Georgina?

Do you want to talk about it Nicholas?

It's complex.

Most relationships are.

Nicholas resumes his fork patterns on the cloth that is now littered with crumbs from the chunks of baguette that we have quickly consumed. I look closely at him. On the outside he's as rugged and robust as the mountains that encircle this town, yet on the inside, he harbours such a sensitive soul. All too often he shows the formidable side of himself and I'm not often allowed glimpses into his soul. I'm surprised that he continues: *Katelyn and I met in our final year of high school. She stayed home and went to a community college nearby in New York State. I was at college in the city.*

I'm listening intently.

So I came home most weekends to see her when she wasn't working to put herself through college. She worked in a department store in a mall, not far from her home.

Nicholas is in confessional mode. I do not speak, trying to encourage the flow of conversation.

This continued all through college. I guess we were just too comfortable, until the summer when we both graduated and we had to start planning our futures.

I know the feeling, Nicholas.

He looks at me strangely as if I couldn't possibly empathize with him.

We'd planned to tour Europe on a backpacking trip, but a month before, she pulled out.

Why did she call it off Nicholas?

She'd met someone else.

While you were together?

Nicholas nods. His shoulders are slumped forward. The conversation is down to a trickle, then it just dries up.

I'm sorry Nicholas. It happens.

Nicholas squirms uneasily in his seat.

It's okay, Georgina. I'm over it now.

I do not really believe him. His body language indicates that the situation is still painful and possibly unresolved for him.

It's strange. I was going to suggest that we break up after our European trip so that we could meet other people.

You obviously weren't that sure of your relationship, Nicholas.

Maybe! I was beginning to think that I'd outgrown Katelyn.

That's possible.

I think we met too young, Georgina, and we'd become too complacent. I just don't think our relationship was going anywhere.

It seems that way, Nicholas.

But when she broke up with me, I was taken by surprise.

You mean you didn't see it coming?

Not at all. But I guess we were drifting a little. But when it happened, I felt such a sense of loss. Just because I couldn't have her, I wanted her.

Did you know the guy Nicholas?

Nah! But he was one of her classmates at community college. Some jock called Shane.

Did you ever meet him?

No. But they're engaged now.

Engaged!

Yeah.

Nicholas purses his lips. Then he lifts his fork and makes slow patterns again on the tablecloth.

So did you backpack around Europe on your own then?

No, I cancelled the trip...which was just as well 'coz my grandfather died soon afterwards.

That must've been really hard for you, Nicholas.

It was.

What happened?

A heart attack. It was sudden and quite surprising, as he was really fit. Every day he walked a number of blocks in the city and he ate healthily.

Nicholas hasn't told me that much about his grandfather, but I know how close he was to him.

It was a really tough time. My mother was pretty busy at work which didn't help. I just felt so alone.

A sizzling Mediterranean pizza is placed in front of me. I cannot wait to get the Mozzarella-dredged wedge into my mouth, but I first pick off the olives from the topping.

Why don't you just ask them to make it without the olives! Come on now Georgina! You're a smart chick.

I'm embarrassed by Nicholas's observations. We eat for a while, then he continues the conversation.

How about you Georgina?

I watch Nicholas lift a thick wedge of seafood pizza and stuff it into his mouth, losing a chunk of fish to his lap. I'm uneasy about discussing my former relationships with him.

Well, there was Tim, who I met at the end of my second year at university in Grahamstown.

Tim as in Timothy?

Yes.

What was he like?

I'm not sure I want to continue.

He was a real hunk but he also had a razor sharp mind.

Nicholas laughs.

What's so amusing Nicholas?

What was he studying, Georgina?

Law. But he also had a passion for history.

Nicholas gives his half-smile and runs his hand through his hair. It does not easily spring back into place.

That figures.

What d`you mean?!

He probably had the gift of the gab, Georgina. Swept you off your feet with his looks and wise comments.

Nicholas certainly knows how to undermine me.

How did you meet?

Tim did a journalism course with me. We were in the same tutorial group. I just loved his humour and wit.

And his looks, no doubt!

We got on really well together—when we actually saw each other.

Why was that a problem Georgina?

I guess it wasn't that much of a problem. No actually it was.

I slice another piece of pizza and eat it with my fingers.

Did he just not make an effort outside journalism class?

He was too influenced by his friends I think, Nicholas.

You mean he couldn't stand up for himself?

No, he could. Why would you say that?

Nicholas looks puzzled.

I was just surmising...

Actually, he's a strong character Nicholas, but a group of them had been at high school together at St. Stithians in Johannesburg and they hunted as a pack.

Sounds like he gave in to peer pressure Georgina.

I guess you're right. I suppose it just wasn't really cool for anyone to have a girlfriend. There was an understanding among them that it was better to play the field.

It is the first time all evening that I have heard Nicholas laugh.

Why do you find this amusing, Nicholas?

I know how these guys' minds work!

D'you see him often Georgina?

I suppose you could say that our relationship was sort of behind closed doors.

That sounds really suspicious, Georgina!

I'm suddenly struck by the irony. Nicholas and I also have to meet on the sly.

Tim was also in the first team rugby at university, which gave him celebrity status on campus.

So he was a real jock Georgina! All the more reason for him to play the field.

I stare down at the table cloth.

You're so gullible!

I take exception to that remark, Nicholas.

Sorry. But it's the same with the football studs on our campuses back home.

Nicholas stuffs a wedge of pizza into his mouth. He chews for a while then says:

But they usually only appeal to a certain type of girl.

What is the implication here, Nicholas?

You know what I mean, Georgina!

I actually don't!

Well, often they go for the cheerleading girls. You certainly have the looks to attract a guy like that Georgina!

I let the comment go and finish my pizza. Nicholas is in an argumentative mood and I'm too tired to defend myself.

I really need to get back Nicholas. I've an early start tomorrow.

Coffee?

No thanks.

We walk into the cold wind that stirs up the dark, inky-blue waters of Monterosso Al Mare. There are only a few people walking on the promenade and even less in the bars and coffee shops. I quicken the pace to keep myself warm, placing my hands in my jacket pockets. Nicholas is in aloof mode, striding beside me. I'm relieved that our hotel transport is waiting as we arrive at the drop-off point.

As we climb up the steep hill towards the hotel I can hear the wind lashing out at the trees. Then I doze in the back seat of the vehicle, until I hear the sound of gravel crunching under our tyres. I wake with a start.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The sign that dangles from Mrs Morton's doorknob indicates that she wants her room made up. I knock gently, but there is no response. I knock again and then open the door with the master key. There is no one there. The bed clothes are ruffled, but I see no sign of the normal room service breakfast tray. I wonder if she has gone down to the dining room for breakfast. But that is not her normal behaviour. I tie back the heavy curtains, open the balcony door and quickly make up her bed.

After I have serviced the bathroom, I abandon my service trolley in the passage and run downstairs to see Mrs Knowles, who is hobbling around because her foot is still in plaster.

Mrs Morton isn't in her room.

I know dear.

She scowls at me as she checks a load of laundry that is destined for town.

Do me a favour, Georgina. Take these beach towels to Room 12. They need them urgently.

Alright, Mrs Knowles. But what's happened to Mrs Morton?

I'll explain later.

I'm worried about her.

You've no need to worry.

I am about to comment that she was fine during the afternoon's poetry reading, but I remember that I probably shouldn't have been there with her. This was only possible because Mrs Knowles was off duty.

Is she okay?

I don't know. I'll find out and advise you, Georgina.

Where is she now?

Mrs Knowles looks at me with an awkward expression on her face.

Hurry with the towels, dear.

I have been reassigned to Nicholas's room. A self-conscious attitude has replaced the curiosity that I first experienced when I serviced his room. At first I was so eager to find out more about him. Now I feel as though I am an intruder, trespassing on private

property. I have been told to keep out of his personal life, so it seems strange to be cleaning up after him. But it is part of my working contract. A novel lies sprawled across the bedcovers: *The Time Traveller's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger. The cover illustration looks interesting, but I have no time to read the blurb on the back cover. The price on the back of the book is in dollars, indicating that he bought it in the States. I half-heartedly dust it and place it on his bedside table, but suddenly realize that I have lost his place. No doubt Nicholas will remember where he was in the novel. I find that his open laptop is in hibernation mode and I gently dangle the duster over the screen.

As usual, his clothes are draped over the chair and one shoe is missing, which I find under the bed. I throw it down and it lands on the cupboard floor with a thump. I resent having to bend over and line it up straight with its partner.

Then without much reflection, I hang up the clothes in the cupboard and open the balcony door to let in the sea air. I linger outside momentarily, while wiping the wrought-iron table. It is going to be a magnificent day. Once again I wish I were swimming in the cool waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

Nicholas's wet swimming costume is draped over the shower door and there is a trail of sand from his room door to the shower. I wonder if he has gone for an early morning swim.

I have not quite cleared the usual bathroom debris when the door clicks and Nicholas enters.

Georgina!

Nicholas!

He brushes past me and sits on the edge of the double bed. He doesn't say much but I'm aware of his eyes travelling over my body from north to south.

I always find it strange to see you in uniform, Georgina.

I pull a face at him.

It's not the first time you have seen me dressed like this, Nicholas.

Yeah, I know. It's not bad on you.

I pretend indifference and keep dusting the table.

It just doesn't do your body much justice.

I do not appreciate his comment. It could make me feel humiliated if I let it.

It's just that in your uniform, you look formal and stiff.

I turn my back to him.

Did you hear what happened to Mrs Morton, Georgina?

No.

I turn around to face him.

Mrs Knowles wasn't very communicative when I asked her where she was this morning.

It seems as though Mrs Morton has had a stroke.

Oh no! She wasn't in her room this morning and I was worried. Is it serious Nicholas?

I'm not sure.

When did it happen?

She was carried out on a stretcher late last night.

How d'you know?

I was sitting in the lounge downstairs drinking coffee, when the doctor was summoned. Mrs Knowles was called in and she was in a state. You should've seen her in her pyjamas! Really manly!

I can just imagine.

I waited with Mrs Morton until the ambulance arrived.

That's so thoughtful Nicholas.

Nicholas gives his half-smile.

Shame! Mrs Morton is here on her own Nicholas. She's just lost her husband and she doesn't have any kids.

That's too bad.

Have you heard how she is doing?

From what I can gather, the stroke seems to have attacked her down the left side. Mrs Knowles was telling the receptionist that last night and she said that Mrs Morton complained about a weakness in her arm and leg. She also mentioned that her face was numb on the left side.

I'm so sorry for her Nicholas.

Me too. Old age is tough!

I should try to see her. D'you know where she is?

I don't, Georgina. The doctor was speaking Italian and I couldn't keep up with him.

I blast the trail of sand with a vacuum cleaner and when I leave the room, I notice that Nicholas is sitting outside on the balcony with his shirt off. He has such a good body. I resume my role as cleaner and do not say goodbye as I close the door behind me.

Later that afternoon I am summoned to Mrs Knowles's office.

Mrs Morton has had a stroke, Georgina.

I heard so. I am sorry.

Please could you pack up her room?

Oh! Isn't she coming back?

It seems as though she'll go home from the hospital.

Where is she now Mrs Knowles?

She's in hospital in Levanto. The doctor says she's had a transient ischemic attack. She's being treated and isn't expected to be in hospital for too long.

That's good to hear. It sounded quite serious. Is that all? Can I go?

I am about to leave the room, when Mrs Knowles calls me back.

Georgina, I have been in touch with Mrs Morton's niece in the UK. She can't come to Italy to fetch her, but she says that she'll meet her at Gatwick airport.

Will she be okay to travel Mrs Knowles?

The doctor thinks so. He says that she should be able to travel quite soon as she's not showing too many ill-effects. She'll get assistance on the plane.

I'm so relieved.

I turn to go, but Mrs Knowles instructs me to sit down.

I need you to travel down to Pisa with Mrs Morton and put her on the plane Georgina. Me?

Yes, you Georgina. Is that possible?

My eyes widen. I've been issued with a command rather than a request.

You seem to know Mrs Morton quite well Georgina.

I don't really. Well, yes. Just from servicing her room.

So you're agreeable to it?

I'm just not sure that I'm capable of doing the task. Doesn't she need a nurse to travel with her? It's a great responsibility.

You don't have to worry, Georgina. The doctor says that she's made a remarkable recovery.

I don't feel that comfortable doing it, Mrs Knowles. How could she recover so quickly?

I need to know if you could you take her to Pisa this weekend Georgina? That is, if she is up to it?

I agree reluctantly. It is a daunting responsibility. Besides I was looking forward to my day off. But then I'm filled with compassion for Mrs Morton. She is a kind, remarkable woman.

While I am still in the office Mrs Knowles phones the station and books two tickets to Pisa on Sunday morning at 10.00.

I'll need time to pack up her room, Mrs Knowles.

Won't take long. You could do it now.

Could I have my lunch first?

Alright. But I need the room cleared, Georgina. I might have to use it tonight.

I find Mrs Morton's old tattered leather suitcase in the top of her cupboard. I carefully fold (not that I am any good at folding) her crisp, cotton floral dresses and place them in the bottom of the case. They exude her smell. To the one side, I place her full length petticoats that are now neat squares, and on top of them her summer nighties and pants. Her one pair of closed shoes—navy courts with sensible heels—that have creases across the tops have taken on the shape of her arthritic feet. The shoes veer outwards in a semi-circle, following the bunions on her big toes.

In the bathroom I find a packet of corn plasters, bath salts and some lavender-scented perfume. I take down the two handkerchiefs that are drying against the tiles in the bathroom.

I put Mrs Morton's two books that are in Braille in her small black carry-all bag, and add her magnifying glass. I rest her straw hat gently on top of the bag. It does not take me long to pack up her meagre belongings.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Church bells echo through the valley. I open my windows and linger a little longer in bed, savouring the time to read. It should be my day off, but Mrs Morton has promised me time off during the week.

Since our meal together, Nicholas's behaviour is even more confusing than it was before. Instead of his openness, he has become secretive and prickly, like a cactus. I am sure that he is hiding from me as I have not seen much of him for days. It's been only his rear view while climbing into the hotel taxi or a quick head and shoulders sighting as he sits in the dining room eating breakfast. I did text him once, but he did not respond. I feel quite lonely without him as a distraction.

I meet Mrs Morton at the station at Monterosso Al Mare. She is seated on a bench, waiting patiently at the entrance to the building while the taxi driver hovers nearby. She walks very slowly, depending on her walker, and although she complains that her left side is a little weaker, there is little evidence of her stroke. When I look closely at her face I notice that her bottom lip seems to have fallen slightly on the left side.

We are seated on a wooden bench on the platform not far from the tracks. I am describing the flowering red geraniums in the flower boxes to my elderly companion when the grubby train arrives, fifteen minutes late. It is almost impossible for Mrs Morton to climb the stairs into the train. I panic. I'm afraid that the train will not wait for us to board.

Please someone help us!

I throw my urgent cry for assistance to the horde of tourists crowding around us. A stocky American comes to my rescue. He carries Mrs Morton's bird-light body up the steep steps while I scramble after him. As I do this, her luggage bangs against the narrow walls of the corridor at the top of the stairs, to the exasperation of those following me. Mrs Morton is out of breath when she is put on the seat but I am so relieved when she is finally settled in the carriage.

It's so good of you to accompany me, Georgina.

It's fine, Mrs Morton.

What would I have done without you?

Someone else would've helped you, Mrs Morton. But I'm pleased that I could help.
When the train stops at Riomaggiore, my travelling companion poses a question.
How's that young man who's studying the poetry of Montale, Georgina? He seemed awfully nice.

I sigh.

I haven't seen much of him recently.

You seemed quite close, Georgina.

He has all sorts of issues.

I'm surprised at the words that tumble out of my mouth.

I thought you two were so well suited, Georgina.

I shrug my shoulders and make some vague comment.

My eyes are so bad these days. I couldn't see whether he was handsome, but he has a soothing voice. He seems a sensitive soul.

How am I to respond?

Does he communicate well, Georgina?

At times.

It's so important you know.

I nod.

Would you mind putting my jersey around my shoulders, Georgina. The air-conditioning in the train is very cold.

When I scratch in Mrs Morton's hand luggage for her jersey, I find a small box at the bottom of her bag which falls open as I touch it. It contains her pearls. I carefully take them out.

I think it would be safer for you to wear these, Mrs Morton.

What are they child?

Your pearls.

Thank you. I feel undressed without them.

Mrs Morton leans forward as I fumble with the ruby studded clasp. Her skin at the back of her neck is soft and wrinkly like the folds of a tortoise's neck.

There should be some small pearl earrings in the box as well, Georgina.

I retrieve the leather box and take out the small pearl earrings. As I examine them in my palm, a shaft of sunlight from outside highlights their sheen. I put Mrs Morton's grey hair gently behind her ears and search for holes in her ears through which to put the studs.

Oh! It's ages since I've worn earrings, Georgina.

Sorry, I thought you wanted to wear them.

No, just the pearls around my neck. In fact, my ears are not pierced, Georgina. These pearl earrings came with the necklace and I've never used them.

I see.

Would you like to have them?

I am surprised by Mrs Morton's generosity.

Are you sure, Mrs Morton?

Yes, Georgina. You've been so kind to me.

I pin up my hair and place the pearl earrings in each ear.

They're so beautiful, Mrs Morton. I don't have pearl earrings. Now I'll be reminded of you when I wear them. Thank you.

When we arrive at Pisa airport we are told that Mrs Morton's plane has been delayed for three hours. While having Earl Grey tea in the bustling airport restaurant, Mrs Morton expresses her disappointment that she has never seen the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

D'you feel up to it?

If you are with me. I might never get back here again!

I call a taxi and soon we are driving along the highway, heading for the famous landmark that I have not yet seen myself.

I don't know how much of it I'll see. But I really want to go there, Georgina. How much further now?

I think we're nearly there.

I so admire Mrs Morton's courage. She does not allow her fading sight to prevent her from experiencing new things. There are long queues at the gate, but I explain to the guard that Mrs Morton is handicapped and we have a plane to catch in a short while. I am both surprised and delighted that he is sympathetic. I help Mrs Morton into a wheelchair and push her closer to the building.

The tower's a bit of a blur, Georgina. But I can see that it is not vertical.

At first glance, it looks like a multi-tiered wedding cake, I think.

I sit on a concrete bench with Mrs Morton and start reading the guidebook.

The Leaning Tower of Pisa

The Leaning Tower of Pisa or The Tower of Pisa is actually the freestanding bell tower of the Cathedral of Pisa and is located behind the Cathedral. Started in 1173, during a time of military success and affluence, it was designed to be vertical but started leaning to the south-east when the building reached the third floor. This was due to an inadequately laid foundation. Structural reinforcing was started in 1990 and at present the surface of the tower is gradually being restored.

I can't believe how long it's been standing like this at an angle. It's very exposed to the weather, Georgina. Wind and rain must damage it.

I suppose so.

You know that it's a World Heritage site, Georgina.

I read that in the guidebook.

I'm afraid that Mrs Morton might miss her plane, so I quickly find our taxi. On arrival at the airport, I discover that her flight is further delayed due to technical problems. I leave her in the capable hands of the airport staff, then I catch the shuttle train that ferries passengers round the corner to Pisa Central Station. I drink a berry smoothie and buy a magazine for the train journey home.

I feel so free. I have no one to care for and no rooms to service. I decide that I will disembark at Vernazza, my favourite town. It's a still, warm day and I will sit in the square and drink cappuccinos and then white wine while I wait for the sun to set. I will make notes in my travel journal, hoping to get another article out of my stay at Cinque Terre.

Vernazza, situated on the Ligurian coast in the province of La Spezia, has a population of about 1000 residents. Built between the 10th and 13th Century, it is situated about 4 metres above sea-level. It reminds me of Venice, though I have never visited Venice before. Is it because its name, Vernazza, sounds like Venice, or is it because water and boats play a role in the life of the town that is separated from the sea by a narrow outcrop of rocks and a small harbour?

Later that evening, as I continue to write in my journal in my tiny bedroom at the back of the hotel, I revisit the photos I have taken of the town, bathed in warm, mellow light.

There is the photo of the sand-coloured Labrador that peers uneasily out of the first-floor window of the building that houses a restaurant down below. I remember witnessing the ongoing communication between the dog and presumably its owner, who is dining at the restaurant below, in the company of five vociferous Italian men of similar age whom I estimate to be in their late sixties. The dog's owner stands up and makes eye contact every so often with his dog, ignoring the anxious howling of the beast. I'm amazed that the dog does not try to jump out of the window.

I have photographed a crate of terracotta-red tomatoes that are plump and voluptuous. The display of healthy fruit and vegetables on the sidewalk outside the deli, entices me into the store. I buy a bottle of Limoncino, a local liqueur made from lemons. And of course I cannot resist the sun-ripened figs on offer. It is the season for figs in Italy and I decide that I will try and grow my own fig tree when I return home to KwaZulu-Natal, even though it would probably not survive in our climate.

Suddenly my attention is drawn to a slip of paper that is shoved under my door. I see my name on top of it. I smile. It reminds me of notes sent surreptitiously around the classroom at school. The trick was to keep making eye contact with the teacher while doing it so that she didn't suspect anything or we'd wait until she turned her back.

I ease myself off the bed and read the note:

Hi Georgina. Could you please return Montale's poetry book as soon as possible?

I really need it. The sooner the better.

Nicholas.

I'm conscience-stricken that I have not returned Nicholas's book. It is at the bottom of a pile of books at my bedside.

I hurriedly slip on a pair of jeans and a tee-shirt, do something with my hair (why do I still bother?) and make my way up to Nicholas's room, peering down the passages for spies as I run barefoot up the stairs.

I knock quietly on his door.

Come in Georgina.

Look, I'm really sorry about the book. I should've returned it earlier.

No problem.

Nicholas is sitting on the outside balcony with his room doors flung open. He is partially hidden by the shadows, created by the outside lights of the hotel and the fronds of the palm trees that have grown higher than balcony level. As I gaze out to sea I am greeted by a thin crescent moon that hangs precariously in the star-studded sky. The view almost takes my breath away as the image is imprinted on my mind.

The ocean is a dark, swirling mass, lit at intervals by the night lights of Monterosso Al Mare. It's a still night and I hear the waves pounding onto the pebbly shore down below.

Come join me, Georgina. It's so beautiful out here.

I'd rather not, Nicholas. I've things to do.

What's so important?

I cannot think of a quick answer.

I'm actually catching up on my travel journal.

Come on Georgina. The night's young.

I'm tempted.

Okay then, but just for a short while.

Nicholas fetches a glass and pours amber Sciacchetta into the two glasses that are in front of him. It is a local wine that he seems to favour. I have often retrieved empty bottles of it from the bin in his room.

How was your day?

I'm surprised that he is showing an interest in my activities, after his reclusive behaviour.

Okay. I took Mrs Morton to Pisa by train so that she could catch her flight back to London.

You did? Was she okay to travel?

She's fine. She's walking with a walking-aid but she had to be carried into the train.

It's good of you to offer to take her to Pisa, Georgina?

I didn't offer. Mrs Knowles asked me to accompany her.

Weren't you worried about her fragility?

At first. But she 'd recovered enough to travel. I didn't mind really.

I'm pleased she wasn't too affected by the stroke. It must've been mild.

I presume so.

I sense that Nicholas is in an easy-going mood.

Mrs Morton reminds me of my grandmother, Rose, Nicholas. My Dad's mum. I wish she was still around. She had terrible arthritis in her fingers and toes, but she still managed to do so much.

I'm feeling unselfconscious in Nicholas's company. I have nothing to lose. I can just be myself. I ask Nicholas about his grandfather without worrying whether I am prying. I expect him to be guarded, but he opens up.

My grandfather, Paps, was the most compassionate human being I know, Georgina.

Nicholas lights up a cigarette, inhales and looks out to sea. I seize the gap.

You've told me that he was a volunteer in a homeless shelter in New York City. That's so amazing, Nicholas.

It really is. He didn't own much, but he gave so much of himself and his time. He really tried to help 'down and outs.' He tried to help them regain their sense of worth. He would sit for hours listening to them talk and he was genuinely intrigued by their life stories.

That's so noble, Nicholas. Tell me more about him.

Nicholas is silent for a while. He looks at the sky as though gathering his thoughts and courage. I wait patiently to see if he will divulge any more information, like he did about Katelyn when we ate pizza together in the old town of Monterosso.

Yeah... Where was I? My father, his son, on whom he doted, left my mother and me soon after I was born.

Nicholas takes a long pull on his cigarette and rearranges himself in the hard wrought-iron chair. Then he stretches out his legs in front of him to get more comfortable. I move my legs to one side to accommodate his feet. He stares intently at the table.

My father left a month after I was born. He just moved to Florida and started a new life there.

That must've been really hard, Nicholas.

I guess so. I've never known him.

You've not heard from your father since he went away?

Not really. It's been a long while now.

Nicholas rushes over the facts. His voice is quite unemotional when he talks about his father.

But hey! Paps became my surrogate father.

That's really cool, Nicholas.

Did Paps stay in contact with your father?

A little. I gather that it was always Paps who made the effort, but they seem to have lost contact now. It hurt my grandfather so much that he didn't speak about it much.

I'm at a loss for words as I begin to gain insight into the issues that Nicholas is dealing with. He is probably still grieving the loss of his grandfather, to whom he was close and obviously the break-up of his relationship with Katelyn. I'm about to ask him if he has ever made an effort to try and find his father, but as I look at his face I notice tears trickle down his cheek, which he quickly wipes away with the palm of his hand. I quickly avert my gaze.

Then suddenly, Nicholas pushes his chair away from the table and strides inside. I hear him blowing his nose in the bathroom and he is more composed when he returns.

What was I saying?

You were telling me about your grandfather, Nicholas.

Yeah! My grandfather was passionate about literature. I can still hear him reading children's stories to me when I was a kid. Huckleberry Finn, Charlotte's Web, Cricket in Times Square, Good Night Moon and other classics. That is probably why I'm so passionate about books. I have also inherited his love of poetry. With him gone, that's all I have to hold onto, Georgina.

I understand. He was a great role model for you Nicholas.

A night sea breeze wafts over to where we are sitting. It raises the hairs on my arms. It is getting cold. Nicholas continues talking in a cathartic mode.

My Paps was so thoughtful. He'd come out to stay with us on the weekends and take me places. We had such fun together.

Nicholas's face is animated as he reminisces about the times he and his grandfather shared.

But Nicholas, surely your mother wasn't happy with your grandfather being around after what his son did to you and her?

I think it was awkward at first. But my mother worked long hours during the week and at weekends she was exhausted. She also had to catch up on admin at home. Now I realize that she was often depressed.

It must've been tough for her as a single parent, Nicholas.

I guess Paps and she had an understanding. I think he felt so badly for what my father did to us and he tried to compensate for it.

I suppose he was determined that you wouldn't lose out by not having a father around, Nicholas.

Nicholas's pain moves me. I'm from a tightly-knit family and I cannot imagine life without one of my parents. They have always been supportive of me. At times my brother's teasing is irritating and there's been the odd bit of sibling rivalry, but we are all still close.

You know Georgina, it was great having Paps around when I was growing up. He did more for me than some kids' fathers. He was always at our baseball games, shouting for me. When there were school functions he'd make a special effort to come out from the city to attend them.

Didn't he have a wife?

He did.

Nicholas sips his wine.

Sadly, Grandma died tragically. They'd only been married for 11 years.

What happened to her?

She was knocked down by a car in New York City and never regained consciousness.

That's so sad, Nicholas.

Yeah. She stepped off a bus and into the road and was hit by a passing taxi.

I'm sorry. Imagine being widowed so young.

My grandmother was widowed, but she'd had forty years of marriage.

My grandfather was so amazing Georgina. He brought my father up alone.

Nicholas unbuttons the top buttons of his shirt.

That takes courage, Nicholas. How old was your dad at the time?

He was only about 8. Paps did have a lot of support from the Italian community though.

Didn't he remarry, Nicholas?

No.

Strange.

Nicholas smiles.

He did have a number of ladies who were after him, but...

I watch the movements of his sensitive hands as he drinks from his glass. I'm beginning to feel compassion for him.

Have you done any more travel writing, Georgina?

I've written plenty in my journal. I just need time to find angles for some travel articles now. I'm so inspired by this place.

It's magical.

How is your proposal on Montale, Nicholas?

Ah! Making some progress, I guess. I think it's finally taking shape. But I keep changing my mind.

Nicholas look at the time. I really must be going now. At least you can sleep in!

It's still early.

It's actually not.

He stops me before I reach the door.

Wait, Georgina.

He holds me tightly. I am filled with ambivalence. I have received too many mixed signals from Nicholas to allow myself to yield to him. I refuse to be hurt. There's a moment of indecision, then he draws me even closer to him. As I nestle against his taut body, I like the feel of his protective arms tracing the contours of my back. There's even a hint of after-shave gel that lingers on his cheeks and I'm surprised that he is clean-shaven tonight. I'm so warmed by the closeness I experience with him. All my senses are alive to him on this balmy, summer night in Italy. It is some time before I creep back to my room.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I dread Mondays. They are often frenetic in the housekeeping department, as we try to resolve crises that were not dealt with over the weekend. Somehow I always find myself with extra work. But today I don't seem to mind so much. Nicholas has opened me up to the joy of being alive. I'm light-footed as I do my work. Early in the morning I start negotiations with Mrs Knowles for my day off, the one I missed when I accompanied Mrs Morton to Pisa. I corner her in the pine-scented linen closet (her natural habitat) and she reluctantly agrees on Tuesday. This means that I will have two days off this week!

Your day off is subject to change without notice, Georgina.

Yes, Mrs Knowles. I know.

Mrs Knowles is flustered. Her ankle cast is not due to be removed for a few more weeks. Her lack of mobility frustrates her. She loathes her dependence on other people and the way in which it makes her appear less in control and less efficient than she should be.

Georgina, please could you arrange for the serviettes from the dining room to be sent to the company who does our laundry. They left them behind in a pile in the corner when they loaded the soiled linen into the van.

Will do, Mrs Knowles.

I am pleased to find an exit. I have just turned my back on my boss when I hear my name being called. I turn around slowly.

Georgina, please check that Room 6 has extra towels. There are two children staying in that room with their parents.

Yes, Mrs Knowles.

I've an urgent meeting now with the general manager and I need you to keep an eye on things here for me.

Alright.

The day passes quickly. Later, I'm in my room when the soft colours of the long dusk dissolve and night covers the steep hills behind the hotel like a blanket. I'm almost asleep when I hear paper scraping against the floor like light sandpaper. I turn on my bedside light and investigate the noise. The folded, lined yellow sheet that has been slipped under

my door has my name scrawled across the top in blue gel pen. It brings a smile to my face. I'm intrigued by this mode of communication. It seems such a primitive way of being in touch with someone in this technological age.

I slowly unfold the note and read Nicholas's message. I can tell from the tone of his writing that like an archeologist, he is delighted with new findings that he has unearthed about Eugenio Montale, whom he tells me is often considered to be the most complex poet writing in Italian since Dante. At the end of his theorizing Nicholas enquires what time we are meeting the following day.

I'm peeved that I have to respond to this immediately as it is late. But if I do not give him an answer now, I might miss seeing him. I decide to text him with the plans.

Six hours later I wake at sunrise to catch the weather report. Cinque Terre is not mentioned as it is far too regional, but a high temperature of 29°C is predicted for Rome. After breakfast as I wait impatiently for the hotel transport, I see diamonds glistening off the surface of the sea. It is enough to entice me to the beach. Anticipation wells inside as I recall childhood memories of languid days spent on the beach and my refusal to come out of the water when instructed to do so by my mother. *One more wave!* I'd cry.

I have already staked my claim to a small rectangle of the public beach in front of the station in Monterosso al Mare when Nicholas arrives. He is an hour late but I do not ask any questions. He places his beach towel next to mine with difficulty as there is little grey, gritty sand that is not already occupied by sun bathers. When I look up from my book (Theroux's *Dark Star Safari*) I catch a glimpse of the white ferry, ploughing through the still water as it takes well-heeled passengers to other Cinque Terre towns, south of us. I imagine that it is primarily for the tourists. What amazes me about Paul Theroux's travels in Africa is that he uses public transportation wherever possible. It provides him with such a good vantage point to see the country for what it really is. In this book I'm reading, he takes the local train from Mwanza to Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. I make notes on his travel writing skills and his observations. I'm fascinated by the way he uses the train journey and his fellow passengers, that are always changing, as a vehicle through which to comment on life in the various regions of Tanzania.

How often do you travel by train, Nicholas?

When my question is not answered I glance to my left and see Nicholas asleep. I'm tempted to wake him, but I day dream instead.

It's so easy travelling on my own by train in Italy and London. A train literally took me from the airport in Pisa to my destination further up the coast and I could easily have continued on to Genoa. I did not even have to hire a taxi to take me from the airport to the train station in Pisa. I'm amazed at the efficiency of the train services in Italy and the United Kingdom. Yet, I would be nervous travelling alone on a train in South Africa. Make that travelling at all on a train in most parts of South Africa. I do not consider it safe.

I was once talking to a waiter at a restaurant on the Waterfront in Cape Town who confirmed this fact. He mentioned that he and his fiancé had taken their savings and headed east by train to Durban so that he could look for work as a chef in one of the many restaurants that line the golden sands of this coastal city. Just outside Durban this man was robbed of his possessions by thugs on the train and he and his girl friend had no option, but to hitchhike back to the Cape as they were penniless and had nowhere to stay.

Nicholas wakes and suggests a swim before taking lunch in our favourite little restaurant near the station. I walk towards the sea but my tender feet rebel against the sharp edges of the pebbles that line the water's edge. How can elderly women roll around on their backs on the pebbles? Although beautifully decorated by nature, the stones are definitely designed to keep people out of the water. But once water-borne and treading water above them, it is refreshing to swim in the waters of the Mediterranean sea. It has been one of the highlights of my time on the Ligurian coast.

I pay half a Euro to shower and change at the cramped beach facilities, while Nicholas spends more time in the water, swimming out towards the buoys. We meet later at the restaurant.

I can't believe how little beach space there is in Cinque Terre. Nicholas.

I guess there's enough.

It's strange to have to pay to swim. At home, in South Africa, there's no fee to lie on the beach or swim at a public beach.

Most hotels have claimed their own beaches. Georgina. For a fee, they provide umbrellas and loungers for their hotel guests and their section of beach becomes very exclusive.

I see that!

Nicholas laughs.

At least there are a still a few free public beaches available to us masses!

We sit on the promenade, shaded by umbrellas and share a plate of salted anchovies. I'm inspired to finish my article on anchovy fishing and send it to a travel magazine in South Africa. I'll either include my visuals of Nicoletta or use her as a separate profile. I decide that I will add the close-ups of anchovies that have been traditionally hand trawled in this region for years.

Hey Nicholas! I still haven't tried 'Tian.'

What's that?

A Cinque Terre speciality. Anchovies cooked with potatoes and tomatoes.

Is it on the menu here?

I quickly peruse the list of items under seafood.

Don't see it.

I think you should try it on your last night in Monterosso Al Mare Georgina! Speaking of which, I only have a few nights left here myself.

I'm shocked.

When are you leaving?

Saturday.

I'm so startled by Nicholas's remark. I feel myself being plunged into an ice cold sea of disappointment, waiting for someone to throw me a life-jacket. Impulsively I reach for a chunk of baguette. I knew that it was foolish to let my heart rule my head. How could I have allowed myself to feel anything for this wandering minstrel from New York City? Why did I not heed his advice when he warned me not to have any expectations of our relationship.

Oh yes! You're going to Florence and Sienna. I think you mentioned...

I have to force an enthusiastic response for Nicholas's travel plans, despite the fact that I would give anything to walk across the Ponte Vecchio with him and see the art treasures

of Florence. All I would need is one morning in the Uffizi Gallery to see the paintings that I studied in my Art History course at high school. How I would love to see the original Filippo Lippi painting, called 'Madonna and Child with Two Angels!'

Where will you stay in Florence?

I have a friend from the States, who is a Fine Arts student. He's spending the summer in Florence and has the use of an apartment, not far from the Ponte Vecchio.

That's great.

It is hard to mouth these words. I hope that Nicholas does not sense the insincerity in my voice. I mean it's wonderful for him to experience these great Italian cities, but I cannot imagine my days at the hotel without him. I am already pining for him.

I nibble at the anchovies and fight back the tears that form in my eyes.

Excuse me a minute, Nicholas.

There is a queue in the toilet and despite the fact that I don't know anyone, I do not wish to be seen with tears cascading down my face. I quickly retreat and gather all my strength to return to the table and appear normal.

Is everything okay, Georgina?

Yes. But I seem to have hay fever.

What has brought it on?

Could be anything in the air. Pollen perhaps. It's bad in the summer.

I wait patiently for Nicholas to finish his café latte. The superb summer day that started out as a ripe, unblemished peach has suddenly been stung by a fruit-fly.

Have I done or said anything wrong, Georgina?

I do not answer him. I'm saved by a train that passes through the station with the speed of a bullet. It shrieks a warning signal before its carriages rattle past, causing the chairs on the street below to vibrate. For a moment, I wish I were on that train.

Oh, by the way, I'm sorry I was late arriving at the beach, Georgina.

No problem. It hasn't made any difference.

I overslept.

You must've been tired. Were you up late?

I was inspired to write poetry again, Georgina.

I'm pleased for you.

I find that I do my best work late at night, but then I oversleep.

That figures!

I even missed breakfast this morning. I had to grab a foccacio slice from a deli on the promenade.

Nicholas pushes his cup to the side, stretches his arms and yawns.

Come let's walk.

He slides his hand into mine as we walk towards the ice cream kiosk that is situated near the sharp, sculptured rocks that rise vertically out of the water like organic, volcanic sculptures. I've often seen them on guidebook covers and advertising brochures for Monterosso Al Mare.

I let go of his hand as we climb down a flight of concrete steps and sit on flat rocks that are in close proximity to the landmark rocks.

Could I taste your fig sorbet Georgina?

Sure. I'm crazy about figs!

I hand over my ice cream.

Would you care for some pistachio ice cream in return?

When I decline his offer, Nicholas shrugs his shoulders. He finishes his ice cream cone then moves nearer to me.

I really like you, Georgina.

I pull away from him. I've learnt not to take his words seriously. I turn my head and watch the waves crash onto the rocks below, spraying foam into the air. I do not know how to respond to him.

You're not like other chicks, Georgina.

It takes a while for me to respond.

What d'you mean Nicholas?

I mean that you're beautiful, but not aware of it.

Must have inherited my mother's genes.

You're caring too, which is rare.

I smile at him.

Hey! You were so kind to Mrs Morton, Georgina.

Anyone would've done that for her, Nicholas.

Anyone?

Well. Mrs Morton's almost blind. I feel sorry for her. She was so courageous, going on holiday on her own...

But you went the extra mile Georgina.

We'll both be old one day...

I try to wipe a blob of ice cream that has fallen onto my beige shorts with a flimsy paper serviette but it leaves a moist smudge.

Nicholas I didn't realize that you were leaving so soon. I thought your time here was open-ended?

I'm surprised by my own forthrightness.

I need to visit these two places and then head back to the States, Georgina. I've been gone a while.

Since when?

May.

I'm surprised at how objective I sound.

I also have to get back to work in the deli so that I can finance my studies for next year.

I suddenly realize how fortunate I am to have had my studies financed by my father.

Let's walk back to the hotel Georgina. It's such a great day.

Don't think I can make it up that steep hill!

It'll be a test of your fitness, Georgina.

Nicholas wins. We walk along the promenade, dodging the babies' prams and delivery vehicles. A slight breeze ruffles my hair so I knot it at the back of my head. Nicholas walks in unison with me, but we do not hold hands. The air hangs heavily on us, like lead. We leave the promenade and turn left into a narrow alley. Eugenio Montale's gracious villa looms in front of us. I imagine the inspiration he must have felt when spending summers here so close to the sea. It is such an inspiring place. As we bypass the house on the left, my eyes are drawn to the grove of olive trees that is fenced off on the opposite side of the road. I can't stop looking at the trees with their spindly stems and fruit laden branches.

Then we face the long, steep climb that is full of hair-pin bends. My calves ache. I have to concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. Through the branches of the pine trees I can see terraces, high up on the surrounding mountains where grapes, olives and lemons are cultivated. Every centimeter of space is put to good use in this densely populated region. It is in such contrast to the wide open spaces at home.

You really need to visit South Africa sometime, Nicholas.

I'd really like to do that. Some day!

The deafening sound of cicadas and the aroma of pine needles underfoot, remind me that we are nearly back at the hotel. I cannot wait to get into a soothing bath. Nicholas and I separate as we approach the hotel. Once more, he becomes the paying guest and I am the employee.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Is that you Mum? Sorry, I can hardly hear you.

I rush out of my room, down the passage with my left index finger over my left earhole and my phone covering the right. I unlatch the back door of the hotel and run towards the trees, hoping for better reception.

Yes, it's me, Gina. No, I'm not feeling down. Is everything alright?

I can hide nothing from my mother.

You say I must come home?

My mother's voice quivers. Fear grips me in its vice.

But why Mum? I've another month of work here at the hotel. Then I want to spend more time working in London.

My legs start shaking.

What's happened? Tell me.

My heart is racing. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth as my saliva dries up. I can hear myself swallow.

Dad's been burnt in a runaway cane fire? Is that right? Oh no! Is he okay?

I find it difficult to visualize the scene.

How did it happen? Is he at home?

I run further up the bank of trees as the reception fails.

If he's in Intensive Care at Medwood Hospital it must be serious, Mum. Where are you now?

The news paralyses me.

I'm here Mum. I just don't know what to say. Have you told Simon? Oh! When will he be flying out to Durban?

A pigeon flies overhead and lands in the tree above me.

I'll try and get home as soon as I can, Mum. Don't worry.

My heart pounds in my chest and my legs are shaking. I let myself back into my room and sit on the bed to steady myself. My mother's conversation is in replay mode in my mind. *A fire, but where? I forgot to ask.* I need to do something, but the news has immobilized me. My mind races back and forth from the past to the future and back. It

suddenly dawns on me that I need to make plans for my return home, but the hour is late. I will have to wait until the morning. I am so alone, in need of solace.

I soak in a full bath, scented with the fragrance of bergamot. Then I try to sleep. I wake every couple of hours, tossing and turning and I eventually abandon sleep just before sunrise.

Mrs Knowles is totally flustered when I tell her that I have to leave as soon as possible.

Who 'm I going to get as a replacement?

I roll my eyes and shrug my shoulders.

Sorry, this is an emergency.

Surely Mrs Knowles can be more sympathetic.

I'm sure you'll find extra help. It's school holidays. Perhaps a young girl from the town. A friend of Serena's.

So long as her English is good, Georgina...

There is not enough time to organize my pay before I leave, but fortunately I have an open-ended return ticket to South Africa. I could fly home from Rome, but when I study the fine print on my ticket, I discover that I have to leave from Heathrow.

I have few possessions so it does not take long for me to pack up my room. There is no time for nostalgia, but I throw open my bedroom windows for the last time to hear the shrill cries of the cicadas and breathe in the morning air, scented with pine.

Nicholas is elusive. I scribble a note to him, giving him the reason for my sudden departure. I leave it for him at reception and hope that I will see him again before leaving.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Although my Johannesburg-Heathrow flight was delayed three hours on the way over (the aircraft apparently arrived late from Washington D.C.) one of the advantages was that instead of flying over the Sahara desert at night, we did so just as morning was breaking. I did have to wait a little longer for the sunrise as I was seated next to a window on the western side of the plane, but I watched fascinated as we travelled at 21,000 ft over the Sahara. The rocky mountain ranges stand guard over a vast, sandy landscape, with not even a hint of human life. River courses are visible between hills of sand, but on closer examination, I see that they are dry sand beds that end abruptly with no outlet to the sea. There is something intriguing about this desolate, abandoned landscape. On the one hand, it offers endless opportunities for solitude and exploration, but should something happen, there is little chance of getting help.

The two hour delay in our late night flight from Heathrow to Johannesburg offers only disadvantages. I will probably miss my connecting flight to Durban. The wait has increased my anxiety and tested my patience. And when I board the aircraft, exhausted, I discover that I've been assigned a seat in economy class next to a mother with a restless toddler, who explores everything in sight, including me, with his hands.

When we do eventually take off, his screaming competes with his mother's attempts to explain that he has a problem with his ears. It is only hours later that he succumbs to sleep, exhausted.

I long for sleep to anaesthetize me. But I will have to wait until after the meal is served. My back aches. I position the small airways pillow as a cushion at the base of my spine, but it offers no comfort. I cover my knees with the navy and white checked airways blanket like a little old lady, until my neighbour knocks the food tray in front of me as he dives into the aisle en route to the toilet. Sticky, sweet wine splashes over my white blouse, making me look as though I have been in a fight.

I'm desperately in need of sleep and contemplate missing dinner when the trolley arrives at the edge of our row of seats. The rubberized chicken resists dissection by my plastic knife and I realize that I should have taken my brother's advice to request the vegetarian meal. The boiled spinach is bitter, but I do find some comfort in the potato au

gratin. I resort to satisfying my hunger pangs with a small transparent container of chocolate mousse, carefully avoiding the blob of artificial cream on top. Then I hungrily devour my all-time favourite, crispy crackers and a wedge of cheese. But it is a small portion. My neighbour has discarded both his mousse and his cheese. I'm tempted to offer him a trade, but I discover that I only have my half-eaten salad for bargaining power which immediately puts me at another disadvantage.

The lights are eventually dimmed in the cabin, but my large, fleshy, travelling companion, seated on my right, continues to rely on his overhead reading light that shines in my eyes like a neon light in Las Vegas. On top of that, his large arm-span encroaches heavily on my space as he flutters his way through *The Financial Times*.

Why do the cabin attendants always pull the curtain that separates business from economy class? Right now, I long for the spacious comfort of the business class lounge. For the first time in my life I resort to wearing the eye patch that the airliner provides (and the socks, as my feet are freezing!) but I toss and turn in my seat, unable to get comfortable. I am overtired. Fractious. I suddenly start to shudder and the cabin attendant reluctantly offers me another blanket. Then when I'm facing west, with my blanket covering my ears, almost in hibernation mode, the semi-silence that cocoons me is shattered by a semi-guttural roar at regular intervals on my right as my companion succumbs to sleep.

In desperation I beg the cabin attendant to allow me to relocate, pleading that I am going home on compassionate leave, only to find that she allocates me the seat that is directly opposite the toilet.

I fall into a troubled sleep, but wake with a start soon afterwards, when the seat belt signs are activated and the plane negotiates a troubled sky. My nerves are shot with this erratic soaring and swooping. I grab the armrests with such vengeance and wipe the sweat that is forming on my brow. I dare not think of my father. Even thinking of Nicholas creates a heaviness in my chest.

On reflection, I think that I managed to eventually sleep for an hour or two. I know that I was one of the first awake the next morning, along with the bright-eyed toddler who took delight in sprinting up and down the aisle.

It reminded me of those times when I was a child and I had a long wait in my room for my parents to wake up and call me to join them in their room. This was to counteract my habit of creeping into their room at all hours of the night. I am an early riser and time dragged in the dark as I waited in my room for the sound of my mother's voice, despite the fact that she put toys at the foot of my bed to keep me occupied.

The airbus makes up an hour en route and there is a round of applause when the wheels of the plane connect with the shiny tarmac in Johannesburg, causing haddas to flee. Alas! My seat at the rear of the aircraft assures me of being one of the last passengers to disembark. I despair when I discover that the queues in the Immigration Hall are progressing at a snail's pace. But there is a hidden advantage to this, which I only discover later. When I arrive in the hall to collect my baggage, I have no competition as most of the passengers have left. I have instant retrieval of my suitcase that is circling round and round the room like one of the stationary horses on a funfair carousel.

The Johannesburg-Durban flight brings me closer and closer to reality. I am longing to be home, but I do not know how to face what awaits me. I have always known my father to be very strong, someone on whom we all rely.

After a cup of tea is served (when I was a child, they at least served a biscuit as well on domestic flights) I notice that we are flying over familiar landmarks on the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal. The sugar cane beneath us is bone-dry and I see that fires have ravaged large areas, robbing the countryside of its life-blood, staining the land black. After trailing the ocean on our left, we are so low when flying over the harbour that it seems as though we are about to skim the water. Then we swoop down suddenly like an eagle with taut, strong wings outstretched.

I panic when my mother is not at the airport to greet me. I even look for my name on the signboards that the drivers and tourist operators hold up to attract the attention of passing passengers.

Sorry I'm late Georgina. I had to park so far away.

Don't worry. I know that parking's always a problem here.

It's so far that I had to wait for an airport bus to ferry me from the car park. It's so good to see you!

As I feel the warm embrace of my mother, her smell comforts me immediately. She is still using *Dolce Gabana* perfume. Her black heeled boots add centimeters to her already tall, reed slim body that towers above me. I struggle to keep up with her as she glides with ease across the marble floor towards the exit, leaving me paces behind her. While many people have commented that I look like my mother, I certainly did not inherit her height.

I'm so glad you could come home, Georgina. I hope you understand.

Of course I do. It's okay. How's Dad? I've been so worried.

He's still in high care, but I'm sure he'll be okay.

Still in high care?

Yes. He inhaled so much smoke. He was battling to breathe.

His weak chest doesn't help. Is he on a ventilator?

Yes, Georgina.

We are about to climb into the car when my mother remembers that she has to pay for the parking inside the airport building. I grab some of the local currency and hurry back. On my return my mother opens the front car door for me.

You look tired, Gina. You're pale.

I shouldn't be. I've been lazing in the sun on the Ligurian coast. It's just that I haven't had any sleep for two days, Mum.

Oh no! I know how difficult it is to sleep on a plane.

On the floor at my feet is a copy of the local community newspaper. I cannot help but notice the head lines on the front page.

LOCAL FARMER AND ENVIRONMENTALIST BADLY BURNT IN CANE FIRE

North Coast Farmer, James Dermatt (aged 55) sustained severe burns in a runaway sugar cane fire on Sunday afternoon, for which he is being treated at Medwood Hospital in Durban...

Dad must be really bad if you've called us back.

He has second and third degree burns on his body.

That's awful.

Fortunately, only superficial burns on his face, Georgina.

That's a relief. But it sounds serious...

Time will tell. The specialist's just worried about the nerve endings and sweat glands.

We find our way onto the freeway into town, dodging taxis and cars that stream past us. Because she is used to travelling great distances from the farm into Durban and back, my mother travels at a reasonable speed, but today she is driving slowly in the middle lane.

Let's get some lunch before seeing Dad, Georgina.

Sounds great.

My mother knows how to please me. She takes me to my favourite coffee shop in a shopping centre near the hospital.

It's good to see you.

I've missed you Georgina.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In spite of the trauma caused by my father's accident, I feel comforted and sheltered in the cocoon I call home. Although the journey home has tired me, I wake early, as I usually do when I am on the farm. I pull up my wicker blinds and gaze at the wide sweep of sky that has been carelessly painted with broad brushstrokes of cloud. The eastern horizon is pink and brings to mind a saying my mother taught me when I was young: 'pink sky in the morning, shepherds' warning!' It's amazing how often it signals a change in the weather.

Outside my window, olive sunbirds are already gathering nectar from the orange-red flowers of the coral tree. Their shrill sound is familiar. I recall that I saw very few birds when I was in Cinque Terre. Only a few seabirds.

Then the reality hits me. My father's presence is noticeable by his absence. I do not hear the familiar roar of his diesel van when he leaves the house at daybreak. He is not back home for breakfast and lunch at the designated times so I often eat alone. The television is now not always tuned to the sports channels. I'm actually really worried about my Dad, who is still in high care. I'm sure he'll need skin grafts on his chest and arms and there is always the danger of infection.

My dreams of pursuing my career as a travel writer will have to be put on hold again, which is really frustrating as I want to write more articles and place them with magazines. I'm missing Nicholas and Italy more than I imagined. Now that I'm back on South African soil I can only be there in my mind and it's becoming more and more difficult, as time passes and events at home demand my focus.

Now is not the time to be sharing my travel experiences with my mother, though I long to. She is frenetically busy and distracted. She writes endless lists, constantly voicing aloud what is next on her daily agenda. There is no time for leisurely breakfasts, like those when I was on university vacation or the late afternoon walks that we took together from the house or in the coastal bush.

What I see beyond the perimeter of the garden, is a constant reminder of the fateful fire. The land looks as though it is in a state of mourning. Short, black stubs of sugar cane

mourn their fate, robbed of months of luscious growth before being harvested for the sugar mill.

The sugar cane grows right up to the edge of our garden and my father usually cuts it in July, the dry, windy season, so that should there be a fire, our house will not be threatened. This time, he did not cut the field in time.

My mother is still in a state of shock and keeps talking about the need that she felt to evacuate the house when threatened by the fire. She recounts the nightmare of trying to decide what to leave and what to take out of our home. The snap decisions that she had to make about what items Simon and I would want saved. While she was constantly ferrying things back and forth from the farmhouse to the outside storerooms, that are some distance from the house, she did not know how badly burnt my father was. At one stage, his clothes were on fire.

As I look outside while lying on my back in bed, black 'izinyoni' (isiZulu for birds) that are really fragments of ash from the fire, dance in the breeze before landing on the ground. Although they look magical when they float through the air, I'm reminded of the damage they cause: clogging the filter of our swimming pool and coating our washing with soot.

The sun rises orange above the distant hills in the east. It is a late starter, which is to be expected as it is mid-winter. From now on the days should lengthen fractionally as we have just experienced the winter solstice. This year I was in Italy on this momentous day that I always like to celebrate. For me, it is a turning point, as the days are redirected on their path towards summer, which I love. I have always thrived in summer, despite the humidity and its debilitating effect on me, especially when trying to play sport. I really battle in the winter seasons of my life.

With a jerk, I pull the duvet over my head and am about to succumb to sleep when I am called to attention.

Georgina, darling, do you think you could get some things for me at the farmers' cooperative as soon as it opens?

Okay, Mum.

I remind myself of the reason that I have come home. I stand mindless in the shower, for what seems like hours, in an attempt to wake up and get going. My mother has

already eaten and is driving around the farm in my father's van by the time I'm dressed. We will not even have breakfast together.

It is good, if not a little strange, to be driving again. I have not driven for nearly six months as I didn't drive in London or Italy. When I pass through our nearby town, it seems busier than usual and a little strange at first, until all the landmarks reacquaint themselves with me. There are the familiar municipal buildings set back from the road and the myriad clothing shops of Indian and Chinese origin that vie for attention as they tout their wares along the main street.

After waiting at the robot, I pass the 'seed shop.' How I used to love going into that store with my mother as a child, when she bought seeds for her vegetable and flower gardens. She always allowed me to choose a packet of seeds. I invariably chose nasturtiums as the packet was bright and colourful. I recall the childhood joy of seeing drops of water balancing on their leaves like mercury. Then when the green patch of leaves suddenly burst into flower, I helped my mother pick them. I normally stuffed them into a tiny vase or bottle while she used them to decorate a plate of sandwiches or toss into a salad, although only she was brave enough to eat them.

I cannot believe how our nearby town has grown in the last few years. It seems that in my absence, when I was at university and overseas, it has outgrown itself, like a child outgrows a jersey. This is probably the result of housing developments and industrial expansion. Now I can no longer walk down the street and expect to know most of the people I see, like I did in my childhood.

I am not known at the farmers' cooperative until I sign on my father's account. Then there are endless enquiries about his health. I pick up a load of protective clothing, gumboots, new uniforms and fertilizer for my mother's strawberries. On the way home, I pass a market plaza, that is already bustling with the trade that goes through it daily. I remember how it used to house a fresh produce market which I went to when I was a child. My mother and I used to go there early on Saturday mornings. Occasionally Simon joined us when he was not going round the farm or bird-watching with my Dad. We were normally there before the arrival of the crowds with their voluminous woven baskets. I can still visualize the large airy building with its dusty windows and the sparrows that nested in the eaves.

The cheeky behaviour of the Myna birds, those ink-black screechers, distinguishable by their yellow beaks and feet, resurfaces in my mind as I recall their swoops down from the rafters to peck at the fruit on the stalls or the squashed specimens lying on the floor.

My sense of smell is aroused once more by the memory. The fresh, pungent aroma of bundles of dhania (coriander). The sharp tang of ginger and garlic. In my mind I can still picture the large, bulb-shaped purple brinjals that shone like mirrors and the piles of small, jam tomatoes that my mother used for salads and home-processed sundried tomatoes. It was there that I first tasted the sweet flesh of a fresh coconut and tried its milk.

I catch up with my mother at lunch.

The plastic surgeon's seeing Dad again this afternoon, Gina. I really need to be there.

That's fine. Go into Durban. I'll keep an eye on things here.

Thanks Gina. But I really shouldn't leave the farm. There are just too many things to organize here. By the way, Simon arrives tomorrow night.

Yes! I can't wait to see him.

My mother's mahogany-brown hair rests on her shoulders and as she pecks at the chicken piece in front of her, that is bathed in coconut milk, I notice that her hair is lank and lifeless. Suddenly she scrapes it back impatiently into a tortoise-shell clip on the back of her head. I do not often see my mother with greasy hair.

A lettuce leaf on her plate, drenched in salad dressing, refuses to be spiked onto her fork. So as she chases it around the blue willow-patterned plate, which is part of a set that my late grandmother, Rose gave to my parents, I notice how tense she is.

It's so good of you to make me this Thai curry. I know how hectic things are at the moment.

I know how much you like Thai cooking, Gina.

My mother looks tired. I'm suddenly conscious of the dark rings under her eyes.

Oh! No!

She pushes back her chair and rushes out of the room.

What's happened?

The soup's boiling over on the stove Gina... I can hear it.

I instinctively follow my mother into the kitchen. A fountain of thick, foamy vegetable soup cascades over the side of the huge pot, hissing as it hits the ceramic surface of the stove.

I forgot to turn the heat down. Ooh! And I still have to get this soup to the Aids Centre this afternoon.

Can't it wait, Mum?

It's for tomorrow, Gina.

I'll do it. That is something that I can do.

Great. D'you know where to go?

I look surprised.

Oh! It's just too difficult to explain how to get there. I'll take it in later.

I shrug my shoulders and notice how difficult it is for my mother to delegate.

But Gina, I need some bread to go with it.

Let me do that...

No, don't worry. I'll pick it up on route to the centre. Perhaps it will be okay to take it to the centre early in the morning.

I have never seen my mother so flustered. Her world is like a cup that is lying on the floor in shattered pieces.

Let me do it for you, Mum.

No. Thanks Gina. I'll be fine.

We are interrupted by a knock on the door. Musa Nyembe, our field manager, seeks my mother's advice about which fields to burn for harvesting in the morning.

But we haven't finished cutting the cane around the house yet Musa.

Yes, but our allocation has gone up. It's pay weekend for most farmers. The mill wants more cane...

My mother's face is etched with anxiety. She is not used to making these decisions. She tugs at a stray twirl of hair around her face, rocks back and forth on her heels and I see her eyes dart back and forth in uncertainty.

Which field was next on the schedule, Musa?

Field 10. The one near the dam.

Well, I suppose you better get on with it then. Thank you. Will you have enough labour?

Yes. I hope so.

My mother peels off her denim jacket and rushes into the kitchen, almost tripping over the grey cat. I notice how loose her normally tight-fitting jeans have become.

Tea, coffee, Gina?

Water, thanks.

She opens the fridge door.

I'll make you coffee, Mum.

We have just sat down in the lounge when my mother says: *I think I must leave now for Durban, Gina. I don't like travelling the long distance home on my own at night.*

Would you like me to come with you?

No, it's fine.

Would you like me to take the soup to the centre then?

Oh! The soup. Forgot about that. Could you Georgina?

Sure.

They need it today for early tomorrow. I'll draw you a map. And don't forget about the bread.

I won't.

Dust billows behind my mother's car as she heads down the dirt road. The sun warms me and I linger outside. I'm shocked at the damage caused to our garden by the heat of the fire. The fleshy grey leaves of the flowering aloes have shriveled and the trees that were standing too close to the fire have been scorched. As I observe their cinder-black stems, the leaves that are littered on the ground are lifted by the wind that swirls around my legs. I wonder if my mother realizes the extent of the damage to her well-tended space.

She has spent years re-landscaping the subtropical garden established by my grandmother when she lived in our house. Slowly, the roses, crotons and exotic trees, such as Tibouchinas, with their purple and pink flowers, have been replaced with indigenous plants and trees that have attracted many birds.

As I open the back door, a gust of wind enters with me. Windows bang as the wind whips the landscape into motion. I close most of the windows to prevent cinders from flying inside. Then I seize the opportunity of checking my emails. A quick scan of the

inbox shows that Simon has sent details of his flights from Heathrow, but there is nothing from Nicholas. Surely he must have found my note at reception. I write a quick email informing him that I have arrived home safely and enquire about his time in Siena and Florence.

Later, I am just about to leave the house with the soup sloshing around in a large plastic container, when my cell phone rings.

Mum. How's Dad?

My heart races.

You sound worried. What's up?

My knees turn to jelly. What's the problem?

Yes. I can hear you. I'm listening, mother.

I'll come as soon as I can.

I find the garage key inside on the key rack and then search for the keys for my father's van. Eventually I discover that they have been carelessly flung onto the desk in the study. On the surface is a mound of papers and sealed window envelopes, waiting for my father's careful attention. My father has always been extremely well organized and a great believer in self-discipline. Even on a Sunday, his day of rest, he gets up at 5 a.m.

As I walk out of the room, with its masculine décor, my father's graduation photo stops me in my tracks. I cannot help but look at it. It reminds me of happier times. My father's angular face with his sharp, high cheekbones, is framed by long sideburns and I notice the cleft in his chin, a feature that he inherited from his father, which I now have. His hair is thick and long at that time, causing his graduation cap to balance precariously on his head. As usual, he is smiling. There's a look of anticipation in his shiny eyes, as though he is on the verge of something exciting.

But then as I walk down the passage towards the back door, I have a painful flashback of seeing him on my return from Italy. The shock of seeing him lying immobile and expressionless in high care at the hospital. The once smooth and flawless skin of his youth, now ageing and ravaged by the heat of the fire.

The steering on my Dad's van is stiff and I find it difficult to drive the vehicle. I'm so worried, that I narrowly miss the garage wall as I reverse out at an angle. In fact, I think I could have actually scraped the wall with my side mirror. I do not like to have to get out

of the car again in order to manually close the garage doors as there is no one around. I need to get going.

I buy bread at the local grocery store and find my way to the centre, using my mother's map. The door has a steel grid over it and although I knock with great enthusiasm, it seems as though no one is there.

What do I do with the soup and bread? The shopkeeper next door answers my enquiries. It seems that Miriam Dlamini has just gone to do her grocery shopping. She should be back in an hour. I strike up a conversation with the friendly store owner.

I can't wait. I have to get to Durban.

You can leave the bread with me, but I've no fridge on the premises for the soup.

As I glance impatiently at the time, the shopkeeper leaves me to attend to a customer. What do I do with this huge container of vegetable soup? Eventually I decide that there is only one solution and that is to return home and leave it in the fridge. The detour makes me anxious. Besides, I notice that the petrol gauge is on reserve.

Eventually I'm driving along the highway in the left hand lane, cheered on by a local radio station. But after a while, the flippant banter of the D.J. and the advertisements, prove too distracting, so I travel in relative silence. A diesel-powered vehicle is never completely quiet.

My thoughts turn to memories. Sunday mornings on the beach with my Dad, where I am making seaweed lasagne for lunch in my makeshift beach house, the rooms of which are easily defined by driftwood sticks.

I can still hear my father's voice shouting *Gina, be careful of the current*, above the sound of the choppy waves, when I ventured out too far. Or *Gina, let me put sunblock on you!* He is a real hands-on father.

Then there were the times when I occasionally went with Simon and my Dad on bird-watching outings around the farm. I really wasn't very interested in sitting still for hours in order to hear or see a bird, but I did like seeing the crowned eagle that nested in the fork of a large, spreading Flat-crown tree in the bush. What fascinated me more than the powerful bird sitting on its nest, were the monkey and buck skulls that lay littered at the foot of the tree.

On either side of the freeway, I notice patchwork-quilt blocks of burnt sugar cane, waiting to be harvested. In other places, I can trace the path of runaway fires that have ravaged the dry, bleached landscape. This is in such sharp contrast to the lush green vineyards of Italy that I recall longingly in my mind. I miss the lemon and sprawling fig trees that are laden with fruit at this time. Instead of the aromatic scent of the pines that filters through the hotel in which I worked, now that I am back on KwaZulu-Natal soil, my sense of smell is assaulted by the arid scent of charred wood and sweet molasses.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Gina.

Dad.

I want to bend over and hug him, but my father seems fragile. His face is puffy and swollen. As my lips brush his forehead, I notice that his fringe and the graying hair above his ears have been singed by fire. The burn on his right cheek, that is uncovered, has blistered. He is off the ventilator, but is not breathing easily. He is back in the Intensive Care unit.

Are you alright, Dad?

He nods. His eyes are slits. In ICU all one's movements are measured. I sense an unwritten law that one should speak gently and softly so that one does not startle or disturb the patient. Everything is done in slow motion. It's as though one is existing in the moment. Everything in one's busy life has come to a standstill, in order to focus on the patient and the crisis at hand.

I cannot bear to see my highly active father lying motionless, attached to a drip, with burn shields over his chest and arms. I hate to see my father in pain. I search for my mother, needing her at my side as I am an inexperienced care-giver, but I'm told that she is in the coffee-shop. But my father rescues me, as he so often does, opening his eyes slightly and smiling at me.

Then my father mumbles apologies for my early return from Italy, but I reassure him that I wanted to come home.

Simon's coming home too. He'll be here tomorrow night.

My father tries to nod and then sighs.

Gina, ice. Please pass me...

He raises his covered left arm slightly in the direction of a steel mug nearby. I put the cold mug to his hot lips and pour a few chunks of ice into his mouth. I hear him crunching the particles.

I'm parched.

Then my Dad closes his eyes and sighs. I take that as a signal to stop talking. Perhaps my visit is making him tired. I wonder if the plastic surgeon and physician have seen my father this afternoon, but I do not want to burden him with that conversation.

It is a great relief when my mother appears at the door. She beckons me outside, offering me a coffee takeaway.

When we sit on the couch in the passage and sip the sweet coffee, I notice how worried my mother is. Lines are etched on her forehead and her hair looks as though it has been styled by the wind. Even her nails are split and in need of reshaping.

What did the plastic surgeon say, Mum?

Only the physician has been, Gina.

And?

He's worried about Dad's chest. Chest X-rays have shown inhalation burns, caused by the smoke. He's on a ventilator most of the time.

I suppose it doesn't help that he's asthmatic.

My mother nods and gulps the coffee. Her hand is trembling slightly. She sweeps her woollen scarf tightly around her neck.

It's really cold in here, Gina. The air-conditioning must be on high.

I look at her surprised.

I'm not feeling cold at all. Would you like to borrow my jacket?

No, I should be alright. Did you manage to take the soup to the centre?

I couldn't.

But Georgina. They need it tomorrow. I thought I explained that.

I know, but there was no one there at the time.

That's surprising. There's usually someone there Georgina.

But there wasn't this time.

You know how urgent it is...

Tears well in my eyes. I walk to the end of the passage and stare out of the window that offers me a view of the car park and the setting sun, sliding behind strips of clouds on the western horizon. Does it matter to my mother that I have cut short my trip overseas to help her? I'm doing all I can. It wasn't my fault that there was no one at the centre to receive the soup.

For a while I watch cars come and go. Then I feel my mum's reassuring hand on my shoulder.

Sorry, Gina. The tension's really getting to me.

I soak in her words but do not respond.

I'm worried about Dad. Let's go and see him again.

As we walk back towards my father's ward on the second floor, my mother asks the sister in charge when the plastic surgeon is due to visit my father.

It's urgent.

We know, Mrs Dermatt. But everything's under control.

My mother is told that the plastic surgeon will probably see my father when he does his evening rounds, after surgery and consultations.

When he hears the door click, my father's eyes open. As we near the bed, he says:

You should go home now, Lindy.

His speech is slow and laboured.

Can I do anything for you or get anything for you before I go, James?

I'm okay.

A newspaper?

No. Thanks.

We'll be back tomorrow night with Simon, James. He's only due in at 19.00 but we'll stop by after that.

Lindy, please get Musa to check on the fertilizer applications. I've got some new plant cane. He'll know...

Okay, James. Don't worry about it. Have a good night.

Bye Dad.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Unlike in Cinque Terre, where I slept with windows wide open to let in the cool breeze, my bedroom windows on the farm are firmly bolted against the darkness of the night. It is late, but I read and reread Nicholas's email, trying to hear his voice...

Georgina, I have spent the entire day, photographing interesting old wooden doors in this old city of Siena. What is behind the doors is far more interesting to me, but unfortunately most of them were closed. The city was founded by Etruscans and the Roman influence is visible in the arches over the doors and in the stone architecture. It is so beautiful. Siena was very prosperous in the thirteenth century because of commerce and wool. Can you believe that it was one of the greatest cities in Europe at the time? It's no wonder. But sadly, in the 1300's the Black Death sabotaged the city. This, together with political unrest, caused the city's demise. I hope these facts don't bore you, but I know you never made it to Siena and being an aspiring travel writer, I thought they might be of interest to you...

I visited Siena first, before going to Florence, as Mark has gone to Sicily and only returns next week...I'll think of you when I whisk through the Uffizi Gallery.

This morning, I walked through the stone alleyways that are like a maze and found myself at a restaurant on the square in the city centre. I was served a bowl of warm green olives covered with orange zest with my drink, which made me think of you! Pity I only had pigeons for company! Sorry to hear about your father. Hope he is okay.

Once again, I open the five visual images attached to Nicholas's email and share his enthusiasm for the beautifully crafted doors. Some are recessed in old stone buildings and are surrounded by decorative stone arches, while others are less elaborate and more functional.

Suddenly, our sand-coloured Labrador (named *Ocean* by Simon) who sleeps on the back veranda of our house, barks incessantly. It unnerves me to hear a dog startled at this time of night as our farmhouse is quite isolated. Perhaps he has sensed a duiker that has strayed into my mother's garden in search of food. Perhaps there is someone passing by.

Eventually *Ocean* settles down again, but it is a long while before sleep claims me. Then two hours later I wake abruptly and only fall asleep again at dawn. Soon after, I'm woken by the sound of clattering cups down the passage.

Here's some tea, Georgina.

Mm...

My mother puts the tray, with its white teapot, floral china cup and bran rusks on the table next to my bed.

I'm going to help Musa with the purpose-burn near the dam, Georgina. Please let Sibongile in when she comes.

Okay.

I open my window to the crisp winter morning. I try to sleep, but cannot. When I try to read I cannot concentrate for too long. I'm restless, so I decide to run to the dam to keep my mother company, as it is not far from the house. As I move through the chilly morning the breath that I exhale forms clouds, like smoke, that swirl around my head. I am unfit and soon find that I have a stitch in my side, which slows my pace to walking.

From the top of the hill, I can see Musa and his men put in small fires at regular intervals along the edge of the cane field that soon merge into one long strip of fire. In no time, there is a crackle in the air as the dry cane sizzles and pops, like fireworks, when ignited by the heat of the flames. Smoke spirals upwards as the fire burns intensely.

It is a sight to see the roaring fire throw red-orange flares into the sky that gyrate energetically above the burning cane. I watch intently as the spectacle continues for about ten minutes more until the fire slowly burns itself out. Fortunately there is little wind. As I arrive at the field, my mother walks towards me.

Phew! The dew was heavy this morning Georgina. It took a while for the cane to ignite.

Wouldn't it be easier to just trash the cane?

Getting rid of the leaves by hand, is just so labour-intensive Georgina.

Of course. But why do you burn so early?

Burning has to be done at designated times, Georgina, and the wind has to be right, so the smoke pollution is minimal.

The cane-cutters, dressed mostly in black, arrive later by truck. During a briefing session with Musa, he informs my mother that it should take two days to cut this field, and another day to finish cutting the field around the house.

As the cutters start their task my mother beckons me into the van. For a moment, it is like old times. Just the two of us. My mother seems more relaxed, now that the burn is

completed. She suggests that we eat breakfast together. It will be the first time since I have returned home.

As my mother mixes the ingredients for a muffin recipe that she has found in a new cookery book, I sit on the counter in the kitchen and we talk. I even find myself kicking my legs back and forth against the counter, as I did when I was a child, when she was making chocolate cakes.

Sit still, Georgina. You haven't changed.

S-o-rr-y!

Then she laughs.

I've been meaning to ask you. In some of your emails from Italy, you mentioned an American student, called Nicholas. Was he a special friend?

Not really. Just some guy who stayed at the hotel. He was doing research on an Italian poet, Eugenio Montale, who had a villa in Monterosso, the town in which we stayed.

Can't say that I've heard of him.

Neither had I. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1975. He was such an excellent poet!

Will have to read his work, Gina.

My mother sloshes the moist mixture into the deep cavities of the muffin tray and shoves it into the preheated oven.

Did you manage to get any writing done in Cinque Terre, Georgina?

Some. But I didn't have much time. I kept a journal and took loads of pics, which I'm hoping to convert into some travel articles.

For local magazines?

Yes.

Are you sure that there's enough scope for travel writing, Georgina. D'you think it will pay the bills?

Yes, I do.

My mother's question evokes tension in me. I jump down from the counter top.

I can understand that if you're Bill Bryson or Paul Theroux it might be easier!

I've got to start somewhere.

Gina... Isn't it too precarious to freelance?

It can be, Mum. But now's the time to pursue my dreams. Travel writing is what I really want to do.

But one has to be realistic too, Gina.

I know. I was hoping that London would provide me with more opportunities to travel...and hopefully more articles. But it's a competitive field and it takes time to get established.

Dad's hoping that Simon will consider coming back to the farm, Georgina.

To farm full-time?

I wonder if my father has ever made his wishes known to Simon. My brother has never mentioned anything about this to me.

Right now?

Not immediately, but after his time in London.

I cannot hide the surprise, that I am sure my mother sees on my face.

He has to make that decision, Mum.

I know.

We all know that Dad wanted to work in the city, but felt obliged to return as it was becoming too difficult for his mother to manage the farm.

I know, Georgina, but it worked out for him in the end. It provided him with the opportunity to pursue his interests in the environment as well.

So few of Simon's friends have come back to family farms.

There are some Gina...

Farming's not the same anymore.

I suppose so. But what will happen to this farm when your father retires? It's been in the family for so long.

I shrug my shoulders. I cannot think that far ahead. I've just finished studying and I want to get out there and create a career for myself. It *will* be tough to freelance at first, but when I become more known, it should be easier. I could even join a magazine as a feature writer. I know I can do it!

We sit at the dining room table, like old times. My mother slices open a banana, date and pecan nut muffin, releasing the steam inside. She lathers it with honey and chunky cottage cheese and sips the hot coffee that is at her side.

The soup. I must get it to the centre early, Georgina.

I'll take it.

I take my steaming herbal tea through to the kitchen and help Sibongile pour the soup back into one container. I'm sad that the unhurried time that I've been spending with my mother on her own is interrupted. It's not always easy to find this one-on-one time with my mother when all our family members are together. There is so much to talk about and share, yet she seems so distracted at present.

I drive slowly into town. When I arrive at my destination Miriam Dlamini apologizes profusely that she was not at the centre when I visited it the day before. Her assistant was off sick and she desperately needed to do her weekly grocery shop. She ushers me through to the kitchen where a couple of women are hovering around the stove, stirring a large pot of vegetable soup. Their singing filters through the building. I pause for a while and listen to their melodious voices.

Saturday's our busiest day, Georgina. We're not only feeding HIV/Aids sufferers, but homeless and hungry people as well.

I nod.

Eish! So many people are hungry. So many people are without work...

I marvel at these unselfish humanitarians who are so pragmatic. I'm suddenly filled with guilt and at the same time admiration for my mother and the interest that she takes in the people at this centre. Her Social Science degree has equipped her with organizational skills, but it is her commitment to helping others that moves me. And her compassion. For a while, when I was at university, I was involved in a soup kitchen in the middle of Grahamstown for street children, that was started by a local church. But all I had to do was pitch up once a week with a couple of loaves of bread and help serve the soup.

From the start, my mother has helped where she can at the centre in a hands-on way. Invariably this has led her to becoming involved in other community projects as well. Like helping to source a house in town for a rural woman who single-handedly cares for a group of abandoned orphan children. She also organized for a local supermarket to give bread to the children a couple of times a week.

On a Saturday, this town swarms with people. Taxis from rural areas ferry people back and forth all day, so there is congestion on the roads. Bank queues run around the block

and one is assured of a long wait if one goes to the post office. Parking is impossible, but I double park and duck into a newsagent in order to buy a copy of a local travel magazine.

On my return home I'm greeted by our house helper, Sibongile.

Sawubona, Georgina.

Yebo, S'bongile. Kunjani? (How are you?)

She replies in Zulu, stating that she is well, but then breaks into English.

Your mother's gone, Georgina. She'll be back soon.

Did she say where she was going?

No, Georgina. She was in hurry.

I download my most recent photos of Italy onto my laptop. When I do write travel features on the 'Five Lands' that comprise Cinque Terre, I will have a number of stunning visuals from which to choose. It is no wonder that in 1998, this part of the Ligurian coast was declared a world heritage sight. As I look closely at the buildings I'm amazed that they have remained intact for centuries, though some walls do look as though they are crumbling.

It's also surprising that the landscape with all its steep mountain terraces, remains unspoilt, despite the volume of summer visitors. I marvel at the way in which they've managed to keep commercialization under control in the area.

I flip through the local magazine I've bought, hoping for inspiration. There's a travel article on a quaint rural town that is situated about an hour's drive from Cape Town. As I live in a rural area, I immediately identify with aspects of it. I think of places of interest that are within an hour's drive from Durban, our nearest city. The Natal Midlands has cattle, horse and trout farms, but it is better known for its craft outlets. The Drakensberg Mountains nearby are havens for those in search of relaxation or hiking. North of our farm are game reserves, that entice locals and tourists from Durban who are only prepared to travel for about two hours. But hey! It's difficult to find a new slant on wildlife, unless one features a new game lodge that is really very unique and even that can be passé!

Even though my time is taken up with domesticities at home, I suddenly feel the urge to write. I try to conceptualize ideas while Italy is still fresh in my mind. This diversion in my thinking also helps me not to focus on my father's condition.

Many of the travel pieces I read seem to follow a formula; what to see and do: what to eat and drink: where to stay and how to get there. I open my well travelled journal.

Saturday morning

How can I be original? How can I find a new slant on my trip to Italy? Perhaps I will write from my own experience and attempt a piece on how to survive as a maid and still have some fun in Cinque Terre! I make notes:

- Make sure that you get a live-in job in a hotel or private home. That way you will be able to stay longer at the resort than you might normally have done (especially when converting Rands to Euros). It will be a treat to avoid the cost of the pricey accommodation in Cinque Terre. You may even have some meals provided by your employer as well.
- Choose to walk, rather than take taxis. The exercise will be good for you and there are well marked trails that take you from town to town!
Monterosso al Mare to Vernazza : 4 km. Estimated time: Just under 2 hours
Vernazza to Corniglia: 4km. Estimated time: Just under 2 hours
Corniglia to Manarola: 3 km. Estimated time: 1 hour
Views: stunning!
It will help to have good walking shoes, both for business and pleasure.
- If you want to swim in your leisure time (!) avoid the paying beaches that are attached to hotels. You will recognize them by their softly padded loungers and striped canvas umbrellas that provide shade. In fact, if you are up early enough, you might even see the sand on the paying beaches being raked in the morning. At dusk you will notice the conical canvas covers that are put over the closed umbrellas in order to protect them from the sea air. Look out for the beaches that are free. There are fewer of them and they are smaller and more crowded, but they do exist.
- When you find that your muscles ache and your back is almost going into spasm from bending over beds, hoovering and stacking the dishwasher, try a stone massage. The beaches are pebble lined and rolling around on them at the water's edge is conducive to muscle relief. Given the pleasing temperature of the water, and the natural surroundings, you might even think that you are in a European spa. Others do!

- The superb Italian cuisine that is offered in these towns may well stretch your financial resources. Take advantage of the specialties of the area, such as *anchovies*, by ordering a starter portion of them. If you are desperate to taste *Limoncino*, a local infusion of sugar, alcohol and lemon peel, that is bright yellow in the bottle, remember that samples are offered to anyone willing to try it in little shops in the towns. But be warned! It has a kick!
- There are a few grocery stores and deli's in the towns that offer choice hams, cheeses, pestos, Italian breads and fruit. Prepare a picnic for the beach, to be shared with someone special you might have met on your travels. Or eat it alone in the shade of an olive tree in one of the town squares.
- Italian ice creams deserve their reputation. Try the pistachio, fig or tiramisu flavours.
- If you are really keen to do some serious travelling on your day off, take a train. Train transport in Italy is usually very reliable and inexpensive...

I'm interrupted by the sound of a vehicle that stops abruptly outside the back veranda. Ocean barks half-heartedly and when I hear him knock his tail against the kitchen door I realize that he must be greeting someone familiar.

I close my travel journal and slide down the long, wooden passage floor in my socks. When I enter the lounge, I find that my mother has collapsed onto the soft, beige sofa. She is hugging a striped cushion.

Are you okay? What's happened?

My mother shakes her head.

Did you get the soup and bread to the centre, Gina.

Yes, I did. Don't panic. What's up?

My mother is close to tears.

Can I get you some tea?

That would be great Gina. Thanks.

When I return to the lounge, my mother is still staring at the floor. Her legs are knotted at the ankles, her taut neck shows raised veins and the fingers that are holding the cushion are clenched tight. She sighs.

How many sugars? I've forgotten.

Half, Georgina.

I pour a pool of milk into the bottom of a paper-thin, white china cup and drown it with Earl Grey tea.

This tea 's weak, Mum.

It 's how I like it.

My mother chews a digestive biscuit as she waits for the tea to cool. I do not press her for an explanation, but wait impatiently for her to speak, while I pour myself some strong tea. The dog brushes against my legs.

Outside Ocean!

I get up to chase Ocean outside. He has been frolicking in the sprinkler on the front lawn and has left a patch of mud on the floor.

Out!

Ocean is reasonably obedient, but I have to physically urge him to move from the kitchen to the back veranda.

I can 't believe that this has happened, Georgina.

What is it? Tell me. Is it Dad?

I'm almost gasping. I swallow hard and throw myself onto the chair next to her.

Last night the fertilizer shed was broken into and a sizeable amount of fertilizer and potash were stolen.

Oh no! How did they get in? I thought the shed was secure.

That 's the point.

I shake my head. My mother is dealing with so much at the moment.

Mum, those bags are heavy and if they stole a lot of them, they 'd need transport to take them away.

My mother nods.

It must have been well organized.

I can 't work it out, Georgina.

Have you any idea who could have done it Mum?

At this point, I've no idea. But I really can 't tell your Dad about this now, Georgina.

No, don 't. Not now.

Have you reported it to the police?

I have. But they are dealing with larger issues like murders and hi-jackings... theft just doesn't seem as important.

I shake my head.

Give me more details, Mum. How did you find out?

Musa Nyembe told me. He found it strange that the door wasn't locked when he went to fetch fertilizer this morning for a plant field.

Was the lock smashed?

No.

My mother dunks the digestive biscuit into her tea, then scoops out the broken sections with her teaspoon.

What is strange is that the patrolling night watchman said that he didn't hear anything.

That is strange. It was quite a still night.

I know.

Ocean barked at around 1.30. I was still awake.

But the shed is some distance away, Gina.

Yes, but someone could have been walking around. Ocean didn't bark that long though.

It was full moon, too, last night Gina. There was plenty of light.

That's right.

I try to work out the logistics of the theft. Whoever stole the chemicals knew what they were looking for and where to find them. And they had access to the shed.

The fertilizer and potash were only delivered a week ago.

By whom?

The manufacturer, Gina.

So they had an idea of the set-up. But Mum, it must've taken some time to drag those bags out of the shed and transport them away. They're really heavy.

I know, Gina.

Surely if the watchman was patrolling, he would've seen something?

He should've Gina.

Who else has keys to the shed?

Don't worry about it now, Georgina. There's a lot that still needs to be worked out.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

We reach the arrivals section of the airport forty-five minutes early. On our arrival we notice that a returning rugby team is due, so the airport is crowded with people waving flags. I cannot wait to see Simon.

You should see Simon going off to work in a suit, with his hair plastered down respectably.

My mother laughs. I can sense her excitement too.

It's probably the first suit he has owned, Gina.

I know. So strange to see him in his black leather lace-ups too. So formal!

I can just imagine!

Simon and his house-mates were so good to me when I was in London, allowing me to squat in the lounge.

Did you cook for them in return, Gina?

My mother asks this question, tongue in cheek. She is well aware that my culinary skills are lacking.

I did a little cooking for Simon. The others were pretty good at looking after themselves. I tried to make myself scarce when they were around.

Simon hasn't told me much about his digs and housemates.

Typical! You know they live in Wimbledon.

That I did know, Gina!

They share a three bedroomed house with a small kitchen, an even smaller bathroom and there's a tiny garden out the back.

A garden too. Is there anything in the garden?

Can't say I noticed Mum. Has he never sent photos of his place by email?

My mother shakes her head and laughs. She and Simon are very close.

He has two digs mates. There's Pete, an old varsity friend of his from South Africa. Although he's a quantity surveyor, he's actually working in construction at the moment. Boy does he look a sight when he gets home in the evenings, covered in cement! And the bathroom...

I can imagine that, Gina.

Then there's a local guy, Matthew Burton, who works at the bank where Simon used to work.

What's he like?

He's quiet, but genuine. Very independent.

A quick glance at the board informs us that Simon's flight from Johannesburg has been delayed for half an hour. After coffee, we browse in the airport bookstore. My mother finds a gardening magazine and I look at the latest South African books that have been published in my absence. I'm intrigued to find a novel, *Dream Weaver*, that is written by a fellow journalism student at Rhodes, who graduated with me. It has been published by a women's imprint in Johannesburg and on the back is a glamorous photo of Sandile. The blurb just mentions that she was a print media major but I'm curious to know where she is and what career path she has followed. I make a mental note to find out more about her on the internet. Publishing a novel so soon out of university is a great achievement!

I show my mother the book.

It's surprising that someone that age has been published, Gina.

There are some young authors around. Especially overseas.

*In my day, publishers never took a chance on young authors. It seemed that age came with the territory. The only South African novelists that we read were mostly older heavyweights who were writing at the time of *The Struggle*.*

My mother flips through the pages of the gardening magazine that she has bought, but she doesn't focus on much. I'm fascinated by the array of people that parade up and down in front of our seats and I try to imagine who they might be waiting for. Like the girl my age, who is dressed up for a night on the town. Or the woman in her thirties who is battling to reign in her brood of five children. Are they all hers?

Sorry your garden was so affected by the fire, Mum. You've put so much time into it.

My mother's eyes show signs of sadness.

I haven't even had a chance to walk around and assess the full damage Gina. In a way I don't want to.

I'm filled with compassion for my mother, but words escape me. How do I comfort my mother?

There's been so much farm work to do that I've never done before ...

I know. It's so difficult for you.

I move closer to my mother on the aluminium bench-chairs that line the arrivals hall. She responds by hugging me.

Could you mill all the cane that was burnt, Mum?

Yes, but some was so short. The insurers are coming to look at the fire damage early next week.

I know so little about the mechanics of sugar cane farming, other than what I have picked up from my Dad over the years.

The arrival of Simon's flight from O R Tambo airport is eventually announced and some time later, he bounds through the sliding door. He is one of the first to pass through to the arrivals hall as he has carry-on luggage and has avoided the queues at the baggage carousel. It is so good to see him again.

As is typical of Simon, he is dressed in a striped shirt, jeans and casual shoes. He wears a day's stubble on his cheeks that is rough to the touch as he hugs me. I notice that his hair has grown longer since I was in London.

Good to see you George!

You too, Simon.

As he greets my mother I sense the closeness between them.

How was Cinque Terre?

Really amazing.

Have you used the pen that I gave you?

I sure did!

I do not need to explain that I've used it more since I've been home than in Italy.

I smile to myself as I register that Simon is the only member of my family that calls me George.

Sorry you had to wait. The luggage hatch was playing up in Johannesburg.

No problem, Simon.

So annoying, especially after a tiring international flight. The airport was so crowded.

It's the weekend too.

As we walk down the passage Simon puts his arm around my mother. Although he teases her, he seldom does wrong in her eyes. I notice that already she seems more relaxed, now that my brother has arrived.

Simon assumes control. He pays for the parking and suggests that he drives the car. As we journey along the highway, he is full of chatter. His conversation focuses on old boarding school friends that he has met in London and the pubs and places that he has visited over the weekends. At the spaghetti junction we change direction and head towards the city.

How 's Dad doing?

Okay, Simon. But his chest 's not good.

What are they doing about it?

He 's on a ventilator.

What about the burns, Ma?

It 's going to be a long haul. They're bad, Simon.

My mother's voice is shaky and her words disappear into a thin trickle. After a while she collects herself and continues.

He has second and third degree burns on his arms and chest. There 's talk of skin grafts.

Simon shakes his head.

Oh no! That is serious. Poor Dad.

My mother wriggles in her seat, fiddling with the seatbelt, trying to make herself more comfortable.

I'm afraid it is.

The wind must have been really tricky for him to be caught like that. He 's fought so many cane fires before.

It was a terrible night Simon. There were so many fires in the district that night.

Were they put in intentionally Ma?

It 's so hard to tell. The cane is just so dry at the moment.

Did Musa Nyembe not have the fire-truck at the fire?

He did, but it took some time for him to find the driver as it was a Sunday night!

But Ma, he should 've been on stand-by.

I know. But then. Musa had to organize fire-fighting staff as well who were dispersed all over the countryside. It all took time...

Simon shakes his head and taps the fingers of his right hand on the steering wheel rim. He is lost in thought for a while. Again, I visualize the trauma of that fateful night as told to me by my mother, recounting details of the suffering my father endured, especially when his clothes were on fire and the workers poured water over him.

So you haven't had much rain, Ma.

Last rain we had was end of May.

And before that?

It's been very patchy, Simon. Last good rain we had was in early March.

So it's very dry now.

Yes. We only expect rain again in the Spring. But you never know. If we get a cold front...

How are the boreholes holding out?

Fine.

That's a relief.

I sit quietly in the back, listening to the conversation and the music that is playing in the background. It's as though I am not in the car. We turn off the highway and are driving through a residential area when Simon goes down a one way-way street.

You've been gone too long, Simon. You've forgotten your way around Durban!

Yeah! Sorry about the detour!

My mother and I are patient, although this episode is a real time waster as the road is narrow and Simon finds it difficult to turn the car. Eventually the hospital looms large in front of us, lit up like a beacon at the crest of the hill.

My father is asleep when we enter his semi-darkened room. It is a relief to find that he has been transferred from the Intensive Care Unit to a private ward, but he is still on a drip. We are told that he needs to be kept in isolation to prevent infection.

As the light brightens the room, we are faced with the clinical, sterile atmosphere that prevails. My father wakes and seems a little disorientated. I see that his face is still pale and puffy and that he now has a dressing on the burn on his face. He is lying stiffly on his

back with his bandaged arms held stationary on either side. It takes him a while to register that we are there.

Dad!

Simon speaks to my father in a loud stage whisper.

Who is it? Simon, is it you?

Yes. It's me. How are you Dad?

My father has been in a deep sleep, probably induced by sedatives. Simon moves slowly towards my father as if to hug him, but holds back. He grabs my father's finger tips instead.

I'm doing well, son.

I'm so sorry...

So pleased you're back, Simon... Your mother needs your help on the farm.

Simon looks uneasy, but is quick to respond.

I'm only back for a long weekend, Dad.

Is that all? I thought...

I try to explain.

I'm the one who is back for a while, Dad.

My father looks confused. He tries to sit up higher in the bed and is supported by my mother who props his head up with another pillow. Does it mean so little to my father that I have interrupted my life in order to support my mother back on the farm? Surely my career is as important as my brother's?

I hardly recognized you Simon.

I've been gone almost a year Dad. But I'm the same old Simon.

There's something different about you.

Simon shrugs his shoulders. My mother provides some insight.

He's now wearing glasses, James, and his hair's got darker and longer since he's been in London. He probably looks a lot paler too!

My father nods knowingly.

So that's it.

He's got a new hairstyle too, Dad.

My father attempts a smile but just stares at Simon in disbelief.

Simon needs to stay a while, Lindy. There's so much to do on the farm and he can help with the accounts.

He can't dear. He's just started a new job and he has no leave due to him. It was good of him to travel all this way just for a weekend.

Don't forget I'm here to help, Dad.

I know, Georgina.

Then my mother gets up graciously from the chair in which she is sitting. She pulls down her long gray jersey, so that it stretches evenly over the black skirt that is wearing with black boots and sweeps her newly-washed hair off her shoulders. She looks prepared for action. She pours my father a fresh glass of water and decides to straighten the bed linen. I think she is trying to divert the attention away from Simon.

As I watch my mother's agile hands move over the surface of the bed quilt, straightening imaginary wrinkles like an artist at work I register how beautiful she is. But then I notice her uneven, chipped nails and the situation is brought home to me once again. My normally meticulously-groomed mother doesn't even have the time to file her nails.

How are you doing, Lindy?

Fine. Everything's under control, James.

That's good to hear. Musa sends regards.

Thank you. Please tell him that I'm doing well. You spoke to him about the fertilizer applications.

Yes...

A nursing sister enters the room and suggests that the patient needs to rest. I think how difficult it must be for my father to be alone in a hospital room, while the rest of his family are together.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A south wind swirls around the house shaking the window frames. When I look out of my window I notice that the wild iris plants have white flowers, which is often a prophetic sign of rain. My mother keeps a close watch on the weather forecasts and looks for changes on the barometer, that is positioned near the coat rack on the passage wall.

There I see my father's black raincoat hanging limply from a wooden peg. On the next peg is his beige, canvas farm hat that has been moulded to fit his head by constant use. Next to it, is my mother's straw hat that is slightly torn at the brim, that is worn on the beach and in the garden. At the end of the rack is my old white panama school hat, kept by my mother for nostalgic reasons.

After inspecting the fields with my mother, Simon spends time on the computer in the study, assessing the farm's cane deliveries to the sugar mill over the past few months. I am accessing the internet on my laptop, but I can hear his conversation with my mother.

You seem to have hit a wobbly with the deliveries at the beginning of last month, Ma.

They were down because of the cane transport, Si.

Are you still using the same haulage company?

We are, but they've had some problem with their trucks.

Has their efficiency improved since then?

Yes. We don't seem to have had any more problems. In fact they gave us extra trucks when we had the fire.

That's great.

And the mill allowed us to increase our daily allocation so that we could get the burnt cane milled quickly, Si.

I also see that you took advantage of the opportunity to send extra cane to the mill when the mill needed more cane.

Yes. Musa decided to harvest the field around the dam as it was next on schedule.

How's the mill been running Ma?

It had a slow start at the beginning of the season. Perhaps just teething problems or lack of maintenance in some sections of it. But it's running okay now.

You have such an interest in the farm, Simon.

There is silence. Then Simon clears an irritation in his throat.

Well, if you've grown up in a place, it rubs off on you...

Dad's hoping that you'll return to the farm Simon.

Now? No ways. I've only just got to London, Ma.

I know.

I've just got this awesome job in mergers. It's great for my C.V. and I need the experience.

That's true.

My mother's tone of voice is wistful.

I also want to take this opportunity of travelling as much as I can Ma, using London as a base. As soon as I have leave I want to go to south-east Asia with Pete and some of our mates. It'll probably be at Christmas.

Does that mean you're not coming home for Christmas, Si?

I'm straining my ears, waiting for a response. Does Simon know about the unexpressed expectation that he is required to be home for Christmas?

Not sure yet, Ma.

I don't know why I brought this matter up now, Si. About you returning to the farm.

There is silence. I suppose my mother is waiting for an affirmative response. When it is not forthcoming, she continues.

It's just that Dad wants to retire eventually and he'd really like to pass the farm on to you. He's done so much to build it up.

I know he has. It's looking great.

Pity about the fire, though.

The rest is looking good and our trip around the fields confirmed that. Ma, you have to remember that I studied finance.

You need good financial skills to farm, Simon.

But Ma... Farming doesn't interest me.

Their conversation falters. Then Simon says:

Perhaps George...

I strain my ears.

I suppose that's a possibility, Si.

I smile to myself. No one has ever suggested that proposal to me. Although I feel at home on the farm, walking along these rolling hills of sugar cane with Ocean, or swimming at the beach, I have never contemplated farming. I want to travel. To explore the world and write about it.

Agriculture is in a difficult place, Ma.

You don't have to tell me that, Simon. The costs increase yearly, finding labour becomes more difficult because of the scourge of HIV Aids and the world price for sugar is not looking that good either.

Quite frankly I'd rather live and work in a city, Ma.

I decide to join my mother and brother in the study. It seems a poignant moment to enter the conversation. My mother is looking down at a pile of papers that contain figures. When she sees me, she puts them down on the desk.

Gina!

Then, taking both hands, she suddenly kneads her neck with the tips of her fingers, pushing them up and down on either side of her stiff neck. Simon voices his thoughts.

I don't know what my future holds, Ma. It's too early for me to see where my career is going at this stage. Right now I really need the work experience that London can offer me. I couldn't get it here.

I suppose so, Si.

I take note of the dejected tone in my mother's voice. Is it that she just misses having Simon around because of empty nest syndrome or is she concerned about succession on the farm? My mother is unrelenting. She continues the conversation like a dog with a bone.

Your father has found farming a fulfilling career option, Si.

Dad always wanted a career in accounting Ma, but there was this expectation that because he was the only son, he had to run the farm. It must have placed a huge burden on him.

He knew that he had to do it, Si.

Did he?

My mother turns and quickly leaves the room. I hear her talking to Sibongile in Zulu in the kitchen. Simon gets up and stretches. When he notices me he rushes over and gives me a hug. I relish the attention.

So how was the talent at Cinque Terre?

What talent?

Come on George! There must have been someone of interest.

I was working most of the time.

How did that go? How did you ever cope as a housekeeper?

You'd be surprised.

Wasn't it a pain to make all those beds?

I got used to it.

Simon smiles derisively at me.

You have to go to Cinque Terre. It's so incredibly beautiful, Simon.

I've heard so. Hey! I bumped into Tim in London. Your old flame?

Really? Where?

On the train. Where do all South Africans see one another?

What's he doing there?

He's playing rugby for a club in the country, Oxfordshire, I think. He said that you should contact him when you've over.

I smile to myself. What is to stop Tim from contacting me? He has my contact details!

How about you Si? Are you seeing anyone?

I know that it is futile to ask this question. Simon is extremely cagey about his relationships.

Nah! No interest in anyone at the moment. No time!

Simon gets up and starts to leave the room.

Hey! You must see my photos of Cinque Terre!

Absolutely. I'll catch up with you later.

Towards evening the wind increases. The trees and shrubs, not affected by the fire, fight the powerful gusts that send dark clouds scudding across the metallic sky. I am sitting cross-legged on my bed with my laptop on my lap, when I hear the first thud of rain against the windows at the back of the house.

Yes, it is raining!

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It is a lazy afternoon. My mother is in our farmhouse kitchen, preparing a pasta dish—penne with sausages, homegrown pecan nuts and cream—which is Simon's favourite Sunday night supper. We are fooling around, keeping my mother company. All of a sudden, Simon invites us to take a drive with him to the beach.

I'd really like to swim before I go back.

You're crazy, Simon. It's midwinter.

Come on George. You can just sit on the beach and keep me company.

Mum?

I need to attend to some things, kids. You go.

Are you sure?

Absolutely, Gina.

We won't be that long.

The few showers of rain have hardly settled the dust. Black soot rises as we drive through the scorched fields in Dad's van. As we pass through fields and fields of sugar cane at varying heights, that are whipped by the wind, a green sea of foliage is visible all around us. Eventually the dirt road narrows and then veers off to the left, taking us through the coastal bush towards the sea.

I heard Mum's conversation with you about returning to the farm, Simon.

Yeah!

I wonder why she's so concerned about that now?

Ask me?!

Does she think Dad won't make it?

I suppose she's thinking of Dad's retirement or else his accident has got her thinking, what if...

It would be very difficult for her to farm alone, Si. She could do it with the help of the staff, but it would be very lonely and unsafe.

I guess so.

Simon's eyes are focused on the sandy track ahead of him that winds through clumps of indigenous bush and trees. I recognize the Umtoni trees and the wild strelitzias, with

their wind-torn leaves. Soon I can hear the uneasy pounding of the waves as they hit the shore, indicating to me that we are almost at the beach.

D' you think you'll return to South Africa when you've done your stint in London Simon?

Quite honestly George, I don't know. I haven't mentioned much to the folks but I want to stick it out in London so that I can get my ancestral visa. I need options.

That makes sense.

What about you?

I'm not sure. I just feel that my life's on hold at the moment, Si. I desperately want to get back to London so that I can travel and work as a travel writer.

Sounds so idealistic George. How will you support yourself as a freelance writer?

His response catches me by surprise. He is usually so supportive of me.

Have you been talking to Mum Si?

What about?

I turn away from Simon and open the window of the van as tears fill my eyes. Why is there so much opposition to me following the career path that I really want to take? As I wind down the window, the pungent smell of the dune vegetation hits me as Simon's words waft over me.

No Gina. I haven't discussed this with Ma. But London's an expensive place. Wouldn't it not be a good idea to try and get work experience here first?

Perhaps I'll get another job when I'm in London and just write part-time.

I don't know, Gina...

Simon manoeuvres the van through a thick, bare patch of sand, almost getting stuck, before reaching a clearing from which we can see the waves of the Indian Ocean.

I'm not sure about returning to South Africa, Gina. I read the local press on the internet every day and I'm just not sure if it holds prospects for me. Job opportunities for white males are bleak and I'm not sure I'm comfortable with where the country is heading.

There are so many challenges here, Si. Aside from farming, there's the whole issue of land claims as well.

I'm aware of them George. A vast expanse of agricultural land in our country is under land claims. So few have been settled.

The engine grinds to a halt. We walk down an overgrown path that gives us access to the sea.

So many broken bottles here, Si. Someone must've had a good party.

Probably the fishermen, taking shelter in the bush. Isn't the shad running?

Simon tears off his clothes and runs towards the choppy water. I sit on the dune, blown about by the wind, drawing patterns in the sand with a driftwood stick. Simon wades into the icy water until he is waist-deep, then dives under a wave. By the time he has surfaced, I notice that the current has swept him southwards and is pulling him strongly in the direction of Durban. He uses his strong arms and legs to tread water, but I feel uneasy about him swimming.

Hey Simon! Come out now! It's not safe to swim.

I echo my mother's words. I still recall her issuing the same instruction to me when I was a child swimming on this same stretch of beach.

Relax, George! Are you worried about sharks?

No, it's rough. Watch out for the currents!

It is not long before Simon takes a wave to the shallows and runs up the beach. When he stands beside me, with water dripping off his body that is as pale as a gecko, I notice that he is shivering uncontrollably.

Race you to the van, George!

He is already several paces ahead of me, so I have no chance of winning. As usual I trail him, fighting the wind and spitting out sand. By the time I reach the van, I am out of breath. As we drive off through the clearing we startle a Burchell's Coucal, that flies clumsily into a nearby bush. The brown feathers on its body catch the mellow, late afternoon sun.

I remember my birdwatching expeditions with Dad, George. We used to sit in the bush for hours.

Me too. But I was far too impatient to spend hours sitting still.

When I reflect on those times, I'm reminded of the coucal's warbling sound that is often read as a sign that rain is imminent. There's often one in our garden.

It is dark by the time we reach home. My mother is waiting for us on the back veranda. Ocean bars our entry as we rush up the steps.

Out the way now, Ocean! Into your kennel!

Where've you been? I was worried about you.

We weren't gone that long were we Ma?

I thought you'd be home sooner.

My mother is clearly anxious.

I've just had a call from the hospital.

What's up?

Dad has a high temperature and his pulse rate has increased.

Oh no! He looked okay when we saw him this morning, Ma.

Sort of.

What's caused this Mum?

Could be a sign of infection.

Oh no. D`you think it is serious?

It could be Si.

Let's go through to Durban now, Ma. I'll drive.

It's too late now, Simon.

It's never too late.

My mother is gripped by indecision.

The sister in charge said she would contact us if his condition deteriorates. I did tell her that we'd see him early in the morning.

Are you sure, Ma?

Yes. We're only an hour and a half's drive away.

I'm sure he'll be okay. He's in the best hands.

We shower and change quickly before supper. My mother has laid the table with her blue and white china (that always reminds me of home) and has arranged flowers for the table. But the mood is subdued, underscored with worry. I sip the chickpea soup slowly, savouring the flavour.

This is good, Mum. It has so many vegetables in it too. Could it be used for the centre?

Suppose it could Gina.

Simon tears off some chunks of ciabatta loaf and allows them to float on the surface of the soup, before dunking them under the steaming surface with his spoon.

I need to sop up all the juices!

You've been to so much trouble for us, Mum.

It's my pleasure, Gina. It's not often that we're together.

Simon and I glance at each other, feeling a little guilty that we have flown the nest. I am not used to seeing my mother so vulnerable.

I find that when things are a little difficult, it really helps to be creative. To try and find some order in this chaotic world. Sometimes I hack back overgrown shrubs or I bake something, preferably for someone else.

I don't think there is a creative bone in my body!

Oh Simon! You're numerically creative.

It's the same with me when I write, Mum. Putting something down on paper really helps me to clarify my thoughts or gain insight into my situation.

Can't say working with figures does the same for me!

I'm so hungry from our time on the beach that I quickly finish the penne that is smothered with nuts and cream sauce. I am savouring the smooth pannacotta that my mother has made for dessert that is decorated with the first strawberries of the season from her garden, when I hear my cell phone wringing. But by the time I reach the bedroom it has stopped. I grab the phone and place it on the sideboard in our dining room.

Don't you think that you should phone the hospital Mum?

The sister will contact me if she needs too, Gina.

We are sitting in the lounge, lazily drinking cappuccinos when my phone rings again.

I better get it. It might be an urgent call.

Nicholas? Is that you? Oh hi!

I rush down the passage and check for reception in my room. It is not good, so I rush back out again and almost trip over Ocean in the dark on the back veranda. Nicholas and I do not talk for that long, but I am not prepared for the interrogation that waits me on my return to the lounge.

Who's Nicholas?

Just some guy.

Come on George. You look really happy to have heard from him!

Do I?

My family's curiosity is aroused. I know they will badger me until I reveal more.

Remember Mum? He's the guy I told you about who was staying at the hotel in Cinque Terre.

Surprise, surprise, George!

Was he the student from the States who was studying the work of the Italian poet?

Yes.

I can't remember his name.

The poet's name is Montale.

What did he want George?

You're quite blunt, Simon. It's a long story.

Panic grips me. I quickly try to find the best explanation for Nicholas's unscheduled visit.

When I was in Italy, I once casually said to Nicholas that he should visit South Africa some time. He said he'd like to do that.

So?

I didn't think he would come so soon. He's just called to say that he's at the airport in Johannesburg.

You're joking, George.

I'm serious, Simon!

My mother looks very surprised. It's as though I have been hiding something from her.

He says that he's booked a flight down to Durban in the morning.

George!

Simon!

Does he know Dad is in hospital, George?

I told him.

It's poor timing, George.

What can I do about it, Simon?

Let's be practical. Where's he going to stay, Gina?

I don't know, mother. He was going to spend some time in Florence with a mate of his from the States who's an art student there, but it fell through.

Would you like to invite him to stay with us? How long is he here for?

I honestly don't know.

He must like you a lot to have come all this way, George. You really are a dark horse.

It's not like that at all. He's just a friend, Simon.

Yeah!

I think he just wants to see South Africa in general and Durban in particular. He probably has time on his hands.

And cash! At least if he comes tomorrow, I get to meet him. I need to give him my approval!

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Nicholas, how could you do this to me?

Do what Georgina?

Just arrive, without consulting me.

Nicholas lights up a cigarette and turns his face towards the sun as he puffs smoke into the air. His shirt and trousers are heavily creased and I wonder if he has spent the night at the airport in Johannesburg. He wears a few days stubble on his face and for an instant I'm reminded of the dishevelled state of his bathroom that I encountered most days when I was servicing his room at the hotel.

I wanted to come Georgina.

Do you realize what a bad time this is for our family?

I know. That's why I'm here.

His comment catches me unawares.

I read your email and thought you could all use a little support right now.

But Nicholas, you don't even know my family.

Yeah! But I know you.

I should be appreciating his thoughtfulness, but I'm clearly irritated by the inconvenient timing of his visit. There is so much to do on the farm that I cannot even find time to do what is on my own schedule.

Perhaps it was a bad decision, Georgina, but it seemed right at the time. Have I offended you by coming?

I'm clearly irritated but I hesitate before speaking, searching for a reasonable response.

No. I'm okay with it.

Does he see the angst written all over my face? Then I realize that I am not being very hospitable.

It's good to see you, Nicholas.

As I slip my arm around his waist he responds warmly.

Tell me. How's your father?

He seems a little better this morning. But one of the burns on his chest has become infected.

I'm sorry. I'll just hang around somewhere if you need to get back to the hospital to see him.

Nicholas travels light. I open the boot of the car and he throws his backpack into it. He keeps his laptop in the car with him. I fumble in my bag and eventually locate the keys in the bottom right hand corner.

My brother, who's out from London, is spending the morning with my parents in hospital so I'm the designated driver today, Nicholas.

No problem. I'm happy to have the ride.

I'm apologetic, complaining about the traffic and the hazards of driving in the city. Nicholas responds that he is of no use, as he is used to driving on the right hand side of the road and besides, he does not have an international driver's license with him.

How long are you here for, Nicholas?

I'm not sure. It's sort of open-ended.

I gulp, but he does not hear me.

I thought you had to get back to New York to work at the deli, Nicholas.

Georgina! Would you prefer me to leave right now?

No. That's not what I meant.

The silence between us is awkward.

They're holding my job for me at the deli. They've plenty of help in the summer.

There are school kids and college students around who could do with an extra dollar or two.

What about your dissertation proposal?

I can do that through email, Georgina.

Haven't you finalized it yet?

I'm almost there.

It's taking a long time to formulate, Nicholas.

It is. There are a few things that I'm still not that happy with. But it will all fall into place, I guess.

Have you made any new discoveries in your research on Montale?

A couple.

Nicholas does not elaborate. Suddenly out of the corner of my eye I see him staring at me as I drive.

What's up Nicholas?

Wow you look great, Georgina!

I glance sideways at him and smile. But the warning bells sound. I remind myself that I am not going to succumb to Nicholas's flattery. I remember his warning to me in Italy about having no expectations of our relationship.

Your hair looks cool, too.

Thanks.

I suddenly remember that it is ages since I've had my hair trimmed and it is a little out of shape. Although he is observant, Nicholas does not seem to have noticed the jagged edges and split ends. I also really need to spend some time in the gym to tone my body. But it is a low priority when there is so much else to do at home.

I thought we could have lunch at the coffee-shop at the hospital.

That's okay by me, Georgina.

I need to see my brother, Simon, before he flies back to the UK this afternoon.

Sure.

I do not mention that Simon has specifically asked to meet Nicholas. On our arrival at the hospital, Nicholas asks the administration staff if he can shower. He is directed to a bathroom at the other end of the building and he quickly disappears down the passage. I notice that the restaurant is filling up fast, so I secure a table and wait patiently for the men to arrive. Simon joins me first.

How's Dad doing?

Okay. His temperature is down. His BP seems to be on the rise again, but they seem to have the infection under control.

That's great Si.

He's looking a little better, but it's going to take so long for those burns to heal Georgina.

What about skin grafts?

That comes later.

Did they say when he could come home?

Not for a while, George. I can see that Dad is getting very frustrated.

I know Si.

Now tell me more about Nicholas.

There 's not much to tell.

Come on now, George. A guy flies out from Europe to see you...

Why do I always confess everything to Simon?

Okay. He 's at college in New York City. He 's a published poet and he 's doing his Masters degree on the work of Eugenio Montale, who 's a Nobel Prize Laureate.

A poet, George?

Yes. A poet, Simon. He 's just a friend.

Simon looks surprised. He stifles a smile and tries to look serious.

What 's wrong with a poet? He 's really interesting.

If he 's a poet, he must be a sensitive guy George!

Si moves his head from side to side, play-acting.

Not at all like Tim, George! He was really argumentative- that one!

Oh! But he was so bright and funny!

Nicholas joins us. I sense the relief on Simon's face when he sees Nicholas. What was he expecting? A barefooted beach comber with long hair in a ponytail?

Nicholas?! Hi, I'm Simon, George 's brother.

Hi Simon. Good to meet you. I believe you 're travelling back to London today?

Unfortunately, yes.

Why don 't you stay longer?

I can 't. I have no leave.

But surely your company would make allowances under the circumstances?

I sense that Nicholas is trying to make Simon feel more guilty than he already does.

It 's a really hectic time at work right now, Nicholas.

I see. What do you do that is so important, Simon?

I listen to the conversation, deciding not to interject. It must follow its natural progression.

I'm into mergers and acquisitions, Nicholas.

So you're in the corporate sector.

Yes. The bank I work for has put in a bid for a French bank and although I'm not one of the main movers and shakers, I still have my role to play. There's lots of admin work to handle.

Sounds very impressive.

Eventually I interrupt their discussion as I'm starved.

Listen guys. It's self-service. You have to help yourself, then grab something to drink from the fridge and I'll settle it at the till.

I long to just spend time with Simon on his own as I do not know when I will see him again. I need time to sound him out on inexpensive flights and accommodation in London as I really want to get back there soon. But it's awkward discussing my plans in front of Nicholas.

My mother finds us in the coffee shop. Nicholas jumps up and extends his hand towards my mother.

Mrs Dermatt! Hi, I'm Nicholas.

Good to meet you, Nicholas. Georgina has spoken to me about you.

In my mind I reproach my mother for her inappropriate remark. Nicholas would not like to know that he's been discussed, but I realize how distracted my mother is.

Sorry. It's time to go, Si. We've forty minutes to get to the airport.

We don't need to leave so early, Ma.

We do. The traffic is so unpredictable. One just needs an accident to block the road...

Sure.

Simon gives me a bear hug, shakes Nicholas's hand and wishes him a good stay.

Nicholas and I will finish our lunch, Mum, then we'll meet you back at Dad's ward.

Sure. I'll see you later.

I am sad to say good bye to Simon. He promises to improve his communication skills, but I doubt it. Mostly, I only hear from him when he phones occasionally.

I pour another cup of coffee, choose a muesli bar and return to our table that is positioned next to a stand of fragrant flower arrangements that are for sale.

You must've been disappointed not to stay longer in Florence, Nicholas.

It was disappointing, Georgina. I found Siena so inspiring and I was really looking forward to spending days as a tourist in Florence. There's so much to see.

All that amazing art, Nicholas!

I know.

Nicholas looks intently at me.

But that's how it works out sometimes, Georgina. When I got your email I just knew that I had to come to Africa to see you.

It was thoughtful of you.

Nicholas downs half a bottled water.

You just don't realize Georgina...

What?

How fortunate you are that your father is still around.

I know.

I felt for you when I realized that his life might be in danger...

Nicholas's observation makes me realize how often I take my father for granted. Although, just seeing his coat hanging limply on the coat rack at home, makes me feel his absence more keenly. Nicholas is silent for a long while.

I don't think you realize how tough it is growing up without a father.

I try to imagine the sense of loss that Nicholas feels.

I'm sure your mother has compensated, Nicholas. She's done a great job of raising you as a single parent.

I know, but you always feel as though something is missing. You see other kids out with their fathers at the movies or ball games or even grown men with their fathers and it makes you realize what you've missed.

Not all of them have good relationships with their fathers, Nicholas.

I guess you're right.

I try to think of consoling words to say to Nicholas.

But Paps was there for you.

He sure was Georgina. It wasn't the same, but he was a great substitute.

The restaurant assistant sweeps past us and picks up an arrangement of yellow roses that has been bought by a customer.

My mother has invited you to stay with us, if you'd like.

That's generous. Are you sure?

Yes, Nicholas.

I was just planning to stay at a backpacker's lodge somewhere.

It's up to you. We're hectically busy on the farm. But if you can entertain yourself and not accuse us of neglect, you're welcome.

Thanks. That'd be neat. I'd really like to see your farm.

Nicholas grabs the strap of his backpack and pulls it towards him. The restaurant is emptying and I'm about to suggest that we return to my father's ward when Nicholas scratches in his bag.

This is for you, Georgina!

Nicholas hands me a paper packet. Then I stare at the bottle of khaki olives, disbelieving what I see.

I so enjoyed the heated pale green olives with zests of orange that were served to me on the square in Siena, Georgina. Although you don't eat olives, they reminded me of you. That's why I've brought you some!

I don't really follow his logic, but I am touched by his thoughtfulness.

You'll enjoy these, Nicholas. You know that I don't like olives!

You don't know what you are missing, Georgina.

We both rise from the table at the same time. I saunter towards the lift. As I enter the ward I notice that my father is asleep. He is lying on his back, snoring. I'm relieved that Nicholas has decided to wait in the reception area downstairs.

I sit in a chair in the far corner of the ward and gaze out at the harbour. The waters of Durban are flat and still and I notice a yacht sailing close to the shore, with its sails as white as clouds against the aquamarine blue sky. In the foreground are the sugar terminals that store sugar that is exported from Durban. Then I notice a container ship gliding past the breakwater. Perhaps it is taking our locally grown sugar to Japan for processing in its refinery there. I'm amazed at the life-cycle of a stick of sugar cane.

My father stirs when he hears the click-clicking of my mother's heels as she enters the room. When he wakes, my father seems disorientated.

Lindy. I must go home. They can't keep me here. I need to go home now!

Be patient, James.

We're in the middle of the cutting season and there's planting I need to organize.

Just relax. That's only done in spring when the rains come.

We're planting some fields in the winter this year, babe. We're trying to avoid thrips.

Thrips?

They're insects attacking the cane.

My mother looks surprised, but quickly retorts:

Musa has the planting under control, James. He's really well organized.

Just make sure he uses enough filter-press.

Okay, James.

Linds, I can recover so much better at home. I'm getting so bored.

My mother shakes her head. She does not have the right words to reassure and appease my father.

You really need to be here, Jamie. If there's an emergency, you have help on hand. We are so far from town.

A team arrives to change my father's dressings. My mother lingers, but I excuse myself. In the reception area. I find Nicholas curled up asleep on a couch as though he were at an airport or railway station, waiting for his next connection.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

How 's your writing going, Georgina?

It's on hold, Nicholas. I just feel as though my whole life is on hold at the moment.

The circumstances will change ...

I could be needed here for months. Years? My father's recovery's going to be a slow process.

Nicholas nods sympathetically.

It's not so bad, Gina.

He moves closer to me and I feel his soft lips on my forehead.

I've had those periods in my life too, Georgina. One has to be patient.

It's just that in some ways it's not easy living at home again. You have to live according to someone else's rules.

Don't tell me! I know!

Besides, I want to become a travel writer and I'm encountering opposition from my mother and Simon as well. It's so difficult. They are both people whose opinions I respect.

Nicholas looks surprised.

Do they have a problem with travel writing?

They just don't think that it's viable as a career option. They say that it sounds too fanciful.

Nicholas laughs.

I know a number of writers who contribute regularly to the travel sections of magazines and newspapers. They survive. Often their trips are sponsored by travel companies eager for publicity. It just takes some initiative, Georgina.

You're right.

Show them, Georgina.

That's true.

Start here in South Africa! Travel writing's more than writing about exotic places that will entice the tourist trade. Sometimes there are things to write about in your own back yard.

I guess so.

Often travelling is lonely, treacherous and very unglamorous. Explore those aspects.

You're right Nicholas.

My mother is late for lunch. She has been at a field of plant cane that Musa Nyembe is supervising. The workers have been delayed for a few hours as the filter press has not been delivered on time.

I offer Nicholas homemade strawberry ice-cream, made by my mother, for dessert. Then we sit on the front veranda and drink coffee.

How about you Nick? Have you done much writing?

I'm really into writing poetry at the moment Georgina.

That's great.

I think I have nearly enough poems for a collection. That's if I use poems I've written before as well.

That's so amazing Simon.

Yeah! There's a university in Maine with a Visiting Writers' Program. It offers a poetry award that includes cash, travel and lodging expenses in order to give a reading of your poetry. You only have to submit about five poems, so I can be selective. I might go for it.

That's cool, but what about your thesis proposal?

There are so many avenues I could explore, Georgina. I'm still not certain.

I'm surprised by Nicholas's indecision. I thought he had chosen an angle for his thesis. *I thought my time in Italy would channel my ideas, but I'm still not sure of the direction I should take. Montale had such a broad interest in the arts.*

Didn't you say that he studied singing at some stage?

Yes. He was very interested in music.

You mentioned that earlier.

His interest in the arts included the Impressionist painters as well. Not to mention his vast interest in literature and some well known 19th Century European novelists as well.

Wonder how they influenced his writing?

Nicholas shrugs his shoulders. It is great to hear him speaking passionately about his work. He leans back in the chair and sprawls out his feet under the table, losing one of his slip-slops. Then he continues:

I think I definitely want to concentrate on the collection of poems in 'Satura.' Do you remember reading poems to Mrs Morton from the book?

Yes, Nicholas. I remember that afternoon so well. You read the poem 'Words.'

That's great poetry.

I wonder how Mrs Morton is doing Nicholas?

There is no response. Nicholas stands up and walks to the edge of the veranda.

I can't believe this is winter.

I know. It's so warm.

I could do with some exercise. I'm going to walk to the dam.

Sorry, I can't join you Nicholas. Sibongile has a doctor's appointment in town this afternoon and I'm driving her there in a while.

The talk of Montale, poetry and Mrs Morton transports me back to Cinque Terre. Although the work in the hotel was really tough, I long for the free days that I had to explore the ancient towns and swim in the refreshing waters of the Mediterranean Sea. I long to see the vineyards and of course the khaki olives that were sprouting from the branches of the spindly olive trees.

I'm inspired. I hurry to my laptop and access information on the olive groves of Tuscany. I quickly make notes in my journal.

Olea europaea (The botanical name for olive tree)

Probably dates back to 3000 yrs BC. Grown in Tuscany for centuries.

To harvest: trees are beaten and olives are collected on nets or hand-combed from branches.

Olives from the tree are processed in salt water for a few weeks before eating. Then put in brine or spiced oil.

For oil, olives are pulped, then oil is filtered. Good olive oil is kept for eating, poor oil is used in cosmetic industry.

An olive sprig is a symbol of peace.....

I find it interesting that Nicholas has brought me olives as a gift. I wonder if they are a form of peace offering.

Later Sibongile and I travel in the van along the undulating road that leads to the dam. A fish eagle circles the air above the water before heading off in an easterly direction. We have travelled some distance before I hear its haunting cry.

Nicholas, who has been lying on the grass near the dam water, springs up when he hears the vehicle approaching. I stop when he waves us down.

Could I take a ride with you? I need to get some things from town?

Okay.

Nicholas is disappointed to discover that there are no franchise bookstores in our town, but he finds a magazine in the local supermarket.

Why's that guy in uniform so heavily armed, Georgina?

Nicholas freezes. He is referring to the security guard who is patrolling the parking lot. It suddenly dawns on me how blasé I have become. I did notice the guard, but I do not notice his large gun, that is draped across his body.

That's to prevent hi-jackings, Nicholas. Car thefts!

You mean, they happen right here? Where there are so many people? In broad daylight?

Yes, at times they do.

He looks apprehensive.

Surely this happens in New York City as well?

I guess. I'm just not that conscious of it.

While Sibongile is at the doctor's surgery, Nicholas and I browse around some of the little shops in the town. He has no interest in the seed shop, but is intrigued by a corner shop that sells mainly kitchen utensils. We walk sideways through its very narrow aisles, scanning the contents of the shelves. Huge aluminium cooking pots that are used for large volumes of curry and rice, sit cheek by jowl with heavy China serving platters and bowls. The variety of floral embossed China tea sets, indicate a demand from the locals who seem to have a preference for Ceylon tea, rather than coffee.

I buy an assortment of nuts: cashews, almonds and raw, unsalted peanuts that will have to be roasted in the oven before eating.

Nicholas pages through an Indian cookery book. He beckons me over to join him.

Do you think you could make me some of these curries, Georgina?

I panic. I do not want to admit my poor culinary skills.

They'll be a welcome change from Italian food.

My mother's a great cook, Nicholas. I'm sure she'll oblige.

I'll *make you a really good curry.*

Nicholas's eyes light up when he hears this offer from the store proprietor.

Actually not me. My wife. Just phone when you're coming to town.

Nicholas buys the cookery book and a few packets of Chai tea.

Sorry, Nicholas, we'll have to go. Sibongile has phoned to say that she needs collecting now.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It is late afternoon. Nicholas and I are eating popcorn compulsively while watching an art movie, *The Swinging Palms*, at a movie theatre in Durban. It is some time since I've seen a film. We are seated in the back row of the middle section and have a clear vision of the screen, even when slinking down in our seats, as the other patrons are sitting further forward, to the left and right of us.

There aren't many people here, Nicholas.

I'm whispering, so Nicholas inclines his head towards me. It's good to feel him close to me.

No sweat Georgina. The film's had good reviews.

Hope it's okay.

It was showing on the plane coming out to South Africa, but I watched something else.

I wonder why I am so concerned about what Nicholas thinks. It's not as though I need to make a good impression. I keep reminding myself that he is just a friend. Although I really like him, it was he who set the boundaries for our relationship when we were in Italy. But has he changed his mind?

The film location is seventies Southern California, which immediately attracts Nicholas to the movie. He tells me that at the end of his sophomore year at college, he and a friend took a Greyhound bus across the country and spent the summer in California, sleeping mainly in flea-bitten youth hostels and on the beach. It was there he first learnt to surf.

I really hope I can surf in Durban, Georgina.

I'm sure we can make a plan. Simon has a board somewhere at home.

The movie rolls and the beach scenes are superb. The translucent ocean viewed through slightly hazy conditions unfurls in front of us. The waves breaking in regular rhythm show that the filming took place early on a tranquil, sunny day. There is little evidence of human existence on the sand except for the odd dog's footprints, almost washed away by the tide.

All too soon, the placid scene recedes. The sound of the waves pounding onto the shore crescendos dramatically and the sea is replaced with the chaotic interior of a fairly rustic beach house, dwarfed by tall palms at the back.

This looks promising Gina. I could be into this.

I nod, noticing that Nicholas has abbreviated my name.

Me too.

Then the focus is on a dishevelled forty-something woman, whose life is unravelling like a ball of string. Her husband has just left her. The conflict in her domestic life has had a negative effect on her job as a copywriter at a hip ad agency, and as we survey the chaos around her, she is told that she has just been retrenched.

I'm worried that this is a girl-movie. It rolls on and on. For the first time, Alicia is faced with the prospect of custody battles and raising two teenage sons on her own, without the assurance of adequate financial support. I immediately empathize with Alicia, feeling her anxiety as she struggles to plan the near future. She has inadequate college education to provide her with new job prospects, other than fifteen years of experience.

Her boys have been given visiting rights for the first part of their summer holidays with their father, who is taking them on a trip to Cancun, Mexico. Alicia wonders how she can compete with that! She is not up to competing with anyone or anything at this point in time.

I'm hoping that some new male interest will be introduced to the movie soon so that it will increase the film's appeal to a less gender-specific audience. But I wait a long while for this to happen. I see Nicholas squirming in his seat, crossing and uncrossing his legs as he peers dejectedly into his empty carton, before discarding it onto the floor. The smell of popcorn hovers between us.

For the first time since college days, Alicia is on her own, without extended family support as her parents have recently moved to Spain. She has to be resourceful. She slowly turns to more creative pursuits, at first as a means of consoling herself, but then as a possible vocation.

She has always wanted to be a sculptor. I'm relieved when, in the film, she is directed to an established sculptor who holds classes in the next town. He seems a caring, sensitive older man. At first, Alicia attends his sessions feeling like a discarded piece of old dead wood. But slowly, like the wood that she is moulding into new life with her hands and tools, her inner life is restored and reshaped. But in time, we discover that the sculpting teacher holds her captive emotionally and it is a relief when she finally has the

courage to break free from him. Then she has to pick up the pieces of her life and start over once again. I'm intrigued by the repetitive nature of seasons in our lives.

On the way out of the theatre I casually pick up an in-house film magazine, glancing at the review of the movie that we've just seen. I look forward to the hour and a half journey home as it will provide Nicholas and me with an opportunity to chat and catch up with each other. But Nicholas is incommunicative. I watch him out of the corner of my eye as I'm driving and notice that he is engrossed in the magazine.

I can't believe that this film was actually shot in Cape Town, Georgina.

Really?

I thought it was set in California!

Yeah! But they used Camps Bay for the beach scenes and a bungalow further up the coast for Alicia's house.

That's so amazing. I've been to Camps Bay beach a number of times.

It must be beautiful.

It is. I remember its soft white sand and smooth rocks, but the water's always cold. Come to think of it, the vistas of the sea in the film were vaguely familiar. But the mist prevented one from identifying the exact location.

Surely it's a more expensive option to film a movie set in Southern California in South Africa Nicholas?

That's the point Georgina. Labour costs are cheaper here, and with the favourable dollar-rand exchange, it makes sense. Apparently the local film crews are really good too. That's if you believe the movie magazine!

I suppose it also provides local actors with a chance of featuring in the film and I'm sure they always need extras, Nicholas. Then there are the favourable weather conditions too...

I'm tired and I battle to concentrate on the road ahead. The bright lights of the cars headed for Durban on the other side of the freeway blind me and the traffic on our side of the highway is heavy too. When I fumble in my bag for some cash for the toll, I notice that Nicholas has fallen asleep in the front seat next to me. I debate whether or not to wake him to keep me company, but instead, I tune in to a local radio station that features heavy rock music. Nicholas sleeps through it all.

Ocean barks when he hears us arrive home. Nicholas wakes with a start.

Where are we?

Home.

I must have dozed off for a while.

I laugh. As he climbs out of the car, he seems very disorientated.

You slept the whole way home Nicholas!

No way Georgina.

It is a clear, crisp winter's evening with cool temperatures of 7 degrees Centigrade. I dread the thought of fixing supper and am relieved to discover that my mother has made a savoury quiche for us. As I wait for it to heat up in the microwave Nicholas hugs me from behind. It is good to feel his lean, muscular body tight against my back. Then as he turns me around to face him, I look into those exquisite brown eyes that speak to me of things to come. But later. My fingers find the nape of his neck and I press down hard on the muscles.

That's so good Gina.

He whispers the words.

Would you like a neck massage Nicholas?

A kiss is better.

Before our lips meet, I glance into the depths of his eyes that are soft and vulnerable like a deer's. The microwave pings.

It can wait.

All my energy is concentrated on Nicholas and I'm lost to the stillness of the night when I hear a slipper-shuffle at the door. My first reaction is to disentangle myself and I just see the back of my mother's dressing gown as she disappears around the door.

I'm so embarrassed that I drop a large spoon on the kitchen floor and fumble as I take the meal out of the microwave. I serve helpings of the vegetarian quiche and throw together a salad. Then I sit close to Nicholas at the kitchen table.

I didn't enjoy that interruption, Georgina.

Neither did I!

As I sample my mother's cooking, I'm once again in awe of her culinary prowess!

It's great to try some different cooking, Georgina. For weeks now I've eaten nothing but foccaccio breads, pizzas and pastas, with the odd salad thrown in.

I'll have to ask my mother to make you some curry sometime, Nicholas.

That'd be great.

I serve myself a second helping. Then I find some vanilla ice cream and bottled chocolate sauce for Nicholas. I am about to excuse myself when Nicholas asks for coffee.

I'm really awake now!

Sorry, Nicholas, I'm finished. I'm sure you'll be able to find your way round the kitchen. Milk is in the fridge, coffee in the cupboard. Sugar...

Thanks, Gina.

I have to go to bed. I'm dog-tired.

Just then, my mother reappears in her pyjamas. Ocean has woken her on our return and she cannot fall asleep again. He paces restlessly up and down the back veranda and continues to bark.

I'll just let him into the kitchen for the night, Georgina.

Are you sure?

Yes.

My mother braves the cold and drags Ocean's grey blanket onto the kitchen floor, rearranging it under the table. He enters with an old bone in his mouth and circles the blanket a number of times before settling on it.

How was the movie Nicholas?

I've seen better.

Their voices trail as I head down the passage towards my room. It is not long before sleep claims me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I wake with a start. As I adjust myself to the light that filters through the blinds in my room, I realize that I have overslept. Hastily I throw off my white duvet and as I shower and dress, I plan the day ahead of me. I suddenly remember that the assessors are arriving to examine the cane damage caused by the fire and my mother has asked me to accompany them around the farm.

As I'm en route to the kitchen, I see Nicholas sitting on the outside veranda, drinking coffee. The sun has just broken free of the tall trees and shrubs on the east side of the garden and is flooding the veranda with light and warmth. I grab a mug of tea and join him. It would be good to spend the whole morning with him.

Georgina, I have to tell you something. I was woken this morning by the most amazing singing.

Really?

Just listen! I hear it again.

At first, the sound of a bulbul distracts me, as it flits from branch to branch in the Umdoni tree in front of us. But when I consciously still my mind I hear the workers' melodious singing.

It's the women planting sugar cane in the field behind the house Nick. They're actually from our neighbour's farm.

Do the women do the planting?

Yes they do, Nicholas.

That's interesting. I thought the men would do it.

I quickly drink my hot tea, burning my tongue.

Sorry. I have to go now.

What's the hurry?

My Mum wants me to go around the fields with her straight after breakfast.

I am eating muesli and yoghurt in the dining room on my own when my mother returns home. She is thinking aloud.

We just don't have enough cutters today. It's going to take us much longer to harvest that field.

Is that a problem?

I really wanted to visit your father this afternoon, but I don't know if I can get away.

Why're there so few cutters today?

It's the Monday after pay weekend Georgina.

But Musa Nyembe can take charge of the cutting in your absence.

Sure.

I'm also here as a back-up.

Thanks Gina.

But isn't the mill closed on a Monday, Mum?

Yes, it opens again late afternoon.

Therefore it doesn't matter if there are less cutters. You can just harvest less cane today as the mill's not running right now.

My mother is staring absentmindedly at the ground.

Doesn't that mean that our allocation is less today then, Mum?

Yes, but we still have to meet it.

My mother quickly changes out of her work clothes. The assessors arrive a little late. After the formalities my mother drives us around the charred fields that look as though they are in mourning. Somehow they look more forlorn with the winter sunlight on them. It's as though they have been made to stand out against the rest of the landscape, like a chunk of highlighted text, marked with a translucent magi-marker.

In some areas, the burnt cane has been harvested, leaving the bare earth exposed. *Trash* (old dried cane leaves) litters the ground and is lifted by the breeze as we pass by. Scores of milk-white cattle egrets trawl the bare earth in search of insects. I am so used to seeing them on their own, not in such a crowd.

My mother responds unflinchingly to the questions asked by the insurance assessors. I'm amazed at how knowledgeable she is about the farm. Although she was not that involved in the day to day running of the farm before my father's accident, as he does most of the work himself, she has acquired farming expertise unconsciously.

When I see how emotional she is recalling the events surrounding the runaway fire and the extent of destruction caused by it, I can see the reason for her asking me to

accompany her. I sense that I am with her as a moral support. She breaks down on a number of occasions.

Nicholas is not home when we return. Sibongile explains that he has gone out. The assessors are apologetic about bringing dust and soot into the house.

We'll take off our shoes.

It's not necessary, but perhaps it's a good idea.

My mother leads the way to the lounge. The assessors sit side by side in two matching, dark-beige striped armchairs. Between them is a dark-wood coffee table that houses a wooden chess set on a shelf underneath it and on top is a modern brass lamp.

This is a great room.

We often sit in here.

My mother sinks into the couch, propping herself up with a soft cushion that is moulded into shape to accommodate the contours of her back. Immediately she engages herself in conversation with the assessors, talking about premiums and compensation. I take that as a cue to offer refreshments so that I can make myself scarce.

Tea? Coffee?

Coffee.

I bypass the dishes that line the sink after breakfast and fill the kettle with water from our farm borehole, that comes through the taps so clear. I long for my father to return home from hospital so that life can return to normal. Then I will be able to work on my travel articles.

When I complain to my mother that there is just no time at the moment to write, she suggests that I need to be more disciplined and more organized. She reproaches me for not yet having learnt to snatch short periods of time and take advantage of them. She suggests that if I continue to wait for the ideal time, I'll not achieve very much. My mother comments that if I went to bed later and got up earlier, I would be able to find plenty of time to write.

I butter the pecan-nut banana bread that my mother has made and fix filter coffee. I hear the assessors comment on my mother's fire-ravaged garden as they view it through the lounge window. How spectacular that vista normally is with its vast expanse of lawn and border of lush, sculpted aloes.

It's really disappointing, gentlemen. You've no idea how many hours I've put into this garden. Not long ago I re-landscaped the entire garden.

It will recover in time, Mrs Dermatt.

I guess I'm just impatient.

Nature is resilient.

I pass around the coffee and the assessors double-up on their banana bread, making sandwiches out of it.

I must say, farmers are very hospitable.

I guess so.

My mother explains that farmers are often physically isolated. Therefore when they do have company they make an extra effort for their visitors.

We have to be cautious these days though. Chemical and clothing representatives visiting the farm were always welcomed into our homes, but now a different salesman comes every time and we don't know them as well.

My mother shakes her hair free of her face. She is such a beautiful woman.

We wouldn't be treated like this in town!

My mother smiles. Then she adds:

I can't even give a lift to people standing on the side of the road unless I know them. I still find it difficult to drive past them with an empty car...

I excuse myself and take my coffee through to the bedroom. I glance into Nicholas's room as I rush down the passage. I cannot believe that he has made his bed. I wonder where he is?

I am writing in my journal, working on an idea, when my mother interrupts me.

Georgina. I can't believe that there's always something going wrong.

What's it now?

The swimming pool pump has given up in protest against all the smut that has been dumped into its filter.

From the fires?

Yes. Also from our neighbour's purpose burning. Could you please phone the pool company and see if someone can come out with a replacement for the pump.

Sure.

I wonder why it is that I am always interrupted when I settle down to work. I'm hoping that a serviceman is available to come to the farm so that I do not need to fetch the new pool pump myself.

By the way, Gina. If they can't send anyone out, Nat Naidu in the workshop could always fit it for you.

When I eventually make contact with the pool company, I'm told that the technicians are all out on jobs, so a trip to a coastal town south of us is inevitable.

As I leave my room on the south side of the house, the wind brings the women's singing closer. They seem to be repeating the same phrase over and over again in melodious tones. Then suddenly the women shout and laughter erupts.

I drive through the yard and as I turn into a short-cut through our neighbour's farm, I see Nicholas at the edge of a field, observing the women as they plant rows of sugar cane. I detour and stop next to him.

What're you doing, Nicholas?

I'm so intrigued, Gina.

By their work?

No, by their songs.

Really?

I wish I knew what they were singing about?

Sounds very repetitive to me, Nicholas. They just sing the same phrases over and over again.

Hey! Are they singing in Zulu?

Yeah!

I've recorded some songs on my phone.

Oh!

I've also taken some pictures of them working. It's ages since I've heard work songs, Gina.

This is the first time I've really taken notice of them myself, Nicholas.

The women's clothing is so colourful too. They're all wearing those Wellington boots with bright, high socks.

I laugh.

You mean Gum Boots, Nicholas!

Hey Gina! How 's your Zulu?

Not that good. I've a working knowledge of isiZulu, Nicholas. But I'm not nearly as good as my father. He learnt to speak the language as a child. At least I know how to greet people!

Nicholas joins me and as I turn onto the main highway that leads south towards Durban, he plays his recording of the songs. I marvel at the women's voices and the sense of camaraderie that comes through in their singing.

That harmony is so amazing, Nicholas.

I know. It's unbelievable.

He plays the recording again.

Hey! I'm noticing that a woman leads the song, singing as a soloist, then the rest of the women respond. The whole song's a repetition of this pattern.

I just wish I knew what they were singing about Gina.

You could ask Sibongile to translate the songs for you, Nicholas.

That's such a great idea, Gina.

It is only when we arrive at the pool company that I am informed that they do not have the correct model of pump in stock.

I've driven thirty-five kilometers to fetch it!

So sorry.

Your salesman did say that he had it in stock. I phoned before I came. Why didn't he check?

He shrugs his shoulders, not taking responsibility for his employee.

Look, we'll order the new motor and when it arrives, I'll have our technician come right to your house and fit it.

How long will that take?

A few days.

Nicholas senses my frustration and suggests that we go for lunch in the town.

That'd be great, Nick. But I need to get back quite early. My mother wants to drive through to Durban.

How 's your father?

He's doing better. His chest is still not that good, though.

Any chance of him coming home soon?

They still haven't given a date.

Don't you want to go to Durban with your mother, Gina? I'll just read.

She wants me to be on stand-by on the farm, Nicholas.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Sibongile Mkize is standing at the kitchen counter chopping onions, releasing their acrid smell to the air, when Nicholas presents her with a recording of the work-songs. She sways her body in tune to the rhythm and then she laughs. It is clear that the content of one of the songs amuses her. When Nicholas asks if she can translate them, Sibongile suggests that he should ask her daughter, Muhle, to help him as she has a better command of English.

She 's usually home from school in about an hour, Nicholas.

Do you think she can do it today Gina?

Not sure. Check it out with Sibongile.

We are in the grip of a cold-front. It usually starts in Cape Town and progresses eastwards along the coast towards us. The icy wind is unpredictable and plays havoc outside. Banks of charcoal-grey clouds, that look promising, scuttle across the sky. The wind ruffles the dry leaves of a few shrubs in the front garden that have escaped the effects of the fire. Once again we are in need of rain. I'm reminded of my late grandmother who always said that rain settles the dust.

I have nostalgic memories of this kitchen. In my grandmother's time, it was a real farmhouse kitchen, with parquet floor and oak kitchen cupboards. An old gnarled wooden table stood in the middle of the room, with many baskets under it. They were used to collect bananas, mangoes and pecan nuts from the garden. At other times they were filled with cabbages, beans and beetroot. I liked it best when they contained freshly cut flowers from the garden.

The kitchen then was so different from what it is today. There was an endless supply of *Tropica* fruit juice in Grandma's old refrigerator and *magnum ice creams* in her freezer. I still remember the corner cupboard where she kept her groceries, that included *Five Roses Tea*, *Rose 's orange marmalade* and boxes of her favourite biscuits, *Royal Creams*.

For a moment, in my mind, I am sitting on the counter beside the Kenwood chef as Grandma mixes sugar and butter for her acclaimed vanilla cake that will be topped with vanilla icing and cherries. She was a creature of habit and this ritual usually occurred

every Saturday morning at 9.30 a.m. In my mind I can also still see the tall pink roses that grew outside the kitchen window that were visible when sitting on the counter.

They're Queen Elizabeth roses, Georgina. They do well along the coast.

Growing up, we lived in a small house not far from our grandmother's home and whenever we stayed overnight with her, we were woken with tea served in fine China cups and boudoir biscuits that we used to dunk in the tea when her back was turned. It was at my grandmother's house, while she was preparing the evening meal, that Simon and I sometimes watched the soaps that we were banned from watching at home. When we heard her footsteps approaching, we deftly changed the channel to *Teletubbies* or some sport, which was a justifiable choice in the case of Simon as he was passionate about sport.

Muhle's arrival is marked by Ocean's awareness of her. It is a welcoming bark rather than one of alarm, as Muhle is a familiar visitor in our home. Daily, after high school finishes, she takes a taxi from town to the farm and usually walks to our house.

After a few hours of laborious transcription and translation, Nicholas hands the notepad to me:

I hope I've got it down right, Georgina.

Leader, Sandile (A) : Zonke izizwe zimazi uZitha (All the nations know uZitha)

Chorus (B) : ziyamazi (They know him)

Leader (A) : Zonke izizwe (All nations)

Chorus (B) : Ziyamazi Zitha ziyamazi (know Zitha, they know him)

Leader (A) : Zonke izizwe (All nations)

Chorus (B) : Ziyamazi Zitha ziyamazi (know Zitha, they know him)

Leader (A) : Nas' eShowe (Even at Eshowe)

Chorus (B) : Ziyamazi Zitha ziyamazi (they know Zitha)

Repeated 5 times.

Notes on performance:

Half way through the song, the young women start to dance. Sibongile explains that it is a dance performed at the time of the UKWEMULA ceremony, during which a girl's marriageable status is made known to the community. At that ceremony, the dance is performed together with girls of a similar age, mostly on the public occasion that marks the completion of the rites.

Nicholas writes the following in bold capitals: TRADITIONAL DANCE USED IN A CONTEMPORARY WORK SITUATION.

Who is Zitha, Nicholas?

I asked Sibongile the same question. She says Zitha is a well known man. He's recognized even as far away as Eshowe.

Do you think he's a special friend of one of the women, Nick.

He must be Gina. Still have to discover more about him though.

Sibongile and Muhle excuse themselves. They walk to their house which is situated at the bottom of the hill, half way to the dam.

I've so often heard these women singing in the fields, Nicholas, but I've never taken note of their songs. I've been more interested in the beautiful harmony in their singing.

The songs are such amazing social commentary, Gina. I really think I'm on to something here.

Nicholas retreats to his room and I hear the sound of his laptop go on line.

Because it is overcast, the day starts closing in earlier than usual and I wonder when my mother will return from Durban.

I offer Nicholas steaming hot chocolate. Then I sit on the chair in his room, drinking mine, while he is on the internet.

I'm starved Gina. Do you have any cookies to eat?

Of course, Nicholas.

I return with rusks, which Nicholas has not eaten before. I advise him to dunk them in the hot liquid to soften them.

Rusks are a South African favourite. My grandmother used to make buttermilk rusks. Now we just buy them. These are muesli rusks.

A bit hard, but pretty good, Gina!

What are you searching for?

I have to find out more about work songs.

Nicholas is so engrossed in his search on the internet that he pays little attention to me, except for interjections from time to time.

Gina, I cannot believe this!

What Nicholas?

Tell you later.

I leave Nicholas and decide to feed Ocean. He devours his food, but instead of retreating to his kennel, he is frisky and clearly in need of a walk. I change into my Adidas shoes and decide that I will run to the dam. The cold wind blasts my face and I confess that I land up walking, with Ocean at my side, when he is not chasing a rabbit or sniffing for food left by the farm workers.

An exquisite Goliath Heron is wading in the shallows at the dam. Its magnificent wings and tail are as grey as the overcast sky, while its head and neck have the subtle colours of a sunset on a normal day. Occasionally it thrusts its beak into the water, in the hope of a frog. But when I am watching it, it spikes only leaves, before flying off disgruntled to the other side of the water, issuing a raucous cry.

Ocean is trotting a little ahead of me now as I start climbing the hill on the way home. I am so unfit that a four kilometre outing has almost taken my breath away. Then it begins to rain. It is just a drizzle, but I am saved by my mother who pulls up behind me.

Why are you out so late? Where's Nicholas?

He's doing his own thing!

Jump in.

How's Dad?

Ocean barks enthusiastically from the back seat and it is difficult to hear my mother speak.

He was making such good progress, Gina.

My mother's voice begins to quiver.

What's up?

I don't know...

Tell me what's happened?

Tears stream down my mother's face. She quickly scoops them up with her hand as I retrieve a tissue from my pocket.

Not really sure Georgina. I wanted to see the physician before I left the hospital, but he hadn't done his rounds yet. I couldn't wait any longer.

Is it Dad's chest?

Yes, but they're more worried about the burns at this stage...

Oh no! Sounds serious. Will Dad be okay?

My mother reaches the driveway and swings the car hard right, continuing until she reaches the garage. Ocean bursts out of the door, when I half open it and he is gone.

The house is in darkness except for a pool of light from Nicholas's room.

Where 's Nicholas?

He 's working. He 's now doing some research on work songs.

Work songs?

Yes. Work songs.

As we walk towards the house, I recount Nicholas's activities recording and translating the songs sung by the women working in the fields.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

It's just morning. I open my blinds to see a bright crescent moon suspended in the midnight blue sky. I can still see the stars that have guarded the sky overnight. A Kurrucane thrush calls outside my window.

Then banging cupboard doors signal to me that my mother is in the kitchen. I creep down the passage and join her.

How did you sleep, Gina?

Not very well. I heard the clock strike most of the night.

Me too.

My mother walks towards me and I'm lost in her bony embrace. Her arms reassure me like they have since I was a child and I'm comforted by her familiar smell, that is so difficult to describe.

I'm worried about Dad, Mum.

Mm...

My mother does not reply. She steps away from me and continues making French toast with firm resolve and a sense of resignation.

Are you going into Durban today? I must see Dad.

Yes, I'm going in this morning, Gina.

I'll join you.

I brave the cold morning to put apples on a bird feeder that hangs from a tree outside the kitchen. It is soon visited by fruit-eating birds in our garden: a Bulbul and Black-collared Barbets. I notice that in the winter, even the seed-eating Weavers sometimes eat the fruit left out for them.

My mother and I are drinking filter coffee in the lounge when Nicholas appears.

His hair is plastered down on the side on which he was sleeping and he is still in his sleep-shorts and white tee-shirt.

This is an early start for you, Nicholas.

It sure is. What's up?

We're going into Durban in an hour's time. Are you going to join us Nick?

I search his face for a response. My mother rearranges the cushion behind her back and addresses Nicholas.

I believe you're recording work songs, Nicholas.

Yes, Mrs Dermatt.

Have you come across them before?

Well, yes I have.

That's interesting.

My mother has a way of eliciting conversations from people.

In one of my poetry courses in my junior year at college we studied Venezuelan work songs.

My mother smiles at Nicholas knowingly.

Are they similar to the ones you're recording now?

In some ways. There were a number of different types: the songs that were used when driving cattle to a new pasture, where the dudes had to sing to pacify the animals. Then there were songs sung by the coffee harvesters.

Were those the ones that were similar, Nicholas? I guess it's all agricultural work.

Nicholas sinks into a chair and attempts to straighten his hair with his fingers.

Yes, they're all centred around getting a task done.

I leave my mother and Nicholas in conversation and return to the kitchen to refill my coffee mug. When I return they are still on the topic of work songs.

Can you believe it? In class we also heard recordings of songs sung by those involved in sugar cane farming in South America. But they were used to encourage the oxen to work, when working the ground.

I'm beginning to share Nicholas's enthusiasm. It's interesting to draw parallels.

That's cool, Nicholas.

He smiles at me. I don't think that I have ever seen Nicholas so animated. In Monterosso al Mare, he seemed so uncertain and unmotivated at times.

I'm sure singing helps allay the boredom of the people doing the repetitive tasks.

It sure does, Mrs Dermatt.

Please call me Lindy.

I make a mental note of my mother's request. Does this mean that a formal greeting makes her feel old? Or is it because she has given Nicholas the stamp of approval?

I guess the main purpose of the songs is really to give rhythm, to help the workers synchronize their efforts.

Gosh Nicholas! I really didn't realize that there was so much to these songs.

Momentarily I see my mother's eyes sparkle.

They are fascinating Lindy! What I'm excited about is that I've discovered that these work songs are part of the oral tradition. They're considered oral poetry.

And poetry is your field, Nicholas?

Right Lindy! It's great to experience this poetry first hand.

That's amazing Nicholas.

Yeah! I'm in Africa and it's mind boggling to be doing original research: collecting songs first hand in the field. My colleagues would travel continents to undertake this kind of research.

It would be helpful to explain to the women what you're doing. They could also give you some explanations about their songs, Nicholas.

Sure. I'll go back and see them, but I need Muhle or Sibongile to go with me to translate.

Ask Sibongile if she'd mind.

These songs are also considered performance poetry, Gina. In the States I've attended many sessions of performance poetry at literary festivals and poetry readings in the city.

I've noticed that the women often break their song to dance or provide a social commentary, which is really insightful Nicholas..

Yeah Georgina! They comment on the situations in which they find themselves.

I guess we hear these songs all the time and take them so for granted, Nicholas.

Nicholas explains that he has recorded a song about a man, Zitha. Although the song is sung about an hour's drive away from Eshowe, a small town, the women remark that he is quite widely known. Nicholas explains that Sibongile said something about it being a praise poem and that she'd mentioned the word 'izihasho' in this connection. I smile as Nicholas battles to say the isiZulu word.

Praise Poems are an important part of oral tradition, Nick.

I gather that.

When Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as president, praise poems were performed for him as part of the ceremony.

Nicholas looks at me as he speaks.

Now I'm learning something too, Nick. Sibongile is very knowledgeable about Zulu culture and traditions.

The smell of French toast wafts through to where we are sitting and evokes my hunger. I listen intently to the conversation between my mother and Nicholas, noticing that she is now calling him Nick. A term of endearment? Or else she is just too tired to use his full name.

As they talk, I hear the hissing sound of another purpose burn in the distance and my mother goes to the window to see where they are burning sugar cane.

Come and look Nicholas. There's a purpose burn on our neighbour's farm.

We both go to the window and see a line of fiery flames throw smoke and fireflies to the air as it consumes the cane stalks. Smoke billows in great black clouds and I wonder how the workers are going to put out the fire. But after a while it burns itself out.

That fire was sluggish because we had a shower of rain overnight.

Will they cut it immediately, Lindy?

They'll start cutting in a few hours.

Do the women cut the cane as well? Will I get more songs?

In some parts they do, Nicholas. But we have men cutting for us. Sometimes the women assist the men, hovering around with food and drink.

Do you think that I can get some more work songs?

Why don't you phone our neighbour and enquire?

I know that I am being anti-social, but I take a slice of toast and smear it with strawberry jam. I pour myself another cup of coffee and while my mother and Nicholas continue their conversation, I retreat to my bedroom. They do not even notice that I have left the room.

I wish my mother were as enthusiastic about my travel writing as she is about Nicholas's new interest in oral poetry. She hasn't even seen my photos of Cinque Terre yet? I wonder where all this is going to lead Nicholas. What about Eugenio Montale?

Talk of poetry has inspired me. I know that I will not have much time to write before I travel to Durban with my mother, but I take her advice to seize the moment and I open my journal, with my pen poised to record a few mind's wanderings. But first, I re-read a few of the pages I wrote in Italy.

Walked to Manarola today. Overcast and windy. While sitting on a bench on a high vantage point, sheltered from the elements, I noticed a fisherman in a boat come into the small harbour, which consists of a gap between rocky cliffs. The sea was very rough and I watched with awe as he brought his boat in. All he had caught were three fish in a red plastic bucket. He first lifted his engine from the water and then a crane lifted his boat to the level of the houses, not far from where I was sitting. The fisherman then caught a lift up to the upper level and fetched a portable cradle from nearby, onto which the boat was hoisted. So amazing that the boats are stored a storey up from where they're launched!

Suddenly thunder clouds bellowed like a herd of bulls and everyone headed for the packed railway station. People had to stand in the deluge for at least three-quarters of an hour, waiting for the train to arrive. I hated the rain pouring down my neck as I didn't have an umbrella! Then two carriages of this coastal train were out of order and there was a stampede to get into the remaining few.

I read in the guidebook that Manarola, the town that perches on an outcrop of rocks, is the greatest producer of grapes for the wines of Cinque Terre.

I make a note to include the mural of the Italian farm workers pruning vines in my proposed article, when my mother shouts down the passage, informing me that she is leaving.

The car journey into Durban provides me with catch-up time with my mother. She complains that she has not been able to spend time at the HIV/Aids centre in our nearby town because of her commitments on the farm. All she can do is provide soup weekly and she regrets missing an important committee meeting this past week.

The farm's your priority now, Mum.

You're right, Georgina.

You have no choice! Miriam Dlamini's a very capable lady. I'm sure she understands your predicament.

I know she does.

It is strange to see my mother so vulnerable. She is looking to me for reassurance, instead of me looking to her, as I so often do.

Because I am not driving, I am able to take note of the countryside as we travel southwards. We leave behind the fire-ravaged areas and pass through landscape that has turned pale yellow on account of the drought. Soon afterwards I'm struck by the housing developments on either side of the freeway that have eroded former sugar cane land, all the way southwards. Industrial and housing developments are screaming up the coast.

Have they phoned about the pool pump yet?

No, Georgina.

I'll phone them when we get back. They did offer to fit the pump for us when it arrived.

The pool's a mess. The sooner the better.

When we reach the hospital I discover my father lying motionless in his bed, connected to monitoring machines. I feel helpless seeing my father like this. He is usually such a strong man and it worries me to see him lying there helplessly. My father opens his eyes when my mother greets him, but quickly shuts them again. He is obviously very weak.

Dad, it's me, Georgina.

He flutters his lids. But it's as though he is too weak to even hold open his eyes. I do not like my dad's pale, pasty complexion and the dark circles under his eyes.

My mother draws up a chair and keeps silent vigil at his bedside. She too, is drained of colour, and her clothes hang loosely around her shrunken frame. She sighs. For a while she closes her eyes. I think she is praying as I see her lips move slightly. I stand beside my father on the other side of the bed, take hold of his bandaged arm and I reassure him of my love for him.

I find it too distressing to see my father like this, struggling to survive. It's as though I have been hit with a brick. A heaviness descends on me.

Go and take a walk, Gina. Get something to drink.

I leave the room and walk slowly down the passage. I walk with heavy footsteps because of the weight that is pressing down on me from the inside. Even in the lift, the visitors and nursing staff wear stern expressions on their faces. They seem to identify with me and understand the seriousness of the situation in which I find myself without a word being spoken. All of a sudden, life is precarious. We're living from moment to moment.

Ebullient children in the hospital restaurant are playing musical chairs. Their parents try to persuade them otherwise, but give up in the end. I sip my bottled water, but I am so distracted by the noise that I need to get out of there. I land up walking out of the hospital doors, into the car park.

Memories of my father come flooding back. My dad is running in the father's race in my junior-primary school athletics day. He flashes past me while I am sitting on the stands and despite his asthmatic chest, I remember seeing him out in the front with a cluster of dads who are being competitive at all costs. He comes in the top three and I am so proud that he has made a place. I can almost hear my voice when I boast to my friends: *My dad came third!*

I turn my glance to the sea in the distance and I vividly recall my father taking me to the animal farm near the beachfront. If I do not remember it that clearly, I can picture the photographs from the day that are in my childhood photo album. I am dressed in denim dungarees with a pink and blue striped shirt. I must have been about three. I am captured on film with a pony, goat and feeding the chickens, but the best photo for me is the one that was blown up and framed. Me holding the most beautiful, silky white rabbit, with pale brown ears and snout and black shiny eyes.

I often look at that photograph of myself as a child. Even then I had the slight cleft in my chin that is inherited from my father, the longish nose, dark brown hair and the vivid green eyes, that Simon used to say resemble a cat's eyes. I don't think I've changed that much in looks.

My mother joins me at the car.

How did you know I was here?

I've been looking everywhere for you.

I had to get away, Mum.

I know.

I'm going to stay here at the hospital, Gina. You go home now. You can come back in the morning.

It's serious, isn't it Mum? Shouldn't I stay too?

You go home Georgina. You must be tired.

My mother explains that she'll stay the night at my father's bed side. She needs to consult with the physician as she missed him on his morning round. I suggest that she phone him for a progress report rather than sit around waiting for him, but she is adamant. She needs to stay at my father's side.

I'll just go back and say goodbye to Dad.

My mother and I walk slowly back to the room. When we enter, nursing staff in sterile gloves and masks are attending to my father, monitoring and discussing his condition. When they announce that they need to change his dressings, I decide to leave. As I am walking out, I hear their comments.

His temperature is up. Blood pressure and heart rate are also up. Mrs Dermatt.

When's he going to be stable?

We're putting him on stronger antibiotics now.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A strong north-easterly wind threatens to blow me off the road on my journey home. The August winds have started. When I arrive home I find Nicholas, Sibongile and Muhle in the kitchen discussing work songs.

Why are you still here, Sibongile?

She does not reply. I surprise myself by losing my temper.

Nicholas, Sibongile should've gone home hours ago!

Sorry, Gina. I guess we lost track of the time.

Come, it's late. I'll give you and Muhle a lift home.

I haven't made the dog's food or the watchman's coffee, Georgina.

Don't worry about it.

On my return home I hear Nicholas listening to his recordings in the lounge. I purposely remain in the kitchen fixing Ocean's supper. I am spurred on by his anticipatory yowling outside. He must smell his food through the door. Then I make sandwiches for the night watchman and boil a kettle for his coffee.

I am about to bypass the lounge so that I do not have to talk to Nicholas or listen to the songs, when Nicholas's pleading request, forces me to reconsider my decision. I feel guilty about losing my temper earlier.

You have to listen to this song, Georgina. It's great.

I sink into the couch.

You don't look very enthusiastic.

D'you know what I'm dealing with Nicholas?

I am so angry.

I'm sorry, Gina. How's your father?

He's really battling.

Nicholas sits next to me and tries to console me.

Sorry Georgina, it was really insensitive of me.

I nod and in a while I continue the conversation.

Where did you record this song, Nicholas?

On your neighbour's farm.

Were the women planting sugar cane?

No, they were spreading the trash with their hoes. The field had recently been harvested.

I see. Sibongile came with me and the women really seemed to enjoy talking to her in isiZulu.

Did she know them?

I'm not sure. But by the end they seemed to be getting along really well.

Daylight is fading fast. As I turn on the light, I glance restlessly around the room. I notice that Sibongile has picked nasturtiums and has arranged them in a glass vase on one of the side tables in the lounge.

Nicholas thrusts a translated copy of a new song into my hands.

Thoughts swirl in my head. Why now Nicholas? All I want to do is pull the duvet cover over my head and go to sleep. I am so worried about my father. As the song plays, he does not notice my heavy sighs. He is not aware of my restless movements in the chair, trying to get comfortable. I am battling to concentrate as I fight sleep.

Nicholas plays the song again as I glare at my feet. Then I drag myself upwards in my chair.

Listen, Gina.

I'm listening Nicholas.

Leader, Sandile (A) : Wayemuhle usibali wayegqoke kahle (My brother-in-law was handsome and dressed well)

Chorus (B) Bali wam (My brother-in-law)

Sandile (A) Wayephoxa ngento (He had only one fault)

Ayodwa wayengaloboli (He wouldn't pay lobola)

Chorus (B) Bali wam (My brother-in-law)

Sandile (A) Wayephoxa ngento (He had only one fault)

Ayodwa wayengaloboli (He wouldn't pay lobola)

Chorus (B) Bali wam (my brother-in-law)

Sandile (A) Wayemuhle usibali wayegqoke kahle (My brother-in-law was handsome and dressed well)

Chorus (B) Bali wam (brother-in-law)

(Repeated ten times)

Spoken commentary:

Ngeke ngikulobole ngoba ulibala ukudla amabhiya wena. Ngifuna abangcono mina ukunukulobolana nawe. Ngeke ngiyimele imali yami iphelele kini. Mina ngibulawa umsebenzi wena ubuya ngokuzolala ulibele amabhiya ngidlala ulovu.

I will never pay lobola for you because you waste time drinking beer. I want someone better instead of paying lobola for you. I can't stand seeing all my money going to your home. I work hard but you come home late and drunk, after wasting time drinking beers just to sleep, and I'm made fun of by a loafer.

What do you think of it, Georgina? It's so intriguing, isn't it?

The rhythm's great.

It's really strong, Gina.

Do you know what 'lobola' is Nicholas?

Can't say I do.

It's a bride price that's offered to the bride's father by the groom. It used to be paid in cattle. But today it's sometimes paid in cash.

Okay. What's really interesting for me is the spoken commentary here.

Yes.

The contents of the song indicate that you have a guy who doesn't want to honour his obligations. But when you hear the commentary given by the women themselves, you understand why.

That's interesting, Nicholas. But d'you mind if I go now?

Nicholas looks at me surprised.

Hey! Where's your mother?

At the hospital.

Suddenly I have to leave the room. Half-way down the passage, I begin to sob. My sadness comes from deep inside and it threatens to overwhelm me.

Nicholas chases me and holds me in his arms. Gently he strokes my hair and tries to console me, kissing me on the cheek.

Georgina! I'm sorry. I've been so insensitive.

Is your Dad okay?

I can't talk about it right now, Nicholas. I really need to be on my own.

Sure. If you need me, I'll be in my room.

Okay.

As I enter my bedroom I suddenly remember that I haven't made dinner.

Oh! Nicholas! Please get yourself something to eat.

Sure.

I laze in a full bubble bath and keep adding hot water when the water grows cold. As I slide into my cold bed I start shivering. I battle to get warm. It is not long before the landline rings. At first I do not answer it, but when it persists, I run down the passage to the study. It is Musa Nyembe who is urgently trying to contact my mother. He complains that her cell phone seems to be off all the time. Suddenly I'm aware of Nicholas standing in the study beside me.

What's the problem, Georgina. You seem upset.

I can't believe that something else has gone wrong.

What's up?

One of the bell-loaders that we use to load the cane from the field into the transport truck, rolled today.

Rolled as in capsized?

Yes.

Is the driver okay?

Fortunately he is. Just shocked. He jumped out in time.

How did that happen?

They were loading on a steep hill. I guess it's not that difficult to roll. The bell loaders are relatively light and the slopes are steep.

My impatience grows as I try to reach my mother. I eventually speak to her when she is having a meal in the hospital restaurant. Her strained voice speaks of exhaustion and frustration. I'm told to get hold of Musa Nyembe and suggest that he and Nathaniel Naidu leave things until the morning. My mother is caught in a vice of indecision. She needs to come home early in the morning to sort out the technical problems, but she does not want to leave my father. I advise her to stay at the hospital.

I phone Simon to keep him informed, but my mother has already contacted him. I cry myself to sleep.

I'm suddenly woken with a jolt. At first I think it is part of the vivid dream that I'm having. But I'm brought to my senses when I hear a vehicle pulling up at the back of the house.

My heart races. It is just past midnight. Ocean barks agitatedly. I freeze. For a long time I listen and wait to hear more, imagining what is happening outside. Then the car engine cuts and I hear the sound of men's voices. I am even more afraid. I am immobilized by fear.

Eventually, the engine starts again and I creep down the passage towards the study. My legs tremble as my heart pounds. I do not put on any lights and when I peer into the dark night from behind the study curtain, I see the tail-end of a vehicle from the security company. They have obviously come on a routine check-up. I am so relieved that I am not alone in the house. Although if there were an emergency, I'm not sure that Nicholas could help much.

Two mugs of Horlicks cure my insomnia. When I finally wake, I discover that Sibongile has been waiting on the back veranda for half an hour.

Nicholas and I have breakfast together. I eat fruit and muesli, while Nicholas has a cooked breakfast of fried eggs (sunny-side up) and mushrooms.

I'd like to come into Durban with you today Gina.

Are you sure? I'm just going to be at the hospital. I could be there all day.

That's okay by me.

You might have to hang around a long time, Nicholas.

No problem. I'd like to get to a good bookstore, if you don't mind.

My sighing does not deter him.

I'll drop you at a shopping centre near the hospital.

I also need to buy a video-camera, Gina.

Really?

Yes, for my recordings.

Do you intend to do more?

As many as I can, Gina.

What are you going to do with them?

This is valuable field research, Gina.

I catch my breath. For the first time I feel that Nicholas is trespassing on my home territory. Then I reproach myself for being unreasonable. It's not as though I am interested in doing something with the work songs myself.

Are you also working on your thesis proposal at the same time, Nicholas?

I guess so.

In Cinque Terre you mentioned that you had to submit it quite soon. I thought...

There's still time.

Nicholas seems uncertain. He smears marmalade on his toast and gulps down his coffee. I do not press him for an explanation.

There's something I need to tell you, Gina.

I'm waiting for a great revelation.

I've just heard that I've had a poem accepted for publication by a well known poetry journal in the States, called 'Under Wraps.'

Well done, Nick. That's great.

I'm really pleased too. It's tough to get published. There's such fierce competition.

What's the poem called?

'Italian Encounter.'

I look surprised.

Did you write it in Cinque Terre? Siena?

Monterosso Al Mare, Gina.

I'm now even more interested in the poem. I remember that when we were together once in Italy, Nicholas mentioned he'd been up most of the night writing poetry.

I was so inspired when I looked down from my balcony and saw you reading poetry to Mrs Knowles that I wrote a poem.

Can I read the poem?

Okay. It's on my laptop. I'll show you this evening.

I'm reflective as we journey into Durban. I'm crossing off all the things on my mental list that I should have done at home before my departure.

You're quiet, Georgina. Is everything alright?

Fine, Nicholas.

I'm pleased that Nicholas doesn't press me further. He's aware that I'm uncomfortable driving in city traffic. I do not move into automatic mode when I am driving, like many people I know.

As we near the city, I dread what lies ahead, like a child returning to boarding school on a Sunday night. I adore my father, but I cannot bear seeing him so ill. What if he does not make it?

At the hospital, my suspicions are confirmed. Despite the new medication, my father's condition has become slightly more stable, but he has not really improved. He lies still, though jerking involuntarily at times, with his eyes closed. When the ventilator is removed for short periods he battles to breathe.

My mother is worried about the situation at home, but I reassure her that Musa Nyembe and Nat Naidu are working on the bell-loader problem. A neighbour has offered to lend us one of theirs until ours is repaired. My mother is relieved to hear that the damage to our machine is not as extensive as she feared, although some reconstruction will still be required.

I glance towards my mother and witness her sigh deeply from the pit of her stomach. My normally well-groomed Mum is in disarray. Her hair hangs limply on her shoulders like pieces of rope. The deep black rings under her eyes tell me that she has not slept much during the night. I hand her a change of clothes and she goes to shower.

In her absence I sit beside my father, talking gently to him. Not telling him news of the day as I always love to do, but instead, I try to offer words of comfort and reassurance. I am not very good at it. I want to take him in my arms and hug him, like I always did as a young child. I do not like the sterile atmosphere that prevents this. It is unnatural.

The sisters on duty are frequent visitors, monitoring his condition. They throw medical jargon around like paper planes and I realize how ignorant I am about how the body works, despite studying some anatomy at school.

I'm so relieved when my mother returns. Somehow *she* knows how to cope in this situation. It is so distressing that I do not know how to console either my father or myself. I feel helpless in this situation.

Where's Nicholas?

My mother whispers.

I dropped him at the mall.

She gets up and stretches her arms and legs.

I've pins and needles in my foot.

My mother takes off her shoe and shakes her foot around. After a while she makes a suggestion.

Don't you want to join him, Gina? I'm fine here on my own.

I hesitate, weighing up the situation.

Okay. I'll come back later.

Nicholas and I meet in the coffee shop attached to the bookstore, on the upper level of the mall. Patrons loll about, reading new purchases or paging through magazines and newspapers that they have appropriated from the bookstore shelves. I observe Nicholas's animated face. He comes alive in a bookstore, like an animal emerging from hibernation.

Is your Dad okay, Gina?

He's not doing well.

Involuntarily, tears well in my eyes. I scramble in my handbag for a tissue but I cannot stop the flow of tears.

I'm sorry. I wish I could help in some way.

I change the subject.

I see that you've already bought your video camera, Nicholas.

Yeah. I got a really good deal.

He removes the camera from the box and holds it up for me to see.

It's quite complicated.

Not really! It'll serve its purpose.

You really are serious about your research, Nick.

He raises his eyebrows that are fine lines above his sparkling eyes.

I really am Georgina.

But what about Montale?

Nicholas shrugs his shoulders.

What about *all the research you've already done on him. Collecting his poetry, reading endless papers about him and his work. Surely...*

I found you two books, Gina.

Nicholas removes them carefully from the plastic bag, savouring the moment. My eyes light up when I see what he has selected for me. The first is a technical book on travel writing and the other is a book by Paul Theroux called 'The Old Patagonian Express: By train through the Americas.'

As you know, Theroux is a revered travel writer, Gina. Thought you'd like to read more by him. Paps had read most of his books, including many of his novels.

I'm warmed by the fact that Nicholas is endorsing my plans to become a travel writer. I so appreciate the interest he is showing in my career, unlike other family members.

I've also bought your mother a book.

He digs into the packet and shows me the gardening book that he has chosen.

It's on indigenous landscaping.

She'll really like that, Nicholas.

The shop assistant recommended it to me.

Good choice.

I'd like to get to a university or reference library sometime, Gina. Is that possible?

Today?

Not necessarily. Just sometime...

I'm suddenly flustered by Nicholas's demands. I have tunnel vision at the moment. I'm not as flexible as I normally am. Not as open to new suggestions. The university library is some distance from the hospital and the thought of fighting the traffic to get there, discourages me.

Okay. Perhaps another day Nick?

Sure. But I'd like to pick up a few items at the grocery store on the way out, Gina.

There's one on the lower level.

I'm amused at Nicholas's purchases. Apart from toiletries, Nicholas buys olive oil, flour, khaki and black olives and a variety of cheeses.

On our return to the hospital I sense that my mother is reluctant to leave my father's bedside. I try to persuade her to return home for a day, but she refuses. I experience guilt because I find it too depressing to stay at the hospital. I am helpless and unable to alleviate my father's suffering, so I need to find activities that distract me from my father's condition.

When we arrive home, Nicholas prints out a copy of his poem and hands it to me.

ITALIAN ENCOUNTER

The poet is the worker
in the vineyard.

Ruthlessly, he cuts back the stray branches
so that they will eventually yield
a good harvest,
a full bodied wine of words,
to be savoured,
to inspire.

'Words' from the pen of Eugenio Montale
roll off your tongue.
They inspire one
who cannot
see--.
But who can hear
the pruning-shears of the poet
at work
in the Italian vineyard.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

It's as though the kitchen is in the eye of a dust storm. Flour coats the floor and fine particles hover in the air as Nicholas pounds dough on the centre island. He is making focaccia bread, using the cookery book I bought for my mother in Italy. He informs me, that theoretically, he is creating 'Focaccia con olive.'

I didn't know you were a cook?

Nicholas laughs.

I'm pleased I surprise you!

How did you learn to cook, Nicholas?

Because my mother was not often around when I got home from school, I had to fend for myself or starve.

So what are your specialities? I'm now interviewing master chef, Nicholas Chiavarri, who has recently spent time in some of the finest Tuscan restaurant kitchens...

Nicholas pounds the fleshy dough with his fists.

Nothing fancy, Gina. Just basic pasta! But I've learnt to negotiate my way around a recipe book so I can produce a few variations of the same basic dishes.

That's impressive.

I suppose Italian cuisine appeals to me because it's relatively easy to produce and also because of my roots!

Nicholas is too involved in his bread-making to notice my reaction. When he finishes kneading the lightly floured dough, he shoves khaki olives into the mixture so that they look like metal studs. Then he spreads the mixture onto a flat baking tray.

Here Georgina, try an olive. It's about time you did!

I hold the pitted green olive in my hand. I roll it around it for a few seconds before finding the courage to take a tiny bite. It is a little bland and oily, but the taste is not too unpleasant.

Not bad.

D' you see what you've missed out on all these years, Gina? You should always be open to new experiences!

Depends on what they are!

As Nicholas covers the dough and leaves it to rise for another half hour, I page through the cookery book. A few pages on from the bread recipe I am surprised to discover another olive recipe that is opposite a stunning visual. It is a bowl of shiny black olives that are decorated with twists of lemon peel. As I note the author's instructions to use only good-quality olives, as is the custom in Tuscany, I'm reminded of Nicholas's email to me, where he describes his experience of eating warmed khaki olives with strands of fragrant orange zest, at the square in Siena.

I'm also reminded of the spindly olive trees that I always noticed when out walking in Cinque Terre. I will always associate those trees with that place. How I long for those carefree summer days though they were not that carefree at the time!

The thump of machinery is a constant background noise these days as the fields in the vicinity of our house are being harvested. Cut cane is loaded into the transport trucks twenty-four hours a day, before being taken to the sugar mill, that is about twenty minutes drive away.

Nicholas asks Sibongile to take the bread out of the oven when it is ready. He urges me to accompany him to the fields as he rushes off to try out his new video-camera, but I decline.

I really have to check things on the farm, Nick. I need to find out the progress of the bell's repairs. Then there's also the question of the swimming pool pump.

Oh yeah! Georgina. Have they still not fixed it?

No. If it's not sorted out soon, the pool water will be permanently green. If that happens, it's so difficult to get the chemical balance right again because of our borehole water.

Nicholas has already gone out of the kitchen door. Because I have so much on my agenda, I walk around in a daze. I just can't get going. I find myself wandering into my parents' bedroom, without knowing why.

A photo of our whole family relaxing on the beach, that was taken by a passing fisherman last December, captures my attention. As usual my father is smiling, an action that produces the 'crow's feet' at the outer rims of his eyes. On closer inspection of my Dad I notice that his greying hair is in need of a trim. It is curling in his neck. My mother has her long spidery arms around my father and her wide smile reveals her even, white

teeth. Simon just makes the outside edge of the picture. He is striking a pose as usual, and because he is just out of the water, his hair is like matted seaweed on his forehead. My hair is scraped back off my face in a pony tail, revealing my high forehead and for some reason I am not smiling.

As I stand next to my mother I'm once again reminded that I am shorter than the rest of my family. Perhaps this is a throw-back to Grandma Rose. As I stand in front of the photograph I'm nostalgic for the times when we were together as a family. But it is too painful to linger there, so I quickly retreat.

I am told that the pool pump repair man is on his way and that Nat Naidu has ordered spare parts for the bell loader that will have to come from Johannesburg. They have already started the reconstruction of the vehicle.

The house is filled with the aroma of baking bread. It is a wholesome smell and I want it to linger for hours. It speaks of nourishing times in Italy. When it is slightly brown on the top Sibongile takes it out of the oven.

How 's your father, 'nkosasana?

He 's okay, Sibongile. Well, actually he 's very sick.

She shakes her head.

That fire, it was terrible. I was afraid it would get my house.

Was it close to you as well?

Too close. Your baba (father in isiZulu) got those burns. Not good, Georgina. I was frightened when I saw them.

I know, Sibongile. While all this was happening, I was overseas, totally unaware of what was going on.

I 'm worried about your mother, 'nkosasana...

She 'll be okay. She 's strong.

I hug Sibongile. She has always been there for me. I have always cherished the warm welcome that she gives me when I return home. I have so appreciated the way she has always prepared my favourite meals for me when there's been no one else at home. I'm warmed by the fact that she has been a substitute mother to me at times.

You must learn to cook, Georgina.

I nod. Then I laugh.

Later, Nicholas finds Sibongile and I commiserating in the kitchen while I am putting together an anchovy salad for lunch, using home-grown lettuce.

I cannot believe that you use so much out of your garden, Georgina.

It's all there.

You should see the wonderful produce in my deli in New York. Some is local, but some is imported from Europe.

You have to see this video, Gina.

Right now?

When it's convenient.

What were the women doing this time?

They were still spreading the trash today.

It does take a while to cover the entire field. Were they pleased to see you?

Yes. They greeted me warmly. They couldn't believe that I wanted to record their singing with this fancy video-camera.

Really?

Yes, Gina.

Perhaps you could do a documentary one day?

That's a possibility. This equipment will definitely make the transcription and translation much easier Gina.

It has been a while since I have seen Nicholas so enthusiastic.

We sit down to lunch on the veranda. Nicholas's bread is warm to the touch. Crusty and a little salty. I break off a chunk and dunk it in olive oil.

This is really tasty Nick.

Nicholas's field work has made him hungry. He eats three quarters of the loaf and then finishes the salad.

Your bread rose so well. I once tried to make bread and it never rose.

Perhaps the yeast you used was past its sell-by date!

Could be?!

I announce my intentions to indulge in an afternoon sleep. I am so weary.

When I wake, I hear Nicholas conferring with Sibongile and Muhle in the kitchen. I linger under the covers and seize the moment to read my new guide to travel writing. The

challenge for me at this stage is to find local places to write about, revisiting them in a radically new way.

There must be so few places left on this planet that no one has visited. I'm reminded of all those expeditions to unusual, untravelled places that took place in my grandmother's youth, and even before that. Everyone loved reading about risky adventures to exotic destinations, undertaken by travel heroes like David Livingstone.

Using the first person narrator, the traveller, would recount his experiences in order to inform those who had never been there, what they might encounter if they did. These travelogues made entertaining reading. But now, regular television and DSTV, with its National Geographic and other travel channels, enable one to be an armchair traveller, without even going out of one's front door! No longer does one have to travel physically in order to experience new places. And one even has the advantage of an edited version of the traveller's experiences.

And yet, I remind myself that someone has to produce the documentaries and travel programs, which confirms for me that there is a need for travel writing, despite the views held by my family.

I fall asleep again and when I surface, I notice that the shadows in the garden have lengthened. I text my mother to find out about my father's health. She responds that his condition is the same and she advises me to visit early the following morning.

Nicholas is in his room, committing his findings to his laptop.

Nicholas, are you sure that you're recording these songs in the right way?

How do you mean, Gina?

Do you have a guide to follow with regards to conducting field research? Interviewing techniques etc

I have that covered.

Thought you would, Nicholas.

His confidence is impressive.

I found a really good article on the internet, which stresses the need to consult the performers themselves in order to get an informative reading of their work.

Okay. I can see how that would be helpful Nicholas. It makes sense.

I'll have to go back to the field with Sibongile tomorrow, Gina. Could you spare her?

I guess so. I have to go back to Durban.

It's a pity that the workers have gone home by the time Muhle arrives home from school. It would greatly facilitate our task to have her in the field with us.

When Mrs Naidu hears about my father's health she sends a huge pot of chicken breyani and dahl to the house.

Here's your chance to try a genuine Indian meal, Nicholas.

Can't wait.

Breyani's not normally as highly spiced as the curry made in these parts.

Later, Nicholas and I sit in the kitchen savouring the breyani and dahl. Mrs Naidu has also made rotis as a savoury accompaniment to the meal.

I really like the split pea dahl.

It's really good, Gina. So smooth.

Have you ever considered how much of life revolves around food Gina?

I guess it's logical. One has to eat three times a day.

If you are fortunate enough, Gina.

The mango sorbet, that is hauled out of the freezer, soothes the palate. As usual Nicholas ends the meal with coffee. I quickly fill the dishwasher before joining him in the lounge. I close the cream shantung curtains, shutting out the night and turn on the lamps. Then I settle into a comfortable chair with my hot chocolate. My afternoon sleep has energized me.

After a while Nicholas speaks.

There's something that I've been wanting to tell you for a long time, Gina.

I am immediately suspicious. I recall all too readily, Nick's words to me in Cinque Terre, when he put the brake on our relationship. It was so disappointing. He takes a packet of chewing gum out of his pocket, offers me some, which I decline, and then chews a few pieces earnestly. It is as though he is fumbling, playing for time.

Do you remember me telling you that my late grandfather, Paps, left a bunch of letters when he died?

I do recall something like that.

Nicholas is watching me intently. It's as though he needs my full attention.

Hadn't your grandfather corresponded with Eugenio Montale at some stage? I remember you said...

Yes...

Nicholas clears his throat as he shifts his position in his chair.

That's one of the reasons why Montale was important to you...

Yeah. Well...

Nicholas hesitates. I wonder if he will ever be able to disclose what is on his mind. He is still stalling.

Just before I left New York City to fly to Pisa, my mother passed on all these letters to me that were in an old, wooden Cuban cigar box... I'm not sure if she'd read them all herself.

Does it matter?

Well...

'éeé I actually don't know how to say this.

I'm surprised that Nicholas is finding this so difficult. He's not normally short of words. He sighs deeply and locks the fingers of his hands together, stretching out his arms in front of him. He is experiencing great difficulty voicing his thoughts.

But this is different.

I sip my hot chocolate that is still warm.

What is different, Nicholas?

I give him time. I sense that he is struggling. It's obvious that he's very uncomfortable with what he intends to share with me. As I wait for his exposé, I observe him closely from the rim of my white mug. The steam that dances above it, creates a misty distance between us. Then I notice that tears are welling up in Nicholas's eyes.

Georgina?

Go on Nicholas.

I honestly don't know how to phrase this.

Leave it, if you'd prefer. Maybe another time...

I wait patiently as he fights back tears,

It's okay.

It's a long story, Gina...

I sense that he needs time and the assurance that I will be a committed listener.

I have all night ... when you're ready...

Okay.

Nicholas takes a deep breath but tears stream down his cheeks, causing him embarrassment.

If it's this difficult, just leave it, Nicholas.

I want to tell you.

He braces himself in the chair, sitting upright. Then he cups his hands around his coffee mug.

Okay...

I took the letters to Monterosso al Mare with me. My mother had only just given them to me and I didn't have a chance to read them before I left.

And?

I thought I would discover something of interest in the letters that my grandfather and Eugenio Montale had shared.

Did you?

That's not the point.

There was one letter from my grandfather that really disturbed me.

I'm sorry.

Nicholas looks down at the floor. I wait for a few minutes before I speak.

What was in it, Nick?

His body stiffens as a battle rages inside him. Suddenly, Nicholas sobs as he rushes out of the room. I want to run after him, but I decide to give him space. I then hear him blowing his nose in the bathroom. He is gone for a long while. In the meantime I grab a gardening magazine from a pile nearby and page through it.

Would you like some more coffee, Nick?

No, I'm okay.

I can't believe it, Georgina.

It is a rhetorical statement so I do not need to answer it.

In one of my grandfather's letters to my mother, he explains that my father was adopted.

I realize immediately that this surprise statement has far-reaching implications. Words evade me for a while.

When was it written Nicholas?

Soon after I was born, Gina.

That long ago?

It was about the time that my father left us.

I shake my head in disbelief.

So that means Paps is not a blood relative, Nick.

Yeah!

That's so hard for you. You were so close to him.

I can see how painful it is for Nick to recount this discovery. It has affected him deeply. It's as though something you have believed all your life is now no longer true.

All this time I've been reassured by the fact that even though my grandfather was a substitute father, he was at least my own flesh and blood. But he wasn't, Gina.

That's really difficult to come to terms with, Nicholas... I'm sorry.

Tears flow down his face. He quickly wipes them off with a tissue as if to deny their existence. As he composes himself he glances surreptitiously in my direction to gauge my reaction.

I understand, Nicholas.

Therefore my biological father, with whom I have no contact, is actually more closely related to me, than he is to his father.

That's right Nick. It's really tough to process that.

Yeah..I'm still dealing with it.

I suddenly recall Nick saying in Cinque Terre that he was dealing with a number of issues at the time. I reproach myself for glibly commenting that we are all dealing with issues most of the time.

Perhaps that partially explains my behaviour in Cinque Terre, Gina. I felt as though I was on an emotional roller coaster.

I do recall Nick's pattern of behaviour. Like high and low tides, he advanced and retreated towards me. It was so unpredictable. Yet I really liked him.

Does your mother know that you've read the letter and found out about your Dad?

I emailed her immediately from Italy.

What was her response, Nicholas?

We've had some really heated communication since then.

I can see why.

She was very upset that I found out in that way. She apologized for not telling me in person. She just didn't realize that that letter was with the others.

I am filled with empathy for Nicholas. Growing up without a father could not have been easy, despite the fact that Paps was so supportive of him. It's incomprehensible that his father has never kept in contact with him and his mother. I sense how uncomfortable his mother must be feeling.

Your mother must feel really bad about it, Nicholas.

I guess so.

Go easy on her, Nick. She must be going through a terrible time as well.

Ocean barks incessantly and I excuse myself. When I peer through the kitchen window I see him waiting expectantly to be let into the house. To stop him barking I let the dog in and place his blanket in the corner of the kitchen.

D'you think that your mother should've told you about your Dad earlier?

I sit on the couch with my legs folded under me.

She did say that she kept putting it off as the truth would be so devastating.

I can see that!

Nicholas's face looks strained. I walk over and sit close to him on the couch. This prompts him to continue.

My mother's been quite good about it really.

That's good to hear, Nick.

She's suggested that I take as much time off as I need to sort myself out.

Now I understand why you didn't hurry back to New York City after spending time in Italy.

Well, when my time in Florence fell through I was about to book a trip back to the States but then I heard about your father.

I really appreciate Nicholas's honesty. His openness has given me access into his personal life, much of which was hidden from me before.

Having not grown up with a father myself, I realize how important a father is in one's life.

I put my arms around him.

When I heard that your father's life was in danger, I wanted to be there for you.

I'm touched by Nick's compassion. But I'm also afraid. My father is desperately ill and I stand to lose him.

It's tough, Gina.

I can see that.

I'm now left with more questions than answers. I want to know more about my own father and his immediate family.

Are you going to try and trace them Nicholas?

I'm still considering it. You're so fortunate to have a family that is intact.

I know, Nick.

As I speak these words, they sound shallow, flippant. Yet I can really identify with Nicholas's pain.

Hey, Gina what about a late night movie on television?

Sounds a great idea to me.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Is that why you've lost interest in doing your masters on Montale's poetry Nicholas?

I guess so.

It is late. The silence of the night is interrupted by the sound of a barn owl calling and the distant hum of machinery as sugar cane is loaded into trucks.

Isn't it that relevant anymore?

Not really.

He glances at me to gauge my response.

I think you're right Georgina. I travelled to Italy to find out more about my Italian roots. At the time, my research on the work of an acclaimed Italian poet seemed so appropriate because of my origins.

I can see that.

But I guess I now realize that I could be Swedish or Irish for that matter...

You still have an Italian surname.

True, Gina.

Don't lose the memory of your grandfather, Nicholas. You had a lasting, special bond with him.

I guess.

You probably had a closer bond with your grandfather than many other people.

I suppose you're right, Gina.

Nicholas is restless during the night. He watches television, checks his emails, flushes the toilet many times, researches work songs and makes endless cups of coffee.

Next morning I mention to Nicholas that I am leaving for Durban but he is still in a deep sleep. As I drive down the hill I meet Sibongile en route to the house.

Don't know when I'll be back, S'bongile.

Travel safely.

As I turn onto the highway, I tune into the local radio station, but my thoughts quickly turn to Nicholas. I wonder why he doesn't often refer to his mother, Beth. Perhaps he's not that close to her. Now Nicholas realizes that he is part of an extended family about

which he knows very little. Finding out about them could create more problems for him. On the other hand, it could give him closure.

I have just passed through the toll when my mother tries to contact me. I scramble for my cell phone.

How 's Dad? Sorry I can't hear... You said it was urgent. Oh no!

I'll try to drive faster.

I have an excuse to exceed the speed limit, but the road is full of commuters heading for Durban. I cannot keep up with the speed of the fast lane traffic, so spend all my time ducking in and out of the slow lane. I feel as though a steam roller has rolled over me, squashing me flat. I grip the steering wheel tightly and keep going. Suddenly I feel the tension in my neck increasing.

The robots are against me as I reach the outskirts of Durban. I sit in commuter traffic for a while and it is some time before I reach the hospital. I sweep past the security guard at the entrance and run up the steps to the second floor. There is no time to wait for the lift. I arrive at the ward out of breath.

Staff are keeping a vigil at my father's bedside, next to my mother. My father is lying motionless and I sense that there is a problem.

Georgina 's here, James.

My Dad flutters his eyelids slightly, but does not respond any further.

The infection on Dad's chest won't heal, Gina.

I am angry.

Can't they do something more?

They're doing all that they can, Gina.

It's not good enough. Have you spoken to the physician?

He's been very attentive. He's put Dad on new medication. They're trying everything.

When the remaining sister slips out of the ward I move closer to where my father is lying and plead with him to get better. Then as I pour out my feelings for him, my emotions take over. As my mother moves towards me, I blurt out:

Sorry, it's too much for me. I can't just sit around here, waiting for something to happen. It's incredibly stressful.

Let's go for tea, Gina. I need a break.

I am amazed at how calm my mother is. Although anxiety is etched on her face, she does not verbalize her fears and worries about my father's health.

He's in really good hands, Georgina. Hold fast.

How's his breathing?

He's still on the ventilator most of the time, but it's the burn on the chest that we're worried about.

It's taking so long to heal.

Give it time, Gina.

My mother eats a slice of anchovy toast.

My breakfast, Gina.

Is that all you're having?

I pour a cup of Earl Grey tea for each of us and add two sugars to mine.

Is everything okay on the farm, Georgina?

It was when I left.

Nat Naidu and Musa Nyembe have both been in contact with me.

Okay.

They say we've been able to meet our daily allocations to the mill, despite the accident with the Bell, Gina.

That's what counts..

I'm about to comment that it is such a strain handling all this responsibility, but I suddenly realize that it is far worse for my mother.

I'm hoping to drive back with you this afternoon, Gina. I must get back to the farm. There are accounts to be paid.

Is Dad alright to leave?

I've been advised to go home for the night, Gina.

How can you leave him? He needs you.

Tears well in my mother's sad eyes.

The hospital staff are doing all they can, Gina. I'll be back first thing tomorrow.

It is only on our return journey home later that afternoon that my mother asks about Nicholas.

He's okay.

What's he up to?

He's still doing research on his work songs.

That's great, Gina.

I debate whether or not to tell my mother about his grandfather's letter, but it is too long a story. I have not even had much opportunity to talk to her about Nicholas.

What are his plans Georgina?

How d'you mean, what are his plans? Do you mean when's he going?

I didn't mean it like that.

It sure sounded as though you were asking when he was leaving!

Gina. Listen. I just wondered if he needs to get back to the States for university or if he intends to be around for a while longer.

I haven't asked him. Would you like me to?

My words are laced with sarcasm.

Georgina, you know that's not what I meant. He can stay as long as he likes.

My mother's insensitivity gets to me. Nicholas has finally had the courage to share something really deep and disturbing with me because he feels that he can trust me and now my mother is wondering when he is going.

Ocean welcomes us home warmly, jumping up at my mother. The tension eases from her face as she pats the dog. Ocean seizes the gap, rushes into the kitchen, and then through the house looking for Sibongile. Amazing how animals always acknowledge the hands that feed them!

An hour later, we see Nicholas returning from his field trip, accompanied by Sibongile.

This research of Nicholas is taking up a lot of Sibongile's time, Gina.

I know, Mum. But speak to him about it yourself.

My mother provides Sibongile with a progress report about my father.

He'll be alright.

My mother smiles in response to Sibongile's reassurance.

I rush to my bedroom and decide that I will try and do some work on the travel feature that I am putting together. As I start to work I can hear Nicholas processing his findings on his laptop down the passage. Suddenly my mother appears at the door.

Gina, may I come in please?

Sure.

My mother closes the door quietly behind her.

Gina I'm sorry that you misinterpreted my comments earlier. I didn't mean anything sinister by them.

I do not reply immediately as I fight the anger inside me.

In fact, I'm pleased that Nicholas has kept you company while I've been at the hospital. I would've worried about you staying in the house on your own at night.

Okay, Mum.

He may stay as long as he likes.

I shrug my shoulders.

I was worried that he may be bored, with you and I tied up with pressing farm matters, that's all...

He's used to being on his own, Mum. He's comfortable with his own company.

My mother sighs.

Sorry Gina. The tension's getting to me.

I hug my mother and am grateful that there are no hard feelings between us. I briefly outline the predicament that Nicholas finds himself in, now that he has discovered that his biological father is adopted. I also mention how he feels the need to abandon his proposed research on the Italian poet and focus on the work songs instead.

We must really help to facilitate his research, Gina.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

You seem so calm, Lindy, in spite of what you're going through right now.

You obviously haven't seen the ulcers in my mouth Nicholas or my nails?

My mother's amber-brown eyes widen as she fans out her hands on the table. Then she quickly retreats them. My mother's bitten nails are the first indication that she is under duress.

Some habits never die Georgina.

I've noticed. But don't start on mine!

I don't really cope well with stress, Nick. But I guess years of social work have helped me to discern between those things that I can do something about and those that I can't. But even then I still worry about situations.

I smile to myself. My mother does not need to confess that she is a worrier.

Nicholas, my mother and I are eating breakfast at an outdoor restaurant that is situated among old established trees, next to a nursery. It is too early to visit my father at the hospital so we are taking time out for a leisurely meal.

My mother points out the agapanthus plants that have blue flowers in the summer, the plumbago and plectranthus bushes. She has just lost me. My botanical knowledge ends with aloes!

Nicholas is reclining in his seat, seemingly at ease in this green haven in the city. A few toddlers play in a sandpit nearby and a man at the table next to us, wearing dark trousers and an open-necked navy pin-striped shirt, types fervently on his laptop with two fingers, showing impatience with his lack of speed.

Aren't you taught to type at high school, Georgina?

No. Most of us type with two fingers.

Wow! Boys and girls do mandatory typing courses sometime during high school back home.

They should insist on that here too, Gina.

I know.

I glance around me, feeling at one with my natural surroundings. Clouds float past the tall buildings and trees that dwarf us and a gentle breeze ruffles the leaves of the old

camphor tree under which we are sitting. After our early start and rushed journey into Durban, it is a great place to catch one's breath. Suddenly I'm startled by the screech of hadedas as they fly away, disturbed.

While we wait for our order, my mother fiddles nervously with the signet ring on the fifth finger of her right hand. There is a sentimental attachment between my mother and that ring. It was given to her mother by her father when they were going out and I seldom see her without it. As she twists the ring around her finger, it catches Nicholas's eye.

Does that ring have special significance, Lindy?

Actually it does. It was my mother's.

As my mother looks pensively at the ring, her thoughts tumble out of her mouth.

I lost my mother in a car accident, many years ago now. It was during my second year at Rhodes University. 16th July to be exact.

That's too bad, Lindy. I'm sorry.

Yes. It was so sudden and so premature.

I notice the pain in my mother's eyes.

It's a shame she never knew Georgina and Simon, Lindy.

I know. I've often thought of that.

A waitress arrives with the drinks and I help her off load them from her tray.

Did it take you a long while to get over her death Lindy?

I note that Nicholas is asking poignant questions.

It did. But I suppose I learnt perseverance, to just keep going, no matter what was happening at the time.

Had you met Dad by then?

I had just met him Gina. It was still early days in our relationship, but even then, I really hoped that our relationship would have a future.

My mother is in a relaxed mode and speaks her mind easily. I wonder if her openness is to help Nicholas gain insight into his own situation.

My mother's death was so final. It left me with such a sense of loss.

I can understand that Lindy. It takes a long time to get over the death of someone you really care about.

My situation was complicated in a way, as I was an only child of older parents and so I had to return to Durban to help look after my father.

That was tough on you, Lindy.

It was, but my father was devastated. I had no choice. In fact, he never fully recovered emotionally.

These nostalgic comments of my mother's remind me of the small, silver framed photograph of her parents that is on her bedside table. Strangely, my mother looks more like her father than her mother.

Did you just drop out of college then Lindy?

I literally did for six months Nick. I had no option.

I can see from his face that this comment of my mother's strikes a chord with Nick.

It was such a lonely time, though, as most of my school friends were away at university or working. My father was also very depressed.

How did you handle it Mum?

I tried to study through correspondence but I didn't get very far. I battled to focus on my studies as there was so much else to do.

I'll pour coffee.

Thanks Gina.

I realize now that I was also working through such anger at the time. I was angry that my mother had died and frustrated that I couldn't be at university.

Did you see much of Dad then?

Only briefly in the December holidays. But even then he and some mates went away to the Cape for most of the summer holidays that year. So that was tough too.

We are interrupted by the waitress who has returned with our food order.

I'm curious, Lindy. Did you ever finish your degree?

Fortunately, my father came to his senses and I returned to university in Grahamstown the next year. So yes, I was able to finish my degree.

So when did you and James marry?

A few years later.

Not straight out of college then.

Not quite.

Whenever he has the choice, I've noticed that Nicholas orders a cooked breakfast, but without bacon because of his vegetarian convictions. The wobbly eggs arrive on soft triangles of toast and he asks if they can be cooked longer.

I have this thing about runny eggs.

I make a mental note to remember that. My mother and I prove unadventurous. As creatures of habit, we order bran muffins.

What about your mother Nicholas? I presume she's in the States?

I cringe. Why is that always of interest to parents? Are we always an extension of our parents, rather than individuals in our own right? I have not yet had the chance to explain all the ramifications of Nicholas's tangled personal history. I'm sure he does not want to be reminded of that right now.

There's a long silence, during which Nick takes mouthfuls of food. I'm tempted to butt into the conversation, but I remain silent. I wonder if Nicholas will speak more about his family situation.

My mother raised me as a single parent, Lindy. I grew up not far from New York City.

My mother nods in a way that seems to indicate that she was expecting to be told that.

That's so courageous of your mother, Nick.

I guess so. My father left soon after I was born.

A steel resolve comes over Nicholas as he talks about his family. He sits more upright in his seat and I notice that he is more defensive than he was half an hour ago.

I see.

Although I have heard the details before, I still sense Nick's pain in recounting them.

I...I think he is in Texas. He went to Florida first.

I can see my mother debating whether or not to pursue this conversation further.

That must have been tough for you, Nicholas.

It was difficult. In fact I have never known my biological father.

Have you tried to make contact with him?

I'm surprised at my mother's forthright questions that fall out of her mouth so easily. I suppose these searching questions are the norm for her if one considers her training in Social Science.

I haven't wanted to. I've survived this far without my father. Don't forget that he made a choice and it didn't include my mother or me.

I order more milk for the filter coffee and spread cottage cheese on the halved muffin sections.

I had a wonderful grandfather, Lindy. Paps, my Dad's father, was a great substitute father.

That's good.

But surely that was a difficult arrangement for your mother after what his son did to you and her?

Now my mother is getting really bold. I'm not sure how Nicholas will respond. My mother may have hit a nerve. I'm thinking of ways to change the subject when Nicholas voices his thoughts.

I think she was glad to have my grandfather around. They got on well and he was a support to my mother who worked long hours.

Nicholas lights a cigarette. Then he orders a refill of coffee.

Wish there was more bottomless coffee in this country, Gina.

Yeah! There're not too many restaurants that offer it.

I'm astounded by Nicholas's forthright comments about his family. He is far less secretive than he was.

Most weekends my grandfather came out of the city, Lindy, to watch me play baseball matches or support me when I was in a school play.

What an amazing man, Nicholas.

Yeah. There was so much I admired about him, especially his compassion. He would help anyone in need.

That's a great attribute, Nicholas. Has that rubbed off on you as well?

Not really.

I've told Georgina how my grandfather volunteered regularly at a homeless shelter in New York City.

Gina must take you to our care centre, Nicholas.

That would be great.

I'm relieved that the conversation has veered away from Nicholas's (and my mother's) personal histories. But Nicholas continues, speaking from the heart.

I'm quite worried about my mother, Beth. She's withdrawn into her shell a lot lately.

Perhaps she misses Paps as well, Nick.

I guess you're right, Lindy.

A text message from the hospital informs my mother that my father's condition has stabilized. After breakfast we visit him at the hospital after dropping Nicholas off at a research library nearby.

As I enter the high care ward, I am surprised to see my father sitting more upright, supported by a voluminous pillow. He is reading a financial magazine, holding it up with his bandaged hands.

Gina!

You look so much better, Dad.

I feel it.

The colour in my father's face has changed from ash-grey to sallow-skinned. Someone has shaved him and it looks as though his hair has been brushed. He explains that his body is responding to the new medication and it seems as though the infection on his chest is at last under control. He explains that he is relying less on the ventilator.

Hey Gina! Look at this travel article in the Life section of my magazine.

I grab the magazine from him and quickly turn the pages.

Hey! It features Italy. The Amalfi Coast.

When my mother sits on the chair next to my father's bed, he immediately hurls a barrage of questions at her, which prompts me to believe that he is on the mend.

How many tons did we get into the mill this past week, Lindy?

Oh James. Let me catch my breath. I've only just arrived!

Sorry.

Phew! You always were a workaholic James!

I've been out of running the farm for so long. I need to catch up now.

I gaze endearingly at my father. It is so good to see animation in his face.

I actually don't know how many tons are in. I haven't checked the deliveries today. But I'm sure we've made our allocation in the last twenty-four hours.

What've you been doing Lindy?

Stop it! Do you want to phone Musa to check the details with him?

My father smiles. It is so good to see the return of the crow's feet to the outer rims of his eyes.

I'm nearly out of here, Georgina!

Not quite yet, Dad. It'll be some time.

Did they say when they were discharging you James?

They've hinted at it.

Could be a while yet, babe... Be patient, James.

Not if I have the choice. They said I'd be discharged in a day or two.

My mother raises her eyebrows.

James, you really need to be wise. You need to be sure that the burns are no longer in danger of infection again. You're in really good hands here.

I leave my parents to debate the issue. I drive back to the research library that is housed in an old historical building that has a panoramic view of the city. When I arrive at the library, I notice that Nicholas is waiting his turn to photostat some papers.

We are not allowed to talk inside the library, so we sit on the stairs outside and chat while the queue grows slowly shorter. Nicholas's tempted to smoke, but I dissuade him.

Didn't you see the sign at the entrance to the library?

This is so mind-blowing, Georgina.

What?

The information I've found. In the past, few if any, of these work-songs, which are an important part of the oral literature of KwaZulu-Natal were even recorded. They were not even part of the recognized literary canon for many years.

Blame apartheid, Nicholas.

Yeah. Although they were part of the cultural expression of the majority of the population, they were excluded. They were not even considered literature!

I revel in Nicholas's passionate response to the research he is doing. Although he was reasonably enthusiastic about his proposed thesis on the work of Montale, his response to the work songs far surpasses that.

The work songs are such amazing social commentaries, Georgina.

I know. What about that song you recorded about the guy who wouldn't pay lobola because his girlfriend was irresponsible.

Sure. If one didn't record the social commentary, one might just be left with the fact that he refused to pay the bride price. One would never know why.

I put my arms around Nicholas and kiss him. Some things never change. He hasn't shaved this morning.

Georgina. It's so amazing. Academics who recorded these songs in the past said things like: the texts are just repetitive and without meaning. Another ancient academic said that their simple form was the most appealing part about them. They just had no idea of the complexity and meaning of the songs.

Perhaps they didn't speak the language, so they weren't aware of the value of the songs?

I guess that's part of it Gina.

So in your dissertation, you're going to prove them wrong. Right Nicholas?

I'm hoping to.

I stand up to stretch my legs.

Hey Nicholas, you're next in the queue!

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

My mother has been speaking to her friend, Nikita, an anthropologist and farmer's wife, about Nicholas's research. This morning Nikita Pillay phones to offer Nicholas the opportunity of recording songs on their farm, about thirty kilometers north of us.

Nicholas is really pleased as it should give him a more varied sample of songs.

Can we go today, Georgina?

I'd really hoped to do some of my own writing, Nicholas.

I cannot resist his pleading eyes.

As we travel through our farm I notice the cane trash blowing around the fields. I can hear the wind howl like a wild dog. It is one of those days when one tries to find something to do indoors. One does not envy those who are working outside.

Are you even going to hear the songs in this wind, Nicholas?

Gina, it's worth a try.

The landscape north of us looks bleak. It has also been ravaged by fire and the sugar cane looks as dry as a bone left out in the sun for too long.

We really need more rain, Nicholas.

I can see that. Does the sugar cane die on you?

It can. But it's quite hardy.

Are the rains seasonal Gina?

Yes. They usually come in Spring with the strong winds of August and September. But we do expect some rain in the winter.

Danesh Pillay meets us at the entrance to his farm. Nearby some female workers on the farm are planting sugar cane. They are putting metre long strips of cane lengthwise into the ploughed furrows. The women are all dressed in a bright orange uniform, with colourful head scarves and knee-length black rubber boots.

Danesh introduces Nicholas and I to the workers and explains Nick's objectives in fluent Zulu. They laugh and gesticulate when they see the camera, but soon return to their work.

As they perform their task, Nicholas records their voices while Nikita and I make notes. In the middle of the song, the women emulate the crying sound of a baby. I'm still

wondering about its significance when Nikita explains it to us while we are drinking tea from thermos flasks in the field. When the women take their breakfast break, Danesh gives a rough translation of the songs for Nicholas, who jots down comments at lightning speed.

It's interesting to note that the women are singing a lullaby here, Nicholas.

Why so?

The task does not require the women to work together in unison, so they're not singing to get rhythm, like some of the other songs you've probably recorded.

Yeah Nikita! That's when one woman sings solo and the others form a chorus. Right?

Correct.

My interest in work songs is increasing. I study the song that has been transcribed and translated by Danesh. It is fascinating.

Umama akekho	Mother is not here
Uyothenga isinkwa	She has gone to buy bread
Angishayo ngaso	And hits me with it
Athi ngidle amasi	Saying I have eaten the maas
Awadliwa yimi	It is not I who has eaten it
Adliwainja	It was eaten by the dog
Inja kaGogo	Granny's dog
Emabalabala *	The one with the spots
Emabalabala	The one with the spots
Emabalabala	The one with the spots

- the women mimic the crying sound of a baby.

But Nikita there's a sense of rhythm when the women are describing the grandmother's dog. The one with the spots.

Yes, Nicholas. The repetition there enforces it.

I see that the leader and chorus sing this song together, Nikita.

Yes.

I sense the anxiety of the mother who has hit her child in utter frustration. She is so dismayed that the maas (sour milk in isiZulu) has been eaten that she does not even stop to enquire who ate it, before lashing out at the child.

I try to ascertain the deeper meaning in this song. Nikita suggests that there are probably financial difficulties in what is probably a female-centred household. Perhaps the grandmother, Gogo, is too old to be looking after a dog, let alone a child, while presumably the mother does agricultural work nearby. Though the song does state that the woman has gone to buy bread, she may have done this when off duty. Perhaps the woman in question is unemployed and has no male support, as is the fate of many rural women. For me this social commentary underlines many problems that rural women face.

Nicholas sits down and we drink another mug of tea. It is cold in the wind, but I button up my jacket to keep warm and cup my hands around my mug. At Nicholas's side is a book about the oral tradition written by Ruth Finnegan.

That looks impressive, Nicholas, but how would these songs interest an American audience?

Well, it's original research on African oral poetry.

Lindy tells me you're a poet, Nicholas.

Well, yeah! At least I can say that I'm a published poet.

Have you written a book of poetry?

No. But I've had one of my poems accepted in a prestigious literary journal recently.

That's a good start.

I've almost enough poems for a collection now, Nikita.

The women resume their work, laying filter press on top of the sticks of cane in the furrows.

Why do you use filter press Danesh?

It keeps the cane moist, Nicholas.

Do you buy it, like a chemical?

It's a by-product of the sugar mill.

Danesh, I was just wondering where these women live?

Most of them live off the farm. Quite a few of them live in the Tugela Valley. Others live in a new housing development nearby, established by government.

Which is where?

Right over there.

Nicholas and Nikita ask the women questions about the songs that Nick has recorded, while I go for a walk. Not far away is a clump of trees near a stream that provides shelter from the wind. Again I'm reminded of my father as he has won a local environmental award for his work on rehabilitating riverine areas. When I amble back I see that Nicholas is still engrossed in his work.

Should I leave you here and come back for you, later Nicholas? I'm really cold.

He's welcome to stay, Georgina. But the women knock off early afternoon.

Nicholas decides to return home and spend the afternoon writing up his findings.

I seize this time as a good opportunity to do market research for the article on Italy that I have almost finished. I'm making good progress when my mother asks me to do a grocery shop for her in town as Muhle, Sibongile's daughter, needs to get to a dentist urgently.

I'll take her and then do the shop while she's at the dentist, Mum.

You'll have to hang around too long, Georgina. I'll take her.

I suddenly realize that the only way that I will be able to get more work done, is if my father returns home. I keep urging my mother to facilitate his release from hospital.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Our nearby town does not boast a great variety of restaurants. Take-aways, such as pizzas, are available but the proprietors are reluctant to deliver them to outlying areas. There was once a Pakistani restaurant, but it disappeared as quickly as it appeared. The two franchised chicken take-away outlets are on the opposite ends of the town. One near the town centre and the other near the taxi rank.

Nicholas and I are about to choose one for lunch, when I'm reminded of The Curry Den, which is modestly situated at the back of a building, the front of which faces the main street of the town. It obviously attracts its clientele through word of mouth, rather than location as one has to access the restaurant through a narrow alleyway between buildings.

The décor is eclectic. There are a few original African art works on the moss green walls, mostly local landscapes and portraits, but they are placed at great intervals between each other, defying stylistic placement. A string of fairy lights dances around the walls, lighting up the dark corners and purple cloths are thrown carelessly over the tables. The entrance is hardly grand but the smell of the food is enticing, making it a favourite venue for locals or those who are passing through town. Nicholas is very excited to experience local cuisine.

It is a Friday and the restaurant is packed with local patrons who greet each other by name. Nicholas and I are greeted by the proprietor of the crockery store.

You haven't phoned for your curry, yet!

I'm having it today!

The table is a little rickety. Nicholas summons the waiter who places a wedge of cardboard beneath the shorter, troublesome leg.

This reminds me of diners in the States, Georgina.

Diners?

In many little towns there are these small diner restaurants where the same old regulars meet for breakfast day after day, year after year.

Were you part of that?

I used to often go to the diner in our main street as a child. It was a small prefabricated building.

On your own?

No, with Paps.

I can just imagine Nicholas's grandfather taking him to a diner. He probably knew many of the locals himself.

They serve oily breakfasts. Then hamburgers, French fries and sodas for lunch. But there's such great camaraderie there and the patrons look out for each other.

Sounds interesting.

Sometimes you see an old jukebox in the corner or car license plates lining the walls of the narrow space.

Do you still get diners?

Yeah! But mostly in towns that are off the beaten track.

There is no printed menu in The Curry Den. The day's specialities, which I'm told are the same every day, fly off the waiter's tongue with ease. Nicholas has some difficulty understanding the accent of the waiter.

Can't decide between the bunny-chow and a plate of vegetable samoosas, Gina.

Take the bunny-chow.

What is it?

I'm about to explain, when a sample is brought to the table by a waiter who is hovering nearby. It consists of a half-loaf of bread that has been hollowed out and filled with curry. In front of us, the waiter takes off the bread lid that has been plonked on top of the curry, allowing the spicy aroma to escape.

Wow! Smells so good. What's inside?

Chicken, lamb or vegetable curry, Nicholas.

I'll take the vegetable curry.

Me too.

You want Extra Mild (no chillies) Mild, Medium, Hot and Extra Hot (lots of chillies)?

It's safer to go for the mild, Nicholas. It will be hot enough.

I'll take the Hot.

You'll be sorry, Nicholas.

I have to confess that I have never sampled a bunny-chow. I tell Nicholas that bunny-chows originated in KwaZulu-Natal when Indians came from India to work on the sugar cane farms. Because they were too busy to make their own Indian breads, they used the local Western loaves of bread that were available and adapted them for their needs. Bunny-chows were invented as a convenient way of transporting curry to the workplace.

So the containers for the curry are disposable, Gina! They're eaten!

Yes. No dishes to wash afterwards!

What's the origin of the term, Bunny-Chow?

The waiter overhears us and sidles up to the table, putting down a jug of iced water. He explains that because bunny chows are eaten with the hands, the action is like that of a rabbit. Chow, he explains is just a slang word for food. He then demonstrates how we should tackle our food with our hands.

I'm fascinated with the meal in front of me. I slowly taste the spiced vegetables, while Nicholas throws caution to the wind. Suddenly Nicholas douses the flames in his mouth with water, grabbing the ice out of the glass to chew.

Phew!

I cannot help laughing.

I warned you Nicholas! Mild is quite hot enough!

The waiter enquires if there are any fires to put out. Nicholas admits to one and orders vanilla ice cream to quieten his taste buds. I'm offered Chai Tea.

The foods of a country offer such interesting insights into the culture of that country, Gina.

I know, Nicholas. I cannot wait to travel and experience new cultures first hand. Italy was such a great experience.

I now need to eat some African food.

Sure. I'll get Sibongile to make us some at home.

How's your travel article coming on?

The one on Italy?

It's almost done. I'm so excited. I've already emailed an enquiry letter to a local magazine that features travel articles.

On the way home, Nicholas and I stop off at the Aids centre. We find that Miriam Dlamini is short-staffed. She asks Nicholas and I to help serve soup to those who are patiently waiting at tables placed throughout the room.

In the kitchen the women sing as they chop vegetables for the next batch of soup. Nicholas soon loses interest in serving soup and bread and wanders through to the kitchen. When I catch up with him I find him stirring the soup while singing along with the helpers.

The solidarity expressed by these women in song is so cool, Gina.

I know. Their singing brings them closer together. Through their songs they can voice their concerns to one another.

On the way home Nicholas hums one of the songs. He mentions that he'd like to return to the centre to record the women's singing.

So women not only sing when they're in the fields, Nicholas?

Not at all. They sing in many work situations. I even noticed that they sing together while washing soup bowls.

The harmonizing is so beautiful, Georgina.

I could hear it too, Nicholas.

As we drive up the steep hill towards home, Nicholas's enthusiasm continues.

Works songs can be highly political too, Gina. I read in research journals that during the days of apartheid, song was often the women's only legitimate form of expression.

I can understand that Nick. Remember they were considered second-class citizens. They were discriminated against in the work-place and at home and they could not even vote.

I've read that song was also a means of protest. The women sang euphemistically about issues that they could not address in public, Gina.

The sun hovers above the hills that landscape the western horizon. This afternoon, the sun is a pale yellow orb, that is only just visible as it starts its descent.

The days are lengthening, Nicholas. Spring's not too far away.

So is Fall back home, Gina!

I noticed that many of the songs sung at the centre were religious songs, Nicholas.

I heard that too, Gina.

Nicholas shows me a transcription of a song that one of the women in the kitchen has written down for him on a scruffy sheet of paper next to the names of the singers.

Leader (A) Unalo yini wena?	Do you have it?
Chorus (B) Nalo, nalo, ithuba lokuthandaza?	Do you have the time to pray?
(A) Unalo yini wena ?	Do you have it?
(B) nalo, nalo, ithuba lokuthandaza ?	Do you have the time to pray?
(A) Unalo yini wena?	Do you have it?
(B) Nalo, nalo, ithuba lokuthandaza?	Do you have the time to pray?

I comment on the repetition that occurs.

Yes, Georgina, it's the call and response mode of singing that Nikita spoke about when I was recording the women's songs on their farm. Just these phrases are repeated over and over again and rhythm's important here.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

It is dusk. I am sitting on the front veranda reading 'The Old Patagonia Express' by Paul Theroux, the book that Nicholas gave me. It kindles the travel writing flame inside me, making me more determined than ever to travel and write. I hope it will be in that order. Although I may well have to write in order to travel.

The north-easterly wind that started early in the day has blown itself out. When I look out the front, past the scorched aloes and across the landscape that has been stripped bare of sugar cane, I'm once again made aware of the sense of space that inhabits my world. I wonder how long it will last. Developments are galloping up the coast. There are land claims.

Nicholas reads next to me, sipping chilled wine.

I'd give anything for a bottle of Sciacchetra right now, Gina.

It's meant to be a nostalgic moment, but I giggle to myself behind my hand when I recall servicing his room.

Do you care to share the joke?

I could tell quite a lot about you from cleaning your room, Nicholas.

How so? Just saying that makes me feel exposed!

It was the only wine that you drank when you were in Cinque Terre! I lost count of the empty bottles I removed from your bin!

That's sneaky. I was there for quite a while though.

My mouth waters for an anchovy salad. Which reminds me, I still need to put together an article on the anchovy industry of Cinque Terre.

Who was that woman that you interviewed in the old town of Monterosso Al Mare?

Oh! Nicholetta Rossi. The fish monger.

That's right.

I never did get to try 'Tian', the anchovy dish with potatoes and tomatoes!

Next time, Gina.

I suddenly rush to the kitchen, slice open the plastic bag, drain the liquid off and place the khaki olives that I bought as part of my grocery shop, into a white porcelain bowl. I do not heat them, but I place zests of orange on top. Nicholas devours them.

These aren't as good as the Tuscan olives, Gina. But they're pretty darn good!

Agreed.

There's a cool breeze so Nicholas and I move inside. I notice that Sibongile has cooked us an African meal. She has made imifino (spinach in isiZulu) and fish. I remind myself to tell Nicholas how Sibongile has just gone into the fields to pick wild spinach or what I call weeds, for the dish.

College's starting mid September, Georgina. We're almost there.

True.

Suddenly I register what he is saying.

I had an email today from Donovan at The Downtown Deli asking me when I was returning to New York.

What did you tell him, Nicholas?

I hold my breath.

Early September, Gina.

But hey! I thought that you were going to take time out.

It did cross my mind.

Didn't your mother say you could take as much time out as you needed, Nick?

That was the plan.

I am so disappointed that Nicholas is considering returning to New York City. Just when our relationship was going well.

Why have you changed your mind?

I feel really focused, Gina. For the first time in ages. I must get going now.

Is your thesis proposal in yet?

I emailed through my proposal on Zulu work-songs a few days ago.

Really?

I should receive confirmation from the faculty any day now.

I suddenly feel so sad. Words evade me. I look for solace in the landscape of my youth that has nourished me for so long. In this light, it is fading fast.

I've thought about us, Georgina.

You have? And?

There's some great places to travel to in the States. We could always get on a Greyhound bus or a train! There'll be scope for many travel articles!

My heart sinks. I wonder how I am going to get to the States. I barely got to London last time. Right now, I'm not even able to get to Johannesburg.

I'll have to write a lot of articles, Nick. That's the easy part. Placing them's more difficult.

I know you can do it Georgina.

We sit talking in the dark, until I light a candle. It is not long before I see the headlights of my parents' car come closer and closer, enshrouded in dust. When I hear my father's voice I run to the back door. I hesitate before greeting him as he still looks so fragile.

Ocean barks incessantly when he sees my mother and father.

Georgina, grab Ocean. He'll knock your father over.

It's so good to see you, Dad.

Great to be home.

I almost trip over Ocean but Nicholas comes to the rescue. He dive tackles the dog and strongly encourages him to return to his kennel.

We all eat dinner by candlelight, savouring sweet potato and coconut soup and homemade whole wheat bread. It is ages since we have had a meal together.

I'm pleased to see that you're still here, Nicholas.

But not for long, James.

My mother gasps.

Why's that? I've grown used to having you around the house, Nicholas. What about your research?

I've got a good sample of songs now, Lindy.

He even recorded some at the centre.

That's amazing.

I'd like to just record a few more songs in the next couple of days, then I should be done.

What's the rush Nicholas?

My father hardly knows Nicholas, yet I sense the rapport between them.

My Masters course starts soon and I have to get back to work in the Deli, James.

Are you sure?

Quite sure, James. I've been travelling since May.

After supper while we are drinking coffee in the lounge, my father hands me an envelope. I can see the look of anticipation on my mother's face. I slowly ease the back flap with my fingers, trying to visualize the contents of the envelope.

Come on, open it Georgina!

What's the hurry?

I suddenly tear open the long envelope that has my name on it in italicized print.

I don't believe it!

What Gina?

It's an open return ticket to London, Nick.

My father beams at me, producing the crow's feet at the edges of his eyes.

In order to be a travel writer, you need to travel, Georgina. We just thought that this would be a good start.

70,732 words

University of Cape Town

Dianne Stewart

Private Bag X10610

Stanger/KwaDukuza 4450

KwaZulu Natal

Phone: 032 4848280

0832889204

Email: dirod@iafrica.com

University of Cape Town