

Careless Human Acts

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1976

SATURDAY, 5 JUNE

“The possibility of a ‘free vote’ on the contentious Prohibition of the Exhibition of Films on Sundays and Public Holidays Bill is being canvassed in opposition parties. According to the Bill, any person violating the law could be fined up to R1500 or be imprisoned for up to 12 months, or both.”

—*Rand Daily Mail*, 5 June 1976

Elsa 1320

‘Coffee or tea?’ The air steward smiles, fake as his hairpiece.

‘Wine.’ The bearded figure hunched over the foldout tray raises his index and middle fingers in a manner that could be interpreted as offensive. ‘Two.’

Eyebrows raised, the steward transfers his attention to the blonde seated next to him.

‘And for you, madam?’

Elsa shifts her weight to reduce the pressure of the dildo against her cervix. ‘I’m fine,’ she lies, fishing for her yellow box of Rembrandt Van Rijns in the ruched vinyl seat-pocket ahead.

Banned from Africa’s airspace, SAA has tried to make up for the additional two-hour travel by giving each seat more space. Still, visibility in the cabin is veldfire poor.

‘What’s the point,’ Derk had sneered when Elsa had suggested they book in the non-smoking section. ‘It percolates through the whole damn tin can. Besides, smoking is the only thing that makes the stench of other people bearable.’

Derk’s misanthropy had once amused Elsa. They had been a team – Derk in the starring role, she his captivated audience. She wasn’t sure when exactly she started bearing the brunt of Derk’s caustic observations. Not that Elsa couldn’t handle Derk’s bile. She may have looked fragile – the delicacy of her wrists and fingers such that chain-links had to be removed from bracelets; her rings resized – but she was no wilting flower. She understood that there was a price to pay for marrying an artist. They suffered, and sometimes you did too. You made your bed, as her mother liked to say. Even if lying in it was entirely without reward.

Elsa flicks open the top of the slim gold lighter she wears on a chain around her neck. Placing the cigarette tip in the flame she sucks the hot burn in, then closes her eyes to blow out a thin jet stream of smoke.

If she could get rid of the thing *now* she would, but where? Far too big to flush away. *Could passenger Elsa du Toit please come forward to claim...* No, she would have to grin and bear it. Yet another of her mother’s homilies, though Elsa can’t recall her mother ever grinning.

She runs a hand along one of the tightly woven braids, fingering the rubber band holding it in place. ‘It’s not a school expedition,’ Derk had jeered while she plaited the strands into two blonde ropes. She hadn’t told him why. A woman in pigtails, contravening the Immorality Act? She closes her eyes again. The less Derk knew, the better. Elsa wouldn’t put it past him to tip off customs, if only for the perverse pleasure he would take in telling Paul that his mother had been taken into custody for entering the country with a rubber cock jammed inside her. The thought produces an involuntary shudder. She shifts again, transferring more weight onto the armrest.

‘Will you stop fidgeting?’ Derk glowers, mouth set in a compressed line. ‘I’m trying to concentrate here.’

‘On what? All you’ve done is stare at that paper.’

Derk covers the page with his arm.

‘I am *thinking*, Elsa. Something you could do more often.’

Ignoring him, Elsa stubs her cigarette into the hedgehog of butts in her armrest.

‘Do you mind Derk? I really need the loo again.’

‘What are you, incontinent?’ Derk drains the bottle, then drops it to the floor where it clanks against the others rolling under his seat. Pushing his notepad into the seat pocket, he heaves himself upright, ignoring the glare from the passenger in front.

Contracting her pelvic floor muscles, Elsa is carefully making her way to the toilets at the back of the Boeing when a hand reaches out and stops her.

‘You okay, love?’

A man of indeterminate age, on the portly side, with heavy jowls and a nose that suggests a proclivity for alcohol. He inclines his head back towards the toilet door.

‘You feeling nauseous?’

‘Do I look nauseous?’

‘No, you look great.’ He smiles. ‘But if you are, Bendectin should see you right. Or is it the nerves maybe?’ Pulls the rucked pocket back. ‘I got some Valium here, Librium too.’

‘What are you, a pharmacist?’

His cheeks are as red as his nose. ‘Ha!’ He offers his hand, says something indistinct.

‘And you are?’

Elsa pauses momentarily before grasping his hand. ‘Louisa,’ she says.

‘Lovely. You look just like a Louisa,’ he says, not letting go of her hand. ‘Look, why don’t you sit down? Take a load off. There’s a seat right here.’

Noting that the loo door is opening, Elsa removes her hand. ‘Sorry, but I do actually need to throw up.’

The cigarette Elsa lights does not quite mask what the last passenger left behind, but privacy is its own relief, and she takes her time before flipping back the lock, ready to run the gauntlet again.

Thankfully Derk has fallen asleep; slack-jawed, yellow-stained fingers curled in his lap. Elsa takes a seat across the aisle, tries to control another rush of panic. What if the plane crashes? Her mother’s grim face flashes before her. Marion, who wouldn’t be caught dead without suitable underwear, asked to identify her daughter’s corpse, with this *thing* jutting out. She would disown her. *Ons is mos ordentlike mense.*

The double bounce of an imperfect landing wakes Derk. He sits bolt upright, bewildered, hair mussed. Elsa reaches over and squeezes his arm. He turns to look at her, confused to find her on the other side of the aisle, his large eyes glinting wet in the low lights of the plane, before collapsing back into his seat. He keeps his eyes closed, ignores the staccato of unclicking safety belts, the passengers lunging up into the aisle to wrest their bags down from overhead bins before they stand belly to back, eyes averted, waiting mutely for a door to open.

Finally the first shuffled steps, and the human river dribbles along the aisle and down the narrow staircase into the cold night. Only once the craft is completely clear does

Derk heave himself up and make his way down the aisle, somewhat unsteady on his feet.

Ignoring the stewards' cheery goodbye, Derk grips the railing and concentrates on the flight of stairs. He is wheezing by the time they reach the airport building and, as the doors slide closed behind them, is wracked by a cough – a wet, hacking sound that has him bent over, red-faced, a hand on each thigh. Struggling to breathe, he straightens up, and allows Elsa to lead him to the back of the queue where he complains loudly that Sartre would know what real hell was if he'd ever flown economy into Jan Smuts in the dead of night. Elsa smiles and nods. She often does this when Derk is mid-tirade – so anyone glancing over would assume active engagement when in fact she is only half-listening, her input neither required nor welcome.

By the time they reach the passport official – a burly man with a broad but neatly snipped strip of fur hiding a fleshy upper lip – Derk is silent. The official stamps Elsa's passport, then stops to study Derk's. His eyes flick between the stern black-and-white photograph taken six years ago and the wild-eyed man in front of him, bloated and in full colour.

Elsa steps closer. 'Is daar 'n probleem, meneer?'

He looks at her again, an appreciative look not lost on Derk, but he stamps the passport. Heart thudding, Elsa leads the way to the baggage carousel where she can see her large green case, Derk's lone battered brown rectangle trailing behind.

Derk hauls them off, almost unbalancing himself. She helps him place them neatly on the trolley, then lets him push it towards the green-lit corridor, leaning against it like a Zimmer frame. *This is it*, Elsa thinks, adrenaline causing an army of microscopic ants to pinprick down her arms. As they approach the customs officer Elsa tilts her head to one side. 'Naand, meneer.' Her smile is flirtatious. 'Die laaste ou agterosse.' He nods, and then they are through, the doors sliding closed behind them.

Elsa's relief is visceral.

'Derk, I'm sorry, but I need the loo again.'

Not waiting for his response she takes small, quick geisha-steps across the arrivals hall. Halfway across, she glances back. Stops. The trolley has been abandoned. The

suitcases are still there, but no sign of Derk. And then, just beyond the trolley, she spots him.

Elsa's steps are even quicker as she backtracks to where Derk is lying spread-eagled on the floor. Unwilling to crouch down in case the dildo shoots out, she half bends, a Victorian in a stay.

'Derk, what happened?'

Derk opens his mouth and emits a wretched '*meh-eh-eh-eh*'.

A passable imitation of a bleating sheep.

Elsa feels a hot wave of anger wash over her. 'Jesus Derk.' She looks around the hall, almost empty. 'What the hell has got into you?'

It takes a few seconds for Derk's eyes to focus on her. 'Tired of being treated like a sheep, Elsa. Herded like a dumb beast to the abattoir. If I'm going to be treated like a fucking animal, I'll act the part.' He closes his eyes and emits a loud '*Meh-eh-eh*'.

'Don't be ridiculous. For heaven's sake Derk!'

Derk response is to ratchet up the volume.

Elsa sighs. She suddenly feels very tired. She wonders for a minute what would happen if she just lay down next to him. Closed her eyes and let Derk get on with the business of being a sheep. But the rubber phallus is now jutting against her panty.

Elsa changes tack.

'Darling, you're right of course,' she says, her tone soothing. 'It's a disgrace. But you can't lie here bleating about it. Someone might call the police.'

'That's exactly what I want them to do. I want to lay a charge against SAA for inhumane treatment. Tell them to call the SPCA too.'

'Derk, please. You don't want to end up like Jack Nicholson do you?'

Derk opens his eyes.

'What?'

‘Frontal lobotomy?’

‘Randal McMurphy, Elsa. The character’s name was Randal.’

Elsa shakes her head, sighs. ‘Look, we’re both tired, right? We really need to get home, Derk; get back to Paul. You can lay charges tomorrow, but right now we need to get some rest. That’s right.’ Elsa keeps her tone soothing as Derk pushes himself up. She rolls the trolley closer, unpegs the cases. ‘Sit here while I just quickly go to the ladies.’

The release is wonderful. She swaddles it in toilet paper, wedges it into the bottom of her handbag, then steps out to wash her hands.

Derk was right. The woman in the mirror could not – even at a glance – be mistaken for a schoolgirl. Elsa leans closer to study the fine lines around her eyes, holds her gaze as she flicks the water off her hands. Still, not bad for 36, even if Derk never misses an opportunity to say she isn’t the woman he married. Not that she wants to be the woman she was 17 years ago.

She finds Derk sitting on the luggage, bowed head hanging off a thin neck.

‘Come on,’ Elsa pats his shoulder. ‘Time to go home.’

Derk pushes himself upright, wobbling a bit as he does so.

A sudden rush of cold night air as the exit doors close behind them and they make their way to the taxi rank. The driver keeps the engine running while he loads their suitcases, the fan spewing out a soporific warmth; the smell of burnt Highveld dust. ‘Hillbrow,’ she says. And then, because she has enjoyed the word, adds, ‘Obrigada’, but the driver doesn’t hear.

SUNDAY, 6 JUNE 1976

“Black nursing sisters will be allowed to nurse White patients at private hospitals subject to certain conditions, the Minister of Health, Dr SW Van der Merwe, said yesterday. The Minister said that in each case the matter will be investigated and permission only granted if there was no trained White staff available, and the patient had no objections. ‘Whites must nurse Whites where possible but often a person’s life is at stake,’ he said.”

—*Sunday Times*, Sunday June 6

Derk

An inability to think clearly was the only side effect Dick experienced the morning after a day of drinking excessively. No nausea or headache, just slightly stupid. Which, given the size of his intellect, he could certainly afford to be. In fact, this was perhaps the best in a string of excellent reasons to drink as much as he could, which was a lot. High or hungover, Dick was better equipped at dealing with the mediocrity of the minds around him when his own was a little handicapped. At least, that was how he used to feel.

Right now, if he is brutally honest, he will admit to feeling – if not quite rotten – like an overripe fruit. It's not just the round and sagging belly. More disturbingly, he is losing – has lost – something less tangible than muscle tone, something more worrying than the hair loss that made him winner of Mr fucking-early-onset alopecia in 1947. Or was it alopecia? And this, right there, is the problem. Derk has never needed a dictionary to spell. Even the most archaic words would appear with military precision, letters all lined up, ready to be deployed. Now their order and shape eludes him. Entire words hide in his peripheral vision. He isn't sure if this preceded or triggered the other troubles, but if he can just get a grip on this one, a solution to the other may follow.

Derk is under no illusions. He was not born with good looks. Not like his cad of a brother Gabriel, or that cock Broccoli. Derk's appeal is his hunger: for Purpose, for Truth. It was an appetite that consumed dull conversations and spat out observations that shocked the sensibilities of those who would rather hide behind their hands than grapple with the existential. Not that Derk was all earnestness. He loved nothing more than to laugh, and why not, when so much of life was absurd; so many sacred cows to slaughter. It brought not only a mental purge but a sensuous joy – the shaking belly, the watering eyes, the stretched and aching mouth. Derk was also, or so he was told, a skilled lover. He was not unaware that woman lied, but he saw the evidence; he saw, because he kept his eyes open. In fact open eyes were essential; never more so than now, when he could no longer rely on the tool required to pin his butterfly to the bed. He had had to make certain adaptations. Or rather, Elsa had.

Derk cups his cock in his hand, glances at Elsa. She sleeps, as she always does these days, with her back to him, her hair still in braids. He closes his eyes, conjures up the

image of little Marie Kitshoff, whose long brown braids had reached her bum. God, watching those braids bounce off her... She'd arrived at Harrismith in the summer of '38, with precocious breasts that had compelled him to push her into the municipal pool, jumping in to grab what he could. Those brief encounters, a momentary brush of hand eliciting a rush of blood; his tumescent boyhood pushing against the fabric of his bather ; the stinging slaps and piercing shrieks; the buoyancy of the water.

Remembering the ease and frequency with which he had later spurted his pleasure into his hand, a sock, his underwear. He'd never imagined that the drive – natural as breathing, involuntary as blinking – would one day slip beyond his grasp.

Derk gives his flaccid self a squeeze, swings his legs off the bed. The bed sways beneath him as he sits upright, a slosh of water. He hates this fucking bed. Man was not made to sleep on water, he'd said to Elsa at the time. Even Jesus only walked on it. But she'd insisted. His right arm is tingling again. He needs a new bed; a new fucking body. Leaning on the bedside table, Derk pushes himself upright. The bed wobbles but Elsa sleeps on. Like a bloody corpse, Derk thinks bitterly as he limps to the bathroom, the pins and needles abating now that he is on the move.

It had been a mistake, taking Elsa to the Lisbon conference. A waste of his hard-earned money. The ingénue he had plucked from Paarl all those years ago had once been turned on by hotel rooms, and he had shown her plenty: New York to London, Paris to Rome, Geneva to Amsterdam. Tiny rooms with threadbare rugs and creaking beds, the basin next to the cupboard – even that windowless cupboard in Athens had awakened the hunger in Elsa, and – happy were those days – he had risen to every occasion.

So he'd invited Elsa to join him at the Estoril and, in a moment of madness, upgraded the superior garden room – paid for by the agency – to a seaview suite. He'd pictured himself returning after a day of droning presentations on market share and media spend to find Elsa waiting, naked and bent under the gold brocade of the four-poster bed, ready to work on raising the Derk of yore. With a local Portuguese girl if needed. The concierge had been most obliging. But Elsa had shown no interest.

In fact, she had shunned the arranged jaunts into the countryside with the delegates' wives, choosing instead to wake late and spend her days lounging around the pool, where she ordered snacks from the pool bar, leaving the buns and croissants he'd

filched for her from the breakfast table to go stale in the room. Despite his explicit instructions regarding expenses that could not be claimed, she had ordered room service on the first night, splayed on the sofa watching TV in the separate lounge that cost him so dearly.

Derk had tried to make the best of things, but the pickings were slim. Most of the delegates' wives were on the wrong side of 40, hair stiff with spray, the weight of their boring, bourgeois lives hanging like sagging tyres not even a Demis Roussos kaftan could hide. He disliked their braying voices, the lipstick smears they left on wine glasses, their diamond rings – was there ever a cheaper gem, its value inflated by the cheap trickery of controlled supply. There was one exception, however. Lisa Fairweather. Now there was an uncut gem worth coveting. A slim woman with large brown eyes, and a toothy slash of a mouth marred only by her American accent. Not a headturner like Elsa, but young, and clearly pliant: listed merely as 'partner' next to Mike Broccali, creative director of the New York office, who – it appeared – had discarded all common sense along with his matronly wife, having strutted into the welcome cocktail party in a white suit, a gold medallion nestling in his hairy chest like some latter-day Lothario. Wanker. With each step he managed to flick his flared trouser leg, like an overgrown peacock. Watching that cock strut around, a full head of hair on his head, with Lisa gazing up at him... well, it had been a knife twisting in Derk's gut. Elsa had once looked at him like that. And where the hell was she? Lying upstairs in his overpaid bed, pretending to have a migraine.

Having extracted a promise from Elsa to attend dinner, he had ensured they would all be seated at the same table. Derk had long enjoyed the admiration of men who dreamed of collaring a creature as desirable as Elsa, but women too looked at him with renewed interest, so when Elsa – her white-blonde hair gleaming under the chandeliers like a beacon – had finally glided into the room, he had stood up, an expectant smile on his face. Hitherto invisible, the Fairweather girl would surely clock him the minute Elsa claimed him as hers. Then he could get to work, showing off a chiaroscuro of diffidence and insight, cynicism and hope; Elsa could play support or starring, he didn't really care, as long as they got the girl.

But Elsa had put on a poor show. The smile she gave Fairweather had more pleasure in it. A quick demure kiss on his cheek before she took her seat and, without even

introducing him, struck up what looked like an easy conversation with Fairweather, Broccali leaning in with a leer. Fuming, he had pretended to be immersed in his pipe, jabbing his forefinger in the bowl. He had puffed away – in his irritation he had packed the tobacco too tightly; the pipe kept going out. When Elsa had finally turned away from the girl to pay him some attention, asking whether the afternoon session had been an improvement on the morning, he had ignored her. *Too little too late*. But Elsa showed no sign of contrition.

Turning back to Fairweather she announced that she was starving, and would anyone care to join her inspection of the buffet. Gallingly, the Fairweather girl had stood up, and the two of them had walked away, leaving him alone with Broccali, the remainder of the seats at the table not yet taken. He had looked away then, not wanting to make small talk. He needn't have bothered: Broccali had gazed around the room without acknowledging him, leaving Derk feeling doubly cheated.

Derk sighs, leans back to turn the warm water tap off, uses the towel rail to pull himself up from the bidet. The one invention the French could be proud of. Anyone who thought washing a fleck of shit off your finger was more important than your arse was just a pig in soiled underwear.

Still feeling shaky, Derk places a hand on either side of the basin and looks into the mirror. Never a sight for sore eyes. 'Today is the start of a new reign.' He looks into the eyes threaded with red. One good poem, and his cock might even salute its master. 'In the mean time,' Derk mutters, wrapping a towel around his waist, 'stay out of my bloody sight'.

Paul

Picking out another cashew nut from his bowl of chop suey in the Chinese restaurant above the bookshop on Claim street, Paul wishes that Elsa would stop looking at him.

'What's wrong, Paulie?' she asks again.

'Nothing,' he says. The nut shoots out and skitters across the table onto the floor.

‘Well, you’re very quiet,’ she says. ‘Surely *something* must have happened while we were away?’ She puts another piece of sweet-and-sour pork into her mouth. ‘What did you get up to?’

He shrugs, banishes the image of Mandy riding him, gymnast on his beam. ‘Nothing.’

Elsa sighs. ‘Ok.’ She picks up her glass, smiles. ‘Did you at least miss me? Just a little bit?’

It doesn’t feel right, the way she sucks in her cheeks like that; the way she pouts her mouth at him before taking another sip of wine. This is exactly why he would rather take the bus these days. The way those losers at school look at her makes him physically sick; the leer on Poena’s face when he said, ‘My pa sê jou ma is ‘n prikkelpop’.

‘Jou pa is ‘n fokken draadtrekker,’ he’d snapped. ‘En die appel lê vrot onder daai boom.’ Lourens, always the peacekeeper, had slapped Poena on the back. ‘Klop disselboom,’ he’d said, elbow between his legs, arm upright with his hand balled in a fist. ‘Punt innie wind my bra.’ They had all laughed but Paul was still smarting. *’n Prikkelpop.*

‘Ok, don’t answer.’ Elsa takes another sip. She shrugs. ‘But *I* missed you.’ She puts the glass down, traces the rim with a finger. ‘Do you remember how you used to hunt for starfish. Near the tidal pool. Do you remember?’

He hates that maudlin tone; pushes his bowl aside. He does not want to be trapped on the other side of Elsa ordering a fourth glass of wine. ‘Can we go?’

‘You’re not hungry? What’s wrong?’

Paul rolls his eyes. ‘I’m fine Elsa, just tired.’

‘You know I hate it when you call me that.’

She drains her glass; indicates to the waitress that she’s ready for the bill. ‘I don’t know why I even bother,’ she says as she places the five rand note on the porcelain plate, covering the snake-dragon writhing in patterned blue. ‘My own son, and you’re like a complete stranger to me.’

He follows her out onto the Hillbrow pavements, the evening pulsating with neon and flickering tail lights, conga lines of cars crawling between traffic intersections. They pass the large brightly lit corner café that Paul used to visit daily when they first arrived in the city, before he learnt that the bladder could not be ignored indefinitely, and had beat a hasty retreat from the puddle in the comics corner, wet trouser leg flapping against his ankle.

Elsa's strides are long, her chin raised, mouth set. A part of him wants to reach out, knows this will release the knot inside her, but there are too many people on the street.

Two blocks later they turn up past the cinema; the streets slowly empty after this, the nightlife options petering out until it is just the two of them, trudging along silently, shadows waxing and waning under the streetlights. Somehow he still cannot do it, he cannot bring himself to touch his mother, and there is guilt in this.

'Thanks for dinner,' he says, touching his cheek against hers to end the night.

He brushes his teeth with vigour, tackling each tooth in a tight circular movement before aggressively working on the molars, black with fillings. He doesn't remember Elsa ever telling him to brush his teeth. It is her dentist who taught him, and taught him well. Every six months she marched him into the tiny waiting room where he would page through magazines he couldn't read, hands clammy with fear. The result was always the same. 'Soft teeth', the dentist would pronounce with a shake of his head, the word 'teeth' lost under the high-pitched whine of his drill. Not wanting to see the gloved hand with the silver hook, the narrowed eyes framed in large tear-drop glasses that were perpetually sliding down a nose peppered with black heads, Paul would keep his firmly closed, but could not escape the smell of rubber glove, the prickle of fear as he sensed Elsa retreating, the click of the door announcing that he was alone with his torturer.

He rinses and bares his teeth. Blood oozes from the bottom gum, pooling in tiny pockets at the base of his incisor tooth. He rinses again, sucking the water through his teeth before spitting the pink-tinged water out. Runs his tongue over the enamel, which feels smooth and clean.

He closes the door and strips, shoring up the growing nest of tangled clothing growing around his unmade single bed. Switches off the light. Shakes off the image of Elsa,

alone in the dimly lit lounge, waiting for Derk. He lies down on the bed, on his stomach, and closes his eyes. Picturing Mandy instead, he clenches his buttocks and rolls his hips around.

Mandy, wearing those jeans that look like they'd been painted on, the hourglass curves of her calves and thighs culminating in two perfect cheeks. He'd been eyeing them in the foyer, hoping the lift wouldn't come too soon while she, oblivious, stared at the flashing numbers. He liked the way she stood – legs slightly apart, like a girl who knew how to fight. Her denim jacket with the sleeves ripped off revealed arms that were pale white and skinny. A bruise on one bicep the size of a thumbprint.

When the lift reached the 10th floor she had turned back to look at him, eyes ringed in smudged black, roots showing in a shock of white hair. She looked like Debbie Harry – damaged, dangerous even. Paul had grinned at her, had held her gaze while the doors slowly closed behind them. A mute competition, the silence broken only by the dull hum of the lift shaft engine as it started up again.

She had been the first to look away, back to the display board. When the lift stopped on the 13th floor, she'd said '13-oh-three', her face expressionless. Repositioned the denim bag over the one shoulder, then stalked out. Unsure of her intent, Paul had watched, thinking she would stop, look back, but she had turned the corner without a backward glance. He had cursed as the lift doors closed, jammed the next floor button, then raced down the stairs two at a time; didn't stop until he was knocking on 1303. She hadn't looked surprised; just opened the door and stepped aside. Mandy wasn't one for talking. He liked that. But then there was a lot to like about Mandy.

Paul turns onto his back, so he can see his penis, which is looking mighty fine. He closes his eyes, imagining Mandy on top, clenching him in her, his hands on her tight little arse. Jesus. Cupping his balls with his left hand, he spits in his right hand, twice.

He doesn't hear the knock, barely has enough time to roll over and pull half a sheet up when the door opens.

'Paul?' Elsa's silhouette, swaying slightly in the doorframe. 'You awake?'

MONDAY, 7 JUNE

“Clash looms over Kei citizenship – The South African Government wants all Xhosa and Sothos to become automatic citizens of the territory when it becomes independent but the Transkei government wants Blacks living outside the territory to “choose” whether they want to become citizens. ‘We will never become the dumping ground for “stateless Blacks” living in SA,’ says Chief Matanzima.”

—*Rand Daily Mail*, 7 June 1976

Herman

Herman can literally taste the stale sweat and acne cream; the odiferous must of adolescence in the school bus that lurches now with another ungainly gear change. Herman reaches out to brace himself, recoils briefly as the metal bar bites back static. Having steadied himself, he makes his way purposefully towards the sprawl of senior boys on the back bench, where Paul sits slouched in the back corner, head against the window.

With a swaggering confidence he doesn't quite feel, Herman slings the bag from his shoulder onto the cracked brown vinyl bench one row from the back. He removes his spectacles, rubbing at the two small indentations on either side of his nose before folding and slipping them into his front blazer pocket, just to the left of his thumping heart. One part vanity, two parts practicality: if all else fails, the audience is at least out of focus.

From the inside pocket he produces a pack of Stuyvesants; flips open the lid with a practiced movement of the thumb that raises a cigarette. He removes one with his mouth, then looks at the large muscled boy with close-cropped blonde hair sitting in the middle of the back seat. He'd clocked him as the likely leader, though he'd moved schools enough to know that looks can be deceiving.

'Got a light?' he asks the boy.

No response.

'Hey.' Herman takes the cigarette out of his mouth and tries to enunciate clearly. 'Ick souk a light.' Impossible to mask the English accent.

'Fok manne.' There's a lazy menace to muscle boy's tone. 'Het een van julle gepoep? Verbeel my daar's skielik 'n vuil stank hier agter innie bus.'

'Happy to swap.' Herman offers up the box.

Muscle boy moves with a speed surprising for someone so bulky. 'Wat soek jy hier onder die grootmense?'

Herman, who has mastered the stock insults at least, doesn't miss a beat. 'Jou ma?'

A snort from the lanky boy seated next to him. Muscle boy glances at him, then back at Herman who is smiling with a nonchalance he doesn't feel.

'Wie laaste lag, lag die lekkerste, jou klein etter.'

'Look, I'm not trying to pick a fight.'

'Watse Engelse kak is dit met jou?'

Herman grins, extends a hand. 'Herman. And you are?'

'*Her-min?*' Muscle boy imitates his pronunciation, corners of his mouth down. '*Her-min?*' He slaps his knee, laughs humouressly. 'Fok man, watse meisie naam is *Her-min?* Hier sê 'n man *Herr-man*. Hoor jy? *Herrr-man*.' A rolling tank of a word.

Herman is surprised by how much he relishes this, the sound of his name in muscle boy's mouth.

'Okay,' he says, putting the cigarette into the corner of his mouth. 'Herr-min would like a light.'

Muscle boy leans forward again. 'Lyk my die soutpiel soek 'n les. En wat hy soek, sal hy kry. Kom manne, wie's reg vir sports?'

'Jy's vol kak, Poena.' The lanky boy whose ears are remarkable for both their size and shape, the lobes fused directly to his neck, is staring at his fingernails. 'Die laaitie soek 'n light, is al.' He raises his thumb to his mouth, ready to gnaw a nail edge.

'Paul, gee die laaitie in Godsnaam 'n light.'

Herman's heart skips a beat. Paul is digging into his inside blazer pocket, has fished out a lighter, is looking directly at Herman as he passes it to lanky boy who now asks in a friendly enough tone, 'En wat soek 'n rooinek in 'n Primus uniform?'

Herman shrugs. 'My father was Afrikaans.' He takes the lighter from lanky boy.

'Grandfather too.'

'Spaar ons die fokken familieboom, soutie,' the boy they call Poena interrupts. 'Jy het nou jou light. Gaan jy daai twak aansteek, of wat?'

Herman flicks open the flame, sucks at it, face hard and hungry. He leans back with his eyes closed and blows two thin streams through his nose, well practiced in the mirror.

‘Hey-ta!’ he hears Poena slap his knee again, detects a grudging admiration in the laugh.

Smoking in a Primus uniform is a minimum six-stroke offence, as Herman well knows. Aside from Pankop – the headmaster’s unimaginative moniker inspired by his tonsured pate – the inmates at Primus were governed by a motley collection of sadists, teachers who beat their charges with impunity for their own good, barely hiding the pleasure they derived from meting out the kind of punishment deemed essential for the building of good character. Herman’s character, clearly in need of serious work, was set about with a determination that implied a certain kind of caring. Herman’s singular lack of interest – the reason given for his last expulsion – only intensified these ministrations. But Herman was not afraid of pain. Hands against the desk, head lowered, he would fill his lungs, would imagine the oxygen pushing up against his capillaries, the perfect trade of carbon dioxide for oxygen, would lose himself in the pictured blood cells, rich and buoyant with oxygen, pumping through the pulmonary veins, the steady powerful thump of his heart as delivering the oxygen to every extremity, rushing to repair the damage inflicted by every stroke, reliable as a milkman in an Enid Blyton book. In short, Herman had developed a taste for sadomasochism, and Primus was ideal for a boy with this proclivity.

‘Is jy fokken jags?’ Poena taps Herman’s shoulder, his tone amused now, admiring even. ‘Kom sit hier, jou klein kakstoker,’ Poena shifts closer to lanky boy, making a space for Herman. ‘Rook jou ent in godsnaam lanks die venster, of ons is almal in die kak.’

An invitation to join the senior backbench is more than Herman had hoped for. As he clambers over to the seat next to the window, Poena lifts his hand, brushing his thigh – an accident surely – before leaning over him to push the window open, blocking Herman from view. Which is when he places his hand – and this is most definitely deliberate – on Herman’s crotch. ‘Jy’t fokken groot ballas, vir ‘n soutpiel,’ he says softly. The squeeze is gentle, and surprisingly pleasurable. Herman closes his eyes as

the sensation spreads upwards and laps at a sensation that has yet to coagulate into embarrassment when someone shouts, ‘Klim van die blerrie pavement af!’

Herman opens his eyes to see what looks like an orange tennis ball fly past through the open window before bouncing off a lamp post and rolling into the gutter, a few feet from where a bewildered black man has stopped and is staring at the tail end of the school bus. ‘Hey, dit was my fokken nartjie, jou poes,’ Poena says, punching the lanky boy’s arm.

Herman moves closer to the window, to the blur. A thin tendril of smoke reminds him that he is still holding a cigarette. He raises it now, trying not to spill the long tube of dangling ash, but the open window blows the grey powder into his face, leaving the taste of ash on his lips.

Derk

The lift door opens to the smiling receptionist. ‘Good morning Mr du Toit!’

Derk nods curtly – not one *he* would have hired; tits too big, face too bovine – and enters the studio. He waves a hand in the direction of his art directors and typesetters, a few of whom look up as he walks towards to the glass cage that is his office.

Claudia, his new secretary, looks up from her typewriter. Now this was the kind of sweetener that leavened the dull endurance race. A heart-shaped face with a good set of teeth, bookmarked by two small dimples. Derk was fond of lists – to-do lists; instruction lists; rankings lists; pros-and-cons lists. Claudia’s smile featured prominently on all four.

Claudia is standing up. She picks up her notepad and pen. ‘Welcome back Mr du Toit.’

‘Morning Claudia.’ Derk stops in front of her desk. ‘You really must call me Derk.’ He wonders, not for the first time, what her breasts look like. He imagines from her sweater outline that she is a C-cup, which is a little on the large side. Derk doesn’t really like his breasts bigger than a cupped hand, but this was relative. A 21-year-old

C-cup in hand was worth two in some elderly bush. He imagined Claudia's aureolas as small, and a dark pink, similar in colour to her lips.

'Can I get you some coffee, Mr du Toit?'

'Yes,' he says. 'What time does the circus start?'

Claudia checks her notes. 'Four internal presentations scheduled this morning, with the first one starting at nine, but Manny and Nigel asked if they could see you before that. The Sprite presentation is only tomorrow, but they wanted to make sure you were happy.' Claudia looks up.

Derk is surveying his in-tray, the large envelopes stacked beside it. He nods, distracted. 'Just give me a few minutes.'

'Of course. Oh, and Mr du Toit?'

'Yes?'

'There's a woman who keeps calling.' She looks at her notepad. 'A Katrien van Niekerk? Says she's family.'

'Never heard of her. Bring me that coffee and tell Manny I'll see them in a few minutes.' Derk closes the door. The room smells of stale pipe tobacco. He looks at the pinboard papered in pulls and tear sheets. What a pointless exercise this was, selling shit to arseholes. He walks to the corner to draw back the vertical blinds that are partially obscuring the view of the blue-tinted glass of the office block opposite. Ten floors below people are moving in ant-like streams along the pavement. Each carrying a small crumb to some corpulent bastard. He sighs heavily, returns to his desk, piled high with envelopes – each numbered and labeled with a client name. He grabs the closest, labeled 'Life'. Removes a file, flips it open to read the strategy he had presented to the client before he left for Portugal. *'Today, bring your taste to life' — A slogan that reflects our recommended strategy that Life cigarettes should be seen as the most honest, satisfying smoke for people who've got their feet firmly on the ground. The Life smoker is perceived to be grown up, mature, rugged – a man of character.*' Jesus. He tosses the file aside. He rubs his eyes and yawns, a wave of self-pity washing over him. Not even nine a.m. and he feels like he's about to fall asleep at the wheel.

A tap at the door. ‘Ah-ha, maestro!’ Ray doesn’t wait for a response. He strides into the office with the dapper swagger of the short man, arms akimbo. ‘Welcome back. Good to have you back in the saddle.’

‘Thank you Raymond. I’m not sure I feel the same.’

Ray laughs, sits down without being invited. ‘Well, I’m sure we can find something to cheer you up.’ Ray takes out his box of Ritmeester, removes a brown cigarillo. ‘I got myself a brand new filly.’ He winks. ‘A frisky one.’

‘Really?’ Derk picks up the pile of envelopes and deals them croupier-like across his desk. ‘What about that Cally bird?’ He glances at Ray.

Ray shakes his head. ‘This one’s in a class of her own. Goes by the name Pat. Has a penchant for velvet suits and cigars. Likes to wear the trousers, if you know what I mean.’

Derk stops, studies the postage stamps on a sealed package, a few of which feature the crowned silhouette of Queen Elizabeth. ‘Look Ray, I can’t really talk right now. Dinner tomorrow night?’

‘Of course chief,’ Ray gets up.

Derk doesn’t look up. ‘Close the door, won’t you.’ He tears the envelope open, removes his manuscript. He glances briefly at the title page then flips through the thin sheets of paper. No comments in the margins. A small envelope with ‘Derk’, written in Colin Wilson’s scrawl, slips out from between the pages. Sticking his pipe between his teeth, Derk considers this. He had struck up an admiring correspondence with Wilson after reading his novel *The Outsider*, and asked him to read his manuscript. Wilson was a good writer but more importantly, a modern philosopher, a man who could see beyond the standard paradigms. It had been a slightly sycophantic request – one did not ask a writer to read your work without some degree of flattery – but he had meant it: Wilson’s *Outsider* was a work of genius, and he wanted his honest opinion on the enclosed draft.

Derk considers the envelope. Knowing it is here, just waiting for him, will get him through the interminable talk of targets and competitive advantages. But Derk is not a

man to delay gratification, so he puts his pipe down, tears the envelope open. A single sheet, typewritten.

Dear Derk,

You have asked for my honest opinion and knowing how much you value it I am duty bound to give it.

I'm afraid my overall reaction to this first draft is that I was simply bored—

Derk stops breathing.

—as this is neither high-brow literature nor, given the pedestrian and repetitive nature of the sexual encounters, good pornography. The quasi-philosophical asides of the narrator and main character do nothing to hide his contempt for women. He is nothing more than a sweaty bug-eyed masturbator hiding behind screens, a voyeur and coward preying on victims who – because they are unwitting, unknowing – can offer no resistance; a sniffer of purloined panties soured with stale piss —

‘Mr du Toit?’ He looks up to see Claudia hovering at the door. ‘It’s that Katrien on the line again. Says it’s urgent. A family matter. She insists on speaking to you. Can I put her through?’

Derk puts down the letter, wipes his palm, suddenly clammy, against his chest.

‘Certainly not. Tell her I’m too busy to take unsolicited calls. Ask her what she wants. And take my coffee to the boardroom.’

When he stands up he feels dizzy. He puts the manuscript in the bottom desk drawer, the letter in the bin. Distracted, he follows Claudia to the boardroom where he lets his coffee grow cold while he stares at the work pinned up on the wall, chin held between thumb and forefinger, listening to Manny talk about the ‘*Sweet Fountain of Satisfaction*’. Occasionally he strokes his bearded jawbone, slow deliberate movements that give him the appearance of a man deep in contemplation, while his mind keeps wandering like a tongue to a missing tooth, probing the ache. *A sweaty bug-eyed masturbator.*

Unnerved by Derk’s silence, Manny’s presentation is brief.

Derk sighs. ‘It looks like a fucking campaign for Coca Cola.’

Nigel glances at Manny. ‘Come again?’

‘Wouldn’t any of these ads look just as dandy with a Coke logo underneath and the line “Things go better with Coke”? For heaven’s sake, Manny. Sprite is losing market share; a thirst-quenching positioning is not enough. According to the strategic document that I wrote and the client signed off on, Sprite’s unique selling point must be its ability to revive flagging energies. Regardless of the veracity of this, what’s needed, Manny, are people in ordinary, everyday situations taking a break and refreshing themselves with Sprite.’

Manny looks abject. Nigel, his writer, is staring at the wasted efforts they had pinned up so eagerly an hour earlier. ‘You know what.’ Derk gets up. ‘I think this calls for a line up.’ Code for The Springbok, the three-star hotel bar that doubled up as their informal boardroom.

Manny and Nigel exchange another glance. Neither of them look at their watches.

‘I know. It’s 10am on a Monday morning. But it’s midday in Lisbon,’ Derk lies. ‘And I for one could do with a drink.’

Elsa

When Elsa steps into the sweet smell of heated cedar, she is disappointed to find a naked stranger stretched out on the bottom shelf of the gym sauna, arm casually flung over her beaded forehead. The supine woman does not acknowledge the cool rush of air, remains motionless as Elsa awkwardly steps up and over her bulk to reach the top shelf which is narrower and too close to the timbered ceiling for Elsa’s liking.

Spreading her towel, Elsa tries to ignore the figure on the shelf below but there is something compelling about the woman’s corpulence, her relaxed oblivion, so that Elsa can’t help but surreptitiously glance down and take in the voluptuous curves of the woman’s thigh, the last fold as it tucks into its hairy crease, the full purple lips wrinkled like elongated prunes. Elsa looks away but not before the sensation – because it is a sensation rather than a thought – rises unbidden, of what it would be like to penetrate into that soft mound, the slap of hips against those fleshy thighs, the slow pendulant sway of her breasts and slack-jaw moan with each juddering thrust.

And then Elsa flushes, for there is a moan, small but real, emanating from the woman who lifts her hand now, her eyes glazed and blinking. Elsa feels a hot rush of shame – hotter than the cedar heat – as she shrinks back against the warm timbers of the sauna and closes her eyes, making herself invisible. She can feel the movement of the fat woman, her weight displacing hot air, the timber creaking. Through her lashes Elsa sees the sagging breasts now resting on a deep fold of stomach, a hand on either side of her trunk-like thighs, fingers curled around the bench. Her head is hanging down, the dark roots visible in the parting of permed hair that hangs like a crinkly curtain on either side of a neck. With a sigh she pushes herself up. A sudden draft as the door swings open, and then Elsa is alone.

This is what comes from living with a man like Derk, Elsa thinks, moving her towel down to the recently vacated level. Aggressively she smooths the corners of the towel. It was unnatural, shameful to entertain thoughts like that. She lies down again, careful not to touch the wood, planting one foot against the warm cedar wall. But having entertained Derk's so often, who could blame her? Looking after Derk was her job. But when she had vowed, all starry-eyed, to honour and obey him in sickness and in health, she had pictured nursing him when he came down with a fever. It hadn't occurred to her that honouring and obeying could become a test of unknown limits.

Elsa remains in the sauna for as long as she can bear it, until she is quite dizzy stepping out into the cool air. In the shower she turns the cold tap open wide, relishes the cold needle-pressure on her shoulders. By the time she has toweled herself dry, rubbing her thighs vigorously to stop the spread of cellulite that is starting to dimple her skin, she is feeling better. Has, in fact, put the entire sauna episode behind her. And this is her skill: to never dwell on the negative, to keep her face turned towards the warmth of the sun. She'd once overheard Derk likening her to a plant. He'd been explaining to Paul how one-dimensional a thinker his mother was, while he, like his father, was a complicated creature, able to experience the peaks and troughs of the truly sentient. But as far as Elsa was concerned, the way Derk allowed his feelings to contaminate an otherwise perfectly good day was a kind of ailment. Being clever wasn't all it was cut out to be.

Elsa appraises herself in the full-length mirror: the brown polo-neck bodystocking paired with brown tartan culottes and long brown boots look better without the jacket.

She puts on the jacket, then takes it off again. She's not happy with the necklace; she should have packed a choice. It isn't easy dressing for a date with Lynne. All her life she's dressed for men: fabrics that drape or shape, cuts that provide generous hints of the strategically hidden. Dressing for a woman requires more subtlety.

When they first met, Derk had made it clear that Elsa having girlfriends was extraneous and unwanted, and she had shrugged them off for him with the same ease she had her dresses. At the time it had hardly been a sacrifice. Girls had become complicated in ways that eluded Elsa, their false camaraderie and barely concealed envy growing as they clocked the hunger in the men gathered around Elsa. At least men were honest. And Elsa liked the way they looked at her. Refreshingly, so had Derk – another reason Elsa had been drawn to him; Derk didn't have to keep marking his territory to know he owned it.

After Derk's transfer to Johannesburg, socializing with clients became more important. Elsa had tried striking up a bonhomie with the wives of the men he was courting. But even those that played it warm would be caught in unguarded moments, faces haughty and sharp with dislike at the abandon with which Elsa laughed and dressed, halter necks and plunging necklines showing off the hollow pools above her clavicle; the oval cut-out in her catsuit framing the neat O of her bellybutton. The way she kept crossing and uncrossing her legs, drawing attention to her calves. The way she dropped her chin to look up at their men through eyes fringed with thick false lashes. Elsa flirted as others blinked, an involuntary instinct with no conscious intent, but her ostracism by women was punitive. Even in the cosmopolitan gathering of the delegates' wives in Lisbon she had had felt out of her depth, envious of the ease with which apparent strangers seemed able to find common ground; those conspiratorial knots of sisterhood sharing lipstick in bathrooms and advice that withered into silence as soon as Elsa stepped in. Derk's secretaries, partners of the men working for him, the models he brought home from castings – these were the closest she had to friendship. Only Lynne was hers, separate from and unknown to Derk.

Nosing her battered Datsun through the traffic, Elsa feels a rising excitement at the prospect of seeing her – 'my diastema sister', as Lynne had called her the first time, shoving her tongue into the prominent gap between her teeth. 'It brings good luck, you know,' she'd said in a voice made husky by her 40-a-day Benson & Hedges

habit, reaching out to touch Elsa's arm. Elsa liked how affectionate Lynne was – she would often leave a hand resting on her, thread her arm around Elsa's as they walked, hug her with a warmth that was as therapeutic as a bath. She loved the chaste but comforting pressure of Elsa's leg against hers; the ease with which she'd run her fingers through her hair, then press them against her temples, saying 'that's the spot, right there; can you feel it?' Elsa had never experienced anything like it. Men – hard, stiff, grasping – were not made for this kind of comfort.

They had met at a casting – a pilot for a soap powder commercial. Elsa, hair scraped back in a severe bun, wearing spectacles and a white coat, was supposed to be a serious clipboard-carrying scientist, noting down the effusive comments of her happy housewife subject. Elsa had hesitated – she really was getting too old for this – but Ray had persuaded her. It was his darn client, and he could darn well cast whom he pleased, he'd said. And wouldn't she like a bit of pin money?

So she had agreed but arrived late, looking as harassed as she felt – 'the traffic', she'd explained to the disgruntled assistant who had hurried her into her coat and into position next to the pretty ash blonde with the lollipop mouth. Apparently unfazed, the blonde had stuck out her hand and said, 'I'm Lynne, your co-star', accompanied by a wink and a throaty laugh that was infectious.

Lynne had then proceeded to repeat, take after take, how 'Superblue Surf's new blue formula froths *all* my whites brighter—,' 'Superblue Surf's *new* blue formula froths — , 'Superblue Surf's new *blue* formula froths all my whites —' Ray being unable to explain what exactly it was that was missing from Lynne's delivery. After the 16th take he'd asked the assistant for a glass of water, and Lynne had leant over and whispered in mock-horror, wiping the corners of her mouth with a forefinger, that Superblue Surf had her frothing from the mouth, and then – eyes glancing to one side – she'd squeezed her knees together and whispered that, actually, ever since she washed with Superblue Surf she could feel herself frothing *down there*, and after that they had both doubled up over the twin tub with every take, teary eyed with laughter, while Ray rolled his eyes and yelled 'cut', like he was a famous film director. Unsurprisingly, neither got a call back, but they left with each other's telephone numbers, and that had been compensation enough.

Elsa – late again – pulls the Datsun into a loading zone opposite the sign on which *Taverna São Cristóvão* is written in cursive script. She crosses the road at a half-run, pushes the door open and scans the windowless room, bathed in a perpetual evening glow cast by the red lampshades hanging over the diners. Lynne is already seated at the table Elsa booked under the mural of the large ship cresting the seas, a crude outline of a mountain in the background. Elsa acknowledges Lynne with a raised hand, then quickly scans the rest of the room. Thank heavens; no sign of the owner. A month ago Derk had flung a plate of empty prawn shells across the table, narrowly missing his intended victim – an inebriated account executive – and splattered buttery crustacean shells all over a woman seated at the table directly behind them. The owner had banned everyone at the table from returning. Derk had tried to reason that this was patently unfair given that it was all the fault of ‘that twat’, but the owner was beyond reasoning, so they had all trudged out of their favourite Portuguese restaurant, accompanied by a stream of infective, while behind them waiters carried bowls of steaming water and fresh napkins, the damp edges of which they kept pressing onto the oil patterning the back of the hysterical woman’s blouse. It had been a risk, booking here, but she had a craving that only a plate of *São* prawns could satisfy.

‘Darling, you made it!’ Lynne is edging her way out of the banquette seat, the familiar gap-toothed grin filling Elsa with pleasure.

‘Oh Lynne; don’t get up...’ But Lynne is already putting her arms around Elsa who allows herself the relief of Lynne, her body solid yet soft, her hair smelling faintly of apple, murmuring as she does, ‘Sorry. Late, as always.’

Grasping an arm in each hand Lynne steps back, ‘You’re worth the wait.’ She winks. ‘As always.’

Elsa feels a weightlessness, a sense of effortless comfort as she seats herself opposite the billowing sails of the ship that will forever be rounding the Cape.

Lynne is prattling ‘— feels like *forever* since we last saw each other. How *was* it? Dying to hear. And what are the Portuguese men like? Tall and dark?’ Lynne’s eyes follow a dumpy waiter as he walks past, ‘Or fat and short?’ She gives one of her throaty laughs. ‘Gosh, to think you’ve been halfway up the world and back! You look great – caught a bit of sun.’

‘Spent most of my time at the pool.’ Elsa looks at her forearms critically then laughs and looks up. ‘A bit silly flying all the way to Portugal to work on your tan, but honestly.’ She shakes her head. ‘I just couldn’t face those arranged activities with the wives.’ Her mouth turns down at the corners. ‘A dour bunch. Except for one. A young American called Lisa who was having an affair with one of the delegates.’ Elsa takes out her yellow box of Van Rijn. ‘Scandalous. Even Derk, who doesn’t give a fig, commented. She and I spent a few days by the pool.’ She offers the pack absentmindedly to Lynne who already has a B&H smoking in the ashtray. Elsa picks up Lynne’s lighter. ‘But I did get to go to the bullfight they arranged.’ She pauses as she pokes her cigarette into the flame and lights her cigarette, squinting. ‘Derk was terribly disappointed. Didn’t realize they don’t kill the bull in Portugal. He said that’s why the Portuguese would always be second-rate citizens – no bloodlust, no balls.’ She shrugs. ‘Said loud enough for all the Portuguese to hear of course.’

‘What about the rest of the delegates. Any—’ Lynne wiggles her eyebrows and grins.

‘Oh God no. Even Lisa was a little tough to talk to. So earnest.’ Elsa rolled her eyes. ‘Hard to have a conversation with any of them without *apart-hate* coming up.’

‘And the food?’

Elsa taps the ash from her cigarette. ‘It was okay, but nothing as good as this. I mean, you just can’t beat a plate of LM prawns. Shall we order?’

Lynne nods, picks up a menu, then puts it down again. ‘Listen Elsa, I have a small confession to make.’

Elsa raises an eyebrow, her smile masking a stab of fear. ‘You have?’

Lynne puts a hand on hers. ‘I’m just going to come right out and say it. I’ve never actually ever eaten a prawn. Can you believe it?’ She laughs. ‘A philistine! But I couldn’t think of anyone I’d be happier to break my shellfish virginity with. You say it’s good, so I’m prepared to try it. Even if, oh my God, Elsa.’ Lynne sticks her tongue out in an exaggerated gesture as a waiter passes holding a platter aloft. ‘They look like giant insects.’

Elsa orders a platter to share, with garlic and lemon butter and peri peri on the side in silver bowls large enough to dip the shelled bodies in whole. When the platter arrives,

she watches Lynne struggle for a minute with a knife and fork before showing her how to remove the head and peel the shell – ‘easy, see, and the mark of a perfectly cooked prawn’. She presents Lynne with the meat – ‘try the lemon butter’ – then watches Lynne dip the soft white flesh in before taking a tentative bite. Lynne closes her eyes and kisses her fingertips, smiling at Elsa now sucking appreciatively on the prawn head. Watching Lynne lick her greasy fingers, lips glistening as she picks up the next prawn, Elsa feels happier than she has in weeks.

When the platter is finally cleared – a mess of cracked shells and long feathery antennae – Elsa shows Lynne how to soak her fingers in the bowls of hot water, squeezing the slices of lemon. Drying her hands on the red napkin she feels a flutter of excitement. It was time.

‘So, darling.’ She leans forward conspiratorially. ‘Enough about me – what’s happening in *your* life. Anything to report on the romantic front?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. You know how it is. All the best men are either already married, or too young, or damaged goods.’ Lynne flicks the water from her fingers, picks up a new napkin. ‘After a certain age the pool of eligible men is the size of a very small pond. And we all know what lives in ponds.’

Elsa bends over to pick up her handbag, relieved. It would have been most inopportune had a new beau appeared in Lynne’s life while Elsa was trawling a sex shop in Lisbon to pick out her surprise.

Lynne continues. ‘So I guess I’ll just have to just keep on kissing toads.’

Elsa feels her cheeks turn pink as she takes out the black velvet bag she sewed up in haste yesterday afternoon.

Placing the bag on the table, she takes a deep breath. ‘Well, I brought you a little something that may help. All the way from Portugal.’

Lynne smiles, the picture of surprised delight — ‘Elsa, you shouldn’t have’ — pulls the bag closer, feeling the contents with her fingers

Suddenly anxious, Elsa puts a hand over Lynne’s. ‘Wait. Lynne, before you open it...’

Lynne looks up, her gap-toothed grin reassuring. ‘Honestly Elsa, don’t look so worried. You know I love a bit of tourist tat. Honestly, whatever it is, I’ll treasure it forever. I’m so touched you thought of me!’

‘Well, ok.’ Elsa slumps back, picks up her wine glass. ‘Go ahead then. But for God’s sake don’t take it out the bag.’

She watches Lynne undoing the bow, maneuvering the drawstring open with her fingers to peer inside. Watches the Christmas-anticipation drain from Lynne’s face, replaced by what looks like shock. ‘Jesus Elsa, how the hell did you—‘

‘Don’t even ask,’ Elsa waves a hand, shakes her head.

Lynne presses her lips together, as if spreading lipstick. It makes her mouth, usually so voluptuous, look thin, disapproving. She pulls the drawstring tight, as tight as she can.

‘I don’t think I can accept this, Elsa.’

Elsa’s eyes widen. ‘Why not?’

‘I just don’t feel... comfortable, receiving something like this from you. And I’m not sure—‘ She shudders. ‘Well, I just wouldn’t want – a thing like that – in my apartment. I mean, it’s not even *legal*, let alone normal. Where would I put it? What if someone found it? How would I explain such a thing to Beauty?’ She shudders again. Or, God forbid, Norman. I mean I do sometimes have sex you know, with a *real* penis.’ Two pink spots on her cheeks, the tone affronted now. ‘What do you think, that I’m some washed up old woman, a lonely spinster who needs a plastic, a plastic *dick* —I mean, I’m not completely incapable of attracting a man you know – a *real* man, with a *real* penis – It’s really not appropriate...’ To Elsa’s complete dismay, Lynne appears on the verge of tears.

‘Of *course* you can Lynne, my God, of course I don’t think; I would never dream of suggesting that you couldn’t. This has nothing to do with, with how attractive *you* are. Heavens above, *I* think you’re gorgeous. I just wanted you to feel liberated. To have some fun.’ She shakes her head. ‘God, if I’d known ... I feel terrible. I can’t tell you what I had to go through to get it here. I thought you’d have a laugh. I thought *we’d* have a laugh.’

‘Yes, well, you thought wrong.’ Lynne picks up her box of cigarettes, takes one out. They are both avoiding eye contact, avoiding looking at the velvet bag, now indelicately draped over the phallus. Lynne lights her cigarette, takes a deep drag. When she finally looks at Elsa, a searching look, Elsa tries to hide her hurt. She can see Lynne working hard now, trying to compartmentalize the moment, folding the corners around it and packing it away in a locked drawer, ready to throw away the key. She knows this because this is another similarity they share, but for some reason she cannot do it now, and so it is Lynne who regains her equilibrium first, puts her hand over Elsa’s, a brief conciliatory pat, patronizing even, her face split into its familiar gap-toothed smile. ‘For heavens sake, eating my first prawn wasn’t enough, you want to serve up a dildo on the same day?’ And she laughs her throaty laugh. She says then, in a softer tone – and Elsa knows it is the last time they will mention this, ‘I’m sorry. Thanks for thinking of me, but I’m sure you understand.’ She pushes the bag closer to Elsa.

Discreetly Elsa places the velvet drawstring bag back into her handbag while Lynne, jovial, is asking if she’s seen the Sly Stallone movie that everyone is talking about. ‘They say it’s brilliant, even if you’re not a boxing fan, which, as you know, I most definitely am not but what with Kallie Knoetze and Gerrie maybe it’s time to pay attention.’ Elsa is pretending to be interested; she’s nodding and saying she’s not one either but what she’s thinking is that she doesn’t understand. She’s mortified actually, and no amount of shoving is going to get this drawer closed. It cost her too much to carry this gift, and there is a dawning realization that she doesn’t really know Lynne at all, that she has misjudged something fundamental, that she has been found wanting, and these thoughts are pushing her into a deep sea, cut adrift with nothing on the horizon to anchor her, and while the hugeness of the void above her is oppressive it is the fear of what waits beneath the surface that makes her really panic, and then thank God Lynne is calling for the bill, insisting it is her turn, even though they both know it is not but she is too dazed to argue with Lynne, who is writing out the cheque while Elsa smiles and tries not to cry.

Back in the harsh dry highveld light her old Datsun is waiting in the loading zone where she left it, a pink parking ticket joining the criss-cross stickers that mark her window – residues of fines she crumples into tiny pink balls stuffed beneath in the passenger seat footwell. The car, dull with dust, is looking particularly tatty today,

and when she opens it is too hot for a bodysuit and boots. She smiles though and gives Lynne a breezy wave before pulling out into the traffic, and somehow, even when Lynne is no longer in her viewfinder, she doesn't cry.

TUESDAY, 8 JUNE

“Dr Andries Treurnicht’s warning against mixed-cast shows has come as a ‘bolt out of the blue’ for multiracial theatre man Des Lindberg. A letter accompanying the refusal said such multiracial performances were directly in conflict with Government policy and could not be allowed to continue.”

—*Rand Daily Mail*, 8 June 1976

Herman

Herman threads his way through the braying knots of girls, careful not to bump into any bovine morons jostling their way into the invisible corrals of social standing and age.

Primus Hoër is a foreboding place. Behind the stark facebrick façade, the words “*Scientia est vires*” inscribed in a plaque above the double-door entrance, is a central quadrant, the corridors surrounding it fenced off in mesh. A flagpole is the only decorative element. Everywhere nature has been thoroughly subjugated: aside from the two sports fields – neatly cropped rectangles overlooked by a pavilion where red-eared pupils with contorted faces shout ‘Byt vas Buffels!’ – the grounds are carpeted in cement. No flowerbeds to grow unruly weeds; no trees to drop messy leaves.

The morning has passed like any other – teachers droning on in their guttural language about things that don’t matter; the occasional crackling interruptions of the intercom; a distant bellow of rage; the high-pitched ringing of the bell funneling the maroon stream up and down stairs, marching them all toward the part of the day that Herman dreads most. Schoolbreak. Not that he isn’t happy with his own company, but a preference for solitude doesn’t mean he’s above caring what others think about his status. So he keeps moving, an enigmatic half-smile pasted onto his face, feigning an air of contentment, glasses folded in his top pocket – should anyone notice that he is always alone, he will be blind to the look of pity he imagines this may evince.

Herman steps into the quadrant where a few of the standard six pupils are gathered, bottom feeders forced into the midday sun that beats down with the peculiar schizophrenia of a Highveld winter. Herman crosses the quadrant, steps up and out of the heat into the shaded corridor. With his hands jammed into his pockets – strictly forbidden at Premier, pockets being the gateway to the genitals – he saunters towards the deeper gloom of the stairwell, passing Mrs du Plessis’ classroom, the windows framed by cheap net curtains, her failed attempt to make the room more homely; then the bare-walled classroom of Mr le Roux, who advertised his bachelor status with miss-matched socks and breath that suggested a lack of dental care. A blend of disinfectant and toilet now drifts into the corridor. Herman covers his nostrils with his thumb and forefinger. Smell shit, and you might as well be eating it; he certainly does

not want any fecal molecules entering through the nasal lining, so takes a deep breath before quickly entering the bathroom.

It's cool in here, and dark. His eyes take a few seconds to adjust to the light. Two boys positioned in each corner are urinating into the waterfall of the common urinal. The stalls have no locks – so teachers and prefects can barge in under any pretext – but they provide at least a modicum of privacy. In the interests of speed Herman opts for the closest. A mistake. Gagging, he retreats quickly. It's all taking too long now; he has no choice but to use the next stall, trying to avoid the wet puddle spread around the toilet base, whether with urine or water Herman can't say.

Herman puts some effort into it, the yellow froth of his own relief providing some respite from the discomforting wetness of the stall. Zipping up in haste, he grimaces as he notes the damp trim on one trouser leg before quickly backing out to the basins for a cursory rinse.

'Hey Klepto.' Herman looks up. Paul, reflected in the mirror. 'Where's my lighter?'

Herman stares at his wet hands, heart thumping. Looks up again, but the perfection of Paul's face is as disconcerting as that of the hideously disfigured. He looks away again, concentrates instead on his hands, running them down each trouser leg.

'Depends,' he says.

Paul snorts. 'Yeah? On what?'

'On what you need it for.'

Paul grins. 'What you think I need it for, Klepto?'

Herman glances back at the stalls. 'Set this shithouse alight?'

'Good plan.' An appraising look. 'But first a man must fortify himself.' Paul pulls his blazer open to reveal the half-jack sticking out of his torn inner pocket.

And so Herman finds himself following Paul back down the corridor, left, down the walkway that leads to the large asphalt parking lot. To one side are the netball courts, where girls with short skirts and hard faces sent English girls home with sprained fingers and grazed knees. Empty now, bar one lone player intently focused on dropping a ball repeatedly through the hoop. Paul now crouch-runs between a pale

blue Corolla and a battered white Cressida, across the parking lot to where the bikes glint in the sunlight; Herman follows, slipping behind the bikes into a narrow sandy culvert shaded by a corrugated roof.

Sinking to his haunches Paul shakes out a pack of Lexington unfiltered cigarettes, one of which he clamps between his lips before tossing the pack to Herman.

‘After Action Satisfaction, bru. Light?’ Paul stretches out his slim fingers, a surgeon looking for his scalpel. A nail biter too, Herman notes.

Herman doesn’t like the taste of the Lexington, doesn’t like how bits of tobacco stick to his lips, but he’s not going to complain to Paul who is sucking hard on his, eyes screwed up like a regular Marlboro man while pulling the half jack of Klipdrift from his inside pocket.

Paul takes two swigs before offering the bottle to Herman who quietly pockets the lighter and takes a small sip before wiping his mouth and handing the bottle back. He feels the heat spreading to his cheeks as his fingers briefly make contact with Paul’s. He is casting around, desperately looking for something intelligent, something funny; yes, he needs something that will amuse Paul, but his thoughts flop about like beached fish.

‘You getting what you came here for?’

Herman colours. ‘What?’

Paul takes another swig. ‘You said on the bus. Your old toppie is Afrikaans. That’s why you came to this shithole, to learn Afrikaans?’

Herman reaches for the warmth of the bottle. ‘I guess.’ He shrugs. ‘It was my mom’s idea. She thinks it will help us “communicate”’ He grins. ‘She just wants me to write to him. Ask him for money. Fat chance. He’s been MIA.’

Paul snorts.

‘Even if I spoke every language in the world I wouldn’t be able to “communicate” with my dad.’

Herman nods, says nothing. Again he casts around desperately for something, anything. ‘How come you speak English so well?’ he asks. Which is so lame he takes a big swig before passing the bottle back to Paul who shrugs and says: ‘My mom, I guess.’ He grins. ‘My mom, the rockspider.’

Herman, imagining a hairy woman with a big abdomen, asks: ‘So, is that like a Jewish thing?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, does an Afrikaans mother make you more like, I don’t know, a genuine Afrikaner?’

Paul grins. ‘I’m only an Afrikaner when I’m with English speakers, the ones who ball ache about how vrot and Neanderthal Afrikaners are. Then I’m like, ‘Fuck off, I’m Afrikaans.’ Paul shrugs. ‘They always say the same thing. ‘Yeah, but you’re not one of *those* Afrikaners. Like that somehow makes it less of a ‘dis’.’ Paul shows his middle finger. ‘Then you get Afrikaners who like to go on about how kaksleg the English are, you know: weak, rootless, spineless. Then I’m like *fok julle poepholle, ek is Engels.*’ Paul runs his fingers through his hair. ‘Such a fucked up place this.’ Paul’s ear is small and shell-like. Herman has never seen an ear that perfect.

‘Anyways, I’m basically a mongrel, a half-breed,’ Paul grins and looks at him. ‘Like you.’ A deep pleasure coils itself around Herman. He rubs his cheek, tries to camouflage the rising heat. ‘‘Cept I can’t speak Afrikaans.’

Paul snorts. ‘Speaking Afrikaans is easy. You’ll be fluent before the end of the year. But *being* an Afrikaner?’ Paul shakes his head. ‘You’re not cut out for it.’

Herman frowns. ‘What do you mean?’

Paul lifts the bottle. ‘You’re just not the type. You know, a ken-jou-plek-meneertjie; ken jou *ky* van jou *u*.’ Herman, who has had a ruler brought down on his knuckle by a puce-faced Mrs Van Niekerk for just this infraction, smiles as stubs his cigarette out into the dirt. Paul takes another last swig; upends the bottle in the sand. ‘An Afrikaner knows his place. After God comes the dominee, and then you more or less line up according to age, then sex. Don’t matter how shit-for-brains you are, if you arrived on the planet first, you get to call the shots. The only thing kids get to kick around are the

dog. Unless of course you are black, or – God forbid – a moffie, because then, oh boy, you’re at the bottom of the shitting order. Open season. But if you’re white and old, you’re close to God. What are you anyway – standard eight? You’re not even supposed to look a senior in the eye.’

‘What, you want me to address you as meneer?’

Paul grins. ‘Poes will do, thank you.’ He picks up the bottle and tosses it towards the end of the sandy culvert where it smashes against the low wall, a satisfying sound.

‘Hey man, let’s blow this joint.’ Paul gets up, a single leonine movement, and dusts himself off. Herman hesitates. His head is hot; he is not sure whether this is even an invitation, or simply an announcement that their unexpected tryst is over.

Paul shrugs. ‘I’m out of here. If I don’t see you through the week,’ he gives a mini salute, ‘I’ll see you through the window.’ And with that he steps past Herman, leaving him amongst the discarded stompies.

WEDNESDAY, 9 JUNE

“A police car was set on fire by demonstrating students in Soweto yesterday. Three other cars belonging to the police were damaged.” —*Rand Daily Mail*, 9 June 1976

Derk

In the foyer of the decaying block wedged between high-rise office blocks Derk watches steel ropes uncoil like well-oiled intestines, the lift clanking its way down to the ground floor. Rubbing the edge of his shirt cuff, a nervous tick, he turns to Elsa. ‘What if Uncle Tertius doesn’t recognize me?’ He pauses. ‘What if we’re too late?’ The implication is obvious.

Elsa reaches out and takes his hand. ‘Positive thinking,’ she says. Just the kind of claptrap she believes in, when thinking will not, cannot, affect rational outcomes. His Uncle Tertius is either already dead and decomposing in the flat upstairs, or he is alive. If alive, he is either senile, or will be as overwhelmed as Derk is currently feeling.

The last time he’d seen Uncle Tertius he was 12 years old. They had taken the train to Bethlehem for the Christmas family gathering, an event that he and his brother Gabriel looked forward to all year. For Derk it wasn’t just the train trip, the prospect of cake and crème soda, presents under the little tree. This was the only time of the year he saw his Uncle Tertius, the only member of the family who favoured Derk over Gabriel.

That year Uncle Tertius had arrived the day before Christmas, pulling up outside the gate in a new Studebaker Commander, a pearlescent beauty that Derk had stroked in wonder, running his fingers over her silky curves with a prepubescent erotic charge.

With Uncle Tertius had come all the customary good cheer. Sitting cross-legged on the floor Derk had watched how every face turned as Tertius entered, sunflowers in rooms darkened by curtains drawn against the midday heat. Even his grandmother’s face, perennial discontent etched on the corners of her sagging mouth, looked younger when she gazed at her youngest son. Only Derk’s father, mouth set in a disapproving line, seemed immune.

That year Uncle Tertius had brought Derk a bright red Viewmaster, with a set of circular slides. He had lifted it to the bright Free State sun, marvelling at the photographs of snowfilled landscapes and exotic landmarks – the Taj Mahal, the Eiffel Tower, the Colosseum – then grinned at the broad-shouldered outline of Uncle Tertius silhouetted against the blue sky. Uncle Tertius had crouched down next to him

and said, his breath sweet with what Derk would later identify as brandy. ‘You’ll get to see them all. You, my boy, are destined for great things.’ Uncle Tertius had pulled him closer, kissed the side of his head. ‘I know a star when I see one.’

They had returned home on Boxing Day, Derk sitting silently beside his brother Gabriel. In the wrong place, the wrong carriage, the wrong family. With every passing mile his resolve grew. He would run away just as soon as he could. He would join Uncle Tertius, the father he deserved, and the only man who saw the star he wanted to become.

A month or so later his father had announced in a matter-of-fact tone during dinner that they would not be seeing his brother Tertius again. No, he would not be joining them for Christmas. Not that year, nor the next. ‘He has disgraced himself; brought shame on the family. To all intents and purposes, Tertius is gone,’ he’d said, sawing off a tiny slice of dry flesh before chewing it with the fastidious care of a man whose bowel had always troubled him, whose cancer, in its infancy, waited patiently.

Derk could recall it perfectly, the rising nausea as he watched his father slowly masticating his mother’s grey meat. ‘What do you mean, gone?’ he’d asked, a note of hysteria in the disbelief. Balling his knife in his fist, his father had brought it down on the table, making the plates jump, his knife pointing up like a lightning conductor. ‘Gone! As in I’ll brook no further discussion on the matter. Now finish the bounty the good Lord has seen fit to provide, every last bit, or you will be taught a new lesson in gratitude.’

Derk had remained seated in front of his plate, willing himself not to cry, while that traitorous arse-creeper Gabriel had asked for another slice of beef.

‘He’s not to leave this table until that plate is clean,’ his father had instructed his mother when he finally pushed his chair back, slapping his napkin on the table. ‘I don’t care if it takes all night.’ His mother had said nothing. Just cleared the table, leaving him alone under the overhead light, staring at the congealed contents of his plate.

When his grandmother died a few months later, Derk’s father had said the cause was a broken heart, ‘and we have your precious uncle to thank for that’. With her death, the glue dissolved; the family never gathered for Christmas again. Derk’s relationship

with his father never recovered. The news of his passing had been met with an indifference that would have shamed him had he not been so very busy creating the life his uncle had prophesied all those years ago. His uncle, disappeared without a trace.

Which was why he had been so floored when Katrien van Niekerk's call had finally been put through. A loose thread in the tangled network of his estranged family, Katrien had started in on him with the news that someone called Fluffie had moved in, which meant she had no space in their Standerton house. He had rubbed his eyes, waiting to decline the inevitable request for financial assistance, when she had dropped her clanger. 'Vir hoe lank groot-oom Tertius nog so man-alleen kan survive kan ek nou regtig nie se nie. Dinge lyk sleg.' She'd sounded slightly defiant, if not downright accusatory. 'Dis nie reg nie, Oom Derk. Groot Oom het mos familie wat hom in sy ou-dag kan bystaan.'

Derk, who hardly heard anything after the words *Tertius* and *survive*, had stared at his campaign notes, a mounting excitement replacing the disbelief. His Uncle Tertius, alive? If it were true he would be able to avenge what he knew must have been a family wrong. Not only would he do right by Uncle Tertius, he would prove that – given the right father – he, Derk, could be a good son. A caring son. The kind of son he wanted Paul to become. He'd scrawled down the address, then immediately called Elsa.

With a juddering thud the lift announces its arrival on the ground floor, an empty cage, open to the stairwell, with a sliding concertina door. It looks antiquated, dangerously so, but there is no way he can take the stairs. A short battle ensues as he tugs the handle; stiff with age it refuses to budge until finally Derk manages to slam it back, wheezing with the effort. Another battle to slide it closed until finally, sealed in, they clank up to the fourth floor.

Under the tiny brass numerals 404 Derk stops to look at Elsa again, eyes bright with dread. She nods reassuringly.

Derk knocks a knuckle against the door, a soft and hesitant sound that would embarrass him were it not for the pressing nerves, because *what if?* They wait a few seconds before Derk gives a more insistent rap.

Derk feels a rising panic, a constriction of the throat.

‘What if he’s just too weak?’ he hisses, wild-eyed. ‘What if he’s actually *dying*, right now, his last moments on earth, listening to us, knocking on his fucking door?’

Elsa tries the door handle. To both their surprise, it opens.

‘Bloody hell,’ Derk mutters. He puts a hand on her forearm. ‘Wait, no. I don’t know if I can do this Elsa.’

‘Derk, you don’t have a choice.’ Elsa sounds calm, which takes him aback, and she is the one who takes the first step into the dim corridor.

‘Hello?’ Derk follows close behind her, deeper into the pungent smell. ‘Hello?’

To the left of the corridor, an open door – a tiny kitchen, formica surfaces covered in dirty crockery and open tin cans.

Derk feels weak. He places a hand on Elsa’s shoulder; leans on her like a walking stick. She leads him into the living room. A sagging couch, a free-standing radiator, cardboard boxes, plastic bags stuffed with papers, and in the corner, a single bed. On it, a skeletal figure. Motionless.

‘Uncle Tertius?’ Derk finally speaks, his voice soft, squashed by the weight of a 12-year-old’s longing. ‘Uncle Tertius?’

Unbelievably, the eyes – a miracle to behold in that cadaverous face – open.

‘Uncle Tertius, it’s me, Derk. Do you remember me?’

It is a hopeless question. There is virtually no trace of the man he had once worshipped: Uncle Tertius’s large hooked nose – now veined and porous, too large for his shrunken skull – is essentially unchanged in shape, but the mouth is puckered in wrinkles, the mottled skin around the eyes folded in on itself, the cheeks hollow, the full head of hair reduced to a few stray wisps, the once strong cleft chin covered in wiry grey hair. To all intents, the wreck on the bed is a total stranger. A disgusting old man – not dissimilar to the wisened beggar who had importuned him last night outside The Springbok, saying, ‘I’m hungry, baas’. Derk’s tart reply, ‘Well then, you should

eat', had amused the company, but now Derk is the one who is hungry, peering into the eyes that appear to be focusing on him now, their colour unchanged at least.

Derk clears his throat, repeats a bit more forcefully. 'Uncle Tertius. It's me, Derk.'

There is confusion in the voice. 'Drikus? Is dit jy Drikus?'

Derk's heart sinks. He hadn't expected Uncle Tertius to recognize the 12 year old stuck in this bloated middle-aged body, but he was surely no facsimile of his father. That his Uncle Tertius could confuse him with that morose, grey, gormless man was mortifying.

He raises his voice, grimly determined to penetrate whatever brain cells are left. 'No, no, not Drikus, it's Derk. Drikus' son, your *nephew*. *Derk*. The last time we saw each other was at the family Christmas, remember? I was 12. You gave me a red Viewmaster. Do you remember?'

Uncle Tertius raises a hand, then drops it. He appears agitated by this news. His lips move but the sound is a rustle, no louder than a sigh. Derk leans closer, recoils, hand over his nose and mouth – the smell emanating from the wrinkled folds and mottled skin is repulsive. It is Elsa who touches him, placing a hand on the old man's forehead. 'Aren't you hot Uncle Tertius?' she asks, her tone gentle. 'I'm Elsa, Derk's wife.' She whispers to Derk, 'Get him a glass of water.'

'It's so hot in here,' she continues, soothingly. 'Surely you don't need these socks?'

Derk watches in fascinated horror as Elsa now moves to the foot of the bed and removes one thick sock, revealing yellow-stained toenails long enough to curl over each toe. As each foot is liberated from its matted cave, flakes of dead skin rise like snowflakes. 'Water, Derk,' Elsa repeats.

Derk retreats to the kitchen. Every glass is filthy. He gives one a cursory rinse, fills it with water, carries it through to Elsa who is searching through her bag.

'What are you doing?'

'Hang on, here it is.' Elsa removes a bottle of Oil of Olay and unscrews the cap, daubs a large blob onto her hand.

‘He needs the moisture,’ she explains as she rubs the cream across one of the old man’s scaly legs. Ministering to him, as if she’s the fucking long lost daughter while he, his own flesh and blood, wants to gag because – oh God, he has to look away – she is even sweeping cream onto his feet.

The old man groans. Derk wonders when last the old man was touched. He looks around the grimy flat. What a pit.

‘Some water, Uncle Tertius?’ Elsa has taken the glass from him and, sliding her hand under the old man’s back, manages to lift his head, enough to coax some water into his mouth, though heaven knows, a thin stream from each corner is dribbling onto the bed. Derk looks away again – busies himself with the top of what’s left of Elsa’s Oil of Olay bottle. It is disturbing how weak he is, but he is also proud of Elsa. They are a team, after all, and he, Derk, has other strengths. ‘We are going to take care of this, Uncle Tertius,’ he promises. ‘We are going to get you out of here.’

Neither speak as they descend, but as they enter the maelstrom of Twist Street, Derk feels a determination grow strong within him. He will redeem something of himself with Uncle Tertius. The day after they’d got back from Portugal, Elsa had accused him of being incapable of love. ‘You don’t care about anyone,’ she’d said, an incredulous look on her face. ‘It had wounded him. ‘I’d sooner save a fishmoth from drowning,’ he’d shouted, ‘than keep indulging the boy. I do care, just not in a soppy, sentimental way. What do you want from me?’

This is his chance to prove he has a generous heart. He will save his Uncle Tertius from dying in lonely penury by finding him a nursing home, the best; somewhere with a buxom nurse on call. Derk smiles. This is what one hopes for at the end. Clean sheets and a comforting cleavage. With this he feels an intense and sudden surge of affection for Elsa. This was the kind of woman you wanted to grow old with. Look how she had treated his old uncle, a virtual stranger. He stops her then, in the middle of the pavement. ‘Thank you,’ he says, leaning in to kiss her. But Elsa turns away, and he notices then that she is crying. ‘What’s the matter?’ he pulls back, hurt that she would rebuff him.

‘Nothing.’ She is pressing her thumb and forefinger into her eyeballs.

‘Look, Elsa. I promise you, I am going to take care of this. You don’t have to worry about a thing.’

‘Ok.’ She bites her lip. The inner squall appears to have passed. Elsa says nothing, just looks at the traffic that has slowed to a standstill. ‘Shall we cross?’ she asks, and doesn’t wait for him to answer.

Paul

‘Wow.’ Herman cranes his neck, taking in the gleaming tube of concrete and glass. ‘You live here?’

Paul had been pleased when Herman had caught up with him as he walked out the school gate. There is something likeable about the kid; a quiet watchfulness, a stillness. Nothing like the rest of the standard eight pipsqueaks.

‘Tallest building in the southern hemisphere.’ Paul curls the fingers of his right hand into a loose fist and casually masturbates the air. ‘Big. Fucking. Deal.’

Herman doesn’t respond. Paul has a sudden urge to wrestle him to the ground, like the kid brother he’d once wished he’d had, to physically force a reaction out of him, but he suppresses it. Trudges up the concrete concourse towards the foyer, where he jabs the lift button impatiently.

They watch the lift’s progression on the horizontal panel above, the numbers lighting up in quick succession.

It takes less than a minute before the doors slide open on the 52nd floor, revealing a curved wall of windows running around the internal diameter of the building. Some of the windows are open, and from the central gaping hole comes a low desolate whine, as if the building is keening. Herman shrinks back, places one hand against the back wall, as if to anchor himself.

‘They call it the core,’ Paul says, noting his discomfort. ‘A few months back a guy jumped into it. My mom says it’s the building’s fault. My dad says she’s being stupid, but then he says that about everyone.’ He digs around looking for his key. ‘He says

suicides will always find a way to top themselves, and that the world could do with fewer arseholes. Here we go—’

It’s warm inside the flat, the temperature of blood. Paul watches Herman run his fingers along the carpeted wall as he looks around the apartment, bathed in the warm honey haze streaming through the windows. It was Elsa who insisted on carpeting the walls with the same cream carpet she’d used on the floor, who’d furnished the lounge in white leather, chrome and glass. Through the windows the sprawling city is a vast plain of miniature buildings, tiny toy blocks blinking in the sun. ‘Wow,’ Herman says again.

‘Do you ever feel like you are living in a movie,’ Herman asks, though it sounds more like a statement. What he says next is indistinct because Paul is in the galley kitchen opening the fridge door, the nail polishes clattering together in the butter drawer. Other than a small silver foiled rectangle – Elsa’s ‘doggy bag’, brought home for Paul – there is no food in the fridge, only wine and a few bottles of beer, two of which Paul removes.

He opens both, and takes one to Herman who is now running his hand along the top of the Sony cabinet TV.

‘Don’t these cost like 700 bucks or something?’

Paul shrugs. ‘I don’t know. Company TV.’

‘Company TV?’

‘My dad works for McCarthy’s, an advertising agency. So he has to use all the shit he gets to sell. You know, company car, company TV...’

‘That’s pretty cool.’

‘You think? I think it’s a fucking sell out man. My dad walks around with a packet of Life cigarettes in his pocket, and he doesn’t even smoke them. He has to drive a Chevvy every day. You know, *Braaivleis, sunny skies and Chevrolet?* Paul makes a gagging noise.

Herman nods, his fingers now running down to the nobs. ‘So, you watch a lot of TV?’

Paul laughs. 'I watch the test pattern when I'm stoned.' He gets up. 'Wanna smoke?'

Herman shrugs, like it's no big deal either way, which irritates Paul. He wasn't wasting his weed on some snotty nosed ingrate. *Snotty nosed ingrate*. That's what Derk called him.

His room is a mess – a sty, Derk called it, fit only for a pig, which only made him want to trash everything. Herman is examining the posters tacked above his unmade bed – a blonde woman in a pink bikini with her legs apart, *Keur* scrawled along the bottom; Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*. Paul tugs at his tie, unbuttons his shirt.

He pulls open the cupboard door and reaches in to find the matchbox at the back of a drawer. When he turns back he catches Herman staring at the poster taped to the inside of the door: a woman pouting coyly at the camera, a hand under each breast, lifting them to greet the camera. Paul grins. 'Herman, meet Joanne Latham, Joanne, Herman.' Herman smiles politely, then wanders over to stare out of the window again.

Paul opens his matchbox and upends the contents on an old *Scope* – green dust, a few twigs, but it's the real thing.

'Time to rock n roll.' Paul pushes the debris back and holds the magazine so the pips roll away. 'Here, hold this.' Paul hands the magazine over while he tears off a piece of card from his rizzla pack, rolls it into a tight spiral to place at the end of the paper. 'Gerrick,' he says instructively. A quick flick of the tongue to wet the edge of the paper and then, biting his bottom lip, he rolls – a quick efficient movement. Studies the joint. Pretty professional, actually. He's pleased. He doesn't know why, but he wants to impress Herman.

'Now gimme my light, Klepto.'

Paul puffs twice to light the tip, then sucks hard, eyes screwed up as he passes it to Herman. 'Good shit,' he manages to say without exhaling.

Herman's drag dissolves into a protracted coughing fit.

'Jesus wept. You ok?' Paul asks. Herman nods. 'Pretty strong stuff,' he says, and hands it back.

Satisfied, Paul takes another deep draw. Speaks as he exhales the plume. 'You know what you were saying. You know, about life being like a movie?'

Herman nods again. Looking at Herman silhouetted against the washed out Highveld light, a sense of relaxed awareness washes over Paul, a welcome clarity.

'Well it's true. Sometimes I do feel like that. But there's no audience. No one is watching.'

Herman takes the joint back. 'So,' he shrugs. 'That means we can do whatever the fuck we want, right?'

THURSDAY, 10 JUNE

“Een van die vernaamste besware teen die verlening van onafhanklikheid aan die Transkei is dat daar by betrokke swartmense geen oorweldigende aandrag daarop bestaan nie. Dit is ‘n saak, so word gesê, wat die gemiddelde swartman glad nie aanstaan nie. Sy belange lê elders. Die begrip van nasionalisme spreek nie baie sterk tot hom nie.”

[“One of the main objections to granting independence to the Transkei is that there is no overwhelming support from the Blacks. It is a matter, so it is said, that the average Black man rejects. His interests lie elsewhere. The concept of nationalism simply doesn’t appeal.”]

—*Die Burger*, 10 Junie 1976

Derk

Derk slows down for the three young girls on horseback ahead. Watches their hips swaying in unison, their hair tied up to mimic the swishing tails of the horses they rode, the upside-down Y of their backs split into neat jodhpur-clad thighs.

He had a good feeling about Honeydew, a name that held some promise, and the promise is delivering. He glances to the left. Not that there is much else to hold the eye – a featureless landscape of unkept small holdings, unfenced and patchy, the long yellow grass broken by the occasional scraggly copse. To the right a line of bluegum trees, the soil under their peeling bark barren and cracked. No, Honeydew is no Eden, but there is space, fresh air, and girls on horseback. He trails behind them, eyeing the apple-buttocks of the girl at the front, now standing up in her stirrups as her horse breaks into a trot. Derk is contemplating how much closer he can get – he doesn't want to spook the girls – when the horse at the back lifts its tail to reveal a puckered purple arsehole and the rounded end of a grassy turd. Feeling strangely affronted, Derk speeds up, overtakes the dirty beast, leaving the riders behind in a cloud of dust.

He drives on for some time, seeing no other cars, only the occasional building, each an exclamation mark at the end of a lonely drive. He is irritated now – he has neither the time nor inclination to get lost on this godforsaken turd-splattered roads but he is damned if he is going to ask some girl on a pony where on earth he is, and the irritation is starting to mushroom into a full-blown rage when the sign for Sunnyside Home appears, just as the woman at the other end of the line that morning had said it would. In fact, when he checks his watch, the whole trek from Hillbrow to Honeydew has taken him far less time than estimated. Derk takes this as a good sign, and as the facebrick building finally hoves into view, its neat façade punctuated with small cottage-pane windows painted in white, he feels an overwhelming relief.

He turns off the engine. It is not quite what he imagined. There is no garden to speak of, just a few clumpy pellagonias and agapanthus ranged on either side of the red-stoep painted stairs leading to the double doors, above which Derk notices the second 's' in 'Sunnyside Christian Retirement House' is missing. A straggly line of pine trees provide limited shade.

He sticks his finger through the metal cage around the black button and waits, impatiently, before pressing it again, perhaps with more force than is strictly necessary.

‘Can I help you?’ The woman peering at him has those disconcerting lenses that magnify the eyes, giving her the appearance of an owl, or a mongoloid, disfiguring the natural proportions of the face.

Derk smiles. ‘I’m here to see Sister McClaren?’

‘You have an appointment?’ Clipped, the smile not returned.

Derk feels his bile rise. Did this ‘home’ understand nothing about hospitality? But it would not do to lose his temper. He’d spent the better part of the morning working his way through the listings in the Yellow Pages, circling the ads he liked in three different pen colours before working his way through, increasingly despondent as each voice said more or less the same thing: ‘Nothing available at this time. Can we can put you on our waiting list?’ By the time he had to move on to the finely printed names listed alphabetically under *Retirement Homes*, he was thoroughly demoralized.

The Sunnyside had taken their time to answer. He had waited, doodling in the margins, until a slightly breathless voice had picked up – yes, she’d said, a bed had in fact opened up that very morning, God rest Mr Heatherwick’s soul, but if he wanted to apply, he’d need to fill in an application form, like everyone else. Derk had pleaded. Surely only divine intervention could explain the serendipitous timing of his call to Sunnyside at the very moment that they had the capacity to assist, and there could be no more deserving candidate in the world than his uncle, who found himself forsaken and alone, and was in as much need of a bed as the holy mother and Joseph in Bethlehem, and so on. She’d sighed, then put him through to a Sister McClaren to whom he had repeated his pleas.

‘It is not for us to know God’s plan,’ had been the terse reply. He had responded that he was literally on his knees. And prepared to make a sizeable donation.

She had agreed to meet him. ‘But I can’t promise anything, Mr du Toit.’ Until Uncle Tertius is installed in that dead man’s bed he is on parole. So he beams at the ugly little owl, mustering all the warmth he is capable of.

‘She is expecting me, yes. Mr du Toit? If you would be so kind as to let her know I am here?’

She looks at her watch. ‘Very well.’ She opens the door. ‘Follow me’. They leave the entrance hall – polished floors, a single potplant in the corner – and head down a well-lit corridor; the lamps hanging from the arched ceiling apparently not providing sufficient light, fluorescent strips have been installed between them. Owl woman stops in front of a door. Derk squints at the sign tacked above the door: *‘For once you were in darkness, now you are in the light of the Lord.’*

‘Here we walk in the light, Mr du Toit,’ she says.

‘I’m rather fond of the dark myself,’ Derk can’t help himself. Owl woman looks at him sternly. ‘The night, I mean. You know,’ he winks. ‘Bit of a night owl.’ Christ. He is losing it.

‘Please,’ Derk reaches out a hand. ‘Call me Derk. And you are?’

‘Sister McClaren.’

Derk refrains from any reaction, merely smiles and follows her into the room, but feels the weight of the situation. He is not accustomed to displays of false bonhomie. He does not like this owl woman. She is patronizing and pious, and ugly as sin. He wants to tell her to fuck off into the light that he hopes is careering towards her. But he smiles again as she indicates the seat. ‘Tidy,’ he says in what he hopes is an ingratiating way, inclining his head towards her empty desk.

‘We run a tight ship here, Mr du Toit. People come to us expecting their loved ones to be fed and bathed, both physically and spiritually. Reading the scriptures is part of our daily routine, as is prayer. Every new day is greeted with a gratitude blessing; no crumb passes our lips before we have expressed thanks, and we expect our guests to spend several hours either reading the Scriptures or, if they are no longer able to see, listening to them.’

‘Quite,’ Derk murmurs. Then, because she seems to expect more, ‘I am very partial to gratitude. Only yesterday I was thinking about this exactly.’ There is a brief pause. Derk curls one hand in the other and smiles expectantly.

‘I am telling you this because we are a home for Christians.’ She rolls her ‘r’ with a certain relish. He nods. ‘To each their own succour; we do not belief in intermingling beliefs. There is no room in Sunnyside House for Jews, Muslims, Hindus; no agnostics and certainly no *atheists*.’ The corners of her mouth turn down. ‘Our job is to tend to our Christian brothers and sisters at the end of a fruitful and faithful life, Mr du Toit.’ She studies him, her owl eyes taking in his unkept hair, the falcon stare and slightly hooked nose. ‘So, I take it you and your uncle are Christians?’

Derk wants to punch her, to splinter her spectacles into her judgemental eye. ‘Of course,’ he says, licking lips that are feeling chapped and dry. ‘My Uncle Tertius was – is – a good man, Sister McClaren. A good, decent, principled man who has fallen on hard times. I’m sure he will be nourished by your ... regimen. As for us – my wife and I – we would not only be forever grateful, but indebted.’ Derk pulls his cheque book from an inner jacket pocket. ‘And I am more than willing to make it worth your while.’

She raises an eyebrow, widening her owl eyes even more. ‘While our needs are many, Mr du Toit, we are not in the business of simply selling beds to the highest bidder.’

Derk puts the chequebook down on the desk. The salesman in him can feel it. He is losing the deal. Two decades of selling campaigns has taught him this – even if the analysis is incisive, the strategic thinking spot on, the creative work inspiring, if the man making the final decision doesn’t like you, you are pissing into the wind. She might be an ugly little fannymuncher but Sister McClaren wasn’t stupid, and she wasn’t falling for his shpiel.

‘Of course,’ he closes the chequebook but leaves it on the desk. ‘And I assure you this is not about money. I’ll be perfectly honest with you, Sister McClaren. You see before you a man who has not seen the inside of a church for many years. That is not to say I do not pray. I do, and often. For my uncle I cannot speak because he was estranged from the family when I was young, but I assure you he has not only suffered greatly as a result, but, I believe, unduly. Mistakes were made, mistakes for which I wish to atone. I sit before you, a man deeply flawed, but willing to do whatever it takes to save the man I once loved as a father. With the right care, I believe he will recover his strength. And with his strength returned, his faith, and mine, will be restored. Just tell me what it is you need from me.’

She gazes at him, her large owl eyes unblinking before opening the top drawer and taking out a sheath of papers clipped together. She slides it over. 'Very well, Mr du Toit. These are the terms and conditions. The first six month are payable in advance.' She places a finger on the figure scrawled in the space between two typewritten words. The monthly rate as you it see here includes accommodation, care and all meals. There is a surcharge for laundry. Your uncle, he is incontinent?'

'Not to my knowledge,' Derk swallows, thinking of the wrinkled corpse. 'But I stand to be corrected.'

She nods. 'Well, if he is, be prepared for some extra costs. As you can imagine, the additional laundry is time consuming. You will want to see his room? Then follow me. The bed that has been vacated is just along the corridor.'

Derk wonders why it is so quiet, where the rest of the fannymunchers are, but they have hardly taken 20 paces when McClaren stops abruptly in front of a door. She gives a sharp rap, doesn't wait for a response before opening it.

Visual impressions are favourable. It is north-facing, with two cottage pane windows bathing the room in wintry sunlight. In the bed closest to him a wrinkled scarecrow lies with his mouth agape. By the window another sits in his chair, gazing at nothing, rocking to some invisible metronome. The smell of urine is unmistakable.

'Morning Mr Blake!' McClaren greets the catatonic rocker as she marches over to the window that she now opens, revealing bars that follow the same lines. Derk wonders if that is to keep burglars out, or the residents in. She turns back. 'Well, this is it. What do you think?'

Derk gave a weak smile, not daring.

'It's lovely Sister McClaren. It's perfect.'

Elsa

Elsa shudders as the door slams into the doorframe behind her. She will never get used to living here, the apartments perched like teeth around a large gaping maw. When Derk had first wrenched her from the seaside bungalow that had been their first

home, he had tried to cheer her up with the promise of a grand house in one of the original garden suburbs of Joburg. She had traipsed around Parktown, Parkview, Parkhurst, Westcliff, looking at houses exuding the gravitas of age and wealth, homes built by the clerks and lawyers who looked after the interests of turn-of-the-century randlords, as the haughty estate agent had explained it to her. She had dragged Derk to view the double-storey on Empire Road, a pretty house with multiple chimneys and wrought-iron detailing – ‘in need of TLC’, the agent had said encouragingly, ‘but a real bargain for the area’, ignoring the proximity to the busy road. On the way back to the two-bedroom furnished flat in Berea that Derk had rented, he admitted what she suspected the agent had known all along. They couldn’t afford it. ‘Even if we could, why would we want to live in a house like that – four times the size we need?’ he’d asked. ‘What would our life be, stuck amongst the fat cats with their gardeners, their cleaners, woken up by lawnmowers on Sundays. The whole point of moving here is to be where it’s happening, to feel the thumping heart of the city flow through your veins,’ he’d ranted, two fingers tapping his wrist. ‘If you wanted a picket-fence life, you picked the wrong husband.’

So they had stayed on in the furnished flat that was supposed to be temporary, living on the 17th floor within view of the Hillbrow tower. Occasionally Derk, who believed in the curative powers of a lump of scorched red meat, lighted his Hibachi braai on the balcony, until the plume of smoke pouring from their apartment caused a panic in the observation deck of the Hillbrow tower. Derk had repaired the damage the fire department did to the front door, but the damage to their relationship with the caretaker was irreversible. After that, Derk ignored the black-ceilinged balcony, and started talking about the Ponte, growing like a concrete paper-towel roll into the skyline.

‘Look at that!’ he’d crowed the last time they went to Heinrich’s, the revolving restaurant at the top of the Hillbrow tower. He’d gestured at the twinkling collage of lights as the restaurant slowly cranked round on its axis, a tinkling pianist at the centre. ‘Here we are, in the suburb with the densest population in the world, at the top of the tallest tower in the southern hemisphere, looking at the tallest residential building in the world!’ He twisted his neck to give an irritable look at the pianist,

starting up on *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, then lifted his glass, inclined it towards her. ‘Mark my words Els, right here, right now, this is the best place in the world to be.’

‘Yes but does it have to be in a furnished flat?’ she weedled, perhaps unwisely. ‘I’ve been looking around Auckland Park. We can afford Auckland Park, can’t we?’

‘Back to the white picket fence, is it?’ Derk’s eyes, bulging and wild; the switch from manic excitement to black rage so sudden, it still took her by surprise. When he suddenly leapt to his feet Elsa had cringed back, but he was not even looking at her, he was pointing at the central island their table was slowly approaching, at the pianist fumbling through the opening chords to *Love Story*. ‘Desist!’ Derk had shouted, silencing the restaurant so that his next sentence was clearly heard by all. ‘Desist!’ he’d repeated. ‘Do not make a greater *cunt* of yourself than God intended you to be!’

Derk had said afterwards that Heinrich’s was overpriced, and no great loss, but Elsa would miss the view.

Elsa opens the fridge, nail polish bottles rattling in the door.

She sighs. She really should have a little talk with Paul. The beers are disappearing at an alarming rate. But the last thing she wants is to pick another fight with Paul when the animosity between him and Derk permeates the flat, insidious as dust motes.

Elsa pours herself a glass; studies the watch hanging from her neck. Twenty past seven. Running late, but Derk won’t care. He’ll go ahead, order what he wants.

She walks through to the lounge and looks around the room critically. She’d been furious when he had taken a penthouse in the Ponte. ‘You can choose the furniture,’ he’d conceded. ‘As long as I get my two-way mirror, you can do whatever you want.’ Defiantly she had spent plenty, but even if she’d plated the walls with 18-carat gold she would still hate every inch of this gilded cage.

She takes a sip, contemplates her silhouette reflected in the window. *You made your bed*. Derk had always been critical of the notion that one owed a debt to family. He’d invited no family to their wedding, not even Gabriel. At the time she’d been so taken by the unconventional nature of Derk – so thrilling after a stultifying childhood – that she had thought it very modern. It hadn’t occurred to her that it might not bode well for the day she wanted to start her own family. Besides, he’d been happy enough for

her to invite her parents, had paid for their flights and accommodation, had even, bizarrely, taken a liking to her mother. But that was all before the fall out with Gabriel. After that he'd used words like 'amputate' and 'cauterize'. A few years back he'd pointed out a woman crossing the road – 'I do believe that's my aunt Fiefs,' he'd said, but made no effort to get up and greet her. He had continued to send his father a monthly stipend but when the end came he was too busy to attend the funeral, though Elsa suspected he just wanted to avoid Gabriel. On the rare occasions he spoke with any warmth about his childhood it had been about his Uncle Tertius. Finding him was, she supposed, miraculous. Watching Derk make an effort even more so. *That's great Derk*, she wanted to say when he told her he'd found his uncle a home. *What about my home?*

She refills her glass then climbs the stairs, wondering what to wear. 'Ray's bringing his new bird Pat,' Derk had said, and she had heard the expectation in his voice. 'A celebration night.' The familiar, wheedling tone. 'A high-note night.'

Elsa places her wine glass on the pedestal next to the bed and turns to face the cupboards – a wall of mirrored rectangles that made the room look bigger, and masked the folding door into the bathroom. She smiles at her reflection, feeling her mouth stretch into her cheeks. *Smile and the world smiles with you*. Her mother – one hand on the hip, the other clenched around her father's belt. *Cry and you cry alone*.

At least they're seeing Ray tonight. Ray's good for a laugh. Elsa likes to look on the bright side, to count her blessings – a healthy son, a man who loves her – but she isn't feeling it tonight. She turns back to the pedestal; drains the glass. *Smile and the world smiles with you*.

Elsa pushes her hand against the mirror closest to her. It folds inwards, revealing shelves rammed haphazardly with clothing. Next to this is a railing so full that she struggles to flip through the hangers. She pauses finally. A silver halter-neck dress that hasn't had an outing for some years. Stepping into it, she remembers why. The fabric is scratchy. It used to be too tight across the chest but she has lost weight and the fit is perfect. She undoes the bow at the back; adjusts it to show a bit more cleavage. Derk will like it. The itchy fabric she'll put up with. Nothing another glass of wine can't fix.

She rummages through the mound of shoes looking for the strappy silver sandals. Not that Elsa likes showing off her feet but this is a dress that requires that kind of sandal, and she will touch up her toenails.

The last time she'd worn them, Lynne had admired them. The shoes, and her toes. She'd said long toes meant a happy life – 'and, if you're a man' – she'd put her hand's 20 centimeters apart, and laughed her throaty laugh.

She will have to get used to missing Lynne. Something stilted has crept into their exchange. The rules of the game have changed. When she'd called her to thank her for lunch, Lynne had suggested a dinner. 'I mean, I would love to finally meet Derk,' she'd said. 'And introduce you both to Norman. His wife's away the whole of next week, so how bout you and Derk come round for dinner?'

Elsa had wrapped her finger so tightly around the telephone cord it started to throb. 'What, at your flat?'

Lynne had been silent. 'Well, unless you think my flat isn't good enough.'

'No, no. I'm sorry. I'm just... It's just that Derk's in the middle of some family drama. I'm not sure if next weekend is a good time.'

'Oh,' Lynne said. Well what about the weekend after?'

She couldn't tell Lynne that there would never be a good time, that the only meal Derk ever ate was one he could order from a menu, and send back if he didn't like it. Besides, she didn't want them to meet. If Derk liked Lynne, he would embroil her in one of his games. If he didn't, it would be even worse. Either way, he would ruin it. In a way he already has.

'Look, let me discuss it with Derk. I'll get back to you,' she had ended it.

Carrying the shoes by their straps, Elsa pads through the silent flat on bare feet, back to the kitchen where she removes one of the nail polish bottles from the fridge door. She doesn't really have enough time to wait for the touch-up to dry so sits down on the edge of the sofa and carefully maneuvers one foot into the sandal. Squinting, she quickly covers the chips on the big toe and is struggling to find the hole in the thin

ankle strap when she hears what sounds like a tap on the door. Swinging the other shoe from its strap, she limps across to look through the eyeglass.

When Elsa opens the door, the boy – for it’s a boy, despite the girlish frame and floppy fringe, but a pretty one at that – looks surprised. He leans back to study the number above the door.

‘Can I help you?’

‘Paul here?’ The intensity of the boy’s gaze is disconcerting. Wobbling on one shoe in her silver minidress, Elsa suddenly feels self-conscious.

‘No. Paul’s not here I’m afraid. Can I take a message?’

The boy looks surprised. ‘He’s not here?’

‘No, he’s not. He is—’ Elsa struggles to recall what Paul does on a Thursday. ‘Well, I think he’s at rugby practice, or maybe with his friend Poena – he usually goes home with him afterwards... You know Poena?’ She stops. They both hear it. A door slams. Paul’s voice. ‘I’m here.’

Elsa lifts one slender shoulder. ‘Oh dear,’ she says, colour rising. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t realise he was home. He’s been quiet as a mouse. Paul?’ she turns back to face the apartment. ‘Please, do come in.’

The boy walks in, stops and gazes up at the stairs expectantly. He has clearly been here before. It unnerves Elsa, the familiarity of this strange boy in her flat.

‘I’m sorry,’ she says again. ‘I’m Elsa. And you are?’

It is Paul who answers. ‘Herman.’ She looks up to watch Paul, hair askew, descending the last flight, a swagger in each step.

‘I didn’t even know you were here.’

Paul stretches, a feline grace to the movement. She wonders again at the length of him, the breadth of him, this tall, handsome child she once bore.

‘I fell asleep.’

‘Hard day at school?’

‘Quite,’ Paul glances at Herman, who holds his gaze.

Feeling awkward, Elsa lifts her shoe. ‘Well, as you can see, I’m about to go out, so I’ll leave you two to get on with it.’ She looks at Herman. ‘I’m afraid there’s hardly anything left in the fridge.’ Glances at Paul. ‘But there’s tea, if you prefer. Though I think we’re out of milk.’ Paul rolls his eyes.

‘Well, I’m late,’ she says, irritated. ‘Have fun.’ She picks up her bag and limps out, leaving the nail polish open on the coffee table. Putting her shoe on while waiting for the lift, an awkward balancing act, Elsa feels a sudden stab of grief. Banished from her own home by a slip of a boy and her own son. Where was the Paul who used to beam up at her when she walked into the room, like she was the pot of gold at the bottom of the rainbow, the sun, shining through the rain. She looks down at her feet. *Shit*. Is there anything cheaper than a chipped nail?

Herman

When Herman had boarded the bus that morning to find Paul not there, the disappointment had been visceral. A physical pain, in the stomach region. *Stomache*, Herman had thought, fingering the crack in the strap of his satchel.

He’d endured Primus, then spent the afternoon listlessly staring out the flat window, watching children clambering on the jungle gym in the park below with the radio on, until Esme Everard’s saccharine ‘*So maak mens!*’ had driven him out the flat and up the hill to the library.

The only single-storey dwelling left in a street of high-rise apartment blocks, the library’s red-tiled roof is in shadowed by its neighbours, its twin bay windows an incongruous contrast to the towering rectangles. Herman likes to browse the shelves for obscure titles, looking for books that haven’t been picked in years. He opens them, breathes in the smell of their long-trapped words, imagining them rising from their thick bed of paper into his nose. It is a panacea of sorts but today he does not want to be that boy, sniffing books in the back corner of the library.

At the Diaz Café he waits impatiently while the fat woman with a downy upper lip complains about the petrol price increase to the bushy-browed man behind the

counter. He taps his coin impatiently against the glass counter, but it is only when her super-sized pillows finally sway out through the doorway that the man pays him any attention.

‘Yes?’ Eyebrows bunched together, underlining his furrowed forehead. His tone is aggrieved, as if he knows what Herman thinks about his fat wife. ‘What you want?’

Lexington. Rizzlas. Stuyvesants. A lighter.

It’s 15 minutes, the walk from the Statesman to the Ponte. Standing outside Paul’s flat, he’d almost chickened out; had been relieved when there was no answer; shocked when it swung open to reveal a blonde woman in a glittering minidress, holding one shoe.

Meeting Paul’s mom had not gone well. Watching her limp out, still clutching the one shoe, he felt somehow responsible.

‘Never mind her. She’s been a bit weird lately.’

When he turns his attention back to Paul, looking at him with a lop-sided grin, he promptly forgets about her. Herman removes the Rizzla pack from his pocket.

‘Come up.’ Paul grins, combs his fingers through his hair.

Walking into the mess that is Paul’s lair, Herman takes a deep pleasurable breath, taking in the full eight litres of Paul: a distinctive, earthy smell of unwashed clothing and a pungent undertow. He wishes he could bottle it.

Herman tosses the Lexington onto Paul’s unmade bed.

‘My man!’ Approval. A coiled snake squeezes Herman’s chest. ‘And my light, Klepto?’ Herman takes out the new lighter and puts it on the table. Paul’s lighter is next to his bed, where it will stay.

Paul opens up his cupboard door to rummage through a drawer, revealing that awful poster again, the woman cupping her naked chestflesh in each hand, showing off her big nipples like a sow. Breasts should come with stars stuck on them.

‘So,’ Paul sits down with a heavy sigh. ‘Anything interesting go down at Primus today?’

Herman lights a Stuyvesant. 'Usual *kak*.' He pronounces it *cack* but Paul doesn't correct him. He takes another drag. 'We got our form threes.'

Paul snorted. 'That's it then.'

Herman shrugs. 'Fuck that. I'm not going.' He pushes out a perfect smoke ring, but Paul isn't watching.

'Hey ho,' Paul licks the edge of the Rizzla. 'It's off to war you go. They got your number now, troepie.'

Herman blows another smoke ring.

'Old Hendriks took a fall. Broke his wrist.' He tries not to look at Paul, thought it's all he wants to do.

'Poena rigged his chair. The whole block C heard – everyone laughing their heads off.' Herman shakes his head. 'Poor guy. They say he was crying.'

He is watching Paul stroke the joint, making sure it's straight, the way his fingers are moving along the length of the two-blader. 'Moffie,' Paul says absentmindedly.

Herman colours. 'I felt a bit sorry for him.'

'And that right there is your problem. You're not supposed to feel *sorry* for those fuckers. It's us against them.' Paul looks up and grins, a wolf-like smile that makes Herman feel good, like he's about to be eaten. 'Once someone feels sorry for you, you're dead.'

Paul bends down, carefully placing the magazine on the floor without spilling the contents; the movement of Paul's shoulder blade as he does so, a sharp, private pleasure.

Herman casts about, looking for something to say, but its like he's in the dark with a dead torch. 'So how come you didn't come to school today?'

'Ag, you know.' Paul flops back, swings his legs up onto the bed. 'As you say, it's *kak*.' Pronounces it 'cack', like Herman. Staring up at the ceiling he now absently runs his fingers around his bellybutton.

Herman can't take his eyes of those fingers, now stroking the thin downy strip that leads from his bellybutton to his jeans. He swallows, feels a deep warmth start in his genital area. With every beat of his heart he can feel his cock harden a little more, slowly rub up against the inside of thigh, the tension pushing against the fabric of his jeans which he wishes now weren't so tight. Soon it will be hard to disguise, and he has to concentrate hard now, has to focus on the chest bags of the pouting woman on the open cupboard door.

'Jees Herman.' With one smooth movement Paul swings his legs off the bed. 'You'd swear you'd never seen a poster of a naked chick before.'

'Course I have.'

'Yeah?' Paul asks casually, passing him the joint. 'How bout a real one?'

'Course. You? Bet the whole netball team has taken their clothes off for you.'

Paul laughs humourlessly.

'Not worth the drama, those girls.' He shakes his head. 'Never putting out till you say you love them, then acting all hurt when you don't. If they didn't force you to say things you didn't mean, you wouldn't say them in the first place, right?' Paul shakes his head. 'Too much hard work, buddy.' Herman smiles at the carpet. Nods.

'I'm through with schoolgirls and their half-hearted hand jobs. Fuck that.' Paul picks up the pack Herman brought him, tears it open. 'No sirree,' he says as he pulls out a cigarette. 'I got me a real woman. Mandy. Right here in this building, lives on the 13th floor.'

A blow. 'That's convenient,' he says, relieved when Paul doesn't notice the sarcasm but continues in a jaunty tone. 'Now there's a woman who knows what she wants.' Paul winks. 'And what she wants, is me.'

Herman is silent. He already hates this Mandy. He doesn't want to hear about her. She is ruining his evening. He tries to smile. His mother is always telling him he has a revealing face. He squints as he concentrates on taking another drag.

Paul now asks in a casual enough tone, 'How old are you anyway?'

‘Fifteen.’ He passes the joint.

‘Old enough to bleed.’ Paul laughs. ‘My dad said that.’ He takes a drag. ‘I popped my cherry with a 15-year-old. In a Portapool.’ He holds it in for a few seconds then laughs exhales, two jet streams of smoke flowing from his nostrils. He contemplates the joint. ‘Don’t remember her name. She was like a cat on heat, man.’ Takes another drag. ‘I mean, I wasn’t into her or anything. I must have been 13, just hanging out with her in the Portapool, in this lukewarm water, watching our parents talking under the tree, when next thing I knew, her hand was in my Speedo. Fucking weird.’ Paul looks at Herman, eyebrows raised, and Herman thinks again how perfect his cheekbones are, how they triangulate his face. ‘Her hands, in my pants, *right there*, with our parents chatting in the garden.’

‘You didn’t tell her to stop?’

Paul laughs. ‘You’re kidding, right? I let her rub my dick, then she took my hand and put it in her bikini bottom and I stuck my finger right in. Fuck man, just thinking about it is making me hard,’ Paul rubs his hand on the bulge that has appeared in his jeans.

Herman looks away.

‘Got to avoid DSB, right?’

Herman keeps his eyes averted.

‘Deadly Sperm Buildup man, makes me ratty as hell.’ Paul looks at his watch, stands up. ‘I’m thinking Mandy might be home. You want to come?’

Herman looks away, picks up his pack of cigarettes.

‘It’s cool if you want to split.’ Paul sounds absent.

‘Mandy got a friend?’

Paul laughs. ‘That’s the spirit, man,’ he says, punching Herman’s arm.

But Mandy is not in, so they walk to Fontana where they share half a chicken, and Paul is right, he’s ratty as hell.

When Herman lets himself into the apartment it is silent, and dark. He is glad to be alone. He pours himself a glass of warm water from the hot tap then takes it to bed where he lies down and looks at the ceiling before closing his eyes and picturing Paul's face.

Softly he says his name aloud – 'Paul' – a perfect plosive.

Herman dips his finger in the glass of water, unzips himself, imagines Paul's tongue. A ridiculous notion, his cold finger. Paul's tongue would be wide and wet and hot, it would wrap itself around him, and just thinking about it spreads a familiar warmth across his crotch, a tightening in his scrotum.

Herman walks to his mother's bathroom, his cock semi-erect and swaying. Takes the box of tampons from the cupboard underneath the basin, twists off the wrapping. He unscrews the lid off the blue tub of Vicks Vaporub she used to rub on his chest when his breathing becomes too laboured at night. Scoops a fingerful with his left hand, the clean camphor smell curling into his nose; then dips the tampon in. Spreads some liberally on the palm of his right hand.

Herman gets down on his knees, facing away from the toilet. He eases the tampon into his anus, starts pumping hard. The tingling sensation of camphor is like a hot wave, pleasure flooding to his pelvic area, the epicenter somewhere about two thirds along his dick. Using his head to balance against the side of the bath he uses his left hand to gently tug at his balls. The orgasm is powerful.

He uses his mother's face cloth to wipe his semen up off the carpet; drops the tampon and its wrapper in the toilet. He has to flush twice before the tampon wrapper disappears. He soaps the face cloth and washes it thoroughly. Carefully drapes it over the bath. Surveys the room again; making sure he has left no trace.

Hungry, he heads to the kitchen but there is nothing in the fridge he wants to eat. He settles on a piece of bread spread thick with peanut butter which he takes to his darkened room. The tower twinkles through the window, a floating UFO above the park, empty now. Herman lies down on his bed and exhales again, *Paul*.

Derk

‘Rape is a relative thing.’ Elsa picks up her glass. ‘Don’t you think? Every woman wants to be raped by the man of their choice. Or the woman.’ A flirtatious look at Pat as she takes another sip from the wine glass that has not been empty since her arrival at the Criterion several hours back. They have been drinking with intent, a bottle down before the starters, the four of them seated at Derk’s favourite lamp-lit table in the corner. Derk had amused them with a dramatized version of his encounter with Sister McClaren; Ray had followed with a convoluted story about a teaching stint in a convent school in Buluwayo, the setting for a seduction scene that had gone seriously awry when a colleague with whom he had consensual sex had discovered him with another woman and accused him of rape.

‘Well I’m not sure you can use the words choice and rape in the same sentence,’ Pat says dryly. She is smiling though, clearly enchanted by Elsa who is looking particularly glamorous tonight in a sparkly silver dress that reveals more than it hides. ‘But I think I understand what you’re getting at. You like it a bit rough?’

Derk likes this Pat. Intelligent. Not a prude. Attractive enough.

‘No, not really.’ Elsa laughs, her mouth splits into a wide grin exposing a perfect set of teeth marred only by that lovely little gap in the front. ‘Depends.’ She takes a sip.

‘Of course you don’t, my darling,’ Ray says. ‘You’re just trying to get a rise out of us.’ He grins, glances at Derk.

Resting a hand on Ray’s arm, Elsa leans towards Pat. ‘This is my favourite man on the planet. After Derk, of course.’ A fleeting acknowledgement, Derk thinks but Elsa has put her arm around both him and Ray and draws them both closer to kiss their foreheads before releasing them and picking up her glass again. ‘To friends.’

‘Top up the happy tank.’ She inclines her glass towards the bottle. ‘May it spill over.’

Derk signals for the bill soon after. He doesn’t want Elsa any drunker. Ray is right. This Pat woman is a good catch. Self assured, with long brown hair. Slim, and taller than Elsa. A well-oiled catch, if all goes to plan.

Back at the penthouse there is a genial and warm bonhomie between them. Elsa asks Derk to put on a cassette. ‘Something good,’ she says, kicking off her heels before bringing four glasses and another bottle of wine from the kitchen. After swaying in front of them for a few minutes Elsa settles on the sofa, stretching a slender leg across Pat’s velvet clad thighs. They speak, the two women, while Ray stands next to Derk and makes some pompous toast to the twinkling lights below. He watches, half-listening to Ray talk, as Elsa gets up to Joni crooning, ‘*Oh you’re a mean old daddy but I like you*’. She is swaying again, but this time her arms are out and she is entreating Pat to join her – and who can resist shimmering Elsa, her white-blonde mane curling against her naked back, her hips anchored by bare, shapely legs.

Pat gets up then and Elsa synchronizes the movements of their hips. She moves a little closer, rests an outstretched arm on Pat’s shoulder. She is gazing into Pat’s eyes, her mouth slightly open and smiling, her bottom lip a glistening invitation. The other arm she curls around Pat’s waist, pulling her even closer. Even Ray has stopped talking now. It is just Joni’s voice and the two of them, the raven and the blonde, sleek and sensuous, slowly moving closer, until Pat drops her head and places her mouth on Elsa’s. Good girl, Derk wants to crow.

Elsa now slips her hands under the shoulder of Pat’s velvet jacket, helps slide it off, then unbuttons her blouse and trousers, her movements sure and dexterous. She runs her hands over Pat’s breasts, gratifyingly small, then down along her stomach. One hand goes between her legs, the other she runs over her buttock. She turns then and lifts her hair, showing Pat the bow of her halter-neck silver dress.

Kicking the dress aside Elsa, wearing just a panty, moves closer. Derk, who has yawned through live sex shows in seedy bars in Amsterdam and Bangkok, never tires of watching his wife, and he can feel his excitement rise, a palpable heat spreading as Elsa now positions Pat so that she is now lying down on the sofa, the one raised leg crooked over the backrest facing him. The other she now places on the floor, spreading herself open for Elsa. Derk reaches down, cups his crotch.

Pat has her mouth open, back arched. She is reaching out for Elsa now, Elsa who looks back at the two of them sitting in their respective armchairs, a hunger in her blue-almond eyes.

To Derk's consternation, Ray stands up. Before he can say anything Ray has undone his trouser button, is unzipping and pulling down his trousers as if they are on fire; almost tripping as he steps out of them to get to the sofa, to Pat's open mouth. Without even a backward glance.

Derk can feel his excitement wane. Raymond, knees bent, pumping away in his socks, his hairy bum obscuring Pat's face, ruining the tableau. It is a bitter disappointment but nothing to the moment when Ray, reaching out like an open-mouthed baby, clamps down on Elsa's breast. Derk feels himself propelled across the floor with a forceful volition: one minute he is seated, the next he has the last remaining hairs on that little pervert's head in his grasp as he yanks his head away from Elsa with a violence born of pure rage.

'You fucking *bastard*. How dare you touch my *wife*!'

An ignominious retreat follows. Pat half-dressed, clutching her shoes to her chest, avoiding eye contact. Ray, looking bewildered. Hurt. As if he doesn't know that there are rules to this game.

FRIDAY, 11 JUNE

“The Minister of Education in QwaQwa Mr JR Ngake said yesterday his department was going to reject Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in QwaQwa schools. He warned that Blacks were no longer prepared to swallow things forced down their throats by Central Government.”

—*Rand Daily Mail*, 11 June 1976

Derk

Sweet Jesus. What a dream.

Derk pushes himself upright, wobbles – this *fucking* bed. A rumpled sheet is the only sign of Elsa. A wave of anger washes over him, anxiety in its wake. What a disastrous night.

He grimaces as he stands up. Feeling breathless and dizzy, he abruptly sits down again, the waterbed swaying beneath him. Picks up his watch, groans. McClaren said collection would be at 9.30 sharp, which leaves him less than an hour to get there. No point in giving a present if you can't witness its unwrapping, so he pushes himself up onto his wobbly legs.

He wonders briefly if he should call Elsa; decides against it. Derk the Munificent, liberating his long-lost uncle from a dank and lonely hovel, was a role that had been somewhat tainted by last night's debacle.

He wonders how much she will remember.

He sits down on the bidet, enjoys the rush of water in his crack. Thinks again about the dream in which he kept driving towards the tiny figure waiting for him patiently on the side of a dirt road. The figure had kept receding, no matter how long he drove through the vast painterly landscape, the broad brushstroke hillocks, tiny cypress trees like exclamation marks dotted along every ridge, behind it all the striated cliffs of the Malutis and an overarching blue sky. The car had finally broken down, or run out of fuel. Driven on by a yearning for who knows what, Derk had set off on foot, trudging along the dusty road. Still, he never got closer.

The cod psychology of it annoys him.

He spits the toothpaste out, rinses his mouth. Notes the smear of toothpaste left near the plug with distaste. He washes it away, dries the basin with a hand towel. Elsa's hygiene standards have been slipping. It is almost spiteful, leaving that blob on the basin, no better than leaving an unflushed turd in the lavatory.

He dresses quickly, and within 30 minutes he is pushing the Chevvy's nose into the traffic, his excitement shot through with anxiety. Sunnyside is not exactly what he

hoped for, but it will have to do. Uncle Tertius will be fed, hydrated, cleaned. With proper care and nutrition, he would recover. He would take him on jaunts to his favourite restaurants. They would reminisce and laugh at the young boy crying over his cold plate on that plastic floral-pattern tablecloth – the melodrama of youth, unable to picture the future, this happy ending. Uncle Tertius would raise a toast. Gratiſied, he would shake his head. ‘To *you*,’ he’d say. Perhaps they would clasp each other close, too moved to say much more, then drink another toast. ‘To freedom, to walking one’s own path,’ he’d say.

In front of the door to flat 404 Derk experiences a momentary dread. He wishes now he had called Elsa. *Positive thinking*. Derk takes a deep breath, and pushes open the door.

There is a draught in the flat, the curtain sucked through a grimy window that Derk doesn’t recall being open. Other than this the flat looks the same: the floor strewn with piles of newspapers stacked and tied with string, plastic bags filled with papers. Uncle Tertius is still on the bed, one bony leg bent at the knee and resting against the wall, exposing purple veins that coiled like boils beneath the skin.

Derk approaches cautiously, fearfully, but there are definite signs of life: a pulsing vein in the temple, a perceptible rise in the chest. He studies the withered and wrinkled creature, tufts of thin grey hair sprouting from his mostly bald and mottled pate. Again he is feels disappointed not to find a shred of the man he’d last seen behind the wheel of his pearl Studebaker. Derk takes a step closer; leans as close as he can without gagging.

‘Uncle Tertius, it’s me, Derk,’ he whispers.

The wrinkled tissue-paper lids flutter open. He blinks twice, focuses on Derk, then tries to push himself up.

‘Wie’s dit? Wat soek jy hier?’ Querulous. Derk sighs.

‘It’s me, Derk, your nephew.’

No sign of recognition.

Derk looks at his watch.

‘It’s me, Derk,’ he repeats again, slightly louder. ‘Your nephew. Drikus’ son? I’ve come to get you out of this pit. I’ve found a new home for you, Uncle Tertius. A sunny room, with staff, Uncle Tertius.’ He grins, trying to inject some cheer into the pitch. ‘No lookers I’m afraid, but you can always close your eyes. Nothing like a woman’s hands.’

‘Wie’s jy?’

Derk feels a twinge of irritation. ‘It’s Derk. Youngest son Drikus, your arsehole brother. I was here two days ago with Elsa? You remember her, surely. You said she was an angel. I promised I was going to take you away from all this.’ Derk waves a hand at the grimy flat. ‘And I am nothing if not a man of my word, Uncle Tertius. I’ve made all the arrangements. It’s cost a small fortune but I don’t want you to worry about that. In fact I don’t want you to worry about a thing.’ Derk pauses, looks around the grimy hovel, then perches on the edge of the bed, careful not to touch the man.

‘You remember the Viewmaster you gave me?’

He can tell the old man isn’t making sense of his presence, but he keeps going, fuelled by a desire to spark any recognition, speaking loudly. ‘The photos of the Empire State Building, Big Ben, the Eiffel Tower? You said I would see them all. And you were right. I did. I saw them all, because of you, Uncle Tertius. You always said I was special, and I believed you. You were the one, Uncle Tertius, the only one who really saw me.’

The old man is frowning now, brows narrowing the watery blue eyes. ‘Wie’t jou gestuur? Wat maak jy hier? Voetsek man!’

Stung, Derk grits his teeth. ‘Look Uncle Tertius. You are leaving this hellhole. Going to a nice new place. In the *country*, with *fresh air*, *sun*. Don’t you want to feel the sun on your skin again?’

‘Nee, nee, nee!’ Uncle Tertius is shaking his head.

‘Well thank you very much too,’ Derk mutters, averting his eyes from the squirming creature in its unmade bed, dusted in flakes.

‘You can’t stay here. It’s filthy. It stinks.’ He waves a hand in the direction of the bathroom, which he has studiously avoided. ‘You’ll die of hunger and thirst, in a puddle of your own shit!’ Derk clenches his fists.

Uncle Tertius is shrinking back, is trying to push himself into the wall, the eyes wide with fear.

‘For god sake man, stop whimpering!’

Derk rubs his temple.

‘Listen. It’s for the better. We are going to get you well again. You’ll see.’

Uncle Tertius is shaking his head vigorously, his head bobbing like a tortoise on his wrinkled neck, looking bewildered and disorientated as he repeats, ‘Nee-nee-nee-nee...’

‘For heaven’s sake, stop doing that!’

The loud knock on the door interrupts him. ‘Rosa!’ the old man calls out, his voice tremulous, ‘Rosa is dit jy?’

‘Rosa? Who the hell—’ Another knock.

‘It’s open!’ he shouts

Two men step in. The one carrying a collapsible stretcher bed nods at Derk, then transfers his attention to the wreck on the bed. At the sight of them Uncle Tertius starts a high-pitched keening wail that sounds to Derk not unlike a bird call, reverberating down the corridor and into the concrete jungle of Twist street.

One of the men bends over to restrain the flailing creature while the other opens the stretcher. Derk looks away. ‘I’ll just pack a few of your things...’ Derk pushes a toe against a plastic bag; it keels over, papers falling into a puff of dust. He goes to the bathroom to look for a toothbrush, wanting to get away from his uncle who is now shouting, ‘Ek willie-ekwillie-ek willie’ ... It is unbearable, a horror movie he can’t even watch through his fingers.

‘Mr du Toit? We’re ready to go.’

Derk looks back at the tangled sheet on his uncle's abandoned bed while the two men roll the stretcher bed towards the front door. He wants them to stop, wants to reassure Uncle Tertius again that this is for his own good, but he can see the pointlessness of pausing an operation that was bound to be unpleasant, he can see that now; it's best they remove him as quickly as possible. So he is mute as he half follows them out into the corridor to the lift, where he witnesses the final indignity: the two men – unable to fit the full-length stretcher into the tiny elevator – collapse it, forcing Uncle Tertius's restrained torso towards his legs, an ungainly half-sit up, head lolling like a rag doll. 'Hey!' Derk shouts as the concertina door is rammed home and the door slowly closes on the hideous tableau. The men must know what they are doing. All the same, the image of Uncle Tertius, torso tipped forward, head dangling akimbo, is one he wishes he can scrub away. Derk looks down at the empty plastic bag, so shaken he can hardly take in what this object is, dangling in his hand, and why it is there.

Paul

Paul picks up the elephant – it's belly painted with an intricate pattern – and looks for a price. He wants to give Mandy something that will remind her of him but she is not a fluffy-toy type. He raises it with a questioning look. The dour woman seated in the corner says, 'One rand fifty'. He nods, returns it carefully, then fingers the neatly folded silk scarves on the shelf below. He studies the earrings but can't recall if Mandy's ears are pierced; looks at the tags on which you can engrave your name for R1.50, or so the sign says.

He likes it here in this cupboard-sized stall in the underground flea market, the musty smell of incense packed into container ships traveling from the east, but the woman is scowling at him and rearranging the scarves. Reluctantly he surfaces from the quiet subterranean flea market into the bustle of Pretoria street, past the ripe smell of garbage to enter the building on which a woman crouches in a bathing cap, and down the flight of stairs to the fug of the indoor pool.

He undresses quickly – the pungent smell of disinfectant in the change room makes it feel even more germ-ridden – then sloshes through the shallow square of lukewarm

water that supposedly kills fungal infections but is urine-yellow and smells like a breeding pond.

It is a relief to finally plunge into a depth of water, even if the chlorine makes his eyes sting, and Paul loses track of time as he cleaves his way across the pool, the sensual pleasure of water streaming on either side of what is no longer his body but the prow of a ship, the nose of a shark.

He bores quickly though, he always does, stopping long before his muscles tire. Floats in the womb-warm water with his eyes closed before lifting himself up and out onto the knobbled tiles in one fluid motion. Surveys the pool. Hardly anyone here on a Friday morning.

He leans forward to sweep his fingers in the water before getting up and walking over to the bench where he has left his towel and locker disc. The towel – stiff and rough against his damp back – affords a small pleasure.

‘Hello.’ The old man slides onto the bench in front of him. Thin and pale with a small paunch; nipples hanging on desiccated teats, wearing a speedo one size too small.

Paul stops drying himself. His hands now press his towel to his chest. He is holding it like a sheet, trying to protect his body from the invasion of the old man’s brazen gaze.

‘You again,’ Paul says.

The old man looks hurt. ‘Don’t be so unfriendly.’

Paul rolls his eyes. ‘Listen, I’m not falling for your shit again.’

Paul looks away, but not before clocking a quick movement, the old man tugging open his bather to drop something in.

Paul recoils. ‘What the hell? Did you just—

‘Please man, find it for me, it’s driving me mad,’ the old man says. Gripping the back of the bench with both hands, he pushes his bum forward so that it is teetering on the edge of the bench, his crotch thrust out from under the shadow of his belly.

‘Jesus,’ Paul feels anger inflate his shoulders, his arms. Clenching his towel in a fist he leans over and hisses, ‘Listen you pervert, give me back my locker disc, or I’ll punch you into tomorrow.’

Unperturbed, the old man proceeds to pull down his bather, revealing its pink contents, the slow rise in his cut member. The disc drops to the ground.

Paul looks away. ‘I’m not fucking touching that.’ The old man shrugs and picks up the disc, saunters over to the footbath and tosses the disc in. He turns back and winks at Paul, then sloshes across it to the change room.

Paul wants to flatten him, but there is the matter of the man’s age. Who would take his word over that of an old man? If a kid his age tried that shit he’d fucking kill him but he wasn’t going to be done for assaulting an old man. So he waits, angry, breathing in the dank chlorine-saturated air, watching the clock.

The old man has gone, or perhaps – a prickle of disgust – hiding. Paul dresses at speed, tugging jeans over his damp costume. Why does that old prick always have to pick on him? *Mommy’s boy*. That’s what Derk often calls him, and right now his mom is exactly what he wants but he pushes the thought away and heads up the stairs, taking them two at a time, relieved to escape the fetid chlorine-rich air. He wonders if Mandy is back yet. When he’d asked when she was available she’d been vague. Said she didn’t like to be tied down. ‘Come anytime,’ she’d said, then smiled, showing her tiny incisors. ‘Just not too soon.’

The first time with Mandy he’d shot his wad in 60 seconds. He’d not told anyone that part. Besides, she’d given him another go and there were no complaints that time. It wouldn’t happen again.

He looks up at the sky, a jagged blue stripe outlined by buildings. Shivers, suddenly cold. Paul runs his fingers through his wet hair, shakes his head, then crosses the road, to the narrow strip of sun.

SATURDAY, 12 JUNE

“South African troops killed at east 18 Swapo terrorists in the operational area of north-eastern Owambo last month. Fourteen South African soldiers were wounded in two separate landmine explosions. Director of Army Operations Brigadier Roos says

SA troops were not crossing the border into Angola “because we recognise the
Angolan border.”

—*Rand Daily Mail*, 12 June 1976

Herman

Herman comes first, a small sound escaping from his rounded lips. Obliquely he glances at the bed opposite where Paul is still working his engorged member, their mutual if not simultaneous pleasure to all intents a kind of sexual congress.

A few long seconds later it is Paul who grunts, jaw slack.

Paul punches the air, a victorious grin on his face. 'I told you man,' he said. 'If you want to stay in the game, you need to get into training.'

Herman shrugs, tucks himself away. 'I train plenty. Anyway, I got the distance, right?'

'Jees, look at the mess you made.' Paul grabs a dirty sock and tosses it. 'Wipe it up you spaz.'

Herman looks at the sock with distaste. 'Is there anything that is actually clean in this room? A tissue maybe?'

'Tish-shoe?' Paul waggles his head, mimics Herman's accent. 'A tish-shoe? Next you'll be asking me for a fucking hanky. A hanky for your wanky.' He laughs.

Herman gets up to go to the adjacent bathroom, but Paul – who has flopped back on the bed, making no attempt to hide his penis – says, 'Check the bathroom in my parent's bathroom. End of the corridor and left, through the cupboard.'

Paul's parent's bedroom is dominated by a rectangular black bed base into which red sheets are neatly tucked. Opposite the window, reflecting the cityscape, is the row of mirrored cupboards, but Paul has to lie down on this bed – he has only ever seen a photograph of a waterbed before. It makes him feel slightly nauseous, swaying on the surface, and then a ringing telephone brings on a nervous rush – he feels like Goldilocks, only without golden locks, so gets up quickly, smooths the bed cover and then turns to face himself in the row of rectangular mirrors running the length of the room.

He pushes against one. Two panels fold inwards to reveal a row of colour coordinated shirts. He tugs on the small handle, and the door slides closed. A gentle push on the middle panel and it slides back on itself to reveal the bathroom, its

entrance concealed between the mirrored panels. Herman steps in and pushes the door closed behind him. Looking back he realises that it is in fact a two-way mirror, providing a tinted view of the bedroom from inside the bathroom.

Rinsing his hands Herman studies his reflection above the basin. His nose looks aquiline, his cheekbones clearly defined, his eyes glitter. Could this be what he really looks like? In the mirror at home his lips are too thin, his nose is too big, his skin mottled and spotty – a litany of ugliness. But here is a face he'd like to get to know. Which mirror is telling the truth? Which Herman does Paul see?

He winces. There it is again. A sudden stabbing in the temple. He pushes his fingers against the side of his head. He shouldn't have had the second joint.

'Herman?'

Herman starts. Through the two-way mirror he can see that Paul is gazing at his own reflection from the bedroom, finger-combing his unruly hair. It is unnerving, Paul staring at himself while Herman, unseen on the other side, stares back. He watches Paul touch his cheekbone. Herman has noticed the small bruise. A rugby injury, he supposes.

'Hang on,' Herman dries his hands. 'Just coming.'

'Bet you are, you pervert.' Paul pushes against the door. 'C'mon, man.' He grins.

'That was Mandy on the line.'

Herman pats his hands dry, using a thick wad of toilet paper. 'You know where I can find a headache tablet?'

'Jesus Herman, you can be such a girl.' Paul is looking at himself in the mirror again, changing the direction of his fringe. 'I'll get you an aspirin, Josephine. And then' – he looks at Herman, grinning – 'Mandy.' Said with a raw happiness that makes Herman ache.

Herman raises an eyebrow, tries to hide his disappointment. 'Now?'

Paul frowns. 'Yeah, now. You got a better suggestion?'

Waiting for the lift, Herman is thinking, I have 10 better suggestion, and one of them is to stand here till the end of time staring at the way Paul's T-shirt hangs off his shoulder bones, the thin cotton fabric stopping short of his jeans, the arch of his back, the tightening of muscles when he leans over to jab at the button again, the swell of flesh below his vertebra. He follows him mutely into the lift, wanting nothing more than to fill his eyes, imprinting the precise oval of his nostril, the curve of his bottom lip. Paul is a painting, gazing up like a saint to heaven: watching the countdown as the shaft drops to deliver him to Mandy's floor.

Paul does not seem to notice Herman gaze, appears in fact to be almost unaware of Herman's presence as he stops in front of a door and knocks out a happy little morse code. Feeling awkward, Herman hangs back.

The door opens almost immediately, revealing a slim woman with shoulder length white-blonde hair, the roots tipped in black. She is smoking a cigarette. Her kohl-blackened eyes have smudged half moons below them. She doesn't look like she sleeps much, in fact she looks slightly feral, all nature and no nurture. The kind of skinny runt who survived a large litter by crawling blindly towards the smell of milk, and once latched clawed her starving siblings away with nails now severely bitten, Herman notes as she raises her cigarette to take a drag.

'Hello Paulie,' she exhales, looks at Herman. 'You never said you were bringing a friend.'

'This is Herman.' Paul shrugs, 'He's cool.'

Herman feels his heart swell, a succulent in the morning dew.

Mandy doesn't answer. She steps aside to allow them both into the flat which smells of stale smoke and incense. It is barely furnished – a sofa half-covered with a cloth, a stained coffeetable. The flat is dark, lit only by the glow of the city below and the light streaming in from the kitchen door. Herman stations himself by the window.

'You bring some?'

Paul tosses the pack of Rizzla papers Herman had brought him and takes ownership of the sofa. Herman faces the sparkling city; wonders how long before he can leave.

‘Sorry I missed you yesterday.’ Mandy sits down next to Paul who is sitting with his legs splayed open.

‘Me or my friend.’

Mandy looks at Herman. Even in the dark he can tell she’s confused. Not a rocket scientist then. Paul takes her hand and places it on his crotch.

‘Not *him*.’

Mandy pretend-slaps him.

‘Naughty boy.’

‘Too naughty for a nice girl like you?’ It is odious, watching Paul flirt with his skinny runt, so Herman keeps looking at the view but he can’t escape their reflections in the window.

‘The things you make me do,’ Mandy breathes, brazenly rubbing his crotch, sinking into him, ice-cream on a hot day.

Herman wants to leave, but he doesn’t want to draw attention to himself, doesn’t want to be accused of being a prude, or a spoilsport, or, Christ, jealous. So he stands quite still, like his mother said to do if he ever saw a snake, because the girl is the original snake in the garden of Eden and he actually feels sorry for Paul right now, because a blind man cannot be blamed for not seeing but the pity is soon replaced by a dawning anger, that Paul has dragged him down here to turn him into an unwilling voyeur, to witness this ugly creature with her horrid wet mouth swallow him like a meal before turning her attention to the table. Enraged, he turns around now and glares at Paul, wanting some recognition, an apology even perhaps.

‘What’s up with you?’ Paul says, and he is lazily stroking the back of his glassy-eyed whore who is now lighting up an old joint she has found amidst the butts, her face briefly illuminted as the flame flickers and the sickly sweet smell of marijuana fills the flat.

Herman shakes his head. He cannot hide the sarcasm into his voice, which is tight.

‘Nice to meet you Mandy. I’ve heard a lot about you. I’ll see myself out. See you around, Paul.’

He is mortified when neither make a move, leaving him to struggle with the double lock.

'I thought you said he was cool,' he hears Mandy as he opens the door. A pause, and then, just before the door clicks closed, he hears Paul say, 'Sorry.' As if he, Herman, is the embarrassment.

MONDAY, 14 JUNE

“No fewer than 61 ports of entry are to be established to handle the flow of people to and from independent Transkei and South Africa, according to an agreement made public last week.”

—*Rand Daily Mail*, 14 June 1976

Derk

Derk pulls the gearshift down into fourth violently. What a shitty day. A crappy fortnight, in fact, but the last few days have been the real turds.

He can scarcely believe that it was only three days ago that he'd left his uncle's flat, feeling badly shaken. Unable to face work, he'd gone home and called Elsa. The unanswered ring had only served to heighten his anxiety. Her absence was both a betrayal and a trigger, and he'd rifled through her drawers, pulling out a selection of his favourite panties to stick his nose in each crotch, hoping for just a hint of her. Then, in the back corner, the black velvet bag.

It had been a shock. This was a level of adultery he was not prepared for. The ignominy of it: jealous of a plastic cock.

He had stared at the phallus, then – that desperate for a whiff of Elsa – he'd sniffed it. Which was when he felt rather than saw the presence in the doorway behind him, and had turned abruptly to find Paul. Who should have been at school, for fuck's sake.

Paul could have backed away, could have pretended this didn't happen, but no, Paul had looked at him with that familiar sneer on his face. 'I see you got some help in,' he'd drawled.

Which, surely anyone would agree, was beyond the fucking pale.

Still, he shouldn't have – he doesn't know what came over him – he should not have struck Paul across the face, a glancing blow with Elsa's cock that took them both by surprise.

'Get out,' he'd shouted, puce with embarrassment. 'Get the fuck out!'

Paul had backed away then, like you do from a predator, the kind you don't turn your back on.

'Enjoy the new toy, dad,' he'd said, a splintered hatred in his voice, a small pink bruise already blooming on his right cheek.

Derk had shoved the phallus back into the drawer. Fucking Elsa. Once again she had got between him and his son.

She had always mollycoddled the boy, her pliancy forcing Derk into playing the hard man. He was only tough on Paul for the boy's sake. He didn't want Paul to be one of those babies who cried when things got tough. He wanted him to be strong, courageous; able to not only look after himself but his own family one day. He wanted to be proud of him, wanted him to be a man, not some softcock layabout too big for his boots. Which was what Elsa's fawning had turned him into. He was always staring at the mirror and fixing his hair. The boy was almost 17 for Christ sake. Or was he still 16? No matter, he was old enough to grasp life by the throat and throttle it, rather than loll about like a little lord Fauntlroy – Fauntleroy? Fuck. How was he supposed to whip Paul into shape with everything else that was at stake? And Elsa always there, offering him her soft landing, while he kept busting his arse, heaving up the stones for Paul to step into the life that he, Derk, had fought so hard for. Paul would have opportunities Derk never had. A university education. Paul was bright enough, of course he was. He was a du Toit! He didn't want him wasting his youth on menial jobs, working his way up from a fucking dishwasher to sales assistant to jobbing journalist, the way Derk had been forced to do. And he certainly didn't want him heading off to the army. It was a conversation he had been meaning to have, but he hardly knew how to talk to his son anymore, and how the hell was he supposed to broach anything after striking him with a rubber dildo.

It felt prudent to wait for the right moment before telling Elsa about the incident. After all, he was embarrassed. The root of the sorry saga was his impotence and he needed, at all costs, to remedy this once and for all. At least Elsa had kept it well hidden, which showed a level of consideration and tact. Care, even.

Then came the phone call in the early hours of Saturday morning. The clipped voice of McClaren, with her 'regrettable news'. Uncle Tertius, heavily sedated, had never woken up. Had not even made it through the first 24 hours.

He had sat down, winded, while McClaren spoke about 'God's will' and 'non-refundable deposit'.

'This God of yours has a rather twisted sense of timing, does he not?' he'd asked.

'Ours is not to question why, Mr Du Toit,' she said, tone brisk. 'But rest assured he is now safe in the arms of the Lord.'

He's dead for Christ sake, he'd wanted to shout, Just a bag of putrifying flesh.

Derk shook his head. The whole endeavour had been absurd.

He should have left his uncle where he found him, should never have tried on this ill-fitting saviour suit. Nothing good had ever come from family, not for Derk. His parents had never hidden their preference for Gabriel, fostering a jealousy that had handicapped their relationship from the start.

If he were honest, a part of him had welcomed their estrangement. Family duty was just a harness in which the strong dragged along the limp and lazy, the feckless, the crazy. As for those smug happy families who went on extended holidays to their cottages on the coast – he despised them, suckling on their shared panacea, their sense of belonging and purpose, their comfort, their indifference to anyone outside the clan, their pride, when all they were was just a random accident of birth.

With his father's death, he had untied the final knot.

The discovery of Uncle Tertius had unraveled him. Because if there was one thing Derk knew for sure it was this: the only desire you can know and fulfil, without any risk of misunderstanding, is your own. It is pointless, dangerous even, to second-guess the happiness of another. If everyone concentrated hard on making themselves happy, it stood to reason that no one would suffer. This is why Derk has no truck with righteous charitable types, do-gooders who sacrifice their time and material goods for the so-called benefit of others. Sacrifice was a selfish urge masquerading as selflessness, and the idea that man could impose order on the infinite complexity life was utterly preposterous. Men and women did good deeds in order to feel good, sometimes with disastrous consequences. So he is not in the least surprised now. He has been punished for a momentary lapse of reason.

Not that he is taking responsibility for Uncle Tertius's death. Clearly his time had come. All the same. He can't shake the niggling voice that says it came a little sooner. That dying in a puddle of shit in his own bed might have been preferable. Cheaper too.

Derk slows down and peers up through the passenger window. There it is: a two-storey block, its 50s façade in vertical brick-pattern, the Dove logo prominently displayed. A loading bay right outside the entrance.

Derk indicates and comes to a halt. The motorist behind hoots before swerving around him aggressively. Derk scowls. For crying out loud, can the man not see that he is trying to park his vehicle outside a funeral parlour? What the fuck has happened to the world? He slams the car door. Contemplates the building again – it is suitably grim – before heading for the double doors.

‘Can I help you?’

A tall stick insect of a man in a shiny black ill-fitting suit, his sleeves exposing long bony wrists, tapered fingers decorously crossed over at the thumb, the hands covering the crotch, as if to hide an accidental leakage. A balding head, eyes blinking at him through teardrop spectacles. The absurdity of encountering a cartoon character in a room full of coffins lifts Derk’s spirits somewhat.

‘Indeed,’ he says. ‘I am looking for a coffin.’ He smiles, lifting his upper lip to show off his nicotine-stained teeth. The man nods, lifts a hand, palm open. ‘Of course,’ he says. ‘Come this way.’

Derk studies the displays: rows of caskets lined with voluptuous ruched silk, like over-sized chocolate boxes. Some have lids propped up like little grand pianos. The man trails behind him. ‘My sincere condolences,’ he drones on. ‘Whilst we know that nothing can compensate for the loss of a loved one, it is some comfort knowing that their final resting place is commensurate with the comfort they enjoy in the hereafter.’

‘This one looks inviting.’ Derk runs his hand along the inside of one lined in a particularly virulent pink, eyebrows raised. ‘Do you mind?’

Without waiting for an answer Derk swings a leg up and into the open box, tests the stability, then heaves himself up and in; the coffin wobbles but stands firm. He wiggles his hips so that his toes are touching the bottom. He looks up at the undertaker, head skewed at an awkward angle. ‘This one’s too tight. I mean, I’m all for a snug fit,’ – Derk winks – ‘if you know what I mean, but not when you’re about to meet your maker.’

The undertaker looks at Derk's bald head, jammed into the pristine pink satin corner, with horror.

'Mr—, I don't think, we don't really encourage...'

Derk clambers out. 'Come now, can't be too careful. Don't want to be having buyer's remorse en route to heaven. Had enough of that already here on earth. What about this one? I like the look of this one.' Again, he swings a leg up and in, and settles in.

'Mmm, this is a much better fit.' Derk runs his hands along the cream interior. 'Nice fabric too.'

The undertaker now places his pale hands together. 'I see you have an eye for quality sir.' He bares his teeth. 'What you are now experiencing first hand is what we like to call our Rolls Royce, sir. Oh yes, you won't find a better coffin anywhere in the country. It's made with a solid rosewood casing, silk lining imported from India, handles imported from Birming—.'

'India?' Derk raised his eyebrows.

'Benares silk, sir; very famous.'

'Oh,' Derk ran his hands along the ruched edges. 'Spun by virgins, I hope, each thread tenderly rubbed between untouched thighs?' The undertaker keeps his smile in place but it is humourless. Derk musters his sphincter muscles, squeezes out a trumpet note. Wipes that smile right off the undertaker's face. Suits him better, the grim expression.

'On second thoughts,' Derk sits up, gripping the sides. 'This doesn't offer enough back support. Do you have a coffin with an orthopedic mattress?'

The undertaker, definitely unsmiling now, shakes his head. 'I don't believe we've had much call for that.'

Derk clambers out, makes a theatrical show of dusting his hands before reaching one out. 'Mr du Toit,' he says. 'What about that one?' Derk waves at a pine box in the corner.

The man purses his lips. 'Well, that coffin is not really suitable.'

‘Yes?’

‘Well, I had thought that you were looking for something a little more in keeping with, well...’

‘No.’ The answer is curt, Derk’s playfulness spent. ‘That’s the one. That will do.’

‘I see. And the funeral service Mr du Toit?’

Derk, who can’t see the point of sitting through an opportunistic Eternal Life sales pitch, shakes his head. *If I were God, he wants to say, I’d look down upon these mewling creatures and feel nothing but acute embarrassment. A quiet fury at the suggestion that these ugly, needy little creatures were made in my image. In fact, if I were God, I’d never ever bother looking down. I’d just slip on a pair of boots and stomp my way through the little turds.*

He looks around the windowless room, suddenly unbearably weary.

‘Are you ok Mr du Toit? You look a little pale. Can I get you a glass of water perhaps?’

The kindness, unearned, disarms him. He is always leaping to conclusions. Perhaps he is wrong about God. Perhaps God cares deeply. Perhaps He suffers like every father does, watching a child set off on its own path, burdened with the freedom of choice. How cruel that errant child’s indifference, never understanding the depth of a father’s love, the breadth of his hopes, the patience with which he waits for his return. Perhaps God was looking at him right now. Christ, what is wrong with him. He suddenly feels close to tears.

‘Mr du Toit?’

‘I’m fine. A cremation. No service. Just a quick cremation.’

‘You have a suitable urn?’

‘What?’ He hasn’t thought it through beyond the saving, which is considerable.

‘We have some lovely urns — there’s a selection this way if you’d like to follow me. You’ll be keeping him somewhere special then?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘The ashes. Are you thinking of keeping the urn in a wall of remembrance? Or will you be scattering the ashes at the place where your departed uncle was happiest?’

Derk feels a mild ache then, a tugging at his innards. He never had a chance to find out where Uncle Tertius was happiest. He sees him again, alighting from that Studebaker, suitcase in hand. Swinging him up into the Christmas sun. The boy at the dining table, staring at plastic floral-patterned tablecloth. The places in his mind where Uncle Tertius lay buried.

He snaps out of it. Uncle Tertius was probably happiest buried deep inside a woman. But that would be too much to ask, even of Elsa.

‘Thanks,’ he says brusquely. ‘But I’m not a sentimental man. A cardboard box will do.’

Elsa

It is late, and talk at the table has circled back to work, to the new Cameo account. Elsa is only half listening, dipping her bread into a pool of butter in which a rubbery snail bobs on a bed of garlic.

‘I don’t know,’ Manny is saying. ‘What about the reinforced crotch panel? According to the manufacturers, it’s made from a breathable yarn.’

Derk is tamping down the tobacco in the pipe clenched between his teeth, finger movements indicative the degree of irritation.

‘How very Germanic of you Manny, but this is not a car commercial. We’re talking to women here. A reinforced crotch is not a sales pitch I see working. Elsa? Am I right? Why do you think a woman would wear Cameo?’

Elsa shrugs, pushes the bowl back. ‘To make their legs look better.’

‘So they wear pantyhose for men?’ Manny asks.

‘Not necessarily.’ She smiles at the waiter filling her glass. ‘It’s not just the way they look. It’s also a feeling. When you’re wearing pantyhose you’re more aware of your legs,’ Elsa takes another sip, decides to be bold. ‘And what’s between them.’

Derk grins as he clenches his pipe between his teeth again. ‘Now that right there is the germ of a big idea, gentlemen. No one is talking directly to the idea that a woman wants to *feel* sexy rather than just look sexy. That’s a human truth right there.’ Derk raises a glass to Elsa, then turns to Manny. ‘Unless, of course, you want to keep exploring the reinforced crotch panel?’

‘I read that the Rhodesian soldiers are wearing knee-highs to keep warm.’ Nigel leans forward. ‘Could there be something there?’

‘For God’s sake Nigel. If you want to jerk off to a Rhodesian soldier wearing nothing but his knee-highs, be my guest. But if you mention that to the Cameo client, you’re fired.’

On the drive home Derk is quiet. Even when manoeuvring the car into his parking space, made unnecessarily narrow by the incompetence of the neighbouring Ford Cortina driver, he says nothing until he has switched the ignition off. He places a hand on Elsa’s knee.

‘It was quite a turn on listening to you tonight.’

‘Really?’ Elsa is winding up her window. ‘You mean as in an actual hard on?’

Derk removes his hand.

Elsa sighs. ‘I’m sorry. It’s been a long day.’

Derk angles himself against the car door so that he is facing her. ‘Elsa, we haven’t really spoken about it, but I am only too aware that we have a problem.’ He decides again to leave the discovery of her dildo for another day. ‘That *I* have a problem.’

Elsa leans back to pick up her handbag from the footwell of the back seat. ‘Really Derk, I wish you wouldn’t put so much pressure on yourself.’

Derk closes his eyes. ‘You know how important this is to me Elsa. You of all people surely understand.’

When he opens them he looks at her with that intensity of his, a falcon-like stare that has her pinned against the car door. ‘Listen, you remember Reynolds – the account executive who lost his wife last year?’

Elsa nods. ‘The one with the daughter. He brought her to the office party.’

‘Exactly! Well, he’s been asking after you.’

Elsa stiffens.

‘No, no, nothing like that...’ Derk waves a hand. ‘This is about his daughter. You spent quite a bit of time with her at that party.’

‘Her name was Anna. Poor little thing was bored stiff.’

Derk nods. ‘Exacty. Well, apparently she’s become quite a handful this year. There’s a boy on the scene, a biker boy whose already out of school, and a bad influence. Reynolds says he’s really struggling. The girl won’t listen to him. Though I can’t blame her – I can hardly bear listening to the man myself.’ Derk shifts in his seat. ‘Point is, Reynolds is at his wits end. He was saying that the last time he saw Anna relax with an adult was with you. So it occurred to me that you might be able to help out. You could take the girl shopping or something. Find out what’s happening. Make sure she’s not getting into trouble with this boy. She might be in need of some adult guidance.’ Derk pauses.

Elsa looks out the window at the empty carpark. Shudders. It’s bitterly cold in the car.

‘She’s too young Derk. I’m not doing it.’

Derk rubs his forehead. ‘Elsa, look at it this way. This is a girl who needs help. She has no mother, nowhere to go. All she’s got is that asshole Reynolds. She could get into real trouble. Or you could help her.’ He puts a hand back on her knee. ‘And me.’

‘I don’t know. I hardly know her Derk.’

Derk squeezes her knee, then slips the key out the ignition.

‘You’ll find a way. You always do. Do it for her sake, Elsa, not mine.’

WEDNESDAY, 16 JUNE

“Six people appear to have died in today’s bloody rioting at Soweto which erupted over a protest march by 10 000 pupils against the use of Afrikaans in lessons. Another 33 were taken to hospital. Snap debate is urged.”

—*The Star*, City Late, 16 June 1976

Herman

Visagie's droning voice – something about Trichard and the tsetse flies – has the entire class in a state of near catatonia when the menacing whine of a siren suddenly starts up. Visagie, big gut hanging from his pigeon chest, drops his chalk and propels his bulk across the room towards the classroom door, shouting, "*Onder julle tafels!*" to children who are suddenly all on their knees as if they've dropped their collective marbles. Visagie slams the door shut, locks it, and turns on his heel with surprising grace. Herman watches, mouth agape: within seconds the only evidence of his 24 classmates is the large bulbuous arse of Kleintjie whose desk is balanced on his back, a flabby tortoise outgrown its shell.

"Herman jou domkop!" Visagie roars, on the move again. *"Kruip in God's naam onder jou blerrie tafel!"* And then the fat man too is on all fours crawling under his desk, from where he continues to bark at Herman like an overweight stoepkakkertjie, too terrified to leave his owner's feet. *"As die kaffir kommuniste jou morsdood skiet is jou bloed nie op MY hande nie, hoor jy my?"*

Swallowing a small but unmistakable glob of fear – is this for real? – Herman finally slides onto his knees and under his own table, now unable to avert his eyes from the stretched stitching that runs like a middle parting down Kleintjie's arse.

It is only a few seconds before the siren is abruptly switched off and the intercom crackles on.

'U aandag asseblief.' Pankop, croaking like the old toad he is. 'Onderwysers, kinders. Primus Hoer...' Another crackle. '...is nie in onmiddelijke gevaar nie.' A muffled sound. Herman watches, quite mesmerized, as Kleintjie tries to back out from under his desk, half-listening as the headmaster explains that today, on the direct instructions of Dr Kotzee, Transvaal Director of Education, all schools will be closing early. No explanation, or perhaps there is but it is drowned by cheering pupils who now scramble to their feet, desks crashing into chairs like cymbals in a Stockhausen composition.

Only Kleintjie remains swaying on his knees, wedged in, unable to quite shrug off his newly acquired carapace. Herman steps forward and places a hand on either side of the desk top. He tugs. It slips free easily which causes him to stumble back into one of

the school's netball stars, just at that moment bending over. "Is jy gebreklik?" she hisses.

Herman joins the jubilant maroon stream now funneling down the staircase into the school quadrant where they have been asked to assemble before dispersing to the school gates. As he exits the staircase he feels a prickling sensation at the back of his neck and turns to look up. Poena and Paul, leaning over the first floor balustrade. Paul is not looking at him but Poena shouts, 'Wat kyk jy mofgat?', and then spits, the globule narrowly missing Herman and splattering at his feet.

Herman keeps his head down; moves as quickly as he can across the quadrant, pushed on by a wave of self-pity, trying to escape the jeering voice in his head. *Yeah you wet blanket, you damp little faggot.* He hates it here. Hates himself. Hates everything.

Last night he'd picked up his mother's well-thumbed *Sun Signs*; turned again to where she had earmarked "How to Recognize Cancer, the Crab" to where she'd underlined parts in pencil.

If you're the kind of person who catches cold easily, wear your raincoat when you expose yourself to the dampness of a Cancerian in a melancholy mood. He can wrap you in wet blankets until you shiver and shake. Cancer can drown you in depression deeper than the floor of the ocean—His tears are never crocodile tears. They flow from the deep rivers of his fragile and vulnerable heart. You can wound his sensitive feelings with a harsh glance or a rough tone of voice—

Herman had stopped. He hates Goodman. Just reading her patronizing dross upsets him. Which only proves that she is probably right. Which depresses him further. The Goodman grip.

Cancer never feels really secure, and no matter how much love he gets, he always needs more. He's always piling up tangibles against some imaginary future disaster. Some Cancerians actually keep big cardboard cartons of food of all kinds under their beds.

He'd snorted, skipped to the next part heavily underlined in pencil.

Let's hope you find his mother congenial. In fact, let's pray you do. It's fairly certain she'll pop up in his conversation frequently, in remarks like, "My mother never wears

much makeup, and she's a beautiful woman. Don't you think your eye shadow is a little heavy, sweetheart?" Or "You use frozen pies and instant potatoes? My mother used to bake her own bread when I was a youngster."

Three big question marks in the margins. If his mother remembered to buy bread it was a miracle.

If you're in love with the more common type of Cancerian, you'll have to cultivate his mother. Let her teach you how to bake lemon chiffon pie. He'll like that – you two girls getting along so nicely. Then turn around and do a brilliant Beef Stroganoff on your own. Be sure to spoil him at least as much as she does, and that may be a lot. He's probably grown accustomed to being considered the apple of her eye. Being fussed over, fed regularly, catered to, hovered over when he's sick, and tucked in bed tenderly at night can turn him into a mighty sweet crab.

Herman had hurled the book across the room. A mighty cross crab.

If his mother had waited just one more day, he would have been a Leo. 'It was you who chose 21 July,' his mother had said when he had pointed out that being born 24 hours later could have altered his entire personality. 'You *wanted* to be a Cancerian.'

'You think anyone would choose to be a Cancerian? Weedy, fragile, wet, with a carton of food under the bed?'

She had laughed and ruffled his hair, which he hated almost as much as being a Cancerian.

'You're a sweet boy,' she'd said with a wan smile. 'Anyway, Cancerians make good homemakers. Women like that.'

Herman had felt then that his life was being hijacked by assumptions, when who he was should be under his control. But who did he want to be? He had thought he wanted to be Paul, carefree and strong, inhabiting the world with purpose and grace. But Paul was cruel and shallow. He could see that now. He had only wanted the things he imagined Paul to be.

By the time his mom finally arrives, driving the banged up Mazda she occasionally borrows from Glenda, he is the only one left outside the school gate.

He clambers into the car, leans over and kisses her cheek.

She looks slightly wild-eyed.

‘Are you ok?’

She shrugs. ‘I came as soon as the school called, but the darn car wouldn’t start.’

‘What’s going on?’ he asks as she turns the ignition again, the starter struggling.

‘They wouldn’t tell us.’

‘Something about some school kids in Soweto.’ She shakes her head. ‘Damn, I hate this car.’ The engine catches and she slams the gear in reverse, the box whining in protest.

She indicates, cranes her neck to make sure there’s not oncoming traffic. ‘They’ve been protesting. Burning stuff and throwing things about. Like that ever fixed anything.’ She puts it into first gear and carefully pulls away, the car juddering slightly. Herman looks back at the facebrick façade, thinking how much he’d love to see Primus burn, Pankop running from the building, his polyester suit in flames.

‘Are you ok?’ Marion asks as she changes into second, the car jerking as she drops the clutch.

‘I’m fine, mom,’ he lies. ‘I’m fine,’ he repeats, as if that will make him so. As she changes into third, the car juddering, Herman turns to look at her. ‘Do you know the ingredients for Beef Stroganoff?’

Derk

Light melancholy settles on his shoulders like dandruff as he watches the fish root about the algae-covered stones, mouths puckered like models at a casting. Above them the ugly brown critter lies listless at half keel, its top fin creased like an old kite that can no longer catch the wind, mouth rhythmically pumping water through gills. It looks as tired as Derk feels, half-dead in fact, so when it suddenly darts forward, viciously dispatching a goldfish, Derk feels bizarrely elated. He reaches for his

wineglass. When he looks again, the fish is again lying motionless, pretending disinterest in the audience of one looming large beside him.

‘What is that brown job?’ he asks the waiter whose name he’s forgotten, tapping the tank to try and get a reaction out of it

‘Don’t know sir.’ The waiter picks up the bottle of wine from the ice bucket standing to one side and dries the dripping base. ‘It’s new.’

Derk drains his glass. ‘Doesn’t seem to like the look of its companions.’

The waiter smiles. ‘It’s on probation. One more dead fish, and he’s down the toilet.’ He fills the glass. ‘My money’s on the toilet.’

‘Pity. He’s got chutzpah, that one.’

‘You keep fish?’

Derk shakes his head. ‘One smooth-skin pet which is one too many, if you ask me. Speak of the devil.’ He waves at the figure, still tall despite the slouch, walking through the door.

Paul slings his backpack on the floor, barely acknowledging the waiter pulling his chair back.

‘Hello and how do you do to you too.’ Paul does not respond. Not a great start. ‘Why the gloomy face?’

‘Did you have to send Nigel to pick me up? Wearing a blouse, with laces at the neck?’ Paul shudders. ‘He was standing outside the gate.’ He shakes his head. ‘Guy’s a fruitcake.’

Derk raises an eyebrow. ‘So much drama, I’m not sure who’s the bigger queen.’

The small muscles attached to Paul’s jaw are bulging.

Derk sighs. ‘Look, I didn’t invite you to lunch so we could have another fight.’ He looks at his watch. ‘Do you want a drink?’

Paul uses both hands to smooth the tablecloth between his cutlery.

‘Go on. I’m not expecting you to order an Appletizer.’

‘Brandy and coke.’

‘Christ, the damage that school has inflicted.’ Derk nods at the waiter, ‘Bring the boy a brandy and coke. A single.’

‘Where’s mom?’

‘Meeting her boss. She called in a panic to say the school was closing early. I’ve been meaning to talk to you.’ Derk picks up his pipe, taps it on the sideplate. ‘I wish you’d take that sneer off your face. It’s very unattractive.’

Paul rolls his eyes. ‘Gee,’ he says. ‘Sorry if I look surprised. But this is the first time in like, 10 years.’

Derk puts the pipe down. ‘Two minutes since you walked through the door and I’m already regretting it.’ Derk waves one hand in the air. ‘Why do you always have to push me like this? You think I enjoyed what happened on Friday morning? You think I’m proud of it?’ He sighs.

‘Look, can we at least just try to have a civilized conversation?’

Paul scratches at an imaginary speck on the tablecloth.

‘I want to talk to you about Primus.’

Paul looks uncomfortable. ‘Why?’

‘I want you to consider moving. No, wait, hear me out. I know you’re clever Paul. That bastion of mediocrity must be responsible for the drastic slide in your grades.’ Derk raises his eyebrows. ‘You think I haven’t noticed?’ He shakes his head. ‘Primus was a mistake. I only ever agreed to make your mother happy—’

Paul snorts. ‘Like that’s ever been a consideration.’

Derk clenches his jaw.

Paul rolls his eyes.

‘What if you we found you a place at St Johns?’

The sneer is back in place. ‘You kidding? We eat those wimps for breakfast. We beat them 21-nil this year. You’d know, if you ever came to any of our matches.’

‘I don’t care what happens on the rugby field.’ Derk taps the side of his head. ‘This is all that matters Paul. This is what you have to start concentrating on.’

Paul slumps back in his chair. ‘Dad, this conversation? It’s too late.’ He waves a hand in the direction of the fish tank. ‘I’m not going to St Johns.’

‘No it’s not. It’s not too late, do you hear me? It’s *never* too late.’

The fervency in Derk’s voice unnerves Paul but thankfully the waiter is back and placing a glass of amber liquid in front of him, opening his Coke bottle with a flourish.

Paul picks up his glass, looks around. ‘Is this new?’

Derk shrugs. ‘No. I come here with clients sometimes. It’s walking distance from one of the casting agents.’ Derk leans closer. ‘That’s the other thing I wanted to talk to you about. I’ve got a Lux casting this afternoon. Come with me. He picks up a sheath of glossy photographs from the empty chair next to him. ‘I mean, look at this lot. Take your pick.’

Paul frowns. ‘I don’t need your help getting laid dad.’

‘Oh come on. I bet you’ve been balling virgins, schoolgirls who get their knickers in a knot when you ask for more than a handjob, and then cry when you don’t call them the next day.’ Derk traces a semi-circle along the base of his wine glass. ‘These are your best years Paul. You’ve got to sow your oats, and sow them wide, without worrying about consequences. I’m not saying you need help. Just offering a bit of a leg up into the adult world.’

Paul pushes the photographs away. ‘Actually,’ he says, shifting in his chair ‘I’m seeing an older woman.’ He lifts his chin. ‘She’s 23. And the only time her knickers are in a knot is when I’ve tossed them in the corner.’

The delight in Derk’s laugh is sincere. ‘Bravo! That’s my boy!’

When Paul smiles now he looks three years younger. Derk can't recall when last his son has looked so endearing. He wants to slap his arm or squeeze his shoulder or pinch his cheek but he has not touched Paul for more years than he cares to remember, so he lifts his hand instead to summon Ronaldo – the waiter's name has come to him, unbidden – *all good things* – mood quite lifted by this unexpected camaraderie. 'Ronaldo, bring this young man another brandy and coke.' Derk pushes the photographs back towards Paul. 'And this time, make it a double.'

THURSDAY, 18 JUNE

“The Minister of Justice, Mr Jimmy Kruger, has called for peace on both sides. To Blacks Mr Kruger said, ‘This past week has been a lesson that whatever you wish to achieve must be done by peaceful means. You must accept the good faith of the government and all Whites. To Whites, the responsibility for good race relations rests on each and every one of you. We are all trying to better our country and we must accept all that is positive to each other. Violence can only harm South Africa.’”

—*The Star*, 18 June

Elsa

Closing the door behind them, Elsa breathes a sigh of relief. ‘At last!’ she says as she raises her left leg, balancing awkwardly on the right heel while slipping off the ankle strap. She tosses first the one shoe, then the other, into the corner. Curls her toes into the carpet. ‘That’s better!’

She smiles at the tiny raven-haired girl who is looking around the apartment, clearly in awe. ‘Make yourself at home honey. I, for one, am ready for a drink.’ She takes a few steps then asks, casually, ‘You want one?’

Drawn to the view, Anna is already in the living room.

‘Anna, you want a drink?’ she asks again, one hand on the doorjamb. ‘A sherry perhaps?’

Anna smiles, nods. ‘Thank you, Elsa.’

‘Good. You deserve it.’ Elsa, now in the kitchen, raises her voice as she opens the fridge to take out a bottle of wine. ‘That was quite a marathon!’

She pours herself a half glass; drains it, quickly. Closes her eyes, then refills it near the brim.

She breaks the seal on the Old Brown sherry, pours the same amount in a wine glass for Anna.

Anna has settled in the sofa facing the view, one leg a triangle under the other, hands curled on her lap. She looks younger than 16.

‘Here’s to a great choice.’ Elsa hands her the glass, then touches hers to it. ‘Well done. I was worried you were going to end up in black, which is classy of course, very Hepburn, but a bit funereal. But that dress, that colour!’ She shakes her head. ‘It makes you look like a million dollars. You’ve got a real eye for good design – are you interested in fashion?’

Anna smiles, clearly pleased. ‘I don’t know. Maybe. But I would never have had the courage to buy that dress without you.’

‘Ah, but you were the one who spotted it.’

She sits down next to Anna, pulls up her legs so that she is cross-legged, their knees almost touching. It’s not strategic, she just wants to be within reach of the ashtray, but it feels right, this proximity.

‘Thanks Elsa.’ The deep dimples are certainly part of the girl’s appeal. *The kind of looks that grow on you*, Elsa thinks, not for the first time. ‘Cheers again.’ She lightly touches her glass to Anna’s. ‘Here’s to being the belle of the standard eight ball’.

She opens her cigarette box and offers it to Anna, who declines. Elsa puts a cigarette between her lips, lights it. Eyes narrowed, she watches Anna take another sip. ‘So, tell me more about this boy you’re taking to the dance. Jason. Is he worth the dress?’

Anna looks into the glass that she now has cupped between two hands. ‘He’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.’ Such sweet sincerity in her voice; Joni Mitchell hitting a high note, it dissolves something in Elsa.

‘It’s kind of hard to explain,’ Anna continues. ‘But after what happened with my mom – it was like I’d disappeared into this black hole.’ Anna shakes her head. ‘I told you how my dad kept me away at the end. Said it was for my own good, like he knew anything about what was good for me, or my mom. He’s the reason she got sick in the first place.’ She shudders. Takes a sip. ‘Anyway. Then I met Jason.’ Those dimples again. ‘And everything changed. He made me laugh again.’

Elsa raises her glass again. ‘Derk always says laughter is the greatest aphrodisiac.’

Anna leans over to pick up Elsa’s cigarette box, takes out a cigarette. ‘Sometimes I wish my dad was the one who died. Is that bad of me?’ She pauses and leans into the flame that Elsa offers, exhales. ‘But he doesn’t approve of Jason. I think my dad just hates to see me happy.’ She frowns, looks unseeingly at the view.

‘Really?’ Elsa blows out a perfect plume of smoke, tosses the matches on the table. ‘I’m sure your dad has your best interests at heart, even if he isn’t necessarily doing what is right.’ A silence follows, long enough for Elsa to regret the matronly corrective.

‘I’m sorry,’ she says. ‘Here.’ She pushes the ashtray closer.

‘I really like your hat,’ Anna says now, tapping her cigarette on the edge.

‘Oh god, this old thing,’ Elsa touches the green crochet skullcap under which her white-blond hair is visible. ‘Picked it up for next to nothing. Found the hat, then found the matching wool to crochet this.’ She tugs the bolero over her breast. ‘Derk hates me in a hat but I’ve started wearing them again.’ Elsa laughs. ‘There has to be some benefit to growing old.’

‘You’re not old.’

Elsa smiles. ‘Another sherry?’

Anna nods.

‘Right,’ Elsa picks up her glass. ‘And mum’s the word.’ She closes her eyes, cringing, but a quick glance at Anna establishes that the anxiety is all her own. This time she returns with the bottle of sherry; her own glass replenished with wine. She fills Anna’s glass. ‘To laughter,’ she says. ‘And love,’ she adds as Anna’s glass touches hers.

Elsa puts the glass down and fiddles with her engagement ring. It is a little loose, so only the band shows, as if the small sapphire that had been Derk’s first token of love is trying to hide away in the palm of her hand. ‘But I want to hear more about your young man. You both feel the same way?’

Anna blushes, fingers a lock of hair. ‘I think so.’

Elsa looks intently at Anna. Watches her take another sip. ‘Well I just hope he understands how special *you* are. Boys can be so heartless at this age.’

Anna gives a heavy sigh, sticking out her bottom lip so that the air blows her fringe up. ‘Well. It’s not like he’s a boy. I mean, he’s almost 21. And I know it might sound silly but we really do have this, um, kinda really *intense* connection. I mean, we’re never bored, we never run out of things to say; things are never, you know, weird between us. Everything just comes naturally.’ She shrugs. ‘You know.’

Elsa nods. ‘Sounds good. So, can I be really upfront and ask— I mean, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but have you slept with him?’

Anna colours, her nod imperceptible. Stares at her glass, almost empty now.

‘Nothing to be ashamed of, honey.’ She fills Anna’s glass but this time it’s just a dash. She needs the girl relaxed, not drunk. ‘But you’re using protection? I mean, he’s using a condom, right?’

Anna pushes her fingers into her temple, rubs her fingers into her scalp. ‘We’re very careful. About the timing.’

‘The rhythm method? You’re kidding right?’ Elsa puts her wine glass down.

Anna bites her lip.

‘Anna, that’s just crazy! You do know that one in every four girls using the rhythm method falls pregnant?’ Elsa grabs the sherry bottle, and pours herself a full glass. She doesn’t like sherry – too sweet – but she can do with some fortification.

Anna’s eyes are wide, two red spots on her cheek. ‘Really? But we are super careful. My dad would kill Jason if, if he knew. If I fell pregnant.’

‘Listen, it doesn’t matter how careful you are. If you’re having sex without any proper protection, you’re playing with fire. And it’s totally unnecessary.’

Anna bites her lip. Elsa reaches out and puts her hand on Anna’s knee. ‘I can help you. I told you once, and I’m saying it again: what we talk about will always stay between us Anna. I promise. But you have to make the same promise. I can show you how to protect yourself. But it has to be our secret. Can you promise me that?’

Anna nods.

‘You especially can’t tell your dad. Not ever.’

Anna’s face clouds over. ‘I’d never tell my dad! If I could never see him again, I would.’ She rubs her temples again. ‘Jason says we just need more time. His parents won’t even let me sleep over, so we need our own place. I want to leave school, get a job, but Jason says that’s silly. I just really, really miss my mom. She would have understood.’ Anna’s eyes are liquid.

Elsa rests a hand on Anna’s shoulder. ‘Look, I know it’s hard right now but being a parent is more difficult than you realize. I’m sure your dad is doing the best he can. In

the mean time you have to be a responsible young woman, right, and not get pregnant.'

Anna nods.

'So here's the deal.' Elsa shifts back so that she's facing Anna.

'Have you ever heard of a diaphragm?' She smiles, disarming. 'Not the one here.' She rubs her stomach. 'The contraceptive one. No? Well, it works a bit like a plug.' Elsa cups her hand. 'So it's this thin flexible silicone cup-like barrier that you insert inside you before sex. If it's correctly placed it stops the sperm from entering the cervix and getting anywhere near your fallopian tubes. It's one hundred per cent safe, and if you use it with a spermicide it's also about a hundred percent effective. And really, really easy to use, once you know how. But you do need to know where to place it. So.' Elsa drains the last of the sherry. 'I happen to have a spare one, which you are welcome to have. I'll show you how to use it, if you want.'

'Really?' Anna is smiling, cheeks flushed.

Elsa smiles back. 'Of course. But honey, this is going to feel a bit weird. But a few minutes of embarrassment now is worth it if you can gain some control over your future. Because make no mistake, if you fall pregnant now you're either hobbled for life, or you're facing an illegal abortion.' Elsa splashes some more sherry into both glasses. 'And that almost killed me.'

Elsa can feel the edges peeling off, can feel herself tilting. Is she pushing too hard? Is this the part where she describes how she almost bled to death? Christ, she should have eaten more than just the one samoosa at the Oriental Bazaar. She rubs a hand along her cheek, smooths it into a smile. She is a little drunk. 'I'm sorry.' She shakes her head and laces her hands around her knees. 'I don't mean to sound melodramatic. I just want to help. But please, don't feel any pressure. I don't want you to do this if you're not ready for it.'

Anna is shaking her head.

'I can't fall pregnant Elsa.'

'Okay. You're sure?'

Anna nods. 'I'm ready.'

Elsa feels light-headed as she leads the way to her bedroom, now bathed in gold light, the evening sun reflected off the wall of mirrors that line the cupboard doors.

'If you can just slip your panties off, and sit down there.' Elsa points at the bed. She opens the top drawer of her bedside table and takes out a box. She turns back to face Anna, who has quickly folded her panties and has them clutched in one hand. 'Honey, do you mind moving that way a bit – over there, to the centre?'

Anna obeys. Elsa sits down next to her. 'You sure you're ok? You know, you can stop anytime. Or if you'd rather come back another day, that would also be absolutely fine. I don't want you to feel any pressure whatsoever.'

Anna smiles but doesn't meet Elsa's eyes. 'No, it's ok. I'm ok. Thank you.'

'Right then, here we go.' Elsa opens the box and removes a small tube that she places on the bed between them, then the dome-shaped latex cap.

'So, this here is the diaphragm. See how flexible it is? Before you insert the diaphragm, you need to put in about a teaspoon of spermicide.' Elsa holds up the tube. 'Into the cup, like so. No need to measure, you just do it by eye – about so much,' Elsa says while smearing the gel around the rim. 'It is very important that you use a real spermicide. Don't go substituting it with something like Vaseline, because not only will that not work, it will eat into the plastic... You see how I am holding it: in one hand, folded in half, with the dome bit pointing down? Ok, you ready?'

Anna pulls her lips in and nods.

'Ok lie back. That's right. Now just relax. I'm going to position your legs,' Elsa picks up the foot closest to her and puts it on the edge of the bed, then the other, so Anna's skirt falls back. She gently pulls the skirt back further, glances at the reflection in the mirror while keeping up her patter. 'So inserting the diaphragm is a bit like using a tampon: easiest while standing with one leg on a chair, or while lying down with your legs up and apart as they now are. I'm going to place it in position now, so you can feel exactly where it has to sit. I'm going to be real gentle. If you feel uncomfortable, or if I hurt you in any way, just say so, ok?'

Anna has her head turned to one side, her face half covered by her hair. ‘Uh huh.’

‘Ok, I’m just going to open up a little more.’ Elsa moves the left leg closer to her. ‘So you saw how I was holding the diaphragm; now you’ll use your other hand – like this – to spread open the vagina. Now we gently place the diaphragm into the vagina using your finger... sometimes it helps to just move it from side to side, or use your fingertip to gently rub your clitoris ...like so... before slipping it in, and up into position, aiming for the tailbone... push it in as far back as you can. Does that feel ok?’

‘Ok,’ Anna sounds slightly hoarse.

‘Ok now I am going to use my one finger to push the front rim of the diaphragm up behind your pubic bone, as if I am aiming for your belly button – sometimes it just easier to just keep gently rubbing, so I’m going to keep doing that while I try to get it in the right position... how’s that feel; is that ok?’

Anna makes a small grunting noise.

‘Good.’ Elsa keeps up a soothing patter. ‘Remember not to take the diaphragm out for at least six hours after you’ve had sex, or you’ll risk spilling. You can have sex again, but to be safe you should use more spermicidal gel; don’t remove the diaphragm, just squirt it directly into your vagina. It’s really important not take the diaphragm out too soon. Does that feel right? I think it’s in position – let’s just make sure it’s settled. And remember that you can’t forget about it either – the longest you can leave it in is 24 hours – so you can leave it overnight, but definitely take it out the next morning. But again, be super careful not to spill when you remove it, because sperm can live on in the body for four even five days—’

Elsa pauses again as Anna, fists clenched, shudders. Silent, neck arched, head turned away.

‘Ready for the removal part? So now you simply hook the front rim with your finger, and pull – voila – it’s out. Do you want me to put it back in so you can pull it out yourself?’

‘No.’ A small and insignificant sound.

Elsa gets up and sits down on the bed. ‘You ok?’

Anna pushes herself up, does not meet Elsa’s eye. ‘I’m fine, thank you.’ She pulls her skirt down, unballs the panties. She turns her back to Elsa and quickly puts them on. ‘I think I better go,’ she says, so quietly Elsa can hardly hear her. ‘It’s pretty late already.’

Elsa takes a tissue from her sidetable, wipes her fingers, wipes the diaphragm then places it in the box together with the tube of gel. ‘So you know what to do now?’

Anna nods and takes the box. She still cannot look at Elsa. ‘Thank you,’ she says, her voice small.

Elsa feels her self-loathing rise like sewage in a soak away. ‘Don’t mention it,’ she says, rubbing her hands along her thighs. ‘It’s a pleasure.’

Derk

Behind the one-way mirror Derk stops his desperate pumping when Elsa gets up from her knees, momentarily obscuring his viewline. The girl sits up then, eyes wide with – what, shock? Self-knowledge? He looks down at his lifeless member, overwhelmed with self-pity.

If even the sight of his wife finger fucking a pretty little 16-year-old fails to supply a rise, it truly is over.

Holding his flaccid dick at the top of the tallest residential building in the world, Derk feels utterly forsaken.

He waits for Elsa to exit the room, Anna trailing behind her, before pulling open the bathroom door. Hopefully, he scans the floor. Nothing. The girl didn't even leave her panties. He waits a few more minutes before hearing the front door slam, then slowly pads down the corridor, the carpet absorbing his footfall.

In the kitchen he pours himself a large glass of wine. He'd had such high hopes, had arranged everything with such care – the subtle well-timed observations to the father: how much Elsa had enjoyed meeting Anna, how Elsa missed having a daughter, how much good she was with troubled girls. The hotel room for Paul with the woman he'd paid to say she was a model. All for nought. Nothing. There was no juice left in him; his was just a dessicated little sack. He might as well be dead. He flops down on the sofa. Which is where Elsa finds him when she slams the front door some 40 minutes later.

'That's the last time. The very last time Derk.' Elsa's blue eyes are ice chips. Even after all these years, the colour impresses. 'Are you listening to me?' she shouts. Derk looks around at the empty flat. 'I hardly have a choice now, do I,' he drawls.

She hurls her bag onto the floor. 'God, I feel so dirty. I *am* dirty. Dirtier than the filthiest whore!' Elsa, shaking her head, stalks the length of the living room before turning on her heel to march back to where Derk is lying supine on the sofa. 'How could you make me do that Derk? Oh my God, I can't believe I just did that,' she stops. Looks at her hands. 'I can't believe I just did that.'

'Calm down. Have a drink.' Derk pours some wine into the empty glass, the lipstick smear marking it as Elsa's. 'Don't be so hysterical. There's nothing to be ashamed of. The girl enjoyed herself – I could see it with my own eyes. If she has any complaints I'm sure it will be that it was all over far too quickly.' Derk's voice fills with self-pity. 'As it is, I didn't get much out of it. Nothing at all, actually.'

'You are a sick, perverted bastard. An unspeakable monster.'

Derk can't help feeling hurt. How selfish Elsa has become. Losing her temper, insulting him, when he's already feeling so wretchedly low.

Elsa is pacing the length of the apartment, a caged animal in full theatrical mode, her face pulled into an ugly grimace: ‘*Do it to help the girl, Elsa; she doesn’t have a mommy; she’ll end up with a backstreet abortion; her daddy will kill her. Do it for the girl Elsa. What’s the harm? No one will ever know.*’ Well I know. We went too far, Derk. This time, we went too far. Oh God,’ Elsa bends over, arm across her stomach. ‘I actually feel physically sick.’ She moans, then stands up; turns on him.

But *you!* An accusation howled across the floor. ‘You don’t feel a *thing*, do you? No shame, no sense that what we did is just plain *wrong*. You’ve perverted me, Derk. All I ever wanted was to make you happy. I understood that you had special needs. But you know why? Not because I love you, Derk. I feel sorry for you. More than sorry. I pity you. Poor, pathetic Derk. But the more I’ve pitied you, the more pathetic you’ve become, the more you’ve pushed me to do things that disgust me. *You* disgust me. But now you’ve gone too far Derk. Do you understand? I’ve gone beyond pity, beyond duty. I’m even beyond disgust. I don’t feel anything. Nothing. Do you hear me? *Nothing!*’

This talk of pity and disgust is upsetting. He can feel his own venom rise, the cobra uncoil itself. Before he can stop to think, it spits.

‘Has it ever occurred to you that the only reason I can’t get it up is because I’m married to a saggy, bitter old bitch?’

Elsa smiles, an icy coldness back in her startling blue eyes. ‘You’re a poison Derk. What you made me do to Gabriel and Alice all those years ago; I should have known then.’

‘Oh Christ. Gabriel? You’re bringing up *Gabriel*? My brother got what was coming to him. And if life with me is so bloody poisonous, be my guest – there’s the door, you’re free to go. But you won’t, will you? Because you’re nothing without me. You couldn’t stand on your own two feet if we pinned them to the floor and strapped you to a plank. All your life you’ve used me as a crutch, then complained about the way I prop you up. But I never forced you into anything Elsa. Last time I looked, you weren’t chained.’

‘Ok Derk.’ Elsa’s voice is quiet now. She picks up her bag. ‘Maybe you’re right. But I’d rather be nothing than live with you. What we just did to that girl? We went too

far Derk.’ She shakes her head. ‘I don’t know who I despise more: you, or me. But this *thing* we are, it’s over.’

Elsa slams the door behind her.

Derk is shaken. *She’ll be back. There’s nowhere for her to go. And when she does, she is going to have to apologise for some of the things she just said.*

He feels the desperation rise again, the longing to lose himself, for the momentary disintegration into an indivisible bliss. In the bedroom he opens the laundry drawer, scrabbles through to find a pair of used panties. Perches himself on the edge of their bed, so his cock can hang free. He spreads the crotch over his nose with one hand, while the other starts to tug. But the panties smell mostly of soap, and he keeps hearing Elsa’s voice *the more I pitied you the more pathetic you’ve become*. He drops the panties on the carpet, breathing heavily from his efforts, which are, he knows, pathetic. His head feels big and heavy, and it droops, a wilted flower attached to its bony stem, hanging between two thin forearms resting on two knobby knees – when did his legs get so thin – and the ache in his chest is pushing up into his throat, his breath ragged, and his ears are filled with a noise that is unfamiliar, but sounds like the high-pitched wail of a keening child.

Elsa

Elsa walks with her hands in her coat, head down into the biting cold.

The payphone booth is empty. She picks up the receiver to check the dialing tone, then rummages for coins in the dark stink of stale cigarettes and urine.

She dials the familiar number, forefinger hovering, impatient for each digit slow return to zero. The mouthpiece of the phone smells of plastic and other people’s breath but she is not thinking about this. *Please, pick up the phone*. It is her father who answers.

‘Hello daddy? It’s me Elsa.’

He sounds pleased, says it’s good to hear her voice, that they’ve just got back from the Bothas.

‘Ja daddy, everything is fine,’ she answers when he asks, not knowing how to tell him.

‘That’s good,’ he says. ‘We can’t really complain either, though ma hasn’t been that well.’ He starts to list the medical ailments.

A peep-peep-peep alerts her to the fact that her time is running out. She slips another coin in and interrupts him.

‘Daddy, I do have some news,’ she says. ‘About me and Derk.’

This silences him. She knows there will be resistance, so her tone is upbeat. ‘Nothing serious daddy, but we have decided to go our separate ways. We will still see each other; just not live together. And so I’ve been looking for a house, daddy, a place for Paul and me. And I think I found one. A place I can fix up and make some money on.’

She waits then. ‘Ag nee, Elsa,’ he says. ‘Wat het jy nou aangevang?’

‘I haven’t done anything, daddy. I just need my own place, somewhere Paul and I can feel safe.’

He is silent.

‘I just need a new start. I have some money saved up but I need a bit more to make the deposit. It’s just a loan – I’ll pay back every cent, I promise daddy.’

Elsa’s heart is sinking.

‘We’ll have to see what your mother says.’

‘But dad, I have a plan. I’m going to making money on this house, I swear. I know I am,’ Elsa pleads, finger curling around the telephone wire. ‘Please daddy, it’s just a loan.’

He says nothing, then: ‘I think you’re biting off more than you can chew, my girly.’ And the words squeeze something inside her, they tilt the lamp post she can see through the grimy snot-smearred window of the payphone booth.

She calls Bev next, but Bev has nothing but regret and platitudes to offer. ‘I would if I could... simply can’t afford to rock the boat my dahling... you know what Derk will

do to me if I take you in... Lost a big punt last week...' She listens, heart as numb as her fingers, waiting for the payphone to swallow her coin.

Lynne picks up on the fifth ring. 'Now isn't a great time Elsa.' The tone coquettish. 'I'm, how shall I put it' – that little hoarse laugh she has always loved but sounds common now – 'rather occupied'. Lynne giggles, then there is a muffled sound as she covers her handset, then: 'Listen darling, I'll call you back tomorrow, alright?' Elsa replaces the handset in its cradle, hand shaking, wondering how she has got to this point, being called darling by people who don't care.

Desperation makes the next call, slips her forefinger into each round plastic hole with the ease of a homing pigeon, dialing a sequence of numbers she can still recall even now, 18 years after the first time she dialed this number, heart thumping with excitement.

Eyes closed, she listens to it ringing, seeing in her mind's eye the phone on its ornate stand below the still life of rotting fruit.

'Hello?' An unfamiliar voice. 'Kan ek u help?'

Elsa clears her throat. 'Can I please speak to Gabriel?'

1960

WEDNESDAY, 16 MARCH

“Mnr Macmillan en Lady Dorothy het bruingebrand gelyk toe hulle op die lughawe uit die vliegtuig geklim het. Van sy toespraak in Kaapstad het Mnr Macmillan gesê: ‘Ek het gepraat oor die wind van verandering wat oor die vasteland waai. Dit is waar; daar is ‘n gisting van gedagte en daad. Maar dit beteken nie dat al die opgeruimdheid, die vrolike karakter, die vriendelikheid en kleur van die oud Afrika nie meer daar is nie. Natuurlik is dit nog daar. Daar is ook baie stoflike vordering van ‘n skouspelagtige aard wat die Blankes se vaardigheid, vlyt en geld na Afrika gebring het.’”

—*Die Burger*, 16 March 1960

[“Mr Macmillan and Lady Dorothy looked tanned when they disembarked from their plane at the airport. Regarding his speech in Cape Town, Mr Macmillan said, ‘I spoke about the wind of change that is blowing over the continent. It’s true; there’s a fermentation of ideas and actions. But it doesn’t mean that the joyful nature, the friendliness and colour of the old Africa isn’t there anymore. Of course that is still there. There is also plenty of material advancement of a wondrous nature that the White’s skills, hard word and money have brought to Africa.’”]

Alice

‘Are you looking forward to seeing them?’ Alice opens her eyes wide, stroking her mascara on with the practiced ease of a concert violinist.

‘The De Wets?’

‘Don’t be silly. Elsa.’ Alice drops her chin to study her lashes. ‘Your brother. Dinner on Saturday?’

‘Ah,’ Gabriel says distractedly. ‘Of course.’

‘I can’t really imagine Derk as a father.’ She turns to look at Gabriel who is pulling in his stomach – a thickening of the abdomen that has not gone unnoticed by Alice – to button his shirt.

Gabriel doesn’t respond, so she turns back to the mirror. ‘I mean, I can hardly imagine you two growing up together in the same house. He has no manners; no idea how to behave in respectable company. Quite vulgar, at times. I honestly don’t know ...’ She pauses open-mouthed as she wields the mascara brush again, then bats her eyes to even the spread. Sits back, appraising her work. ‘Why Elsa had to go and marry him, of all people, I’ll never understand.’ She turns to face him again. ‘Does he even *realize* how lucky he is? I mean, has he ever even thanked you? For the introduction?’

‘He may have. I don’t recall.’

‘Can’t imagine he would have. Gratitude is not exactly Derk’s strong suit, is it?’ Alice runs her fingers above her eyebrows, feeling for the depression in her skull before applying a gentle pressure to her temples. She can feel the dull ache settling across her forehead, like wearing a hat that’s too tight. Brought on by the prospect of another interminable evening with Derk’s boss and his tiresome wife no doubt. Still, no reason to frown. Unattractive and unnecessary, frowning changed nothing. Simply aged the face prematurely.

She studies Gabriel’s reflection in her dressing table mirror. An inveterate gossip, she has always admired Gabriel’s intuition, his uncanny insights into the private drama spooled around each person. His post-dinner analysis of her parties was often the best part of the evening. But lately Gabriel had been terribly distracted. He was working late, spending more time away. A temporary measure, he assured her. ‘*Nothing worth*

worrying your pretty little head over.' She would like to argue the point. Her head, she might concede, is pretty – so it should be, the hours she spent on it – but it *is* worried. However, her role is not to question why. If Gabriel had something to tell her, he would surely do so in the fullness of time.

She rummages in her lipstick drawer. 'Actually, I can hardly imagine little Elsa as a mother. Feels like only yesterday she was still at school. I presume they'll bring the baby.' She twists the stick – a deep red – prepares to apply it. 'Pity about Elsa's parents. Won't feel like a proper reunion with them there.' She runs the red across her lips, rubs them together.

Gabriel slips the narrow end of his tie through the loop he has made. A good choice, Alice thinks as she watches him in her mirror. Gabriel had more sartorial flair than most men in Paarl had in their little finger.

'I don't know,' Gabriel says as he tightens the noose. 'Might be nice to finally meet the people who raised Elsa. Might keep Derk in check too.'

Alice rolls her eyes. 'That will be the day,' she says.

'If Derk wins the pitch he's here for, he'll be in high spirits. He's been promised a promotion.' Gabriel sits on the edge of the bed to pull on a sock. 'It's all very hush-hush. The incumbent agency has no idea. But Derk's pretty confident they'll win.' He repositions the toe, fastidiously lining it up with the edge of his foot. 'If he does, it could mean a move to Johannesburg as group creative director.'

'Creative director?' Alice shakes her head. 'I'll never understand how someone so objectionable could be so successful.' Alice stops herself from frowning again.

'Honestly, I don't know how he does it.'

Gabriel shrugs. 'You two have never seen eye to eye. Derk can be very persuasive.'

'Quite.' She watches him carefully comb his hair sideways, covering the bald patch. What some would call vanity, Alice thinks of as consideration. There is never a good reason to foist anything ugly on the world, after all. With the bald patch covered, he looks more like the man she married, and less like Derk. And heaven knows, the world doesn't need another Derk. She focuses on her reflection again, sighs.

‘Such a bore we’re having dinner with the De Wets.’

Gabriel snorted. ‘Dinner? Try working with him. You know how much I dislike the man. But if I don’t pretend otherwise, the feeling will be entirely mutual. I – we—’ Gabriel looks around at the new pale beech cupboard (the price of which had shocked even Alice) ‘—can’t afford the luxury of honesty.’

Alice isn’t frowning, but she is not smiling either.

Gabriel turns away from his reflection to look at her. ‘You know I can’t do this without you. I need to charm the old toad, and everyone knows the power of a beautiful princess.’

Alice pouts. ‘I won’t have to kiss him, will I?’

‘Maybe just once.’ Gabriel smile turns into a grin, the deep creases in his cheeks book-marking a sensuous mouth.

‘Yuck.’ Alice appraises her reflection one last time. ‘Well, I’m just about ready.’

Gabriel looks at his watch. ‘I’ll just go check in on the boys.’

Alice feels her jealousy unfurl. If the house was on fire, and Gabriel had to choose, he would save the children first. He would leave her to be consumed by flames, and save the darn boys. She knew this because she’d asked him. He’d been gazing at the tiny creatures in the crook of each arm. She’d asked him then, and he’d told her. ‘But you’d do the same of course.’ She’d nodded mutely but inside she’d been howling. *No! I’d save you first. You! Not these mewling interlopers, these cuckoos.*

Pressing her palms against the dressing table she pushes back her chair. ‘You know the boys aren’t *expecting* to see you Gabriel.’ She’s trying to sound matter-of-fact but even she can hear the tartness. ‘I told them you’d be home late, and that you’d see them at breakfast tomorrow.’ She looks at her watch. ‘It’s almost their bedtime and we need to be leave in a few minutes. Seeing them now will only unsettle them.’

‘Ally, I have to see them. It will only take a moment.’ He walks over to her now, bends so that his head is above her, his chin almost touching her hair. He holds her reflected gaze, cups his hands under her breasts, sheathed in a pointed brassiere, before running them over her stomach, flat as the day he had first done so. Alice feels

her skin prickle; a small jolt of adrenaline released. Gabriel still has this effect on her. She lifts the shoulder on which his one hand is resting, inclines her cheek towards his fingers; stops short of touching them. Gabriel knows better than to kiss her mouth, perfectly outlined and coloured in, or to touch her bouffant hair – curled and backbrushed into a pillbox bob with the ends flipped out, like a bell-shaped helmet.

‘You finish gilding the lily and I’ll be right back.’

Once he has closed the door Alice gets up. She wants the new dress. She had thought to save it for Saturday, for Elsa, but she needs the new dress. There is nothing quite like the first time – the self-awareness, the bright confidence of stepping out in a brand-new dress. With every subsequent wearing the dress would lose a little of its power, until finally she may as well be in rags, or naked, an old dress shamed her so.

She unhooks the hanger from the railing and drapes the dress across the bed. A pity, really, to waste it on the De Wets. But she needs a boost tonight. Besides, while the pattern – large white daisies on black silk – is bold, the style is too traditional. For Elsa she wants something a little more modern. An A-line with the pearls Gabriel had given her. Then this style – the tight bodice with the full-shirred skirt cinched in at the waist – it really did suit her. She holds the dress up against her and sighs. It’s ridiculous really, how much she wants to impress Elsa. Just a slip of a girl, able to exert such a pull, creating a kind of hunger. From the first time she walked into their home on the arm of that pretty-boy protégé of Lourens – what was his name again? James, John, Jim, something with a J, it hardly mattered, the point was that Elsa walked in, and every eye was drawn, obedient to the rule of beauty.

‘Welcome,’ she’d said. ‘I’m Alice.’ To her surprise Elsa had blushed. ‘I’ve heard so much about you,’ she said, eyes wide, quite guileless. The girl – on closer inspection she looked no more than 16 – seemed totally unaware of the effect she had. ‘What a beautiful home,’ she had said. ‘Thank you very much for having me.’ She had dipped her head and given an approximation of a curtsy, and Alice had been thoroughly disarmed.

Elsa showed an interest in her art so she had shown her around, pointing out her favourite pieces. It was Elsa who had stopped in front of the still life above the phone. ‘What, *you* painted that?’ she had gushed when Alice told her, hand clasped against

her throat. Elsa was fun too: when Alice had described the smoked oyster on melba toast as an *amuse bouche* and Elsa had asked, with a naughty glint, how one knew that the bush was amused.

‘I think we shall be sisters, you and I,’ Alice had said to Elsa at the end of the evening, and despite Gabriel’s dry post-party comment – ‘pretty but socially ambitious’ – she had been true to her word. Aside from the girl’s beauty, which was an obvious asset to her table, Elsa’s ambition had in fact made her marvelously pliant; she had taken the young girl under her wing and groomed her well.

‘Don’t play the mute, my dear,’ she admonished after the first intimate dinner in which Elsa – apparently overwhelmed by the conversational ambit of the handpicked guests, which included a politician Gabriel was courting – had not participated. ‘You’re not an *object*. No one expects you to be an expert – on the contrary – but you must at least ask questions. You don’t have to be interesting, merely show a keen interest. Express an opinion, but make sure it’s open to persuasion. Honestly, no one wants to be a bore. Read these,’ she’d handed Elsa a pile of books. ‘It’s almost impossible to tell the difference between the well read and the well bred my dear.’ She’d tapped the top book, ‘Start with the Dostoevsky.’

On a later occasion, when Elsa had challenged Gabriel on whether *Emma* was a better, more interesting read than *Pride and Prejudice*, Alice had reigned her in. She was pleased the girl had gained in confidence but there were limits. ‘Men want to feel clever, and it’s our job to help them,’ she’d explained. ‘A bit of conversational jousting is good. But don’t compete. Never argue with the intention to win. A man with a mind will want to exercise it, even at home, but don’t tire him. And you’ll want a man with a mind. Marriage is a full time job, my dear, so you’ll want to make sure it’s to someone with...’ and she had tapped the side of her head. In retrospect, perhaps she made too much of that. Because then Derk came along, and ruined everything.

Gabriel had sprung it on her casually – Derk was going to be in town unexpectedly, and he’d been duty bound to invite him to his birthday dinner. This despite the fact that she had already planned the perfect table seating. But it was Gabriel’s birthday, so what could she say. She rearranged the table, placing his brother well away from anyone important.

She needn't have bothered. Alice had watched helplessly from the head of the table as Derk, who had not taken his eyes off Elsa during the serving of the starter, had taken the seat next to her the moment that hapless Johan vacated it. She'd fancied Johan for Elsa – the lucrative merger he'd recently overseen had made him a contender – but it had been a mistake. The man was spineless. On his return to the table Derk had pointed, eyes blazing, to his vacated seat at the other end of the table. Johan had slunk off, visibly disappointed but unwilling to challenge his usurper. After that, Derk never left Elsa's side.

She'd been furious, but no one ever *chose* to make a scene with Derk – he was quite capable of making one without any encouragement – so she had waited until everyone had departed, and then warned Elsa in no uncertain terms. Derk was trouble. A divorcee, a failure in matters of the heart. Decadent, selfish, wilful. Dangerous, even. Elsa had smiled and showed her the poem he had scribbled on the back of her box of Van Rijn 30. A silly little snippet, something about diving into pools – Elsa's eyes – and finding himself adrift. But it was Elsa who had slipped away, who was drifting beyond Alice's grasp.

The irritation of that night was nothing compared to the rage unleashed by Elsa's call a month later. Leaving the Cape for Durban, a coastal backwater, to be with Gabriel's lunatic brother? It was an outright rejection of all the prudent advice Alice had given her. All that precious time invested in Elsa – *wasted* on that reprobate.

But once Elsa had left, Alice's anger had slowly dissipated, until finally all that was left was an empty hole, an outline within which Elsa had once been. She missed her. She had never had a friend like Elsa. It was Elsa who suggested they celebrate her new Irma Stern by plundering Gabriel's cellar. Elsa who picked out the 1959 Lanzerac Pinotage. 'A national wine champion,' Gabriel had said with a wry smile, only half-irritated to find Alice inebriated, sprawled across their bed. 'Got to hand it to her. The little thief has taste.'

Despite the difference in their age and upbringing, she had felt closer to Elsa than she had to any other woman. If she were honest, she had started to feel closer to Elsa than she did to Gabriel. Perhaps it had been unwise to warn her so vociferously against Derk. But she only ever had Elsa's best interests at heart.

Regardless, it was all behind them now. Elsa was a married woman. The mother of her own baby son. She no longer needed Alice's guidance but they would chart a new course. After all, they truly were sisters now.

Alice turns around to make sure she has covered the starched petticoats that hold the patterned black silk aloft. Strokes the fabric one last time then walks over to the bed to put both lamps on; turns the overhead light off – the incipient welcome of a romantically lit bedroom, an important daily task.

She checks her reflection again briefly in the hallway, then walks the length of the corridor, towards the loud squeals coming from the boy's room. Finds Gabriel on his knees, both boys straddling him like a horse.

'Gabriel?' Alice raises an eyebrow. 'We are going to be late.'

There is a brief silence, the boys staring at her, crestfallen, as if it is all her fault that their fun must end. Gallingly, Gabriel, who has once again forced her into the role of killjoy, is also looking at her with surprise, as if it isn't his boss that they will be late for. She does not, must not, frown, so she gazes at her family with a fixed smile, thinking, this is exactly what I warned him against.

There is no point in leaving lipstick marks on their cheeks, they will only have to wash their faces again, so she gives the boys a little wave then stalks into the kitchen to instruct Wilmiena to take the boys their tea. 'Better add a biscuit,' she says. They will be upset to say goodbye now. Gabriel should have listened to her.

She waits in the hallway for him. When Gabriel appears, wearing an apologetic smile, he gives a low appreciative whistle. Placing a hand on either side of her waist, cinched by its narrow belt, his fingers almost meet.

'A new dress?'

'You like it?'

'I do.'

She smiles, drops her chin so that she is looking up at him through her mascara lashes. 'There was another one, with a rose pattern. I thought the daisy a bolder choice.'

He grins. ‘You should have bought them both.’

Alice laughs. This is the other thing she loves about Gabriel.

‘Shall we?’ he says, and offers her his arm. Alice, happy in her new dress, takes it.

Tomorrow she will return to John Orr, and find a new armour for Saturday.

Derk

Derk is seated at his favourite table, his back to the wall covered in scrawled inanities – *We came, we saw, we ate!* – and the signatures of people desperate to say *we were here*, when no one cared.

The ambience of Bistro 69, table lamps pooling pale yellow light on white-starch tablecloths, is what first drew Derk in, but the food is what he comes back for. That, and the waiters – Derk no longer even has to ask; on arrival he is shown to his table and his bottle of wine brought as soon as he has taken his seat. He eats here most nights now, has come to think of it as his own private dining room, the other patrons simply extras in his personal movie, part of his monthly bill – always paid promptly and large enough to warrant the deference and respect with which he is treated, which only further affirms his sense of coming home. Some nights, when Derk and his guests remain anchored to his table, Luca even leaves Derk with a set of keys. Yet Luca has never asked Derk to sign his wall. It troubles Derk sometimes, the fact that he has not ever been asked to make his mark so that he can loftily decline, to scoff that ‘only children write on walls’. Because Derk wants his words not only published and printed on paper, but studied and written about in turn. He experiences another rush of excitement; an impatient jiggling of the leg. Where the hell is Elsa?

He stubs out his cigarette, picks up a menu, puts it down without reading it. He knows what he wants. Sirloin. Rare. No chips. No sauce. None of that rabbit fodder either.

Derk taps out another cigarette. Inhales the flame flickering at the end of the match. Washes away the hot burn by draining his glass of wine. A waiter appears almost immediately to refill his glass then heads to the kitchen to replace the bottle with another. Derk experiences again the small pleasure of this wordless exchange. Only Elsa is missing.

The pen and notebook he keeps in his pocket is on the table.

He starts to write.

This moment I shall not spend on needs of now;

I'll put it in these lines instead

And hoard it thus

For you, some future self.

He bites the end of his pen, then bends over and writes again, his handwriting neat and tight.

Reach out to me, O self-to-be,

Play leapfrog over Time.

Don't think yourself more real

Or all that different from me.

Derk considers it. A germ of something. Perhaps. But then that part of him, the demon, curls its tail around his neck. *What have we here?*, it asks, one eye open. *Another suckle on the hind tit of mediocrity?* The usual lash. Not that Derk is afraid; certainly not tonight. The demon is part of his suffering, and suffering is what spawns his art.

If anything, Derk worries that his suffering is not big enough. A suffocating mother, a puritanical father – in the litany of childhood pain, these burdens were like little handkerchief-bundles on the end of a stick. He has painted over this relatively unremarkable childhood with memories of waking up in alleyways reeking of piss and rotting garbage, a penniless stowaway in a foreign port. He's lived under the stars in Mombasa, digging trenches and lugging railway sleepers, his only company the spider he captured and kept in a jar, fed with mosquitoes fattened by his own blood. He's slept with whores – one of whom was so grotesquely fat she'd had to lift her belly with both hands, and had left him with an itching crotch; he had even, once, allowed a man to suck his cock, just to see whether he liked it. (With his eyes closed he had liked it well enough.) It was a self-flagellation of sorts, these experiences, but also

fertilizer. From discomfort would grow words that he would harvest and weave together into a safety net he could toss out to others, once he had washed up on less rocky shores. The demon tightened its grip. *Fertilizer is just another word for shit*, it said.

‘Fuck you,’ Derk muttered, and turned the page.

Losing jobs almost as quickly as he found them, Derk had worked in more industries than he cared to count until he had finally landed a job as a junior copywriter. To find that one could be paid well for words, even if they did sell toothpaste and cars, banks and cigarettes, was like stumbling across an ore of gold. Advertising suited his temperament and talents – the paucity of words and time, the cod psychology, the expense accounts, the masculine bonhomie. The money. He discovered he had a flair for the showmanship required to sell new ideas to cautious brand managers unwilling to venture beyond the tried and tested. Within a few months he was promoted to senior writer; within a year his reputation was formidable enough to spread fear in the corridors of any incumbent agency he pitched against.

For the first time Derk felt free – able to structure his day as he pleased, earning enough money to pay for his pleasures. Soon it would buy him enough time. Time to dedicate himself to his true purpose.

Derk had written his best poetry during the break up of his marriage to Pat. The woman who had broken the heart she accused him of not having, had left him for a pious bespectacled accountant, a man who didn’t even have enough character to be called a bastard. The poetry he produced was the silver lining, but there was the demon, sneering that he was no better than a juvenile baboon beating his chest about the impossibilities of love. Derk had returned to these poems, shifting and rearranging, condensing and expanding, endlessly reworking, trying to distill the thing he felt into a Blake-like simplicity. He enjoyed the struggle, but every morning he would pick up the work he’d wrestled with deep into the night and, feeling the poem unfinished, would discard it for the next.

The call from Gabriel had come at a time when the demon again had him in a tight grip. ‘Come on Derk,’ his brother had said, the warmth in his voice a balm. ‘It’s been too long. Come see the boys; come see what we’ve done to the old place. I’m having

a little birthday celebration on Saturday – a few interesting people – you know how well Alice puts these things together.’

Alice was a necessary evil, he supposed, having given Gabriel a leg up into Paarl society, but Derk didn’t care one fig for her society. Keeping up appearances, showing your best side – Gabriel had inherited that from their father. He was good at it too, Derk grudgingly admitted – the nobody who had arrived in Paarl penniless in the early 1950s was now marketing director of the most successful cooperative in the country, driving his fat-arse Mercedes into the double garage of his sprawling bungalow on the slopes of Paarl mountain. He had made their father proud. ‘At least one of you has.’ That’s what his father had said when he had driven up to Harrismith to break the news about Pat, neither of them knowing it was the last time they would see each other.

Gabriel had always been the favourite. Older by only one year, and afforded all the prestige and privileges of the eldest. Gabriel repaid them with stellar school reports, wrestling trophies, and polite manners. He was kind and good to them, and they worshipped him, a mutual sycophancy that only alienated Derk more. He’d stuck his thumb through a clenched fist at their tight little triumverate. And yet, he too loved Gabriel. Gabriel, who listened and understood Derk, had defended him and protected him at school, if not at home.

‘Come on Derk, it’s been too long.’ Gabriel had repeated. ‘I’ve been missing you.’

Derk regretted it the minute he walked through their front door, a feeling that only intensified as braying strangers kept arriving at Gabriel’s “little” celebration. He should have known better. Seconds after greeting him – a warm embrace – Gabriel had been swept away by Alice to attend to other no-doubt more important guests. Derk had escaped to the outside terrace, his state of mind as dark as the moonless night, when the blonde had walked out, accompanied by two men.

She was tiny. A triangular face framed by a blonde bob that cupped her jawline. A slim, Scandinavian Marilyn, innocent yet knowing, all sidelong glances and parted lips, her smile revealing a tiny gap between her teeth.

He had watched, trying to see to which of the two men she belonged, but she divided her attention equitably between them – the touch on each man’s forearm light as her

laugh. He had stared at her, unashamedly, until finally she had returned the gaze, a wicked gleam in her Arctic-blue eyes as she slipped the long black cigarette filter back into her mouth. For a few seconds he had felt himself centred in a shaft of light; everything and everyone in shadow, the volume turned right down. Then the man on her left, the lanky redhead, leaned in to ask a question, and she had looked away. The spell broken, and then the bell signalled dinner.

He had made his move between the starter and the main course, when the redhead made the mistake of vacating the chair next to her.

Derk had wooed her. Not with flattery – a woman that beautiful needed no reminding. Having made short thrift of the redhead on his return, he had made her laugh, lampooning the guests, and amusing her with stories of Gabriel as a school boy. He'd made no attempt to hide his disdain for Alice who glowered at him from the other end of the table, but was surprised to see the disapproval on Gabriel's face. He ignored them both. After the main course ('Trout caught this very day in the Du Toitskloof mountains', Alice announced, she was that pretentious), Elsa asked him what he thought of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. He knew right there and then. This woman was his; he would have her at all costs. Before he left he'd jotted a few lines on her cigarette box – *I haven't learnt to swim as yet,*

So have to stay within my depth,

Dare not dive into the drown-deep lakes,

That are your still, still eyes – a poem he'd completed feverishly on the plane ride home, and posted to her the next day.

He'd waited anxiously for her reply. When it came – *Dear Derk, I am deeply moved by the beauty of your words* – he could have wept. Finally, a real target. His words, right in the bull's-eye.

He'd written again the following day, a new poem enclosed – *Once more my demon swept the child in me; Once more I swam beyond my depth in mad defiance of the sea* – and a few days later again – *You, who read and understand me on some other crumbling shore of time— Know I threw my bottles message in the sea with one like you in mind*. It was as if Elsa had tapped a submerged spring, the words just flowing

out of him: their ink outlines hardly dry before they were folded into envelopes and crushed in airmail bags that winged their way to some imagined bedroom where they were opened and aired and sunk their hooks into the heart of the woman he was helplessly in love with. The demon remained silent.

Elsa's small-town innocence – her biggest adventure to date, she had told him on that first night, was the occasional jaunt along the highway to Cape Town – was matched by an innate cheerfulness and good humour. Yet this essential *goodness* would have soured the interest of a man of his proclivities, had he not also seen a mischievousness, a decadence and wicked sense of humour running shallow beneath the cloistered sensibilities of the Paarl girl freshly sprung from high school.

The exchange of letters had been followed by another flying visit, and then – as fate would have it, Elsa had been offered a modeling job on a cruiseship bound for Durban. Derk had persuaded her to resign her secretarial job and hired a hotel room near his apartment. The hotel room a gesture of respect – he wanted her to know that he would make no demands if the desire wasn't shared. Elsa never checked in. In fact, Elsa had shown an experimental attitude to sex that had thrilled him. He was clearly not her first – so much the better, Derk had no truck with blushing virgins – but he was pleased when she told him that she had learnt everything from a boy called Jimmy, a bisexual kid with film star looks whose company Elsa had enjoyed but who had never, she said, touched her heart. Not like Derk, she had said, trailing a finger along his stirring cock. In turn Derk told her – and it was the truth – that every woman he had ever met had merely been a dress rehearsal, every failed relationship a lesson learnt in order to succeed at the only one that really mattered.

He'd asked Elsa at this very table; Luca – watching from the wings, as instructed – had brought the champagne. He had been relieved when Elsa had agreed to a small civil ceremony witnessed only by her parents. Gabriel, who had sounded shocked when Derk had called him with the news, had said it unlikely he would be able to attend. He had been disappointed but also relieved that Alice would not be there, trailing disapproval in her wake.

On the night of their wedding he had made love to her with a tenderness he had never experienced before, but Elsa had reared up against him, had devoured him with an urgency and intensity that had left him gasping. You'll be the death of me, he'd

murmured, spent, a patch of sperm dampening the sheet. A hidden stowaway had accompanied them on his carefully planned Grand Tour – a six-week honeymoon trip through seven countries on four continents. Remarkably, Elsa had shown no sign of morning sickness, but by the time they returned home, her breasts were tender to the touch.

He had hidden his initial disappointment – he did not want this ‘other’ inserted into their perfect two, not so soon at any rate, but pregnancy made Elsa happy, and did nothing to dampen her sexual enthusiasm.

When the nurse finally placed the tiny wrinkled creature in his arms, it had felt good to have a son. A piece of him and a part of Elsa, melded in one. Not that he was going to try to imprint himself on the boy. He would not repeat his father’s mistakes. He would let the boy run free, become his own man. Because the real legacy, the only legacy that mattered, was the one that flowed from his fingers, his mind, the words with which he distilled meaning. His son was nothing more than the natural outcome of a biological imperative, a creation any moron was capable of. What Derk wanted was to combine a set of words in such a way that it would be devoured by generations to come.

Ah finally! The door swings open, framing his wife.

She waves at him, the other hand holding the tiny bundle that is Paul. She looks around as the door swings shut behind, and there is Rajesh now, taking the baby from her – they all adore the baby, but none more than Rajesh, who settles Paul against his own shoulder, a broad hand spread over the nape of his tiny neck as he marches Paul into the kitchen, where he will remain until he is ready to settle into his makeshift bed behind the bar.

Elsa is picking her way through the tables, smiling. Derk cannot contain his excitement now; he’s on his feet, grinning. It is all he can do not to pick her up and whirl her around the room. She raises herself onto her toes – even in heels she is a head shorter than him – and kisses him, her lips moist and soft. ‘Sorry I’m late,’ she says, which is not true; she is not sorry, she is always late, but he doesn’t care.

The waiter – it is KJ – is holding the chair for Elsa to sit down. Once seated Elsa waves a hand in front of her face. She is gloveless – Elsa has taken to the more

informal dress code of the subtropical city – and wears nothing on her fingers bar the slim wedding band and tiny sapphire ring that mark her as his.

‘It’s sweltering out there!’ She takes out her pack of Van Rijns, then stops to study him. He can feel the smile stretched across his face, his leg again jiggling uncontrollably. She cocks her head. ‘What’s going on?’ she says. ‘You look like the cat that got the cream,’ she lowers her chin and smiles at him; the pouting smile she practised as a model to make her cheekbones more pronounced. ‘Is it a new account?’ Her eyes are sparkling – that wonderful wicked glint he loves so much – their almond shape fringed in black. He feels overwhelmed, sitting here with this beauty who is his wife, his muse, his good luck charm, waiting expectantly for his news. She wears her bobbed hair shorter now, but still long enough for her to tuck one side behind her tiny ear, which she now does as she leans towards the match he has lit, cheeks sucked in.

‘No, it’s better than that.’

‘Yes?’ Elsa smile widens to reveal the tiny gap between her front teeth, the physical flaw he has always found most endearing.

‘The publisher wrote back.’

Elsa raises her eyebrows while Derk taps the table with his index finger, tries to look nonchalant but can’t. He clenches his hand. ‘They want it Elsa! They want the lot. An entire anthology.’

‘No!’

‘Yes!’ he says. ‘This is it Elsa!’ Derk needs a physical release, he is experiencing a pressure to stand, and it is forcing him up onto his feet. ‘This is it!’ He looks around wild-eyed. ‘Luca!’ he shouts and then, in a single lithe movement, he is up on his chair, using it as a stair to stand on the table. ‘Luca!’ he shouts again as the short Italian barrels through the kitchen door. Everyone in the dining room is now staring at Derk. ‘Bring us wine; we need wine; wine for everybody!’ Derk opens his arms wide. ‘Ladies and Gentleman, patrons of the Bistro. One day, you’ll all say, *I* was there. The day Derk du Toit got the news that his first anthology of poetry is to be published by Buren Books!’ He looks around gleefully, ‘Remember the name!’ Even Elsa looks surprised when Derk then jumps from his table to the table closest to him, shouting, as

he lands, plates and cutlery clattering to the floor, ‘Derk!’ He jumps again, lands on the next table like a well-trained athlete – ‘Du! – and then again – this time landing awkwardly, breaking a side plate and upturning a glass, but he is upright as he shouts a final triumphant, ‘Toit!’

The woman at the last table gives a little shriek as the bloom of spilt red spreads across the white tablecloth but the rest of the restaurant is silent, everyone staring at the man standing with his arms open, shouting, ‘A bottle of wine! One for every table!’ Then a few – not those whose cutlery and crockery have been displaced by Derk’s size 11 feet, but those on the other side of the restaurant, the audience to this impromptu performance – start to clap, and Luca is commanding his waiters to bring bottles of wine, instructing them to replace everything – cloths, napkins, cutlery, new dishes – anything they want, on the house, soothing the distraught woman, while the rest of the restaurant diners are applauding the man who is now finally stepping down, and into the arms of the tiny blonde woman at his table.

THURSDAY, 17 MARCH

“Volgens Dr Norgarb is skuldgevolens, wat preutse ouers by hul kinders inprent dat voorhuwelikse geslagsomgang verkeerd is, die rede hoekom baie huwelike misluk. Dr Norgarb het bewys dat huwelike waar die man en vrou geslagsomgang gehad het vóór die huwelk, standvastiger is as die waar daar geen sodanige ondervinding was nie. Dr Norgarb met n vyandige gesinde gehoor te doen gekry. ‘Ek versoek u om hierdie reeks lesings te staak. U gaan die sedelike peil van ons land verlaag,’ het Dr JA Schutte na die lesing gese.”

[According to Dr Norgarb the guilt feelings that prudish parents instill in their children around premarital sex being wrong is the reason why many marriages fail. Dr Norgarb has proof that marriages where the man and woman had sex before marriage are more stable than those that didn't. Dr Norgarb had to contend with an unhappy audience. 'I beg you to desist with this series of talks. You are going to lower the moral tone of our country,' Dr JA Schutte said after the talk.]

—Die Burger, 17 Maart 1960

Elsa

Elsa, wearing a bikini, has a hand stretched across her brow, shading her eyes as she looks out at sea. The lawn in front of the low-slung bungalow is her quarterdeck, a terrace carved halfway up the forested hillock that once rolled directly into the beach, separated now by a single-lane dirt track. To reach it one has to climb 112 steps through a fecund border of subtropical greens; once here you have an unobstructed view of the roiling sea, today a three-hued blue.

It was Elsa who had found the bungalow. Located just beyond Umdloti village in the tangled jungle of the undeveloped north coast, it was cobwebbed and dirty. Marked down to R11 000. But the view was spectacular. Even a grudging Derk – who had no desire to leave his Durban beachfront apartment – had to admit the potential. Located at the end of the track that petered out into a pathway to a forest-fringed lagoon, it was isolated. Elsa persuaded Derk that his writing would be better for being undisturbed by the noise and energy of the city. She would forage the rock pools for mussels and octopus. Paul could grow up feral, beach sand on his bare feet. Derk had finally agreed, on the proviso that he would not be commandeered into painting walls, stripping cupboards or digging up weeds. If she wanted to fix up the bungalow, she would have to do so without his help.

Elsa is happier in this tiny two-bedroom house than she has ever been anywhere. The estate agent had made much of the view of course, and the proximity to the sea, the lullaby that eases her to sleep and back into wakefulness. But this is also her first real home, the first place where she has chosen the colours and the curtains. They don't have much – Derk's resistance to owning possessions has meant that their furniture is second-hand, but she has a eye for a bargain, and an understanding of space and flow, so there are several cozy nooks into which she curls up like a cat, depending on the time of day, while Derk works at the dining room table.

She leans down to read the sheet he has left wound into his typewriter.

I need the night to harden into me,

To let my melted self coagulate;

I need to be alone to concentrate

Myself – to sharpen to a tip, a point

As hard as diamond that I may cut

Words clean and clear into the sheet of glass

That lies between what's me and what I see

Of life – yes, words to crystallize what

A soft mewling pulls her upright like a puppet. Paul. Poem forgotten, she picks him up and carries him to the veranda, still in deep shade. Placing her cigarettes on the glass table so they are within easy reach, she settles into the wicker chair with Paul resting in the crook of one arm. She sits for a moment, just gazing into the eyes of her son, disappearing into him, to the inchoate and ancient wisdom she senses in there. He holds her gaze for a few seconds, his expression solemn, then smiles – instantly she feels the pressure in her swollen breasts while he pumps one tiny fist in the air, as if delighted by her. Keeping his eyes trained on her he now starts to swivel towards her, his mouth opening and closing, involuntarily as a fish, reaching for her milk.

Elsa pulls up her bikini top and proffers him a blue-veined breast. Paul's mouth clamps on, triggering a delicious release. She feels the dampness bloom around the taught nipple in the other breast, its impatient desire to be drained by Paul's tiny wet mouth. She traces a finger along his cheek, the soft translucent poreless skin. His eyes are closed now, but she can feel him swallow her, and together they share their separate bliss, silent but for the waves crashing on the empty shore.

She strokes Paul's cheek again, marveling at the soft poreless pelt of their smooth-skin pet, as Derk calls him. '*Que sera sera,*' she sings softly, that old song her father used to love. '*Whatever will be will be, the future's not ours to see – que sera sera...*'

By day she is ruled by Paul's rhythms; come nightfall it is Derk who sets the pace. Despite her reduced ardour, she does not deny Derk his pleasure. It is hardly a chore when Derk has made her so happy. It helps that Paul – as if he knows what is expected, that there are limits – is so easy. He falls asleep anywhere, and his cry is always a gentle mewl to which Elsa's ears are so perfectly attuned that it will wake

her from the deepest sleep within seconds. Leaving Derk undisturbed in their bed she carries Paul out into the velvet dark, into the cool air blowing off the sea, to settle into their favourite wicker chair. When he drops off, she bends over, as she does now, and breathes him in. He smells of innocence, a pure goodness, like the smell of rain on the hot, parched granite of Paarl Rock. It is hard, sometimes, to return to Derk, the antipode of Paul, with his hairy, scratchy, hard body. The smell of stale sweat and semen, tobacco and red wine. But when Derk wakes up, he will want Elsa there. And Elsa wants what Derk wants.

Paul is asleep now, his tiny mouth slack-jawed around her wet nipple. Content, Elsa leans back to look at the sea. It is certainly not the picture Alice painted – a Mercedes in the garage, a banker in her bed. She feels the lather of guilt. Alice had been a good friend. She regretted letting her down, but Derk was right, Alice cared about things that didn't matter.

At any rate, Alice had sounded perfectly friendly on the phone last week. She hoped there would be no awkwardness on Saturday night. She was Derk's wife now. They would all have to forge new bonds.

Three new storm lilies have pushed their heads through the lawn, a few delicate white petals on leafless stalks spawned by the recent rains. The first time they appeared she had called Derk, excited by their unexpected visit. 'You know they only live for a day,' he'd said, dolefully. 'They die at once when picked, and can't be grown at will.' She didn't understand the sadness that trailed Derk. It made her want to comfort him, and she would take his anxious head and rest it in her lap, stroke his sad thoughts away. 'But if they come back every time it rains,' she'd said, running her hand across his brow. 'They never really die, do they?'

Derk had kissed her then. 'The most beautiful lily of them all,' he'd said.

Elsa carries Paul to their double bed, and places him in the middle. He is at an age that he might roll over, might even, a stroke of bad luck, roll right off the bed, but Elsa does not think about that. Bad luck is something that happens to other people. She is 21 years old, and only good things lie ahead. Using her index finger, the soft part above the knuckle, she strokes the satin cheek once again. '*Que sera sera,*' she sings. '*Whatever will be will be.*' Kisses him on his downy head.

She steps back out to the stoep to pick up the wedding glove she left to dry in the sun. Slips her hand in – it is slightly crusty from the seawater – and tugs the edge up to her elbow. She doesn't like catching octopus, the violence of it: turning a living creature inside out and pummelling it to death against the boulders. *Meat is meat, and a man must eat.* Her mother's words. She shakes her head, trying to rid herself of it. She doesn't want her mother's voice tainting her new life.

In her crochet bikini and elbow-length white wedding glove, Elsa picks up a bucket. She leaves the front door open – the house needs the sea breeze to percolate through – and quickly descends the 112 stairs. She crosses the narrow track of tar – already burning hot – onto the beach. She will never tire of the pleasure it gives her to sink her toes into the long, footprint-less beach. The scent of the sea is clean. It is more than good, this life. She pauses, tugs again at the wedding glove. Picks up the bucket and heads towards the pool where she saw the octopus this morning. *Meat is meat, and a man must eat.*

Gabriel

The room is dark but two flickering candles on the polished surface of the Imbuia sideboard, the late-evening sun pressing against the drawn curtains, underscoring the lace edges in a filigree shadow. There is enough light to make out the silhouettes of the nine men – a trinity of trinities, the perfect plural, Gabriel thinks idly, scratching the bite on his arm.

Hofmeyer, the host of tonight's induction, is bent over the dining room table, stroking out the creases of the flag he has unfurled with a flamboyant flick of his hefty arms. His movements are surprisingly deft for such a fat man. The flag is not entirely flat. He strokes the centre crease with a fleshy palm, like a corpulent newlywed wife nervously preparing the dining table for a visiting mother-in-law.

Gabriel glances at De Wet, standing beside him. In silhouette his lips protrude in a way that is almost amphibian. He really is an old toad. Alice, who could be such a snob, had done well last night. She had shown no hint of how excruciating she had found the evening until the drive back, when she had whined so much that they had finally argued and gone to bed in mute animosity. He will have to make it up to her.

Though finding the time to do so is proving tricky: after tonight's meetings – highly secretive, as they all are – there was a big shipment due to be dispatched tomorrow morning, and then Derk had called to ask if they could meet for a drink tomorrow night after the presentation, so he had made arrangements to spend Friday night in the Clifton flat. Placating Alice would have to wait till after Saturday night's dinner, which he is half dreading.

Hofmeyer is now wresting open the bottom drawer of the matching Imbuia brute, set on sturdy claw feet. Such a far cry from the slim-lined pale Scandinavian designs Alice favours. It strikes Gabriel again just how out of place he is here, surrounded by paunchy men in broad-lapel suits. He knew they thought him effeminate, with his tailored shirts and manicured nails, trailing an expensive smell of spice and citrus in his wake. *Lig-in-die-broek*, they called him, and not only behind his back. *Marilyn* was the other moniker – slept his way up, was the explanation, given with a wink. He didn't care about these jibes, or the men who found them amusing. Gabriel worked hard; he was good at his job. Yes, he had married the chairman's daughter, but that was almost a decade ago. He'd carried his weight since then.

When De Wet had called him in to say that he was prepared to stick his neck out and nominate Gabriel as a Broederbond member, Gabriel had expressed his gratitude, because it was politically expedient to do so. De Wet had then explained that leaving his Anglican congregation and joining the NG Kerk was a prerequisite. Gabriel had been rather fond of his Anglican minister, a gentle man with an enquiring mind, but he had no choice but to accede. The brotherhood had inveigled its way into the wine co-operative, as it had every governmental department and the civil service. Gabriel knew that it was highly irregular to nominate a man who had married an English-speaking woman but against this failure of judgement De Wet had racked up Gabriel's family history: three aunts, two infant uncles and a great-grandmother had all perished in the Bloemfontein concentration camp, while his grandfather had been a loyal Boer koemando. His nomination had duly been accepted, and Gabriel had taken the vows.

At first he had enjoyed the clandestine nature of the Broeders – the furtive arrangements, prearranged pick-ups, unknown destinations, orchestrated rituals. He had borne the dross propaganda, the mindless indoctrination – including the weekly

thunderous voice of the NG dominee threatening a conflagration in hell – because membership meant that his position, his trajectory, was safe. Now he is no longer so sure.

Hofmeyer is removing a long, thin strip of black fabric – the blindfold – from the drawer. He hangs this over his shoulder, then removes a small black cloth. Carefully he places this rectangular patch of fabric on the centre of the flag, neatly covering the Union Jack. Satisfied, Hofmeyer steps back. Holding out both hands to either side, palms up, he intones, ‘Kom, laat ons bid.’

The prayer starts with a request for guidance and blessings in all Afrikaner endeavours to the everlasting glory of God. Gabriel, hand in De Wet’s meaty paw, wonders what exactly he can expect by way of guidance and blessings. Perhaps he has used his quota up. He’d had an abundance of both when Alice’s father was still at the helm of the co-operative. The changing of the guard had been difficult, but Gabriel had remained sanguine. His job was to sell South African wine to the international market, and he loved both. This was why he hadn’t blinked when Alice had wanted to add another wing to the house, refitted the kitchen, the bathrooms, the bedrooms. He had stepped up to the plate as his father-in-law’s proxy: looking after his high-maintenance filly and her needs was as much his job as marketing the undervalued South African wines of the Cape. But Alice’s dad was unexpectedly felled by a blood clot, and with the arrival of De Wet and his cabal, the KWV had changed. Two months ago De Wet had called him in, jowls hanging on either side of a sorrowful expression. The directive ‘from the top’ was that he needed to start sharing his expertise with someone solid and trustworthy, a man committed to the Afrikaner cause. Roux, whom they were inducting today, would be shadowing Gabriel for the next year – after that they would share the marketing portfolio between them. The long-term plan of the Broeders was not difficult to deduce.

Hofmeyer leaves his dining room door ajar. From this angle, Gabriel can obliquely see Roux waiting, hat in hand, contemplating the carpet. He nods at Hofmeyer, then stands and faces the wall. Hofmeyer lifts the black strip of fabric and ties it around Roux’s head, bandaging his eyes. He will have to swear an oath of secrecy before the blindfold can be removed, and he sees the faces of the men waiting in the room.

‘Styf genoeg?’ Hofmeyer ask as he tugs at the knot.

Stokstyf, Gabriel can't help thinking, because he's sure Roux is thrilled, and not just emotionally. He'd like to say it aloud, because there are a few here who would enjoy the joke. But laughter during an induction would certainly be reported, and the joker expelled.

Having guided Roux into the room, hand on the small of his back, Hofmeyer closes the door, then starts up a sonorous soliloquy:

'Roux Totius Strydom, after careful consideration, we, the members, have invited you to become a member of the Afrikaner Broederbond. You have been called here to learn our ideals and principles. Should you accept what will be expected of you, you will make a solemn and binding promise of trust. Roux Totius Strydom, do you solemnly declare, in all seriousness and sincerity, before these gathered witnesses, that you will reveal nothing of what you are told, or what you learn here?'

'Yes.' The word, strong, clear, spoken like a groom.

Gabriel stifles a yawn – it isn't even seven yet. He has to keep focused. After the induction, they are due to attend a regional meeting where there will be an opportunity to pump the hand of Dr Wessels, favoured candidate for next chairman.

Hofmeyer continues in a sing-song lullaby: 'The Afrikaner Broederbond is born from a deep conviction that the Afrikaner nation, with its own characteristics and destiny, was placed in this country by God, and that this nation has been called to remain in existence so long as it pleases God.'

'Amen,' the nine men all murmur.

'On this basis we are wholly devoted to the service of the Afrikaner nation, and to work selflessly for the establishment of a healthy common purpose among all Afrikaners who strive for the welfare and advancement of the Afrikaner nation.'

Hofmeyer pauses, drops a register.

'Membership of the Broederbond entails great responsibility. It is therefore necessary that you carefully consider what is expected of you.'

A click as the torch is switched on. The others watch as Hofmeyer lifts the torch, the triangle of light pointing upwards to reveal a ghoulish face: above all three of his

chins, the fleshy mouth is moving: 'It will be expected of you to live and work in the firm belief that God Almighty determines the destiny of nations, and you will cling to the Christian national viewpoint of the Afrikaner as prescribed by the word of God.'

A silent pause, stillborn. Someone touches Roux on the arm. Roux stiffens, then utters a quick breathy, 'Yes'.

Hofmeyer now passes the torch to Pienaar, momentarily lighting up the porcelain figure of a girl with a staff on the sideboard, a lamb forever pressed against her voluminous skirt. Pienaar intones in his deep, sonorous voice: 'It will be expected of you that you will at all times in your behaviour uphold the honour, value and good name of the Broederbond'.

'Yes,' Roux says into the pause – he is getting into the rhythm now – as the torch is again passed.

'It will be expected that you will strive for the achievement of our ideals, not only through cooperation but also through individual action in your own work circle, family life and sphere of influence, inspired and strengthened by your fellow Broeders, and guided by the Bond's principles and ideals.'

'Yes.'

Some deliver their lines with the pompous high drama of the pulpit, others with flat monotony; into each Roux – patiently waiting for the pause – inserts a clear 'Yes'.

The torch is passed to Gabriel who has been chosen, for this induction, to utter the final words of the induction: 'He who betrays the Bond will be destroyed by the Bond. Its vengeance will be swift and sure.' Gabriel switches the torch off and for a few seconds the room is plunged in total darkness.

Gabriel had once been told by an elderly brother at his first regional meeting that in the first induction rites the Brothers stabbed a human-like figure wrapped in a white sheet, the word *Verraad* embroidered in red thread across its chest. That would certainly liven things up a bit. Gabriel had discarded it as apocryphal – women were explicitly barred from any knowledge of the Broeders, and he knew of no Afrikaans man who would be caught dead with a needle and thread, but the image of men

stabbing a life-size doll had stayed with him. There could be no betrayal of the Brothers. Not even after expulsion.

Hofmeyer now flicks the brass switch, flooding the room with light while Roux pulls his blindfold down. Gabriel forces a smile on his face as he approaches Roux, the black strip of fabric coiled around his neck like a noose, hand outstretched. He will outfox this bumpkin. He will not allow the Broeders to push him out. Even if he has to keep waking up every morning so nauseous that he has to tiptoe to the guest toilet to empty the contents of his stomach, he will make it work.

FRIDAY, 18 MARCH

“Sowat een miljoen gellings brandewyn – 30 persent van die brandewyn wat in die Unie gemaak word – vloeï elke jaar in die onwettige drankhandel, het Mnr Patrick Lewis, Voorsitter van die Komitee vir Nie-Blanke Sake van die Johannesburgse Stadsraad gister gese. ‘Die rassebetrekkings in die Unie sal nooit regkom tensy betrekkings tussen die polisie en naturelle reggestel word nie,’ het hy bygevoeg.”

—*Die Burger*, 18 Maart 1960

“Around one million gallons of brandy – 30 percent of the brandy that is made in the Union – flows out every year into the illegal liquor industry, said Mr Patrick Lewis, Chairman of the Committee for Non-White Affairs of the Johannesburg City Council yesterday. ‘The race relations in the Union will never come right until matters between the police and natives are improved,’ he added.”

Marion

They are late. Worse, they are at the wrong door. Elsa knows perfectly well Marion will have wanted Derk to enter through the *front* door, that she would have spent the better part of the morning on her knees, polishing that red stoep of hers to a mirror-like gloss. But no, instead, here they are, two shadows moving across the net curtain that cuts the morning sun from her kitchen, picking their way across the cracked concrete ribbon of the back yard where the leaves from the avocado tree have not yet been swept up, past the peeling bench that Peet keeps promising to paint, and she is hardly out of her apron when the mesh door swings open, and Derk is dwarfing her kitchen.

She smells it as Derk throws his arms around her, knocking her spectacles clean off her face. They have been drinking, and Marion does not approve of this. Not in the morning, not when you are late, and not when you are visiting your mother. But she knows better than to remonstrate. Derk is his own man, and Elsa will do whatever she wants, as she has the minute she moved out the house. Probably before, but Marion doesn't want to know about that. *Wat die oog nie sien nie, treur die hart nie oor nie.* Elsa is married now, and what she does or doesn't do is her husband's responsibility, and good luck to him. Not that Derk was what anyone would call responsible. Once bitten twice shy, she'd have said if Elsa had bothered to ask her advice before hitching herself to a man who had failed at marriage. But of course Elsa had not asked Marion's advice. She had just called them up one night from Durban to announce that she had accepted the marriage proposal of a man Marion and Peet had not even met. Marion had expressed her displeasure – what kind of son-in-law did not first ask a father's consent – but she had also been relieved. With Elsa no longer living in sin there was less chance of her coming home with an embarrassment.

She had liked that Derk was able to pay for them to fly to Durban. He'd put them up in a nice hotel on the beachfront. She liked that Derk could afford all that. And she had liked the smart Italian restaurant where the waiters had fawned on them like they were royalty, though why anyone would allow people to write all over their walls she would never understand. Mostly she had been surprised by how much she liked her new son-in-law. Derk was what her favourite novelist called a rake, the kind who swept you off your feet and onto his horse, thundering you across the countryside and

into the castle courtyard where he would slide you from his foaming steed, impaling you with blazing eyes. Anyone with eyes could see that he was a handful, but he had made an honest woman of Elsa. And he had looked at Marion in a way that had made her feel younger than she had in years.

A few months after the wedding Derk had called Marion to say he was in Cape Town for an unexpected morning meeting, and could he take them out for a late lunch. Thrilled, Marion had said that Peet was busy, which wasn't strictly true, but she had said it and once it was out she couldn't very well take it back. So Derk had picked her up and taken her to a corner table in La Nostra, the best Italian restaurant in Paarl, where she had ordered, on Derk's recommendation, the 'vitello tonnato'. She didn't normally drink, and certainly not during the day, but Derk hadn't asked, just filled her glass.

Derk had told Marion that he could see Elsa in the shape of her eyes. She had Peet's colouring of course, but where would Elsa be without the architecture of Marion's bones? Marion had glowed with pleasure. It wasn't the compliments – she wasn't born yesterday; she knew her bones were well hidden beneath layers of fat – but the fact that Derk even bothered to lie. He wanted to make her feel good, and that he most certainly did. Emboldened, she had allowed him to fill her glass again, and after that, she had told him about Peet, a good man but not one she would have chosen, that in the end it had all boiled down to biology, and all for nought, because they lost the baby anyway. He had placed one hand over hers, offered her a napkin. He had been very kind, and she had sensed that this was rare, and all the more touching for it. By some unspoken pact neither had ever mentioned their lunch to either Peet or Elsa. But Marion knew they had a special connection, and that was enough for her. Elsa's choice was unorthodox, but it had Marion's approval.

Which is why, despite their arrival through the wrong door, having Derk here in her kitchen is thrilling. For a second she is transfixed as he swoops her horn-rims up from the kitchen floor – spotless enough to eat off, as she had once made Elsa do when she had allowed her lunch to slide off the plate; one had to teach children that money didn't grow on trees. He picks the glasses up and slides them gently back onto her face before she can even say 'oops', and there she stands, one hand on her chest, blinking at him, hoping he cannot see the thudding muscle within.

‘Hallo Ma.’ Elsa, expectant in the doorway, a blanketed bundle in her arms.

‘*Maggies*, Elsa, wat staan jy so?’ Marion sounds affronted, as if Elsa has been caught peeping through a key hole.

‘Kom tog binne.’ She waves her daughter closer. She pouts her lips – an overture, she never touches lips, it’s not hygienic – and twists her neck so that her papery rouged cheek touches Elsa’s, then pinches the blanket edge and carefully pulls it back to study her grandson. ‘So this is Paul,’ she says, with a flatness that is not intentional.

‘Jitte, isn’t he the spitting image of Derk,’ she says next, trying to inject some enthusiasm now, because isn’t that what you’re supposed to say, even though she cannot see a single resemblance in the wisened creature that blinks up at her, its fists balled as if in protest at being here, in her kitchen. ‘Knap gedaan Elsa,’ and she carefully pulls the blanket edge up to cover his face, as if that will shield her tiny grandson from the cruelties of this world.

Stepping back she looks at Elsa critically. Elsa returns her gaze. With that defiant glint she knows so well she lifts her chin and asks, ‘Aren’t you going to ask to hold him ma?’ And so she is forced to take the little thing into her arms and is awkwardly bobbing him up and down, praying he won’t leak onto her dress – her favourite, with the mint-green sprigs, chosen, if the truth be told, for Derk. It is only a few moments, possibly only one, before the baby, sensing her discomfort, starts to cry – a soft subterranean sound that stops the minute she hands the little bundle back to Elsa. And then – the strangest thing – as she watches Elsa, who is looking into the eyes of her son, singing the same lullaby she once sung, she sees the young mother she once was, rooted to the exact same spot where Elsa is now swaying, looking into the blinking eyes of the little girl who had once believed she was the world. For a second she feels unsteady, but the moment passes quickly. *Smile and the world smiles with you*, she always says, especially to Peet who so seldom does these days. Elsa will have her come-uppance now she’s a mother, mark my words, she’d said to Peet, but now she just puts on her bright face and asks, ‘Anyone for tea?’

Derk laughs. ‘We’re not drinking tea. Not today. We’re celebrating, ma.’ He winks at Marion and runs his hand over Elsa’s bum – *how brazen*, she thinks, and she’s not sure if she likes him calling her ma, but then Derk’s arms enfold her in a hug, and in

her confusion – she hasn't felt a strong man's arms around her for so long – she can hardly take in what he is saying; something about his poetry. He has her at arms length now and is looking at her with an intensity that makes it hard to hold his gaze, and he's saying, 'This is just the start Marion. And who do I really have to thank?' He raises her hand and kisses the oblong tiger's eye ring she wears on the middle finger, like she is a princess, or a pope, and says, 'Bless you for producing Elsa, Marion, bless you!'

Derk now picks up the bag from the floor and places it on the formica counter. Pulling two flagons from the bag he demands a jug and glasses. She is obedient, of course she is. Derk screws open both bottles – a Roma Red and Roma White – then decants a half of each into the jug, then holds the jug under the tap and adds water. 'We're making our own blend these days Marion,' he says. 'Much better than any of the rubbish that brother of mine flogs abroad.' He quickly closes the tap. Elsa has the tumblers out; Marion would have preferred the wine glasses but Elsa has not offered these, so perhaps this is the modern way and she, Marion, is not going to be accused of being gauche, so here she is – not yet lunch time – sitting at the table with her daughter and son-in-law, drinking wine from a water glass. She asks once more time if they can't move to the lounge, which she has spent the last two days preparing – every picture and object wiped down and polished, the sofa vigorously beaten and smoothed, the carpet brushed so the pile is at the same angle, the glass panes in the cabinet and dark wooden tables all gleaming. But Derk says, no, no, he wants to stay in the kitchen 'the heart of the house, not in that lifeless mausoleum cluttered with ornaments', which she is not sure is a nice thing to say. So the kitchen is then where Peet finds them when he comes home 40 minutes after noon – you can set a clock by that man's movements, work and bowel – looking embarrassingly like an old tortoise, his long wrinkled neck struggling to hold up his bald oval-shaped head. 'Oh jittie,' titters Marion. 'It must be twenty to one.'

Which is when Derk leaps up, wild-eyed, saying he must go, the presentation in town is at three, and he kisses Elsa on the mouth, a lingering and fulsome kiss that makes her jealous of her own daughter, and then – ignoring her cheek – he kisses Marion on the lips too, a shocking thrill before he wrenches open the kitchen door and disappears. It is quiet with just the three of them in the kitchen that feels much bigger with Derk gone.

She is flustered then, she's forgotten all about Peet's lunch, but Peet says he isn't hungry, he wants to meet his grandson, and he follows Elsa to the bedroom where she put a sleeping Paul down, her old bedroom, still made up with twin beds in each corner – she'd left it like that; if she moved the beds together you wouldn't be able to open the cupboard, and where would they put their things? Besides, it didn't feel right the two of them sleeping together under her roof in the room next door, the walls so thin she was worried about the flatulence that had beset her in recent years. Peet's snoring would keep them all awake – even when he slept in Elsa's room, which he now did, he could rouse her with his nocturnal droning, as if to make up for his silence during the day. She is momentarily overwhelmed with longing. A bigger home, a bigger life. Deflated by Derk's absence, she dries the glasses to the ticking of the kitchen clock and packs them away, the familiar band of steel settling across her forehead.

She stops briefly at the doorway to look at Peet making fussing noises over the baby, as if he too is one. They have always been close, Peet and Elsa; she the odd one out. She closes the door, draws the curtain and removes her shoes before lying on her back on her bed, which is the one furthest from the window and closest to the wall, behind which she can hear the low murmur of their voices. Elsa preferred Peet, and Marion didn't blame her. He was soft on her, and she had him wrapped around her finger. But he hadn't carried her for nine months, didn't feel the energy leach from his very bones, never dealt with fecal nappies that had to be emptied and washed with bare hands, only to be soiled again. Marion takes a deep breath. She wants to think good thoughts, positive thoughts, so she thinks about dinner tomorrow night, about men in waistcoats bending over to spread a napkin on her lap, asking if they could get her another glass of water, more bread sticks, the menu. She is looking forward to meeting Derk's brother Gabriel and his glamorous wife, Alice. Marion hopes the restaurant will be full on Saturday – she wants all eyes on her as she takes her seat at a table with Alice and Gabriel. Thinking of this, she experiences a stab of anxiety.

She gets up and walks over to the cupboard to check on the salmon pink dress with matching bolero. She catches her reflection in the cupboard mirror. It is not easy to reconcile herself with the bulbous shape reflected there, the tyres of flesh collected above and below the girdle and bra. What had happened to the waist that Peet had once been able to encircle with both hands? One didn't like to brag, but she had once

had her pick of suitors – one for every day of the week. And she had enjoyed their attention. A lot. Marion didn't often think about the woman she was before the trouble with Peet, but Derk was the kind of man to make one remember.

Marion pulls a pair of gloves from a drawer, places it against the dress to check the colours, just as she did yesterday. Near enough.

She spent some of her grocery money on a necklace that will follow the neckline, and has hung it on the same hanger. Grace Kelly wore something similar after she stopped being a movie star and settled into her new role as Princess of Monaco. It is never too late for life to get better. After all, after tomorrow she will be on first name terms with Alice and Gabriel; not only would she be friends with the cream of Paarl society, but she was family now.

Derk

'Really? You kept spiders as pets?' Jaco Botha, marketing director for Boland Bank, looks unconvinced.

Derk shrugs. 'Weeks in the bundu; not a soul to talk to. Plenty out there indulged in stranger things. At least the spiders were useful. I caught them and kept them in my room, some in separate jars, where I could study them and get to know their characters.' Derk grins. 'There was one in particular – big hairy thing. Reminded me of my first wife. Slightly more affectionate though.' He cackles as he picks up his bottle of beer. Jaco and Ray laugh, and then Ray says, 'What about that marvelous poem you wrote then, the one about the wasp?' Derk waves a hand dismissively but Ray insists on reciting it, and Derk listens, secretly pleased

I saw a fat and furry, ugly wasp

Blindly butt its head against a pane

Not knowing what it was that stood between

Itself and where it felt a need to be.

I felt compassion for the wasp, and thought

*To interfere. But such repugnance did
I feel, so did I shrink from contact with
The thing, that I just watched its hopeless plight.
And now I wonder, God, if I too am
Trapped behind a sheet of glass – a sheet
That sense will not discern – and if to you
I am, just too repulsive to the touch.’*

Jaco nods, then says, ‘You’re not that ugly, hey,’ and they all laugh.

They are sitting in a windowless wood-panelled bar in the city, framed jokes that aren’t funny hanging on the wall. It feels like an English pub; nothing like the Selection in Umdloti, which looked exactly what it was – a cheap bar in a two-star hotel. Derk likes it though, it feels cozy and intimate and the right place to be having a drink with the man who could swing him his biggest account yet. It bodes well that Jaco agreed to join them for a drink. Surely Jaco would not want to fraternise with the losing team. Not that he would dream of asking Jaco what their chances were. That was like asking a woman if she’d consider having sex with you – if you had to ask, you’d lost the game. Besides, he’d only tell them what they already knew: that the decision would be made at the board meeting next week. But the response to their presentation had certainly been encouraging. And if they had Jaco on their side, the scales would be tipped in their favour.

Derk eyes Ray, who – having ascertained that Jaco has a dog, a bull mastiff – is now onto some bullshit about the scientific link between health, wealth and pets. With his degree in psychology, Ray was an unusual hire. Derk had no truck with arts graduates – pompous and pretentious little twerps – but Raymond had proved determined. When Derk had finally agreed to interview him for a junior position in the Durban office, he’d taken a surprising and instant liking to him. Talk had turned to poetry, and Ray had shown him a few that showed some potential. The ensuing discussion around their favourite poets – uncannily similar – had clinched the deal. He’d hired him on the spot, and it had proved prudent. It was mostly Ray’s concept they’d run with on

the Boland pitch. He'd done stellar work, so much so that Derk had persuaded their MD that Ray should assist with the presentation. 'Having both creatives there will strengthen our hand', he'd said, and he'd been right. Aside from that, Ray understood what the Buren publishing deal meant to him – tonight the plan was to celebrate.

Right now Ray is stroking the tops of his thighs, mirroring one of Derk's habits as he winds up his story with a dry laugh. Derk, momentarily irritated, hands him a one rand note. 'Ray, be a sport and get us another round,' he says, dismissively.

'No, no,' he says, waving a hand at Jaco who makes a pretense of digging for his wallet. 'On me, of course. No point in having an expense account if you're not going to run up some expenses. You hungry?'

'Maybe something small? To line the stomach? I can't stay too much longer.' Jaco looks at his watch. 'My wife will kill me. On Friday she's usually got a leg in the oven.'

'Ha ha,' Derk laughs. *Henpecked*. 'Better than a bun, what?' A misjudged joke but he smiles, keeps going. 'She's a lucky woman. Lot of men don't care for their wife's cooking. Mine can't cook to save her life. She makes up for it in other ways though.' He winks, and drains his beer, then changes tack – and this is partly what fascinates, the mercurial nature of Derk. He frowns now as he peels the corner of the label away. 'She changed my life,' he says, his expression earnest, tone sincere. 'Elsa. Just saying her name makes me smile.' He does smile then, and there is real warmth in the large brown eyes. 'Nothing like the love of a good woman, eh?'

Jaco nods, half raises his bottle. 'So what were you actually doing in Kenya?'

Derk leans back. 'Working on a coal-to-oil conversion scheme for East African Railways. I was a welder in my first life. Got a gig building fuel tanks all along the railway line from Mombassa to Uganda.' Derk grins. 'It wasn't planned. I had set sail from Durban harbour in a first class cabin on the good ship Amra with the sole and noble intention of becoming a beachcomber in the Seychelles. I had seen photographs of the islands, and they looked like paradise. So off I set, 21 year-foolish. On board I met and fell in love. Marie Antoinette de Saint Jorre was her name, a Seychellois who was returning home to the family hotel after being evacuated to South Africa during the war years. Her sniffy mother watched us like hawks – there was some talk of an

engagement with an engineer in South Africa but Marie Antoinette seemed to have a rather casual attitude to this so-called engagement, and by the time we embarked on the last three-day jaunt across the sea from Mombassa to Mahe, I was living out a romantic fantasy in which I would soon be running a hotel in paradise with Marie-Antoinette.’ Derk reaches over for his Ensign tobacco tin. ‘Of course, the Seychelles immigration officers had other ideas. No one told me I would need at least 50 pounds as proof that I had the means to support myself before they’d even let me disembark. All I owned was a volume of William Blake, a few clothes, and two pounds.’

‘So what happened next?’

‘I tried to make a break for it.’ Dick talks with his cigarette between his mouth. He pauses to light it, exhales a plume of smoke. ‘I was caught. Mortifying actually. I was placed under the control of the British India shipping company, and had to sail all the way to Goa, then on to Bombay where I was declared a prohibited immigrant, which was a bit rich given that I had absolutely no interest in immigrating to India. The officials there placed me under arrest for trying to enter India illegally, which again was just farcical. I spent 10 days alone on board that empty ship, pacing the deck, fretting about how I was going to be reunited with Marie Antoinette, watched by two Hindustani guards who couldn’t speak a word of English. I was being deported back to Durban, and that was that.’ Derk shrugs. ‘On the way back to Durban I jumped ship in Mombassa, the closest port to Mahe, with the intention of getting a job and returning to the Seychelles as soon as I had the 50 pounds.’

‘And? Did you see Marie Antoinette again?’

Derk shakes his head. ‘Lost interest once I was in East Africa. Other fish to fry. Ah, here we go.’ He nods at Ray who has appeared with a tray of shot glasses filled with amber liquid. ‘Good man! I’ve just been telling Jaco about how I ended up in East Africa.’

‘Don’t tell me, there was a woman involved, right?’ Ray says as he distributes the drinks.

Derk cackles again and slaps his leg. ‘Course there was. Cheers chaps,’ he raises his shot glass.

Jaco pauses for a second. 'Ag, what the hell,' he says, and lifts the shot glass.

'To Boland Bank,' Derk says, and the three of them clink glasses.

SATURDAY, 19 MARCH

“Frankryk word vandag aanvaar as die land met die hoogste persentasie alkoholiste, naamlik 10 persent, maar Suid Afrika staan nie baie ver agter nie met ses persent, het Dr MA Block, Voorsitter van die Raad vir Alkoholisme van die Amerikaanse Mediese Vereniging in ‘n onderhoud gesê.”

—*Die Burger*, 19 Maart 1960

“France is today accepted as the country with the highest percentage of alcoholics, namely 10 percent, but South Africa isn’t far behind with six percent,’ said Dr MA Block, Chairman of the Alcoholism Advisory of the US Medical Board in an interview yesterday.”

Gabriel

When the phone rings in the inky black of a moonless night Gabriel, alone in his borrowed Clifton flat, wakes up in the grip of a fear so intense he struggles to breathe. He looks at the clock – 3.49am – then staggers to his feet. Only a handful have this number – he runs through them: owner Reginald Cutt, currently domiciled in Chelsea; Sheila, the girl from catering; Stacey from exchange; Derk, who never showed up last night.

He pads down the passage to silence the insistent noise, dread trailing in his wake. Gabriel lifts the phone, hardly recognizes his own tentative, ‘Hello?’

The line crackles, then an impatient: ‘Is dit meneer Gabriel du Toit?’

Gabriel’s gut drops. ‘Ja, dis ek,’ he says. ‘Wie is dit wat praat?’

‘Net ‘n oomblik.’

A fumble, a clunk, and then, the urgent, familiar voice: ‘Thank fucking god you’re there. It’s me, Derk.’

Gabriel closes his eyes as warm relief floods through his body, synapses making the connections, followed by a dawning anger. His wayward brother, for whom he’d waited up last night. In a scrape. Again. Gabriel sits down on the tiny velvet upholstered seat next to the hallway phone.

‘Jesus, Derk.’ He looks around, blinking in the darkness. ‘Do you have any idea what time it is? Where the hell are you?’

‘Of course I know what bloody time it is. I’m in Sea Point—’ he does not sound inebriated, but it’s always been difficult to tell with Derk — ‘at the fucking police station.’

‘Have you been in an accident? Are you ok?’

‘No, no, not an accident, Billa.’ Gabriel’s heart contracts momentarily. It has been years since Derk has used the childhood nickname. ‘I’ve been arrested.’

‘Arrested! What the hell for? What have you done?’

‘For god’s sake, have some faith. I haven’t done a fucking thing. We went into town to celebrate – ended up in that little bar in Shortmarket? Anyway, had a few toots with Botha the marketing guy at Boland – he wanted a drink, and then another, and we had to entertain him, keep up, you know how it goes. They stopped us on our way back to the Claridges hotel. It’s rubbish, a totally trumped up charge. But the bastards have got the bit between their teeth Billa, and they’re riding us. I wouldn’t give a flying fuck, but we’re seconds from getting this bloody account, and the chairman is definitely a Broederbastard – if they get wind of this, they’ll can us. All that work, down the bloody tube. You have to get me out of here, Billa, quietly, and quickly.’

Gabriel sighed. ‘Ok I’m coming. I’ll get there as soon as I can.’

Sliding the door to the balcony open Gabriel breathes through his mouth to fill his lungs, the salty tang of the sea and seaweed on his tongue. He loved it here at the at the foot of this undulating mountain range, the craggy peaks leaning into the setting sun, the crashing sea at his feet. Not for the first time Gabriel wondered what beast lay beneath the rippling water, spattering plumes of wetness on the granite boulders. Alice wouldn’t hear of moving to the coast. Said the constant pounding of the ocean made her anxious. So they continued to live in the hothouse that was Paarl. Gabriel inhales again, his chest expanding with oxygenated air.

It was becoming increasingly difficult to keep everyone happy. The carefully constructed world he inhabited in Paarl felt as fragile as the foam flecks that disappeared as the sea sucked its tendrils back on the rocks below.

‘Fuck,’ Gabriel says aloud, hands gripping the balcony. He is not a profane man. But this binding frustration is spawning an anger, a bitterness that is boiling up like hot milk on the rise. He’d been stood up, then struggled to fall asleep. And now here he is, after only two and a half hours sleep, summonsed to do Derk’s bidding. Derk, the great libertine, always free to do exactly what he wanted. Nothing, not even the inexorable withdrawal of his father’s love, had ever stopped Derk from pursuing his own pleasure. Gabriel feels his chest constrict at the image of Derk, sneering at Gabriel’s life, and the choices he has made, unable or unwilling to see that these were perhaps not choices, but sacrifices, some of which had been made on account of Derk. Because it was Derk’s selfishness, his monumental egotism that had coralled Gabriel

into being the one who always had to please. The more Derk had wounded their mother, had infuriated their father, the more Gabriel had been compelled to be the one who was kind and considerate, a kind of emotional bandage to mop up the tearful questions of where they went wrong with Derk. It was up to him, Gabriel, to make them proud. It was Alice who had once pointed this out to him: with another brother, he might have become another person. Derk had robbed him of his freedom, had taken it all, leaving Gabriel stuck in the straight jacket of conformity. ‘Fuck,’ he says again, the wind whipping it away, casting his anger into the indifferent sea.

He shrugs on his shirt, creased from yesterday’s wear. It doesn’t smell good but he needs to arrive wearing a pressed shirt when he gets home tomorrow – today – or Alice would be raising her perfectly plucked eyebrows. And he said he’d be there by 9 to take the boys on a walk. *Fuck*. He pulls on his trousers, picks up his keys. He is bone tired. Angry. In retrospect, he would have been better off staying in bed.

‘He’s beyond a liability, he’s dangerous,’ Alice had said, thin-lipped, the last time he’d been called in to help clean up after Derk. It was Derk’s colleague Ray who’d called to say they’d been up all night celebrating – Derk’s campaign strategy for the new Ford Zodiac – *What manner of man drives a Zodiac* – had been adopted by the New York agency as their new campaign line in the US. Gabriel, who had seen the ad in the *Paarl Post*, thought the Zodiac man sounded much more like the kind who drove a Healey 3000, the two-tone beast with twin exhausts that Derk had recently procured and had, Ray explained, just planted in the centre of a five-way circle. Still unused to the heavy clutch of his new Healey, Derk had wrestled it into gear, then – with a throaty growl – roared into the night. Swinging the Healey out to overtake Ray, he had hurtled straight into the raised kerb of the circle, rearing the Healey up into the air, and landed with a crunch in the tulip bed. Ray had pulled Derk from the totalled car and driven him to hospital where he had paced the Emergency Room while Derk was stitched up. Which is where it would all have ended, had Ray not struck up a conversation with a young gent in the waiting room, assuming – incorrectly – that he was a patient or a relative. The junior reporter covering the hospital beat rather liked the irony of a Ford celebration ending in a car wreck.

Derk, still woozy, had instructed Ray to call his brother. Gabriel was on first name terms with the owner of the media stable in which the reporter worked, and so the

story was reduced to a few sentences on page six of the Natal Mercury. Derk's collarbone had healed quickly, the small jagged scar etched on his temple the only reminder of his brush with death.

Gabriel can see it now, the pale ridge of scar tissue shining on the large forehead, framed by Derk's hands wrapped around the prison bars. It had taken him only 10 minutes to reach the Sea Point police station, threading his way along the empty cliffside road that wound its way like a sparkling choker along the base of the mountain slopes, and into the neon-washed streets of Sea Point. Negotiations with the police officers – starting with a friendly greeting in Afrikaans, enquiries into their well being, the kind of night they'd had, what exactly had transpired and so on – had taken considerably longer.

'Jesus, Gabriel,' Derk says as Gabriel approaches. 'What took you so long?' He tugs at the bars. 'Have you got them to unlock these fucking doors?'

Gabriel shakes his head. 'It's not looking good, Derk. They say they won't release you before you've appeared before a magistrate. You've pissed them off Derk, and now they're playing it by the book. Only a magistrate can rule on the bail application, and they won't let you go before that.'

'And how long will that take?'

'They say Monday.'

'You've got to be fucking kidding me. A whole weekend in this shithole?' Derk indicates the cell behind him where Ray is sitting on the edge of the narrow bed, head in hands, a bucket in front of him. They are lucky to be alone – it's a slow Friday night for Sea Point – but Derk, pacing up and down like an animal half-crazed by its containment, is clearly not in the mood for silver linings.

'Fuck's sake Gabriel. How is this possible? All we did was give a couple of girls a lift to the Claridges. We had no idea they were prostitutes.'

Gabriel doesn't ask why Derk gave them a lift. With regards their profession, he would certainly give Derk the benefit of the doubt. Married to Elsa, Derk is surely not in need of servicing. But soliciting hookers is the least of his problems.

‘Derk, if you’d given two white girls a lift to Claridges, it wouldn’t have mattered one iota. But you know the new laws.’ He moves closer, drops his voice. ‘These guys are card-carrying Nationalists, Derk, members of the NG Kerk. For them it’s not only against the law but an offence against God for a white man to even look at a black woman.’

‘Exactly,’ Derk’s raised voice echoed down the corridor, ‘God forbid white men should make any more coloureds!’

‘Jesus, Derk, are you mad? How much have you had to drink? You’ve got to calm down. Can you please try to sound even just a bit contrite?’ He lowers his voice. ‘You’ve got these cops pretty riled up. You called one of them a cocksucker.’ Gabriel does not bother with the word allegedly.

‘Faggots, the lot of them. Strutting around in their uniforms with those fucking hairy lips, speaking that fucking barbaric language. I don’t know what’s worse, looking at their porcine faces as they crucify the English language, or watching them stick their fat ugly snouts into the crotches of decent citizens minding their own business. They called us *meidenaaiers*, Gabriel!’ Derk raises his voice. ‘As if fucking a woman of colour is worse than pretending you don’t want a baton up the arse!’

‘You’ve got to keep it down Derk.’ Gabriel keeps his own voice low, though he can feel the check on his own temper, so near the surface, start to fray. ‘I can’t help you if you keep antagonizing them. Maybe you should have called Elsa. I’m sure a beautiful young Afrikaans wife with a baby on the hip pleading your case would swing it.’ He didn’t mean to sneer.

‘Are you crazy? Elsa’s at home with her parents. I’m not involving them. You have to get me out of here Gabriel. It’s not like I’ve done anything wrong!’ Derk wraps his hands around the bars, tries again unsuccessfully to shake them.

‘Derk, the law doesn’t care about what you think is right and wrong. You were found in the back seat with a black woman, her panties in your pocket. According to the police, you solicited a non-European woman for sex. That’s two criminal offences right there.’

Derk lets go of the bars and starts to pace again. ‘She was flirting with me man, so, ok, yes, kill me, I had her panties in my pocket, so fucking what. I didn’t sleep with her, so technically I wasn’t breaking the law. He grasps the bars again. ‘Come on Gabriel, just call up one of your Broederbastards and tell them your brother, your *real* brother, needs a fucking break.’

Gabriel colours. Admitting membership to a non-Broeder is an act of treason. The policemen, who are within earshot, could very well be in a Cape Town chapter. Any suspicion that a fellow brother was indiscreet would definitely be reported. He could feel the heat reach his temples, could feel it pressing against his eyeballs.

‘Listen to me Derk. I have enough on my plate without being dragged into another mess of your making. You swagger around like you’re something special but you’re just the same selfish snotty-nosed kid I was always getting out of scrapes. Well listen up, you’re a father now, with a wife. Time to get your shit together. Time to grow up, Derk, and stop using me to clean up after you.’

Derk looks momentarily shocked, then smiles, though there is no warmth in it. ‘Ah, so it’s calling a spade a spade, are we. When did you get so prissy, Gabriel? Oh yes, I know exactly when. You know what your problem is, Mr Godamn Perfect?’

Gabriel wants to walk away. A part of him already knows he’ll wish he had.

‘You’re jealous. You’re stuck in a life that’s a lie. You got yourself waist deep in the shit when you married that Alice. She’s just a better-looking more stuck up version of ma, always worrying about what the neighbours will say, worrying about appearances. Well, guess what, Gabriel.’ Derk puts his hands up like paws paddling the air. ‘Ma had you on her treadmill, and Alice has you on hers. You’re always running but getting nowhere, stuck under Alice’s little manicured thumb, keeping up with the fucking Jones’.’ He stops, grasps the bars again. ‘I haven’t even told you my news. I’m going to be a published poet Gabriel. A whole anthology. That’s what happens when you bag yourself a real woman like Elsa, someone who supports what you really care about.’ Derk is sneering again. ‘You missed a trick, big brother.’

The heat is gone, replaced by a rage that is like cold mercury sliding through his veins. He balls his fists, a part of him – the wrestler – wishing Derk wasn’t behind

bars. But there are other ways of getting his little brother into a headlock; of pummeling him with blows.

Alice & Marion

The evening is turning out to be far worse than Alice could possibly have imagined. Elsa's mother is a crashing bore. A square slab of flesh in a coral-coloured suit, pearls – fake, Alice can see that from across the table; nothing on that woman is real – emphasizing a chunky neck, atop of which is a round perspiring face from which two owl-sized eyes peer through spectacles at a distracted Gabriel, who is – as they all are – unable to ignore the silent hulk that is Derk.

Elsa's mother is prattling on – ‘...oh and didn't we both so enjoy the photograph of you both in the Paarl Post last month. You were at —’ she hesitates ‘—was it Lanzerac? I said to Peet – didn't I Peet?’ Marion raises her voice triumphantly. ‘I said, look Peet, our family, in the Paarl papers!’

Alice resists the urge to roll her eyes. She had never considered this – that Elsa's marriage would connect her to this woman, that she would consider herself *family*. She looks around the restaurant, forces a smile as she catches the eye of Yolande, her sometimes bridge partner, who is sitting at a table below the wagon wheel, then focuses again on the sweating pink lobster that is Marion.

She had so looked forward to seeing Elsa, and while Elsa had greeted her warmly, had hugged her, which Alice would not allow many to do, she was distracted – playing with her cutlery like the semi-gauche school girl she once was. Clearly Derk's malignant manners have undone all her hard work.

As for Derk: for all his faults, he can be quite the raconteur. Yet he has said not one word tonight. It's not just that he is silent; Derk's brooding presence is a conversational vacuum, a bottomless yawning hole into which every word uttered at the table drops without trace. Only Elsa's mother appears indifferent to the passive coiled aggression of the bearded figure on her right. ‘—Of course we are used to seeing *Elsa* in the papers, I mean, with her winning all those ballroom dancing competitions, and then came the beauty competitions of course, though she was

always a princess, never a queen.’ She glances at Elsa, ‘Not that I ever approved of Elsa parading in the papers in nothing but a bathing costume.’ Marion puts a hand on her ample shelf as she shakes her head, two spots of colour on her chubby cheeks. ‘I mean, our daughter posing half-naked for any man with money to buy the papers. If that wasn’t bad enough, it was always the *same* bathing suit. Heaven knows, I *told* Elsa. I said, Elsa, you are in the papers again wearing the same bathing suit. It doesn’t look good does it? As if she comes from a family that can’t afford more than one bathing suit!’ Marion pushes her glasses up her perspiring nose and purses her lips as she glances again at Elsa who is once again straightening her perfectly aligned cutlery, then smiles at Derk, glowering at his glass. ‘But thankfully that’s all in the past. Derk won’t hear of it, and quite right too. No man wants his wife half-clothed for other men.’

‘It wasn’t for other men, Ma,’ Elsa stops fiddling with her knife and picks up her glass.

‘And who do you think liked to look at you in your swimming costume, Elsa. Women?’ Marion snorted. ‘That’ll be the day. Anyway, that’s all behind us now,’ she looks again at her son-in-law but there is no sign that he has heard a word, and she too finally trails off and lifts her own glass, tilting it towards Alice. ‘Anyway, it was a very nice photograph of the both of you.’

‘Thank you.’ Alice inclines her head, her smile cool.

Alice knows she is being uncharitable, but conversation with this woman is such a cul-de-sac. How on earth did someone like *that* give birth to Elsa? Elsa, who is looking even more beautiful, with her hair cut shorter, and wearing trousers, making Alice feel quite provincial. Looking at Elsa silently fiddling with her cutlery, she feels affronted. The vivacious young friend with whom she had shared so much appears to be gone, vanished, along with Derk’s powers of speech. She glances again at Derk, pipe clenched between his teeth, glaring balefully at his drink. It *infuriated* her. What on earth had Elsa been thinking, marrying a man like Derk, when she could have had her pick of all the eligible men in Paarl.

‘Elsa tells me you have two lovely boys, Alice.’ Marion has started up again, a large ship with small sails. ‘How old are they now?’

Alice cocks her head, wills a smile to her face. 'They have just turned eight.'

'Lovely. And I believe you had your hands full from the start.' She looks at Alice with what she hopes is compassion.

Marion knows the gossip. So-called honeymoon babies. Marion's mother had always said a man wouldn't be buying a cow once he'd had the milk. She glanced at Peet. Hard to believe Peet had once been such a handsome fellow. He had wasted away, his body shrinking, a man cowed and old before his time. Not like these brothers, their virility like an invisible current that swirls around, lapping at one's legs. She colours at this train of thought. But it's true. Derk may be off colour tonight, but she has enjoyed meeting his brother Gabriel. Like Derk, he looks at a woman in a way that says he likes what he sees.

Alice however, is making Marion feel uncomfortable. It's nothing she can put her finger on but if she could only say the right thing, prove to her that she is worthy of her time. So she keeps talking, keeps filling the awkward silences with whatever words come into her head. 'You know, when Peet and I traveled to Europe,' she blurts out next. 'I fell in love with Paris.' And it's true. She has an Eiffel Tower in her glass cabinet, next to the shell figurine from Durban, just above her collection of six spoons that include Swakopmund and Lourenco Marques – coast to coast, my dear, as she told her neighbour who has never gone beyond the borders of the Western Cape. But Alice looks bored, so she abandons that course, returns to the subject of children. 'You know you look very well for a mother of twins. I never really regained my figure after Elsa,' Marion placed a hand on her stomach, 'Not that I'm complaining. Elsa was at least an easy baby after Peet Junior. Now *that* was a difficult one, God rest his soul; crying all the time, as if he had no wish to be on this earth, and God forgive me, in the beginning most nights I felt the same. Those days Peet was still farming with sheep near Caledon. Working day and night, the sheep starving like the rest of us, and the price of wool just dropping. When the bank took away the farm, we moved here, made a fresh start. But it almost killed us, the loss.' Marion smoothed the linen napkin on her lap. 'But you know what they say, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.' Marion puts on her cheerful face. 'You youngsters are lucky. Life is easier now. That Verwoerd, he knows what's what. He's a man to get things done.'

Alice pushes her coiffed hair up just below her ears, as if to make sure her helmet was still firmly in place before jousting.

‘I can’t say *I* like the Verwoerd fellow, or his dullard wife, Betty, banging on about how embroidery is the hallmark of a civilized nation.’ Alice shrugs, ‘*I* can’t embroider.’ She picked up her wine glass, her tone dismissive. ‘And I’d say I’m civilized.’ She turns now to address Elsa directly.

‘Elsa, you’re too quiet. Tell us more about Durban. Though I believe there may be plans afoot to move to Johannesburg?’

Elsa glances at Derk. ‘No, whatever gave you that idea? We’ve only just bought a house in Umdloti.’

Alice raises her eyebrows. ‘How exotic sounding! Oom-shlow-ti, is that right?’

Elsa nods. ‘It’s a little coastal village about 20 minutes north of Durban. Quite undeveloped. We’re very happy there.’

‘I see.’ It pleases Alice that she knows more about Derk’s plans than Elsa. No one understands the value of trading information better than Alice. It would be her pleasure to keep Elsa abreast. She didn’t approve of men keeping secrets from their wives. But now was not the time.

‘Your own home – how wonderful,’ she continues. ‘But you simply must come and see what we’ve been doing at ours before you go back to Durban. And see the boys of course. I didn’t even dare tell them we were seeing you tonight.’ Alice turns to Peet on her left, includes him with a light touch on his arm. ‘When your daughter used to babysit, our boys became meek as lambs. Honestly Elsa, they still ask after you, and it must be – what? – more than a year since they last saw you?’

Elsa gives a strained smile. ‘I miss them too. Wonderful boys.’

‘To you perhaps.’ When Alice shakes her head, her hair hardly moves. ‘Little monsters, the both of them. But you always brought out the best in them. I always knew you’d make the most wonderful mother.’ She pauses. ‘How old is Paul now?’

‘Four months next Tuesday.’

Alice places a hand on her chest. 'I still can't quite believe it. You'll bring him with, I hope.' She cocks her head to one side, 'And right now, he's with the housekeeper?'

Elsa glances at her mother, then back at her cutlery. 'To be honest, I'm feeling rather anxious about that. We've left him alone at home.' She smiles at Alice. 'We've never done that before.' She looks at Derk, and her tone is pleading now. 'I'm worried he'll wake up, that he'll be scared.' Derk does not respond, just stares at the tablecloth, so Elsa looks at Alice again. 'Derk says I need to create boundaries, to start severing the emotional umbilical cord.' Elsa puts a hand against her temple. 'I'm not sure I'm ready for that.' Elsa looks at Derk again, slides her hand closer but stops short of actually touching him. 'Derk, please, I *have* to check in on him. Just quickly. To make sure he's ok. Please? It's only just down the road.'

'For Christ's sake, what's the matter with you?' Alice is shocked. Derk's eyes are so black you cannot see the pupils.

Elsa stands up abruptly, cheeks flushed. 'Very well. I'll walk.'

'Don't be silly.' Alice picks up Gabriel's car keys and hands them to him. 'It's pouring out there. Gabriel will drive you.' She raises her eyebrows, urging Gabriel to act quickly before Derk objects. 'Gabriel?'

Elsa is looking at Derk, who says nothing, just glares at his glass.

Gabriel gets up; gives Alice a quick kiss on her cheek. 'Right, won't be long. Order me a cassata for dessert?'

Elsa

They are silent as Gabriel pulls out into the road, glistening like sealskin in the rain. Elsa is staring at the rain-spattered posters advertising what's on at the local bioscope – the first escape from the claustrophobia of Dorp street, before Derk became her one-way ticket.

Elsa takes a deep breath, an emphatic sigh. Resting her elbow against the door she props her cheek in her hand and turns to look at him.

‘So. You had to go and tell him.’

‘Tell who what?’ Gabriel grins, the deep smile crease in his cheek still visible as he turns left into Dorp.

‘Don’t play games with me Gabriel. You know who what.’

Gabriel shrugs. ‘I’m sorry. I thought it best that Derk know.’

‘Spit it out Gabriel.’

He is no longer smiling. ‘So? I told him about us.’

‘Us? There is no ‘us’ Gabriel! We were just an ‘it’, an ‘it’ that happened before Derk.’

‘Which is why I thought he should know.’

‘Gabriel, this is serious. You see how badly he’s taken it.’

Gabriel slows the Mercedes down, looking for the house.

‘Keep going. It’s the last on the right. You don’t remember?’

The house on the corner is dwarfed by a large avocado tree. Slasto paving steps lead to the ox-blood red stoep, glistening in the pouring rain. Elsa knows Marion will be on her knees again tomorrow, polishing it after the squall.

‘I didn’t want to have to hide anything from my little brother.’ Gabriel shrugs.

‘Besides, I didn’t tell him everything.’ He strokes her bare shoulder with the back of his index finger.

She turns to look at him, her blue almond-shaped eyes with the tiny black pupils cold as a snake, her full lips curled in contempt.

‘Derk always said you were a bullshit artist, and he’s one hundred percent right. No one knew but us, and no one was ever supposed to know. That was the deal, remember? It was always going to be our secret. Those were the terms *you* set. So what did you think you would gain by telling Derk? Some stupid one-upmanship? Is that it? You wanted to say, hey, don’t get too cocky, boetie; I was there first. You wanted to show him that the eldest always gets first helpings – is *that* it? Like I’m part of some twisted competition between the two of you? Well, this is not just about you

and Derk. What about me, what about what *I* want? Derk was my choice Gabriel, he is the man I married, and now – thanks to you – he won't even speak to me. You saw what he was like tonight. How am I going to recover from this?'

Gabriel sighs and looks away. Runs his hand over the top of his head, smoothing down what remains of his hair. 'Dammit Elsa. I have problems of my own, you know. And Derk...' He grips the top of the steering wheel with both hands, locks his elbows straight. 'Derk just gets away with everything. If he showed any sense of responsibility, any kind of appreciation ... but no, Derk is all about taking and taking and taking.' He hits the steering wheel with his palm. 'So selfish. So arrogant, looking down on me, and my life. Honestly, I'm just sick of it. It's time for Derk to grow up and face facts – life is not a bloody bed of roses.'

'You think you're any different?' Gabriel has never seen Elsa so angry, like a kitten with a neckruff, claws out and spitting. 'You call yourself a grown up? You're a pretender, Gabriel. You pretend to care, but deep down you're just as selfish. You're a taker too. Look what you've done to me. At least Derk is honest.'

'That's not really fair Elsa. Look, I'm sorry; Derk pushed me, and I lost my temper. I said things I shouldn't have. But I made it very clear that our... dalliance ended before you two met. Don't look at me like that. I told him, I did. I said there was nothing between us now, nothing to worry about.'

Gabriel paused, his tone wheedling now. 'I can see why you're angry. I'm sorry Elsa,' Gabriel put a hand onto her knee. 'Sorry about a lot of things.'

She pushed his hand away. 'Oh please. Don't start. We were always temporary. You told me so from the start, and I understood. I mean, what possible future could you have offered me? A flat in Cape Town? A screw every Wednesday night while Alice plays bridge? Nights waiting for the phone to maybe ring?'

'It could have been more. I know it started off like that but things changed for me Elsa. You never even asked me how I felt. You just upped and left. When I think about you, about us, about what we had... Don't you ever think about us?' He slid his hand back onto her thigh. 'I'm just a man, Elsa.'

Elsa pushes his hand off her thigh. 'A married man.'

Gabriel leans back against the window, studies her. ‘That didn’t stop you before. That day I first picked you up outside the school gate, you never complained then.’

Elsa bites her lip. ‘I was stupid. Gullible.’

‘Even when Alice took you under her wing, you never said’ – Gabriel mimics a high-pitched breathy voice – ‘*oh no, I can’t do this*’.

She whirls on him, fists balled. ‘It was a mistake Gabriel. One I am terribly ashamed of. I wish it had never happened.’ She puts a fist against her mouth. ‘But you had no right to tell Derk. No right. You have no idea what you’ve done.’

The windscreen wipers drag a squeak across the glass. The rain has stopped again. Elsa pushes open the heavy Mercedes door.

‘I am going to check on Paul. Then you’re going to take me back to the restaurant, and we will never talk of this again. Not about what was, or whatever fantasy you have of what could have been. As far as I’m concerned, it’s buried.’ Elsa slams the door.

She almost slips on the polished stoep but manages to right herself. Carefully she unlocks and opens the front door, steps into the darkness, silent bar the ticking of the cuckoo clock that enjoys pride of place on the left-hand wall of the corridor.

Elsa closes the door behind her, tiptoes to her bedroom, the second door on the right. The tiny shape of Paul, asleep under his blanket in the semi-dark room. Elsa feels a deep yearning then, a need to physically root him to her. Quickly she pulls the blouse off over her head. Gently picks him up and presses her breast into his mouth. He stirs, latches momentarily but falls asleep within seconds. Both nipples are now leaking milk so she places him on his side near the wall, covers him with the blanket. With a hand spread across both breasts she walks through the dark house to the bathroom; pulls a wad of tissues free from the crochet box on the cistern. Separating them she pushes a few against each breast. She checks her reflection in the mirror, then retreats back through the dark house to her bedroom where she puts the blouse back on. It’s a mistake not to wear a bra – there is a milk stain now, so she pulls it off hurriedly; replaces it and lets herself out of the ticking house.

‘Sorry you had to wait,’ she says as she crosses the dark street to where Gabriel is leaning against the car, the rain ceased. ‘He was hungry.’ ‘No problem,’ Gabriel says as he opens the door for her, the solid weight of it closing on her somehow reassuring.

Now that she knows that Paul is fine, Elsa feels ready. She will weather this. She has not done anything wrong. Tomorrow they will fly home. Derk will come round.

Alice & Marion

A frozen tableau: the petite blonde a few paces in front of the man who had opened the restaurant door for her; the waiters bearing trays; diners looking up from their tables; the shock on the face of the woman in salmon pink and the pretty one seated next to her; the tall bearded man on his feet, his voice, hurled across the restaurant, reaching them all like a slap.

‘You just *fucked* her, didn’t you!’

It is only a few seconds, and then the waiters continue on their trajectory, the diners lean in towards each other, murmuring; the man whose eyes they will later describe as blazing striding towards the pretty blonde standing rigid beside the man most know to be Gabriel du Toit, marketing director of KWV.

‘She’s all yours, boet.’ Derk tugs the door open, then he is gone, disappeared into the night.

Marion blinks. Her wrist into which she has dug her nails will show four purple bruises tomorrow, but there is no awakening from this nightmare in which her son-in-law has publicly accused her daughter of sleeping with his brother, the man who now has his hand in the small of Elsa’s back and is guiding her back to their table, past women obliquely staring, hands covering their mouths.

Elsa looks as shell shocked as Marion feels.

Alice clips open her handbag and removes her gloves.

‘Well, good riddance. I mean, really. The man is quite mad.’ Alice pulls her gloves on, wiggles her fingers. She likes a snug fit, to emphasise the slim length of her fingers, but tonight the gloves feel too small, as if her fingers are swollen.

‘Let’s settle the bill. Gabriel?’ It sounds snappy, and Alice does not want to sound snappy, does not want to add fuel to her brother-in-law’s fire, so she smiles for all the world to see at her husband, the man clutching the back of his chair, staring sightlessly at the bowl of melted ice cream. ‘Unless you still want your cassata?’ Gabriel shakes his head, as if trying to clear it. He raises an arm and a waiter appears almost immediately, as if eager to usher the troubled table out. Alice turns to Elsa and puts a placatory hand on her arm. ‘I am sorry my dear, but that man.’ She shakes her head. ‘I don’t know how you put up with him.’ She touches her helmet hair, pushing it up behind the ear, checking that everything is still in the correct place, then smiles at Marion, who has finally, thankfully, been silenced. ‘Shall we drive you all home?’

The drive, mercifully short, is silent. The three Jouberts are in the back, Peet wedged between Marion and Elsa, his long legs folded locust-like on either side of the central hump. Marion pins her eyes on the back of Alice’s perfectly coiffed hair. She cannot bear to even look at Elsa.

A quiet chorus of goodbyes, forced smiles, and then the lights of the Mercedes recede, leaving them in the dark.

Peet leads the way round the back, to the kitchen door, his shadow eaten by the looming avocado tree. He holds the door open for them, solicitous as always, then closes it gently. Marion tugs her gloves off, face set. ‘Well?’ She slaps the gloves against the chair, looks expectantly at Elsa.

Peet grasps Elsa’s arm, bony fingers wrapped around her elbow, watery eyes searching hers. ‘Are you ok my girly?’ he asks.

‘I’m fine pa.’ Elsa smiles. ‘Dis alles net ‘n misverstand. Everything will be all right in the morning.’ Ignoring Marion’s snort, Peet nods. ‘More is nog ‘n dag.’ He glances at Marion. ‘No good raking over old coals,’ he says, then kisses Elsa on the forehead. ‘Don’t stay up late. You’ll need your beauty sleep my girly.’

Marion wants to strangle him. Someone has to take a stand, or the wheels will come off. They'll be stuck, not only with Elsa, ruined and discarded, but a bloody baby. She blows air through her nose. But to take a stand you need a backbone.

She waits stiffly for him to kiss her dry powdered cheek, watches him tread through the door before addressing Elsa in a low, menacing voice.

'I m not going to ask what happened between you and Derk's brother, Elsa, because I really don't care.'

'Ma, nothing —'

She holds a plump hand up, the oval tiger's eye ring blinking in the kitchen light. 'It doesn't matter what you say Elsa. All that matters is what you do. Lord knows, I prayed for guidance every day while raising you. All I ever asked for was a daughter to be proud of. Is that too much to ask? And *this* is how you repay me? If Derk doesn't come back, you'll have only yourself to blame.'

'How can you take his side ma? Sometimes I think you'll pick any side, as long as it's not mine.'

Looking at her daughter's truculent expression – so far from the abject apology she feel she deserved, given the debacle – Marion feels the heat rise and blossom on her cheeks.

'Sometimes I wonder where you crawled out of, Elsa Joubert. But I can see where you are going, and it's not a pretty place. You better make good my girl. You do whatever it takes to fix things with your husband, because you are not coming back here, you understand?' She folds her arms. 'You always were a selfish child, with wayward ideas. But you're a married woman now, with a baby to think about. He's not even three months old. What were you thinking?'

'But I didn't do anything wrong, Ma.' It gives Marion no satisfaction to see Elsa's face crumpling, water spilling from her eyes. 'He's punishing me for something I didn't do. It's not fair.'

Marion feels a flicker of compassion but she knows better than to encourage this sort of weakness.

‘Don’t you come with *unfair*. You think I had a fair hand? You got lucky with Derk. A provider, a man of substance, a promising future. And now you want to throw it all away by talking about *fair*?’ She taps her finger on the table. ‘When he comes back tonight you are going to beg his forgiveness even if – for heaven’s sake stop that *sniffing*. Crying never solved anything.’ Marion narrows her eyes. ‘Even if there is *nothing* to be sorry about, you understand? This is the man you promised to honour and obey. If there’s one thing I have tried to show you by way of example Elsa.’ Marion gets up, her face in shadow from the overhead light. ‘It’s that a wife’s place is by her husband’s side, no matter whether it’s *fair* or not. Tomorrow you make things right, Elsa. The Lord says He helps those who help themselves. Well, you better help yourself Elsa, because you’ll get no help from us, and no help from Him.’ Marion switches the light off, leaving Elsa in the dark.

MONDAY, 21 MARCH

“Agtienjarige Matie Imelda Lock het Saterdag op Bellville se skietbaan die beste skut in Wes Kaapland uitgestof. Sy het die hoogste telling van die dag – 145 uit ‘n moontlike 155 – behaal. Imelda is na die wedstryd deur baie mans gelukgewens, al was dit dan ook net om ridderlik te erken dat sy beter was as hulle.”

—*Die Burger*, 21 Maart 1960

Elsa

Propped against the wall that had been her cage in what feels like another life, Elsa settles Paul into position, then straightens her legs, sliding them under the quilt folded at the foot of her single bed.

She considers the quilt, the faded rose pattern stitched by her father's mother, a woman she has only ever encountered in the hallway, her stern countenance framed in black. Her grandmother had stitched the quilt for her, or so her father said, and so in some way had stitched herself into Elsa's first memories.

When Elsa turned 16 Jimmy took her virginity on it, her blood pooling in the stitching. 'Happy birthday,' Jimmy had said, breathless on her pillow. Pushing him off she had pulled the quilt off the bed and taken it to the bathtub. She knew better than to leave the blood. The day after she started bleeding Marion had stalked into her room and thrown her panties at her feet. 'Don't you ever put something this *filthy* in my laundry basket,' she'd hissed. 'I don't want to see this, not ever – not a spot, not on these, not on your school dress, and most definitely not on my sheets. One spot, and you'll use the money you earn at the bioscope to buy a new set. You hear me?'

So Elsa had quickly scrubbed the quilt while Jimmy rinsed his limp member in the basin, bloody water swirling down the plugholes.

The first time had been unpleasant, but she'd been glad to be rid of it. Virginity was a burden she had no intention of saving for a husband. Not that Elsa played loose. She wasn't one of those desperate girls looking for love. Quite the opposite. What Elsa wanted was a life that was out of the ordinary. She was never going to become her mother, constantly cleaning everything, as if a good rubbing could turn coal into gold. She wanted a vocation, a degree. Marion had laughed at her tentative enquiry. 'See any money on that tree?' she'd said, pointing at the avocado that kept the backyard in shadow. 'You'll be getting a job the day you finish school; start paying your way around here. Help make ends meet.' But Elsa didn't want to make ends meet. She wanted a means to an end.

Jimmy was never going to be a long-term prospect but he owned a car, and with his brooding stance and thick black hair slicked back he was a dead ringer for Marlon Brando. Elsa was fond of him, but she wasn't under his spell. Not like Lourens, the

architect Jimmy worked for. Anyone could see that Lourens was in Jimmy's thrall, and Jimmy played the game both ways. When Lourens said he was taking Jimmy on a 'field trip', Elsa joked about their 'feel trip'. Jimmy was amused. He liked Elsa, sometimes more than he liked Lourens, but Elsa had nothing to offer but her looks. Lourens liked Elsa too, her looks providing the perfect cover, and the three of them often turned up at events together. It was Lourens who took them to meet Alice and Gabriel du Toit. She had been nervous, that first time, but Alice had put her at ease. She'd rearranged the table seating, placing Elsa across the table from her. Jimmy she had seated at the corner furthest away, the start of a slow separation, though Elsa had not realized this at the time.

Both the du Toits had been charming, and Elsa had grasped every opportunity they put her way. In retrospect she should probably never have accepted Gabriel's offers to lift her home from school, but he would suddenly appear, winding down the window with that raffish grin of his. And she had felt proud, getting into his cool silver Mercedes, while the other girls walked in the searing Paarl heat.

Like Alice, Gabriel put her at ease. He seemed genuinely interested in her opinions. She had been flattered. When he asked her when last she'd seen the sea she told him she had never been; her mother hated the beach – said the sand got in everywhere, like dirt. 'Nothing wrong with a bit of dirt,' he'd said with that mischievous glint, his smile wide and easy. 'How bout we take a drive to the sea?' he'd asked.

'What, right now?' she'd asked, excited as a child, which technically she supposed she was. He'd shrugged. 'If you're free, I'm free.' And with that they'd sailed down the N2 to the Clifton flat she later learnt he kept for just such occasions.

She had looked forward to their Wednesday afternoons. She enjoyed the sex, and the way Gabriel listened made her open up completely. Of course she felt guilty – despite the age difference Alice was fast becoming her best friend – but the du Toits both saw her as their little project, and each in their own way were molding her for their purpose. Besides, after the first time they were discreet; careful not to be seen together. If no one knew, what was the harm?

Claustrophobia tightens her chest. It's been two days since Derk stormed out of the restaurant. How much longer will Derk leave her like this, unwanted baggage in her mother's house.

Elsa looks at their son, his cherubic mouth slack around her drained aureole. Gently she places him at the foot of the bed, resting his head on the quilt.

She gets up to go to the bathroom, closes and locks the door. Sitting on the loo she contemplates the red rubber bag that still hangs on the back of the door. The Sunday evening dread that had lined her stomach along with the milk of magnesia her mother made her drink before herding her into the bathroom. There she had shed her clothes while her mother had filled the red bag with soapy warm water, had sat on her knees in the bath, naked and cold, head down, waiting for her mother to insert the black nozzle into her rectum. The embarrassment of the probing nozzle – her mother, close enough for her breathing to be audible – inserting it into her most private of privates, followed by the shamefully pleasant sensation of warm liquid filling her colon, an almost soporific pleasure before the cramps set in, when – ignoring her mother's admonishments to keep it in – she simply had to relieve herself, and would clamber out the bath and onto the toilet while her mother, disgust all over her face, would exit the bathroom. Even at the time Elsa had understood that her mother wanted to clean her, like she cleaned everything. Mothers meant well, and still they did bad things. She would not make the same mistakes with Paul. But she needs to get him away from here, she wants desperately to get home. *Please, please call.*

As if in answer, the phone rings. She listens. A low murmur, then the unmistakably heavy tread of Marion, the floorboard creaking outside the bathroom. 'Elsa?' Two knocks. 'You in there?'

Another knock. 'Elsa!' More strident now.

She opens the door. Marion averts her eyes, lips pursed. 'It's Derk,' Marion steps back. 'You know what to do.'

TUESDAY, 22 MARCH

“Tientalle naturelle is gister gedood in bloedige onluste in die lokasie Langa en Sharpeville. Op albei plekke het die onluste as betogings begin, en het naturelle op die polisie geskiet... In die buitelandse pers het SA seker die swartse dag van sy geskiedenis beleef.”

—*Die Burger*, 22 Maart 1960

“Dozens of natives were killed in a bloody unrest in the location of Langa and Sharpeville. At both locations the unrest started as protests, and the natives shot at police... In the foreign press South Africa surely experienced the darkest day of its history.”

Gabriel

No sooner has Gabriel swirled the rich red liquid around to take his first sip of the new pinotage when the cellar door opens and he is told that he is wanted on the phone.

‘Mr De Wet would like to see you at 10.’ The clipped voice of the silver-haired harridan who controls De Wet’s office. ‘In connection with?’ Gabriel asks.

‘Mr De Wet does not discuss agendas of meetings with me,’ she snaps. ‘Only that I inform those required to attend.’

He looks at his watch, regretfully at the glass. The timing is most disagreeable. He has been looking forward to the barrel tasting of this new experimental varietal that had garnered SWF last year’s wine of the year award. He wonders what De Wet wants. Too many wagging tongues in Paarl for one thing. Alice is right, this time Derk really has gone too far. He hopes they have left town. Derk is a liability he can’t afford right now.

Gabriel looks at his watch again; he’ll have to leave right now to get there in time.

He arrives promptly at 10 but De Wet’s silver-haired guard dog insists he take a seat, like a truant schoolboy outside the headmaster’s office. Finally the box on the corner of her desk buzzes. ‘You can go in now,’ she says, dropping her chin to glare at him over her bifocals, ‘he’s expecting you.’ As if he has been the one to keep De Wet waiting.

‘Ah, Gah-briel.’ De Wet half raises his imposing bulk behind the large teak desk and waves a pudgy hand at one of two small chairs opposite. ‘Kom sit. Goed om jou te sien.’ When De Wet sits, his seat cushion exhales a small sigh. His eyes, blinking through thick black-framed spectacles, are difficult to read. ‘En hoe wonderlik is hierdie weer?’

English pleasantries about the weather, spoken in Afrikaans, De Wet’s standard ambit. He is sure De Wet hasn’t called him in to discuss the weather, but two can play this game.

‘Indeed. The farmers are saying it is going to be an exceptional harvest. Feb conditions were perfect for ripening. I’ve asked Kanonkop and Bellevue to give us more of their pinotage. I was just about to taste the ’59 they sent over when your call came.’ He waits expectantly. ‘The quality of the harvest is one of the best we’ve had in years. Specially our Stellenbosch farmers. The cooler Feb was perfect for ripening. The Robertson report is the last in – looks like it’s one of the biggest harvests ever that side, so we’ll have a glut of Cinsaut and Chenin. I’ve asked Kanonkop and Bellevue to make sure they give us some barrels of the new Pinotage. SFW took it all last year but they won’t make the same mistake again.’

De Wet nods, pauses. ‘Gabriel, ek gaan nie doetjies omdraai nie.’ De Wet taps his temple as he switches to heavily accented English. ‘A little bird has been whispering in my ear. I believe you’ve been casting around, Gabriel, fishing for opportunities.’

Gabriel is speechless. Rademeyer had sworn his interview would be handled in complete confidentiality.

De Wet raised his eyebrows. ‘You look surprised. But not as surprised as we are, Gabriel. You have the most powerful position in the wine industry, the man who decides the fate of South African wine on the international market. Why would you consider moving to SFW, and become fenced into the local market?’

Gabriel leans back, pulls his jacket over his stomach. He is not going to deign to say it. SFW, where actual innovation was taking place, and free of Broeder influence. Or so he’d thought.

De Wet nods. ‘This is about Roux’s appointment, I understand. But Gabriel.’ His name is a purr in De Wet’s mouth. ‘You know the high esteem I personally hold you in. I had little choice with Roux. Is it really worth sacrificing everything you have achieved here just because you’re unhappy with some new blood?’

Gabriel snorted. ‘New blood? The transfusion only works if they match you with the right type.’

De Wet put his beefy forearms on the table.

‘You have two sons, Gabriel.’

De Wet's fingers are now splayed like fat sausages on the desk.

'We are pleased that you enrolled them into an Afrikaans primary school this year. Do you know that 165 years ago, there were only 15 000 Afrikaners here in the Cape? A hundred years later the English, who called us barbarians, slaughtered 26 000 woman and children. Cut down an infant nation just finding its feet.'

De Wet takes a deep breath and pushes his large bulk back into the seat.

'But they didn't reckon with the blessing of God. We are a productive folk, Gabriel. Between 1910 and 1954, Afrikaner women gave birth to 70% more children than the English. In the last decade, 33 000 Afrikaans children were born while English women gave birth to only 9 000.' He leans forward, taps a sausage on the desk.

'English-speaking whites will never outnumber the Afrikaners again.'

It's all Gabriel can do not to roll his eyes. 'Why does it matter? Isn't there enough for everyone.'

De Wet shakes his head. 'We are not children squabbling about dessert when there is a feast on the table. But what we cannot risk is contamination. We must retain the purity of our traditions, our nationhood, our language.' He pauses. 'The choice you made – to marry an English woman – for some this is a source of suspicion. But I have always believed in you, Gabriel.' Gabriel cannot see De Wet's eyes with the light reflecting off his glasses.

'Right now, we need a man who can be all things, Gabriel.' De Wet opens a drawer, takes out a copy of *The New Yorker* and places it in front of Gabriel. 'I think it's safe to say we have a tough year ahead.'

Gabriel smooths his hands over the headline above a grainy photograph of a faceless man with a gun at his side, bodies strewn like garbage.

'We live in a complicated world Gabriel. Uitlanders verstaan glad nie die uitdagings van Afrika nie. 'n Storm van veroordeeling het gister teen ons losgebars. With the weight of world opinion so heavy on us, Roux is not the man to chart the course ahead. We need you in these troubled times.'

Gabriel exhales a low whistle. 'What the hell happened?'

De Wet shakes his head. ‘It doesn’t take much to sweep up mass hysteria, and the police who are paid to protect us and uphold the law get the blame. The point is the entire wine industry, all the farmers, their families, the people who work for them, they need someone to speak for them. Someone who can keep the focus on the wine rather than the politics. I’ve discussed it with the board, and we’d like to offer you an executive position.’

Gabriel feels nauseous. De Wet is putting him back in the driver’s seat in order to defend the indefensible. But what choice does he have? The Broeders are everywhere, and they are watching. He has Alice and the boys to consider. ‘This executive position,’ he asks De Wet. ‘Assuming it is of interest, what kind of figure are we talking about?’

‘Let’s just say your interest will determine the remuneration,’ De Wet replies, pushing the newspaper to one side.

Alice

Catching sight of her scowl in the shop mirror, Alice fixes a smile on her face and quickly reties the chiffon bow around her neck. She really must banish Derk du Toit from her mind, as she has from her home and company. She had wanted to do so from the first time she met him, when he’d trumpeted hot air into her dining room chair in front of the French ambassador. Gabriel had always been too soft on him. Well, Gabriel has surely learnt his lesson now. Not that she was going to keep harping on about it. Not to Gabriel, nor to poor Elsa. But honestly, after all the warnings she had given them both it was hard not to crow **I told you so!**

Elsa’s call earlier this morning has thrown Alice into a flurry of preparation – she’d phoned in to order a coffee and walnut cake but the baker said he only made those to order, and it would never be ready by three. Much to her chagrin, she’d had to settle for a boring cream sponge. It had taken the better part of an hour deciding what to wear, but she had finally decided on the lilac dress with lace accents and softly shirred sleeves, 68% cotton, 32% Dacron polyester. Tres modern. No time to shop for a new dress, but at least the stockings would be brand new, which is why she is in Juta’s, waiting to pay.

Clearly Elsa needs her friendship now more than ever, and Alice was *not* going to say I told you so, not even once. Patting the chiffon bow she looks herself in the eye. A friend in need, how thrilling.

Elsa had made a mistake, tying the knot with that madman, but if there was one thing at which Alice was adept, it was unpicking knots. Only yesterday she had painstakingly untangled the chain necklace that Gabriel had given her to celebrate their first anniversary. Alice would unpick the mess Elsa had got herself into, and together they would put the entire sorry episode behind them. She has already left a message with Abraham Cohen's secretary.

As a divorcee Elsa's prospects were diminished, and the baby was an unwelcome complication, but it was 1960 for heavens sake. If the king of England could abdicate his throne for the love of a divorced woman, she was sure she would find someone willing to take Elsa on, and if he didn't want the baby surely Elsa could leave it with her parents.

Seeing Elsa on the arm of another man would drive a wedge into that Derk's heart, if he even had one. After all he had not only humiliated Elsa, he had slandered Gabriel, who had only ever done his best for Derk. Well, Derk didn't know who he was messing with. She would take Elsa under her wing and together they were going to teach him a lesson he will never forget. Alice looks at her watch. She wants to pick up some fresh flowers – lilies, Elsa's favourite, but she hardly has enough time.

'Excuse me.' Alice smiles at the stern-looking matriarch who is rearranging gloves behind the counter. 'I'm in a bit of a hurry. Would it be possible to pay for my stockings here?'

Thankfully the woman is obliging, because even though she rushes to pick up the flowers and the cake she hardly has time to get changed before the doorbell chimes.

'Elsa!' Delighted to see her she puts her arms around the girl, who feels thin and insubstantial. Alice steps back, composes a face she hopes conveys compassion. 'You poor thing,' she said. 'You must be feeling terrible. Come inside, come. It's so good to see you here, Elsa. Honestly, you have no idea how much I missed you.' She closes the door, notes Elsa's polka-dot court shoes.

‘Oh I love those; are they new?’ A question that is perhaps not entirely appropriate given the gravitas of the current situation but it’s out before she can stop herself, and surely a few social niceties will ease the tone. ‘Thank you Alice,’ Elsa gives a wan smile. ‘They’re not new but I don’t often get a chance to wear them in Durban. You, of course, look wonderful, as always.’

‘What, this old thing?’ Alice glances at the large mirror in the hallway. ‘Almost ready for the rag bin, but I am rather fond of the colour. Can I take anything? Come through, come through. Tea?’

Elsa nods. Alice has the tray set out and she pours Elsa a cup the way she likes it – weak, with no milk, no sugar.

‘Are the boys here?’ Elsa stretches out a hand to receive the china saucer.

‘Oh they’ll be home soon. They’ll be terrifically excited to see you. But I’m glad to have you to myself for a while.’ She pauses and smiles warmly at Elsa. ‘It’s been too long.’

Alice bends over and pours tea into her own cup, stirs the sugar in. ‘We’re both – Gabriel and I – rather worried about you. I mean, what happened on Friday night was beyond the pale Elsa. I want you to know that I – we – are one hundred per cent behind you. You know I never approved of Derk.’ She takes out the teaspoon and puts it down on the saucer. ‘But that is neither here nor there. The point is, even if mistakes are made, there is nothing in this life we can’t fix.’ She smiles brightly.

Elsa puts her teacup back on the saucer, slides her hair behind her ear. ‘Do you mind if I smoke?’

‘Of course! Be my guest.’ Alice pushes an ashtray closer. Shakes her head when Elsa offers her the pack. Smoking is a habit she has not mastered, and not for want of trying.

Elsa lights her cigarette, blows out a thin plume. ‘Alice, I want to say how sorry I am about Friday. It wasn’t right, what Derk did, ruining everyone’s evening like that.’

Alice raises her eyebrows. ‘*You* don’t have to apologise Elsa. The whole incident was as embarrassing to *us* as it was to you, but you are the one with the additional burden

of being married to that maniac. I assure you, no one will hold Derk's behaviour against you personally, not if you act decisively and firmly. You need to look after your own interests, my dear. Yours, and Paul's of course. What kind of role model is a man like that for a little boy?' She takes a sip, let's the words sink in. 'Of course there is some stigma to divorce, but nothing we can't overcome. Perhaps Paul could live with your parents while you settle down?' Alice puts her cup down. 'Now, I took the liberty of calling a good family solicitor, and I have made an appointment on your behalf. You are still young, and beautiful. We will find a new sponsor, no?' She smiles coquettishly. 'The main thing is, you are not alone. Gabriel and I are here to help.'

Elsa looks stricken.

'Don't look so worried my dear. Derk may be Gabriel's brother in blood, but as far as I'm concerned, the man is dead. You on the other hand, will always be family.' She takes another sip of tea, barks a humourless laugh. 'Don't you think there may perhaps have been some mix up at the hospital. I mean, the idea that Gabriel and Derk are brothers – well, it's just preposterous.'

'Alice, stop.' Elsa stubs her cigarette out, presses her palms together as if in prayer. 'There is no easy way to say this, so I'm just going to say it quickly. Gabriel and I did have an affair.'

Alice blinks twice. There is a noise in her head, a low hum. When she tilts her head to one side, as she does now, it is like water lapping the inside of a barrel. She hears a voice, hers, polite, saying 'I beg your pardon?'

'Oh Alice, I am so sorry.' Elsa has covered her face with her hands. 'It was so stupid, so selfish. It meant nothing, I swear. I feel terrible about it. It ended when I met Derk, but Gabriel told Derk about it, which is why he was in such a state on Saturday night. He wants his revenge, and this is it.'

She takes a deep breath, shudders as she exhales. 'Derk said I had to come and tell you myself that I have been having an affair with Gabriel, that it started when I was 16, that it went on for just over a year.' Her voice breaks. 'He said he won't take me back to Durban until I have told you everything. He says he'll leave us in Paarl, leave us with my mom. I can't bear it, Alice. I can't stay with my mom another day.' She is

sobbing now. 'I'm so sorry.' Alice notes that Elsa is ugly when she is crying. That Elsa is ugly, uglier than she ever imagined. She would like to upturn the coffee table and send the china tea set crashing to the floor, to hurl her tea cup at Elsa who has her head clasped in her hands, but she cannot move, she is frozen to the spot, one hand pressed against her chest, legs still crossed in her new stockings, purchased just for Elsa.

'Get out,' Alice is surprised how steady her voice is. 'You know the way. Get out of my house, and don't ever come back.'

1978

SATURDAY, 27 MARCH

“Looking back on 30 years of Nationalist rule Prime Minister Mr Vorster strongly defended the Government’s many security laws and said that the security situation would remain as long as communists were there to ‘dish out arms and have their grand strategy of world domination.’”

—*Rand Daily Mail*, 27 March 1978

“A resolution calling on Western states to stop multinational companies dealing with South Africa was approved this week at a UN conference meeting in Geneva.”

—*The Star*, 27 March 1978

Elsa

Elsa lies perfectly still, nose numb with cold, the thud of her heart preternaturally loud in the dark before dawn.

Today she will have to go and see Derk, the prospect like a thick Basotho blanket pressing her wide-eyed onto the bed.

‘Please, Elsa,’ he’d wheezed into the phone yesterday.

‘Derk, what more is there to say,’ she’d said, holding the curtain fabric swatch up to the light. ‘We’ve said all there is to say.’

‘Please, Elsa,’ he’d repeated. ‘I’m in hospital.’

She’d put the swatch down. ‘Are you kidding?’ A slow dread rising. *To have and to hold.*

Derk told her then that he’d been discovered half-conscious and delirious next to his car. Pneumonia. But the bronchitis was the real issue. The doctor had shown him the X-rays. ‘Nothing there but a smudge, like they’ve been vaporized, turned into smoke.’ Derk’s cackle turned into a cough, the receiver suddenly muffled by a hand. The doctor had managed to reduce the inflammation, he continued after a moment, but there had been some grim remonstrations about lifestyle choices. ‘Look, it’s really not that serious,’ he’d said, the reassurance bobbing on an undertow of desperation. ‘But I do need to see you. Please Elsa.’

She couldn’t very well refuse him, sick, alone, in hospital. And there was always the hope that he might actually have come to his senses, that he might be ready to sign the papers. Where are they again?

Elsa sighs. She may as well get up and look for them.

She dresses quickly, putting on an old jumper, then an overcoat. There is frost on the front lawn, glinting under the streetlight. She walks down the corridor, the loosened parquet tiles click-clacking with each tread, and into the gutted kitchen. The overhead light is a bright glare she squints at before retrieving the tin of coffee from the small walk-in pantry. Switching the kettle on she gazes through the window she has recently installed above the sink to provide a garden view, the scraggly outline of the lemon

tree now etched by the dawning light. She must get on with this – plant a lawn, some cheerful daisy bushes in the flowerbeds.

You're biting off more than you can chew, my girly.

She supposes she should be grateful.

Her father's words, ringing in her ears, had made her slam the phone down, not wanting to risk another rejection. Standing in that dank-smelling telephone booth, she had felt the words ignite a slow-burning anger, the heat of which had dried her tears, had almost warmed her as she lay down on the cold backseat of her Datsun, waiting for the sun to rise.

She'd made sure that Derk's car was gone before she returned to the flat. She'd run a bath – scalding water that made her fingers and feet ache – then dressed quickly. The sleeveless black minidress with the white stripe down the centre. No cleavage; plenty of leg. Derk always said she had persuasive legs.

She had found a parking space right outside the black-painted windows, the hand-painted red letters reading 'Easy terms. Instant access. No loan too big or small.' Part of a motley assortment of businesses operating in street-front cubicles underneath the Braamfontein office block where she worked, it had gone unnoticed, until the morning a low whistle emanated from the doorway. 'Hey baby,' the man had said, tugging at a jacket that would not button over his distended stomach. 'Any time you need a cash injection,' he'd winked as he pushed open the door. 'You just let Nicolai know.'

She had stepped off the pavement and crossed the street, a short detour to get to the entrance of her office block. She was used to men whistling at her; she knew what to do. You pretended not to hear; picked up the pace. It was a game in which they won by watching how quickly you walked away. But Elsa didn't mind conceding. She understood that the whistle was an acknowledgement of her desirability. Her currency. Losing value with each passing year.

A bird – in her lemon tree? – starts up a warble, the notes clear and strong. As if in answer another starts up. It strikes her again what a gift this is, this dawn greeting, rather than the vacuum-packed silence of the 52nd floor. Elsa pours hot water over the

granules. A good aroma, coffee. It had permeated Nicolai's office that morning, and he'd poured her a cup, black and sweet.

He'd asked her what he could do for her, with a smile that squeezed his eyes into slits, the fleshy cheeks bunched taut as he pushed the cup over the desk on which a framed portrait of a girl in pigtails watched him work, if that was what one called it.

You've bitten off more than you can chew my girly.

Her father's words, whipping her on. Well, there had been no biting, no chewing. She had watched the loan shark use a broken match to clean the dirt under one of his fingernails while they discussed terms. He'd leered at her when she said she had no assets, but dropped the smile when she said she would not be making monthly repayments. He'd flicked the match in the bin. 'This is not a charity shop, Miss.'

Elsa had crossed her legs. What she needed was a lump sum that she would repay in full, with interest, after one year. Her intention was to buy a property, and profit from the resale. She had pulled off her first her wedding then her engagement ring, placed them on the desk next to the plastic sign that read Nicolai Botoulus. 'A token. To show how serious my intentions are.'

Nicolai had wiggled his head as he slipped the rings into his top drawer. She had agreed on the interest without haggling. As for Nicolai's other terms, she felt no shame. Perhaps it was just that she and shame were such old bedfellows, but relief is the only emotion she recalls while she watched those chubby fingers count out her escape. Maybe she was born shameless; maybe Derk had made her so. It hardly mattered anymore. Point is, she can navigate her way through certain sewers without gagging, able to do things that sometimes just need to be done.

She didn't waste too much time thinking about what her life would have been had she taken Alice's advice all those years ago. That Elsa, the one whose hands had been trembling too much to hold Alice's china cup, had been afraid. That Elsa – that naïve and gullible girl, dying just a little bit as she walked out of Alice and Gabriel's home for the last time – well, she was now truly and totally dead. And good riddance.

‘Thank you Mr Botoulus,’ she said, picking up the two bricks of cash tied together with elastic bands. ‘Don’t be so formal,’ he’d said, looking vaguely hurt. ‘All my friends call me Nic.’

Elsa had used the bulk of it as a deposit on a dilapidated house she’d found in Triomf. A house that stank of lives broken by alcohol and unemployment, but over the vibracrete backyard wall was a world of green: sloping lawns and willow trees, their drooping branches trailing the grey-green waters of the Westdene dam. She would clear the backyard of its rotting debris, dig up the concrete splattered with excrement, install a garden gate and open the house to these views, she explained, arms spread wide, to Paul. They would start by camping out in the bedroom, and the house would take shape around them.

Paul declined. ‘Great choice, thanks Elsa,’ he’d said, his mouth curled in distaste as he looked at the rubble-strewn garden, eyes accusing her of some unspoken crime. ‘But I’ll stay where there’s at least running water.’ She hadn’t the words or the energy to make her case. It was true: Derk could offer Paul more material comfort. And, if she were brutally honest, it had been a bit of relief – rebuilding her life would be easier without the gravitational pull of her sulky teenage son. She had failed as a wife. But she would not fail at this. Once her nest was feathered, she would lure Paul back.

She’d enrolled in a bricklaying course – the only woman in the class of bulky men bent over their bricks in a large draughty warehouse, her leering instructor constantly circling back to hover over her. ‘Kom kyk gerus manne,’ he would invite the men who needed no invitation to stare at the slim blonde carefully shoveling a neat line of plaster onto the next row of bricks. ‘Kom kyk hoe mooi bou die dametjie ‘n muur.’ Rubbing moisturizer into her leathery hands at night she had known she wouldn’t be the one to build the extension, knock out windows or plaster the walls. But she would be better equipped to judge the workmanship of the men she hired to do so.

The house sold the day after she put it on the market. Too quickly – she would not rely on an agent’s advice again – but she was able to shed Botoulus and put down a deposit on her next find: a 1920s single-storey family home with good bones in the up-and-coming suburb of Melville.

Elsa looks around the lounge, the picture rail she has picked out in white against pale yellow walls. She likes living here, in this solidly-built house, it's teak bay window like bulging eyes on either side of the deep shaded porch. There is something else too, an intangible sense that the walls have absorbed and radiate the happy memories of the family who called it home for half a century. Elsa sighs. But she needs liquidity, and soon. Another two months, and then it must go on the market. If it gets the price she has in mind, perhaps the next house can become a home, a place to root. But Elsa doubts it. Who knows how much you need before you know you have enough.

She yawns as her feet click-clack the loose tiles back to the room she thinks of as Paul's, though the only item of furniture is an antique desk she picked up for nothing in a junk shop in Brixton. The papers are probably here, in one of the drawers. On the desk are the fabric swatches. She picks one up. She'll head to the Plaza later – see if they have something similar but cheaper. The papers, found in the top drawer, she slides into her handbag. Just in case.

* * *

The smile on Derk's face as she walks into the ward a few hours later puts paid to that hope.

'You came.' Said with so much delight, it evinces a sharp stab of guilt.

Derk looks terrible, eyes red-rimmed and rheumy, tubes taped into his nostrils, beard hardly concealing the hollowness of the cheek she reluctantly brushes with pursed lips. There is a smell emanating from him, something putrid, as if a part of him is in decay.

'Wow, what happened here,' she says, touching her forehead, not wanting to touch the egg-like protuberance on his.

'Oh, this.' He grimaces as his fingers – the nails yellow and long – trace the purple bloom shadowed in yellow. 'My fall from grace.' A thin-lipped smile. Derk drops his hand on the bed, palm upward. He gazes at her with evident pleasure. 'You look great Elsa.'

'Don't be silly,' she says, combing her fingers through her hair with rapid strokes. 'I'm a mess.'

As if in answer there is a long, low moan from behind the pale green curtain drawn around the next bed. Derk turns his head towards it. ‘Fuck *off!*’ The exertion brings on a convulsion, a wet hacking cough that forces him forward, the blood rushing to his face, eyes bulging with the effort of dislodging a thick glob of phlegm which he hawks into a kidney-shaped metal dish pulled in haste from the bedside table. He lies back, eyes closed, panting. Again the man behind the curtain moans, a single note of pain.

‘Not exactly the Estoril Hotel, is it,’ Derk says, opening his eyes to look at her. A wan joke.

Wondering how long she will have to stay before she can reasonably make her excuses, Elsa pats his arm, careful to avoid the needle. ‘What happened?’

‘Fucking winter. That’s what happened.’ Derk’s struggle to breathe is audible, a quick intake punctuating each short sentence. ‘Thought it was a cold. Got to feeling damn weak. But you know me. Hate doctors. Sanctimonious killjoys. But after I passed out, they brought me here. Asked me who they should call.’ He looks at her. Despite the red rims there is something in the gaze – a reminder of the intensity that had once pinned her down. It is all she can do not to shudder.

‘Ironic, really. Because this,’ – he lifts the arm with the drip to touch his bruise again. ‘It’s been my wake up call, Elsa. Literally.’

Another low moan from behind the curtain. Derk closes his eyes.

‘The fever was bad. Visions of hell, like a Bosch painting. People being eaten alive; others burning.’ Opens his eyes, Derk moves his hand closer to Elsa, leaves it lying on the bed, palm upturned. ‘Then you appeared. A vision. Remember what uncle Tertius said? When we found him half-dead in that flat? He said you were an angel. He was right. I was there; I saw it with my own eyes – the light radiating out of you. Poor uncle Tertius.’ Derk shakes his head. ‘That was a bad time for me. He deserved a good send off, a proper burial, a grave, a tombstone. Now he’s just a bag of ash in a cardboard box, shoved at the back of my cupboard. What an ignominious end.’ Derk looks tearful. ‘I don’t know what gets into me Elsa.’

Elsa squeezes his hand, which feels dry and leathery. ‘Come on Derk. Don’t think about that. You need stay positive.’ She inclines her head. ‘We need to get you out of here.’ *We*. An accidental pronoun.

Derk smiles. ‘That’s the thing. I *am* feeling positive, Elsa. I’ve had time to think. All the years, I wanted more. More money. More praise. More recognition. I wanted to get to the top. Every promotion, every pay-rise, every account, was another step closer. I didn’t care about anything else. But there *is* no top. I see that now. Or maybe there is, but I don’t want it anymore.’ He pauses to catch his breath.

‘It’s a crock. All those years, wasted...’ Derk shakes his head. ‘I don’t know why, but somewhere along the way I lost the plot. Forgot... what was... important...’ He trails off, his voice weak. Elsa wonders if he is on medication. Derk closes his eyes, makes a visible effort to gather his strength, opens them again.

‘I’m trying to say that I know I made mistakes Elsa. Followed the wrong path... up the wrong mountain. To where the air is too thin. I mean, literally...’ He lifts his free hand, waves it at the oxygen tank behind the bed. ‘I can’t breathe.’ He places it over his heart, a sworn-in witness to his own melodrama. ‘I’m lost Elsa. Lost with a pain in my chest and a missing lung. And I know, if I could just get down, retrace my footsteps.’ He tries to sit up then, his gaunt head too large for his turkey-wrinkled neck. ‘If I could just find my way back to you.’

Elsa extricates her hand from his. ‘Don’t be silly Derk. Sounds like you might have concussed yourself when you fell. A fall on the head can do that to you, you know.’ Meant to sound light but even she can hear the cajoling borders on cruel.

Derk, apparently undeterred, is shaking his head again. ‘Maybe. Maybe that’s what it took. A knock to the head, to make me realize: the real achievement of my life, Elsa, is you.’

A red tide of anger – unbidden, uncontrolled.

‘I am not an *achievement* Derk,’ she snaps. ‘You don’t get to own me like that. I’m not some base, raw material that you discovered and fashioned into something of value.’

Derk looks hurt. ‘I showed you the world, Elsa. Showed you things you would never have seen. Where would you be if I hadn’t found you? Married to one of Alice’s prospects, pushing out another baby to help pass the time.’

‘What, and that’s supposed to be worse than ...’ Elsa glances at the green curtain, drops her voice to a hiss. ‘You think being married to a man who likes to watch his wife with other women, with a teenage *girl*; you think that’s some great achievement?’

‘That’s not what I meant. You’re twisting my words. What I’m trying to say is that marrying you was the best thing I ever did. I love you Elsa. You’re the only woman I have ever loved.’

Elsa snorts. ‘You don’t love me. You love some idea of me, but that’s all it is, an idea, an imagined person who lives only in your head.’

Derk frowns. ‘Is this because there is someone else? Is that shit Ray still sniffing around?’

Elsa rolls her eyes. ‘No, there is no one else Derk.’

‘Well then, please, I’m begging you Elsa. Give me another chance. I’ve changed. I’m not the man you left. I see everything clearly now. We can start again. Go somewhere new. Or back to the coast, if that’s what you want. Back to Umdloti. Make a fresh start. Don’t answer me now, just think —’

‘Ha!’ A sound like the snap of a whip. ‘Remember that story you once told me about the scorpion who persuades the frog to give him a ride across the river? And halfway across, the scorpion stings him, and as they both start to drown the frog asks ‘Why?’, and the scorpion says, ‘It’s just my nature’. You won’t change, Derk. You can’t. And I’m no gullible frog.’

Derk collapses back onto his pillows; looks at her with wet wounded eyes. ‘But Elsa, remember the beginning. How we once were. We were happy.’

‘Whatever we had, it ran its course a long, long time ago. I don’t love you any more Derk. Maybe I never did. Maybe we *both* just fell in love with some idea we conjured up of each other, two figments, never based on reality.’

Derk, who has arched his neck to push his head back into the pillow, now turns away, as if warding off the blow. ‘Don’t say that Elsa,’ he whispers, closing his eyes.

But she allows her anger free reign; is enjoying its honest heat. ‘You say you love me, but if you really loved me, you would want what was best for me. And you most certainly are *not* what’s best for me, Derk. You’re not good for me at all.’ Her voice is low and threatening. ‘So don’t say you love me. I don’t want to hear it. You don’t know the meaning of the word.’

Derk is silent. He keeps his eyes closed. Lying there in his hospital bed surrounded by the detritus of a patient he looks old and vulnerable. Elsa feels her anger recede, a tide retreating, leaving her guilt naked and shivering on the shore.

‘See now,’ she says. ‘You bring out the worst in me. Or maybe it’s just me.’ She pauses. ‘But honestly, I’m not the woman you fell in love with, Derk. Maybe I was. I can hardly remember her. Maybe the whole thing is my fault. Maybe I’m the one who’s incapable of love. All I know is that I need my own fresh start, Derk. Me, alone.’

Derk remains silent.

‘Derk?’

He does not move, keeps his eyes closed.

‘I’ll let you rest.’ Elsa picks up her bag. ‘I’ll come by tomorrow,’ she says, patting his arm. He is just too repulsive to kiss. ‘Check on your progress.’ She stands up.

‘Tomorrow is another day.’ Her father’s bland words of comfort.

SUNDAY, 28 MARCH

“Visiting diplomats say negotiations were badly damaged by South Africa’s raid into Angola three weeks ago... Chief negotiator on South West Africa, Mr Don McHenry, was last night strongly attacked by Mr Pik Botha, Minister of Foreign Affairs. ‘I don’t know what game Mr McHenry is playing, or who instructed him to come to South Africa, seemingly to wave the SWAPO banner,’ said Mr Botha.”

—*Sunday Times*, 28 March 1978

Paul

Paul is so hot he is struggling to hold onto a train of thought, his brain slowly broiling in the heat. He stops, one hand leaning on the shovel; the other he uses to wipe the sweat from his stinging eyes.

‘Wat staan jy so rond, du Toit.’ His lieutenant, listlessly patrolling the back line. ‘Dis nie ‘n fokken teeparty nie; grawe daai gat, hondekak.’ Paul lifts the shovel up again and rams it back into the hard sun-baked earth.

He’d been so amped, ready for some real action. Six hard months he’d endured that snaggle-toothed cunt Corporal Dreyer screaming spittle in his face. Dreyer, who had it in for him from day one, after Paul made the innocent mistake of making eye contact during inklaar. ‘Moenie vir my loer nie fokken troep!’ he’d screamed. ‘Ek suig jou oog uit en spoeg dit uit sodat jy self kan sien watse groot poes is jy!’

Dreyer had made an example of Paul: ordered him to do 150 push-ups, two sandbags on his back, while everyone watched. He’d managed 55 before collapsing in the dirt, coughing as Dreyer kicked fine red dust into his face. ‘Fokken rofie kak,’ he’d said. ‘Sien julle hoe lyk ‘n fokken moffie,’ he’d said before turning back to look at the fresh-faced intakes, their eyeballs all straining into the far distance. ‘Van nou af is die army jou ma! En ek, Korporaal Dreyer, is jou pa! En ons is nie getroud nie, so julle is ‘n klomp fokken hoerkinders!’

Dreyer had sworn that he would turn every one of them into killing machines, capable of wiping the Rooi Gevaar off the continent. And while he hated Dreyer with a ferocity that made him dream of putting a gun into his ugly spewing mouth and pulling the trigger, the bastard had drilled them into shape. By the time Paul boarded the train for Grootfontein, his body felt like a well-oiled machine. He was looking forward to killing a few terts – that’s what the whole shitshow was about, after all – killing terts to keep the women and children back home safe. And after Grootfontein he’d be earning R4.50 a day danger pay – whoohoo, yes sirree – and he meant to earn it.

But some fucking joker had deployed his unit here, to this godforsaken baking stretch of bush. They were told to start digging holes. Not for fucking tert corpses either. The trucks had arrived the next day, covered in plants: young sisal and haak-en-steek thorn

bushes, their rootballs in black plastic bags filled with soil that soon set into hard lumps of clay.

After months of physical training, learning how to ambush, kill, retreat, here they were, R4s discarded on the ground, sweating over shovels. A bunch of glorified fucking gardeners, digging and planting, kilometer after kilometer. ‘We’re going to grow us a corridor, troopies,’ the lieutenant explained, trying to instill some enthusiasm. ‘An impenetrable wall that the terrs will never get through.’ Any fool could see it was a hair-brained scheme dreamt up by some fucking asshole in Pretoria, some guy in a suit who had never set foot in any warzone. A fucking joke, that’s what they were. Bosbefokte bosgrawers, Johnny had called them last night, rooting around his ratpack for some sugar. They’d bought a liter of mohangu from the local Ovambo – un-fucking-drinkable shit, but when they added their sugar rations it made it almost bearable to swallow. And it put on alright. Which is partly why he is sweating like a fucking rapist right now, his brain turned to mush.

Paul stops again. Someone – looks like that hairyback arsecreeper Bertus – is jogging over to the lieutenant, clutching a piece of paper. They look at the paper, and then the lieutenant looks back at Paul. Paul grabs his shovel, readies himself for a new shitstorm of abuse, but his lieutenant says nothing, just folds the piece of paper in two and starts to walk towards him. And there is something about the measured pace, the frown, the paper in his hand. It is unnerving. Paul waits, one hand gripping the shovel to stop the slight tremble, whether from the physical exertion or that mohangu shit he doesn’t know.

MONDAY, 29 MARCH

“The Minister of Police, Mr JT Kruger, yesterday called on all population groups to support the police force in the uneasy years that lay ahead. Through the years, the demands made on them have intensified. ‘We all realize that the enemies of public order are always planning and organising to create chaos in our country. It is not the duty of the police to decide if the law is unpopular or not, but to enforce the law. The police did not mind criticism, he said, as long as it was constructive.’”

—*Rand Daily Mail*, 29 March 1978

Gabriel

Even he is surprised. Almost 20 years since he's last heard her voice, and still it produces a bloom of pleasure. 'Elsa... Is that really you?'

'I'm afraid I'm calling with bad news, Gabriel' she says.

Gabriel feels his gut twist, a faint nausea rising in the back of his throat as he sits down behind his desk. He runs a hand over his naked crown, a compulsive stroke of comfort. He is faintly embarrassed now when he sees photographs of his younger self, the neatly combed strands an ill-conceived attempt to hide the bald spot that had spread like a slow breaking egg across his crown.

'What?' he asks, resting his hand on the back of his neck.

'It's Derk,' she says. 'He died in the early hours of Sunday morning.'

'No.' An exhalation of air, as if with his breath he can push her voice, her words, back up the telephone line, back down her throat.

'I'm so sorry Gabriel,' she says. He hears snatches now, about the struggle to get hold of him ... pillar to post ... finally ... Derk admitted last week ... JG Strijdom hospital ... unexpected complications ... heart failure.'

The first time Elsa had walked into their living room, Gabriel had known she was Trouble. Alice, usually so aloof with strangers, had given her a tour of the house, then corralled her on the sofa. Even their cross-eyed cat, that arch misanthropist, had stalked its way onto Elsa's lap while Alice leaned closer, a proprietary hand on Elsa's arm. Curious, he had approached with an offer to replenish their drinks. Elsa had looked up at him, lips slightly parted to reveal the small gap between otherwise perfect teeth. A guileless smile, but there was a glint in those almond-shaped eyes, a precociousness that had quickened his blood, sent it rushing to his groin. Elsa was irresistible. And, despite the difference in age, she had proved surprisingly easy to seduce; low hanging fruit, ripe for the plucking, or so he'd thought with a cavalier indifference. He hadn't realized how much their weekly assignations would come to mean to him. Nor quite how calculating she was. It had been sheer carelessness, introducing her to his rapacious little brother. A thoughtless act that had set in motion

a chain of events that ended here, with him listening to the voice of a woman he had once loved, telling him that the brother she had cost him was now irrevocably lost.

‘I’m so sorry Gabriel,’ Elsa says again. It angers him, her pity, but only briefly. If he has learnt anything, it is that anger is a costly emotion. Not for the young perhaps – anger was their fuel – but his time is finite, and shrinking. So he closes his eyes, listens to Elsa’s voice – the slight rasp he had always found so sexy, trying to picture the woman she has become.

‘I had no idea how serious it was,’ she is saying. ‘I mean we weren’t – Derk and I have been living apart almost two years now. The first I knew of it was when he called me from the hospital on Friday. I went to see him on Saturday. He didn’t look great, but he said he was doing fine. There was no indication... God, I still can’t believe it.’ An awkward silence follows. Gabriel sits quietly, the ball of his thumb pressed into an eyesocket, elbow resting on the desk. Is Elsa crying? Is he supposed to be crying? He feels numb. He turns the phrase over like an object. *Derk died in the early hours of Sunday morning.*

‘Gabriel, are you there?’

He runs a hand over his crown again, back down to his neck; wraps it across the nape and squeezes hard. ‘Are you sure?’ he asks. ‘I mean, it’s not possible there’s been some mistake?’

Elsa is silent.

‘Of course you are. Sorry. Jesus. It’s just.’ Gabriel shakes his head. ‘I can’t believe it.’

‘I know. When I saw him on Saturday, he spoke about the future, about...’ Elsa stops again.

Gabriel closes his eyes. An image: his little brother, ever the fearless one, at – what was he, 10? – the eyes that were always too large for his face, whites showing, his maniacal grin beaming down from the top of the willow tree before he leapt – with a hoot – into the churning waters of the Harrismith river. Derk, always the first to break the rules – this one established last summer in the wake of Elsa Marais’s drowning – testing the depth of the river after the first summer rains. Gabriel could still recall the fear that had snaked like a scalding drink through his gut. He had pulled himself up

into the branches, the better to peer into the opaque brown water, willing Derk to reappear. Derk holding his breath, hiding below the brown depths for as long as he could, before finally erupting, his laughter a wild and untrammelled joy that always trumped Gabriel's outrage, his disapproval.

'Will you come? The funeral is on Wednesday.'

'Of course,' he says. 'Of course. I'll be there.'

They say goodbye, and then the phone line is as dead as his little brother.

He stands up; is momentarily dizzy.

The naked stupidity of his pride shames him. For years he'd thought it only right that Derk be the one to extend the olive branch. Recently he had considered making contact, but he'd been fearful, had been waiting for what felt like the right time. He had imagined them one day, wizened and wrinkled, trading tales, catching up on years lost. Derk was only, what – 53? He places a hand on either side of the desk, covered in papers; looks around the room in which there are still unpacked boxes, the files he still has to sort through stacked haphazardly on shelves. Derk, always the neat one, had hated sharing a room with him. He wonders where the photograph albums are. Probably in one of the boxes he's left out in the garage, their innards succumbing to the gluttony of fishmoths. The boys had shown little interest – neither in the selection he had salvaged from his grandfather's drawers, nor in the photographs of their own childhood, the loss and gain of teeth, the changes in hair and skin, each time capsule carefully captioned in Alice's hand.

'Gabriel? Who was that?' Emma, in the doorway, one finger twirling a strand of hair. He ignores her. He doesn't want the intrusion, doesn't want her, neither as audience or player. But he can't tell her to go away. Not in her own house.

She switches the light on. He closes his eyes. She always does this, switches on the overhead light when a lamp will do, the kind who prefers a torch to the light of the moon. 'Who was that, Gabs?' she asks again.

He feels himself swaying, sees his little brother again, a tiny gleeful figure dwarfed by the huge veld, running after their mother's scampering dogs.

‘Gabriel? Are you ok? Who *was* that?’

She does this – wraps the steeliness of her demands in a fluffy handtowel of concern. To think her jealousy had once reassured him.

Gabriel takes a deep breath. ‘That was Elsa. You remember, I told you about my estranged brother Derk? Well, that was his wife Elsa. Calling to tell me that Derk died yesterday.’

She stops twirling her hair, covers her mouth. ‘What? Only last week you were saying it was maybe time to patch things up.’

He says nothing.

Her fingers, needy as a smoker’s, curl around that lock of hair again. ‘Well I guess maybe it’s good timing. I mean, it would have been worse if you had seen him, right? This way round you can just pretend you’re still not talking.’

Gabriel realises in this instant that he can no longer live with Emma, that he will come back from the funeral and load his unpacked boxes into his car. He has known this for some time, has hidden it behind the convenience of a life shared. He is tired, so tired, but it is time to face the inevitable recriminations, the pointless anger, the energy required to find a replacement.

Sensing his withdrawal, Emma steps closer. ‘I’m sorry. Was that insensitive? I just mean, it’s good you weren’t close, right? It’s easier to say goodbye to someone who wasn’t part of your life in the first place.’

‘The thing is, Emma,’ Gabriel bites down hard on his jaw, swallows. ‘He was very much part of my life in the first place.’

‘Of course. I didn’t mean it like that. You poor thing...’ He can see her shift roles, ready to play the compassionate partner in the new drama she is scripting. She approaches now, eyes large and sorrowful. ‘Honestly, I’m so sorry for your loss, Gabs.’ She lifts a hand and cups his clenched jaw, kisses him on the lips.

He takes her hand off his cheek. ‘I need a walk. I’ll take Suleiman.’

Gabriel whistles for her overweight Aghan. He makes a point of picking up the leash that she keeps hanging by the front door – yet another little lie in a line that goes back further than he cares to remember, because the leash never leaves his neck. Gabriel doesn't believe in curtailed freedom.

He heads west, towards the looming bulk of Paarl Rock. Pretends not to notice the Afghan squatting on the crease of grass the man on the corner has nurtured into a Wimbledon-like green. He doesn't have to pretend for long. The lawn; the dog; the house – just a blur now, the grief finally washing over him, and he has to steady himself on the post box, one hand resting on the oversized golf-ball as he bends over, eyes closed, a toddler bowled over by a wave.

Ray

'C'mon m'dahling.' Ray reaches across the table, places a hand on Elsa's wrist. It feels thin and knobby, a sapless branch you can snap in two. 'You've hardly eaten a thing.'

Ray had gone round to check on her when her phone went unanswered the whole morning. She was still in bed at twelve, the curtains drawn; said the calls to share the news of Derk's death had drained her. He'd cajoled and pushed, finally luring her out with the promise of a Jimmy's sirloin, but she'd shown precious little interest in the hunk of rare meat she kept pushing around the plate. Which irked the part that would be signing the cheque, but there was another part that was smirking: if not the steak, it was surely present company that had persuaded her to put on that dress, to smear on that lipstick. Even this thin, Elsa was the only woman in the room.

He smiles reassuringly. 'Just one more mouthful.'

Elsa waves a hand as if to disperse an unwelcome smell. Pushing the plate to one side, she picks up her box of Van Rijns.

'I'm sorry Ray. I should have known better. I can hardly even look at it.' She shakes her head. 'I just can't eat anything at the moment.'

With her knobbed twig fingers Elsa places a cigarette in her mouth, waits for him to light it. He studies her as she inhales the flame.

She has cut her hair into a bob that reveals two tiny earlobes, shorter than when Ray first laid eyes on her, sitting next to Derk in that black Triumph sports convertible. He'd noticed the Triumph first – the TR3 was a flashy car, sweeping lines emanating from a wasp-like middle, headlamps above a full-width radiator grille, 48-spoke wire wheels spinning past. They had swept around the corner of Marine Drive and King Street, where Ray was patiently waiting for the lights to change. Elsa was wearing a leopard-print scarf; Derk his fierce falcon-like stare under a large black fedora. They were a remarkable sight. Watching them roar down Marine Drive he could never have imagined that he would, one day, come to know them both so well.

‘Do you remember Derk’s black Triumph? He was driving it the first time I saw you both.’

Elsa rolls her eyes. ‘Oh god, the sports car days. None of them ever lasted long, did they? I liked that Triumph. But Derk got so smashed he had to steer the car against the kerb to get home one night. Shredded both tyres, and scraped home on the rims.’ She smiles, a genuine look of amusement. ‘A week later he parked it on a hill and forgot to pull up the handbrake. Was it the Healy next?’ Elsa takes another drag – ‘You went with him to fetch the Healy, didn’t you?’ She stubs the cigarette out aggressively. ‘God.’ She grimaces. ‘Don’t you hate smoking?’

Ray nods. He doesn’t, but he will humour whatever nonsense Elsa spouts.

The steakhouse is full and noisy – the clatter of plates and cutlery, the laughter and chatter of people lured by cheap meat in sugar-based marinades, the smell of grilled flesh heavy in the air. He hardly hears what she says next, then, as it sinks in, is slightly incredulous.

‘You saw Derk? I thought you weren’t talking to each other?’

She shrugs, picks at an invisible speck on the tablecloth. ‘He called. Said we had to talk.’

‘He called you from the *hospital*?’ He didn’t mean for it to sound so accusatory.

She places her elbows on the table, leans her chin on interwoven fingers. The weight loss has made her cheekbones more pronounced. She looks like a Modigliani painting, like one of his pointy-chin nudes reclining on the sofa. He wishes she was. Reclining,

naked on a sofa, that is. Even this thin, he'd like to see her naked again. God knows he's tried.

The night Elsa had called him crying – some convoluted story about a girl, about Derk having gone too far – he'd fobbed her off. Told her to go home, get some sleep; things would look up in the morning. The minute the line went dead, he'd regretted it. Poor little Elsa, all alone in some phone booth, nowhere to go. No one to turn to. He'd sat by the phone, hoping she'd call back. The next day Derk had arrived at work in a foul mood but Ray knew better than to pry. It was a few days before Derk admitted that Elsa had packed a bag; that she wasn't sleeping at the flat. 'But she'll be back, mark my words,' Derk had said. 'Tail between her legs.'

As the month progressed Derk had become increasingly maudlin. Always prone to bouts of rage he was now an old wounded buffalo, impossible to please. After a few months the studio was informed that Derk would be taking a sabbatical. Rumours were rife: McKinsey's was looking for a new creative director. Then Derk finally handed in his resignation. Ray assumed a forced hand, but he wasn't going to ask.

Elsa in the meantime tackled her Triomf project, her determination a carapace that burrowed through every obstruction. Ray had helped her find a reputable electrician. He'd accompanied her to demolition yards to search through discarded doorframes and cracked window frames, basins stained by taps long dry. He'd played house with her in tile shops and bathroom warehouses, grinning at assistants who assumed they were partners. They were a kind of team after all; surely it was only a matter of time. When she sold the house, it was Ray who arrived with a bottle of Spumante in each hand, crowing, 'Hey Big Spender!'

Later that night he'd tried to stick his tongue in her mouth – a clumsy embrace after he insisted they upturn a ritual glass over the SOLD sign. 'I'm still technically married to Derk,' she'd said, pulling away.

'Technically, Derk doesn't give a fig,' he'd replied, putting a hand on the sign to steady himself. 'Not like I do,' his penis straining against the fabric of the jaunty tartan trousers he'd picked out to impress her. She'd laughed. 'Don't be silly Ray.' Turned away, walked towards the pool of light on the slasto-tiled porch. 'You know what Derk would do to you if he knew.'

The waiter has stopped at their table, interrupting Elsa's story, which he wishes now he'd been paying more attention to, as he has lost the thread.

'Something wrong with your food madam?' The waiter is young and skinny, narrow hips accentuated by the blue apron, a curly shock of red hair that is too long to be hygienic. Ray had taken an almost instant dislike to the boy, exacerbated by the little twerp's obvious infatuation with Elsa.

'No, no, it was perfect, thank you. Eyes just a bit too big for my stomach.' Elsa pats her flat abdomen.

The boy opens his palms to her, an egregious smile on his face, 'You sure? Something else I can get for you? Something small?'

Ray snorts.

Elsa looked questioningly at Ray. 'Ray, it's ok to clear?'

Ray nods, pushes his plate back to indicate that he too has had enough, but the boy has eyes only for Elsa.

'No problem madam.' The waiter picks up the plate on which her large hunk of untouched flesh floats in its moat of blood. Her sideplate he balances on his forearm before whipping out a cloth to wipe the table in front of her, his movements quick and somehow divisive, as if drawing an invisible line between her and Ray. 'Can I get you an Irish coffee? Dom Pedro?'

'That's enough,' Ray snaps.

The waiter acknowledges him with a small nod. With his free hand he picks up the breadbasket. 'I'll be right back,' he says, leaving Ray with his plate still in front of him.

Little prick.

Elsa is watching him. 'I'd forgotten how intolerant you and Derk can be.'

Ray shakes his head, tries to shake off the feeling that he has lost a small battle he hadn't even realised he was engaged in.

‘I’m sorry.’ He smiles, hopes it’s disarming. ‘The hazards of dining with a beautiful woman: you have to keep fending the bees from the honeypot.’

She returns his smile, but it’s tight, polite.

He puts his hand back on her wrist, keeping his touch light. ‘I’m sorry. Can you just ignore that? I’m a clutz. Carry on with what you were saying, before we were so rudely interrupted. You saw Derk the day he died?’

Elsa shook her head. ‘It doesn’t matter. I shouldn’t have brought it up.’

‘Don’t be silly. It’s important. I want to know what happened. What did he want?’

Elsa removes her hand from under his and reaches for her cigarettes again. She shrugs, opens the box. ‘Same story. Another chance. A fresh start. But he was quite sweet about it.’ A wan smile as she places the cigarette between her lips and waits for him to light it. ‘About me. About us.’

Ray nods, tries to look sage. ‘He promised me he wouldn’t reach out until he’d finished the new anthology he was working on.’ This is a lie. Derk had never made this or any other promise to Ray, but Derk cannot refute it now, and Ray feels a need to infer some kind of intimacy between them.

‘Did he say anything to you about it?’

Elsa bites her lip. ‘No. I didn’t know he was working on anything. I guess it’ll be in the flat. God, I don’t even want to think about going back there.’

Ray taps his unfiltered cigarette out. ‘You know you’re not alone, Elsa.’

‘You’ve already taken on so much.’ Elsa picks up her napkin and absentmindedly starts to twist it. ‘I don’t know how to thank you, Ray.’

Ray knows how. He wishes she would break down so that he can put his arms around her, offer some real comfort, but Elsa remains resolutely dry eyed. Aside from the lack of appetite and general ennui, she seems eerily detached.

‘A dessert Elsa, I insist. Something sweet. Get your energy levels up.’

Elsa shakes her head. 'I can't.' Puts her hand over her mouth to stifle a yawn. 'You've been so kind,' she says. 'But I need to get home. I haven't finished making the calls. And Paul is arriving tomorrow. I need to get his room ready.'

Ray nods as he looks around, hoping to catch the eye of another waiter, but it is the narrow-hipped boy who acknowledges his air scribble. No doubt he will take his time. He places both elbows on the table, one forearm resting on the other.

'Listen, here's what we're going to do. How many more calls do you have to make?'

Elsa shrugged. 'I don't know ... I've just been working through my telephone book. I'm only on G.'

'Let me take care of the rest. Then we can sit down and make a list of everything that needs to be done, and together we'll decide on what to do next. You're still set on a burial?'

Elsa nods. 'I know Derk would have wanted it.'

'Well, I'll be happy to be one of the pallbearers. Did you ask Gabriel?'

Elsa bites her lip, shakes her head. She can hear Derk's voice. '*It's not enough you put me in an early grave, you want me turning in it too?*'

TUESDAY, 30 MARCH

“‘South Africa must end its isolation from the western world,’ Dr Piet Koornhof, Minister of National Education, said yesterday. ‘We must be militarily prepared to defend her from the vultures [but] we must aim to have a system based on full citizenship for each person within his own group. Each group must be able to maintain its own identity, and the rights of minority groups must be protected.’”

—*Rand Daily Mail*, 30 March 1978

Paul

Paul sits up with a start, bumping his head on the roof of the compartment.

‘Fuck,’ he mutters, momentarily confused. The facts hit him seconds later. He is on a train. His dad. Dead.

Paul swings his legs over the edge of the fold-out bunk bed he vaguely recalls heaving himself into some hours ago, when that spoilsport finally closed the bar. He has a piss on him big as a horse, with a thirst to match.

He makes no sound as he drops to the carriage floor. Army skills, useful if you want to graduate in burglary. Along with sharpshooter, assassin, bouncer. He slips his hand into his boxer shorts, pushing his erect penis up against his stomach, securing it there with the elastic. No sense in scaring the ladies, though he had yet to see anything he would describe as such on this train.

Paul slides open the carriage door; instinctively scans the swaying corridor: right to left, like he’s been trained. Beyond the mirror-like windows of this capsule the world appears eerily absent, like hurtling through a black hole. *Through the valley of darkness.* He stands for a moment, staring at his ghost-like reflection. *Your rod and staff, they comfort me.* Shifts his penis to the right. *Yeah, sure.*

The army was supposed to toughen you up, and Paul was feeling pretty tough. Derk’s death had come as a surprise, but his response even more so: he had remained dry-eyed while his lieutenant had told him, had felt nothing but a slow relief when he was informed that he was entitled to a few days compassionate leave. Which worries a part of him, the small part that isn’t angry all the time. Because if there is one thing the army is good at, it’s sticking the hot poker of resentment into embers of self-pity, blowing gusts of loathing to stoke you into one big, blazing rage. Some days he felt like a walking fucking inferno.

The toilet cubicle is tiny. Paul takes careful aim. He is a tidy pisser now. A neat folder too: acute angles like a man born with an eye for symmetry. It has surprised him, how much he enjoys this order. His bed, his rifle, his uniform, his boots – immaculate. He had looked forward to showing off this newfound skill to Derk; Derk who had so

often called him ‘a pig, good only for a sty’. Derk, with his obsessively neat cupboards, would have been pleased. Proud even, perhaps. He pushes the thought away. He doesn’t want to think about Derk. He has allowed himself a single yearning since hearing the news: Elsa. He never knew he could miss his mom this much.

Which is why his heart, or whatever it is that lives in the cavity of his chest, clenches – a short, sharp pain – when he sees his mother waiting for him on the station platform, and next to her, Ray. The disappointment is visceral; he has to blink a few times before the emotion that cleaved its way up and grasped his innards is gone, leaving nothing but an emptiness.

What does it matter anyway. His old familiar, anger. Not that he is angry with anyone but himself. You’d think he would have learnt by now to expect nothing. *Nothing.* Every time he thinks he’s finally learnt this vital fucking lesson, the baby boy comes creeping out and betrays him with those eyes big with hope. But it doesn’t matter, because that stupid needy baby boy is banished to some dark corner, and he, Paul, is in control. The day will come when he buries that boy. God knows, he’s tried.

He slings his balsak over his shoulder and steps onto the platform. Greets Elsa with a formal kiss on the cheek, all ramrod soldier boy; acknowledges Ray with a nod. They drive home in silence, him in the back with his knees shoved up against the seat, digging them with meaning into the small of Ray’s back.

He knows Elsa wants his approval when she shows him around the new house. And while it is an improvement on the last, it’s still unfinished, reeking of raw plaster, loose tiles underfoot, the kitchen bare and unpainted. But what really upsets Paul, as he traipses after her, looking into the barely furnished rooms, is how he has been erased. There is no sign – not even a photograph on the fridge – of the life they once shared. Nothing in the house belongs to him, or was part of his childhood. Nothing to anchor him.

‘Great,’ he says, dropping his balsak in the room she says is his. The mattress on the floor beats sleeping in a trench, so it’s not entirely untrue.

‘You must be thirsty. Can I get you something to drink?’ Ray pipes up behind her. He doesn’t like the way Ray is making himself at home, as if this is where he belongs,

treating Paul like the guest. But he'll deal with it, he can deal with anything, just as soon as he's had a drink.

'Whatever's going,' he says as he takes a seat at the cheap pine table Elsa has in the middle of the gutted kitchen. 'As long as it's not soft.'

Ray brings opens the fridge and retrieves a jug of what he assumes is his father's traditional mix. *Was*. Elsa fetches two glasses from the drying rack, one from the cupboard. Ray pours, and then there they are, the three of them, facing each other across Elsa's unvarnished pine table.

'So, your mother and I have been discussing the funeral.' Ray takes the lead. 'But naturally she wants you to be privy to all decisions.' He smiles at Elsa.

'I'm not sure how much you want to be involved Paul.' Elsa picks up her glass. 'You don't have to do anything. But I don't want you to think your opinion doesn't matter.' She takes a sip, and then Ray talks about how they will lay his father's remains to rest.

Paul says nothing. It is slightly surreal, listening to Ray talk about the logistics of the burial. He remains silent until talk turns to pallbearers.

'You asked *Nigel*? Are you fucking mad?'

'Don't talk like that Paul. You might be 19 but I'm still your mother.'

Paul rolls his eyes. Ray's focus is suddenly on the edge of the table, along which he is running his thumb.

'But you know how dad felt about him. And now you're asked that asshole to carry his coffin?'

'We're not exactly spoilt for choice Paul. And don't call him an asshole. You are not your father.'

Stung, Paul flings an arm over the back of the pine chair. Feels his anger close around him like a protective fist.

'Sweet Jesus.' He drains his glass. 'I'm not a kid anymore, you know. Why are you even bothering with all this bullshit – worrying about where to put him, what to put

on his tombstone, who to carry him into his hole. Why aren't we just cremating him? Grind his ashes in the carpet of his favourite restaurant, and be done with it.'

'Paul!' Elsa places both palms into her eye sockets. 'I know you two didn't always see eye to eye—'

A humourless laugh. 'More an eye for an eye.'

'Can I just finish?' Elsa is rotating her palms, as if her eyes are aching. Is she trying to hide her tears? He feels a flicker of guilt but she is looking at him now, dry-eyed, if a bit unfocused. Is she on tranquilizers? If so, he needs to find out where she's keeping them, and sharp. Because this bullshit is really starting to get to him. Paul refills his glass, which is too small. He needs a proper glass, not this stupid fucking thimble. He hopes Elsa isn't going to make a scene. Or maybe she should. Maybe that would be better. That, and a bigger glass.

But Elsa just sighs, and starts to fiddle with the wedding ring she still wears, Paul notes.

'There are things about your dad that you didn't know, and now you will never know, and I am sorry for that.' Elsa spreads her fingers wide across the table. 'But I assure you, he thought a burial a proper send off. He did *not* want to be consumed by flames.'

'Well that's pretty bizarre, for a man who made damn sure he was going straight to hell.'

'Paul!'

'What, so now I can't speak the truth? Now he's dead we have to talk about him like he was some kind of saint? And since when did you ever care about what he wanted anyway?'

It felt good to release the anger, to pull the plug and feel his rage flow out across her damaged flooring, pooling around the cheap pine legs of a table he has never seen before. This strange house, filled with used stuff, strangers' discarded things; his mother, or the ghost of her, looking like a brittle doll. Fuck her, fuck Ray, fuck them all.

He shakes his head. Nigel? Christ, what kind of a man didn't have six friends to carry him to his grave? Six people he loved, six people who loved him. For a moment he actually does feel like crying. But he doesn't, because it evaporates under the flame of anger. *How the fuck could you choose a man like that to father me.* He glares at Elsa, picks up the empty jug.

The fridge contents are, at least, familiar: empty bar the nail polishes rattling in the shelf of the door, a few bottles of beer, wine, a knob of butter on a plate, a rectangle of foil.

'Paul?'

It's Ray, closing the kitchen door behind him.

'Yes, Ray?' He unscrews the top of the one litre Roma red bottle.

'I think you need to take it a little easier on your mother. She looks stronger than she is. To be honest, I think both of you are still struggling to come to terms with Derk's death.'

Paul slouches back against the sink. 'No kidding.' He takes a swig straight from the bottle. 'What do you suggest, Raymond?'

Gabriel

Gabriel is under no illusions: it is going to be a shock. The body that once pleased Elsa in Flat 303 is now covered in mottled rolls of flesh; his paunch such that he puts his jacket back on before disembarking at Jan Smuts, despite the midday Highveld heat. He is a balding middle-aged man with heavy jowls and an extra chin somewhat camouflaged by a grey beard. No doubt the vagaries of time have wrought their own changes in Elsa, but her degeneration concerns him less than the expression she will wear when she sees him today, after so many years. Oh, that his vanity had diminished along with his eyesight. But as he scans the arrivals hall – wishing he didn't require glasses to do so, contracting what's left of his stomach muscles – he is nervous as a schoolboy on a blind date.

Elsa looks nothing like the Monroe-like ingénue that walked into his home 20 years ago, but she is still easily the most striking woman in the room. Her honey hair is white-blonde, and cut in a severe bob that follows the line of her jaw. She is thinner, with skinny legs sheathed in skin-tight jeans, a cowl-necked sweater cinched at the hips with a gold chain. There is something hard about her demeanour, a hunch in the shoulder, the angle of her chin, but then her eyes – he'd forgotten the intensity of that blue – meet his, and the smile curling into her cheeks reveals the tiny gap between her teeth. His Elsa, walking home from school, the same delighted look of recognition as she bent down to see him at the wheel of his car.

'There you are,' she says, as if he is something she has merely misplaced.

Now that he is closer he can see the lines radiating from the corner of each eye, the creases in her cheeks.

'You haven't aged,' he says.

Elsa rolls her eyes. 'You haven't changed,' she smiles, waving a hand dismissively.

'It's good to see you.' Gabriel pauses. 'Even under these circumstances, it's good to see you, Elsa.'

He embraces her then, longer perhaps than is strictly necessary, but the fit feels so good, like tapping in the last jigsaw piece to complete a picture.

'I'm sorry, Gabriel,' she says when he lets her go. A part of him wants to ask what it is that she is sorry for – what she did, what it cost, the years it wasted, their mutual loss – but Elsa has turned brusque. 'That's it?' She points at the bag he has in his hand.

He lifts it, cocks his head in answer.

'You always were a light traveler.' Said flirtatiously, or is that his imagination?

He follows her through the sliding doors into the harsh Highveld sun; relieved – despite the years – to find her still so attractive; in fact, with character now etched into her face, perhaps even more so than the fresh-faced schoolgirl. He wonders what she is thinking about him, whether he is a disappointment or a matter of indifference.

Ashamed of his paunch he keeps his jacket on when he gets into the passenger seat;

winds the window down and opens the vents, the midday heat unseasonal for someone used to the wet squelch of the Cape winter.

Elsa drives with an aggression that surprises him, pushing the Datsun hard into each gear. She overtakes a Cortina, gears down with easy confidence as they approach the red light, talking all the while about the many tasks – the certificate, bank account, funeral director, notices, coffin, hearse, cemetery, tombstone, sermon; filling the space with words, and he listens, leaching her anxiety with his attentive silence, until finally she is quiet.

‘And how’s Elsa?’ he asks once they are at cruising speed on the highway, past big brands claiming ugly factories as theirs.

She shrugs. ‘Ok, I think.’

They travel in silence and then Elsa asks, ‘How is Alice?’

‘I don’t really know. She doesn’t tell me much.’

‘You’re divorced?’

‘God, no. Separated. Alice refused to get divorced. Didn’t want the stigma.’ He laughs. “‘I’d rather be a widow”, she said, and for a while there I was careful what I drank or ate around her. You know Alice. Wouldn’t put it past her.’

Elsa looks in her rearview mirror before overtaking again.

Gabriel strokes his head, that old compulsive action. ‘I did tell her about Derk. Said she might want to bury the hatchet, give you a call.’ He smiles. ‘Alice said she had no interest in Derk when he was alive, even less now he’s dead. I don’t know which one of us she hates more.’ He glances at Elsa. He isn’t going to say it, because what would be the point. *You didn’t have to follow Derk’s orders. He worshipped you. He would have come round.*

She says something he can’t quite catch – it’s blustery now she’s picked up speed. He winds the window up. ‘Come again?’

Elsa flicks the indicator on to overtake a car on the inside lane, shaking her head at the driver grimly clutching the steering wheel, peering at the road from under a brown felt brim. 'It's always the one wearing the hats, right?'

Gabriel says nothing, then: 'Remember Derk's black fedora – the one with the bullet hole in the brim?'

Elsa laughs. 'The one he shot himself, then told everyone it was an angry cuckold.'

'And you call *me* a bullshit artist.'

'Your *brother* called you a bullshit artist.'

Gabriel is silent. He is gazing out but not really taking in the surrounds as Elsa takes the off-ramp and turns right into a broad single-lane road fringed with trees.

After a few seconds he turns to her and asks, his tone sincere: 'Are you ok, Elsa?' She glances at him. 'I mean, how are you really feeling?' He is gazing at her with a look that floods her suddenly with a warm nostalgia, the look that always put her at the centre of some unspecified but important universe.

Elsa swerves the Datsun off the street and onto the kerb. She tugs the hazard light switch, then drags her bag out from between his feet in the passenger footwell.

'Sorry,' she says again. 'But I need a cigarette.'

'You still smoke those?'

She nods, flips open her yellow pack of Van Rijns, offers him one. He picks one out even though he no longer smokes, wanting the easy intimacy. Elsa scrabbles around for a lighter, muttering, 'Bloody bag's too big.'

She finds it, allows him to take it from her. She leans the tip into the flame, inhales deeply, sits back. Gabriel lights his own; winds the window down again. Elsa, who has kept the engine running, switches it off. Gabriel senses that there is something important that Elsa wants to say, a confession of sorts, and so he waits, allowing an amiable silence to grow, a blanket under which she can whisper her truth.

Elsa is nibbling her thumb, systematically removing the skin surrounding the nail, gnawing at her own flesh. She drops the hand onto her lap again. 'Jesus, this is hard.'

He remains quiet, a bubbling hope that what she is about to say will be about him, about them.

‘I think I might be to blame.’ She bites her bottom lip, looks at the grass verge, frost-yellow in the afternoon light. ‘The doctors say it was his heart.’ She looks at him, stricken. ‘But his heart was broken, Gabriel.’ She turns away, covers her eyes with one hands. ‘God, the last time I saw him, I was so cruel. If I had known, I would never have said those things. He could have died a happy man. As it is...’

Elsa feels the guilt squeeze her windpipe. She cannot bring herself to tell Gabriel that they found Derk with his oxygen tubes ripped out, his drip lying in a puddle of liquid on the hospital floor – Derk’s final wordless message. Nor about the overwhelming relief she felt when the call came. She who thought she was inured to shame. She was wrong.

Elsa turns to Gabriel. ‘Do you think that if you live with someone for long enough, you end up becoming like them? You know, like dogs and their owners?’ Gabriel thinks fleetingly of Emma’s Afghan, with it’s silky long hair. ‘Or do we choose people who are like us in the first place?’

Gabriel reaches out, places his hand on hers. ‘Sometimes we fall in love with the people we admire, because we want to become like them. Other times we feel truly seen, some intangible connection to another human being. Or maybe it’s more practical – an escape, a new life, stability, security. The thing is, love is never unconditional. It needs constant looking after, or it withers. Whatever happened, I know how difficult my little brother was. And I know, Elsa, that you would have done your best.’ Elsa’s face crumples. ‘It’s ok, Elsa.’ Gabriel puts an arm around her. ‘Whatever happened, you’re not to blame.’

It’s an awkward embrace, stuck in the tiny Datsun, sweating in his jacket. But it’s a start.

Paul

Paul twists open the Klipdrift.

He is standing at the kitchen sink, from where he can watch Ray pace the backyard as he practices his eulogy, the low murmur drifting in through the plaster-spattered window.

At least now he'll be able to say he's seen a dead fucking body.

Paul takes a swig, grimaces; runs his tongue over his teeth. Vasbyt, min dae. One hundred and fifty days. Not exactly min, but in one hundred and fifty days he'd be home. And wherever the fuck that was now, it was better than being bitten and burnt to shit in South West Africa, playing garden boy for the SADF. He was going to make it home. Not like poor Poena. He'd heard that the largest piece left of Poena was his arm, the watch his dad had given him still strapped to the wrist. Landmine, just fifty clicks west of the Cuando. Now that was a dead body you did not want to see – someone from your own unit, a friend, blown to bits. Paul shakes his head. Truth be told, he doesn't actually want to see a dead body. Not even his dad, and fuck knows he'd wished the bastard dead on more than one occasion. But he would do it for Elsa. Ray was right. Elsa was looking pretty zoned out. Ray said she wasn't eating much. No shit. She looked like a stick insect. If staring at his dad's fucking corpse jolted her back to life, then so be it.

Ray has stopped in the small patch of shade and is reciting a poem to the weeds. A guy like that wouldn't last a day in Basics. *Have you ever taken drugs? Are you attracted to other men?* He'd be out, quicker than you could say Mike Roberts.

Poor Mike, doomed on the day they ran out of English forms. Mike, a Durbanite who couldn't understand a word of Afrikaans, had asked the guy behind him for help, and the hairyback from Vereeniging took the piss, translated 'Vind jy ander mans aantreklik?' as 'Are you a man with integrity?'

Corporal Dreyer made Mike's life hell. 'Gatte teen die muur, hier kom Roberts!' The pack instinct soon set in; no one wanted to be seen associating with a loser. Even Paul wasn't completely convinced by Mike's story. Did he honestly think the army gave a fuck about integrity? And what hairyback even knew a word like that? While on kitchen duty Mike used a knife to saw away at his wrists. Last they saw of 76296150 BA he was being marched away, wrists bandaged like a tennis player. Dishonourable discharge. Skuitpoep, Dreyer called it. Paul takes another swig, grimaces at the burn.

He hates most of the hairybacks but they sure had a way with words. Like Bertus, who liked to fart while taking a piss. ‘’n Pis sonder ‘n poep is soos ‘n huis sonder ‘n stoep,’ he said the first time, shaking his member.

Ray turns away from the lemon tree. Catching Paul’s eye through the window, he gives a little wave.

Paul waves back with a smile. It *is* amusing, really. ‘That second-rater’ – he’d overheard Derk refer to Ray on more than one occasion – ‘clutching onto my tailfeathers’. And here Ray was, reciting Derk’s eulogy, mulling over the wording on Derk’s tombstone. Comforting Derk’s widow. Talk about poetic fucking justice.

You reap what you sow my boy. Paul reels around. He definitely heard it. Derk’s voice. Loud and clear. ‘Fuck,’ he mutters, his own voice sounding loud in the empty kitchen. He is drunker than he realised. Maybe he should eat something. Wouldn’t do to go spewing over his father’s corpse, even though that would be quite a story to tell.

He is surprised to find actual food in Elsa’s pantry: a bag of pasta, a few tins – creamed corn, baked beans, tuna. Behind the sunflower oil, a bottle of Old Brown sherry. OBies to wash away the Klippies taste. Paul takes a swig, wipes his mouth. Hearing the front door he steps back into the kitchen, a defiant look on his face. Elsa, who had ruined their reunion, back from picking up some old uncle he’s hardly heard of. He runs his tongue over the sweet residue on his teeth, the surface now feeling furry, and waits, one arms folded across his chest.

The shock almost winds him.

‘Hello.’ His dad, grinning at him from the kitchen doorway, head held at the exact same angle.

‘You must be Paul.’ His dad’s voice, stepping into the room.

‘Gabriel.’ The man offers a hand. ‘I’m sorry we’ve never had the chance to meet before.’

Paul takes the hand, stares at the face. He hardly hears the actual words coming from the mouth – *unexpected... wish... regret* – just wallows in the familiar timbre, the sound dislodging a clot of longing into his bloodstream.

Close up he can see that the resemblance is cursory. This man has the same bearing, the same shaped head, but the eyes are much smaller; the smile broader. The nose pudgier. And yet, there is the ghost of him – again, there it is, the sense that it his father looking at him, in the cock of the head.

‘Paul? Are you ok?’

He looks at Elsa to see what she makes of this doppelganger, but she has nothing but disapproval to add.

‘That’s my cooking sherry.’

He raises an eyebrow, irritation flowing in the wake of her banal concerns. ‘You’ve learnt to cook?’

Elsa doesn’t answer, just takes the bottle from him and returns it to the pantry. She reappears with a box and a tin. ‘Tea, Gabriel?’ she asks. ‘Or coffee?’

Gabriel glances at Paul, grins. ‘I think we can do better than that.’

He puts his suitcase on the pine table, pushes two buttons to release the clasps, tugs the lid up like a bonnet to reveal four bottles of wine snugly arranged on top of his clothes. He takes one out. ‘KWV Roodeberg. 1974. Or—’ He pulls out another, looks at Elsa. ‘The last of the 1960 Lanzerac Pinotage. I’ve been keeping it for a special occasion. Which I’d say this is. Paul, pass me the bottle opener?’

Paul does as he is told. Elsa opens the window to summon Ray while Paul watches Gabriel carefully remove the cork. He sniffs it, looks at Paul with a mischievous grin. ‘Looks like we’re in luck,’ he says, and Paul cannot control it now; the little boy who once looked for God in the clouds is raising his hopeful head. ‘Looks like it,’ he repeats inanely, watching the red-brown liquid splatter into Elsa’s chipped glass jug.

Elsa

It is repugnant to be walking down this wide corridor again, the smell of antiseptic barely masking the undertow of puss and blood, but at least this time, Elsa thinks, I’m

not alone. Flanked by Gabriel and Paul, she walks towards the double lift doors where a hospital aide waits, hands resting on the rail of an empty gurney.

Elsa, light-headed with dread, watches Gabriel press the button. He steps back, runs a hand over his head, the motion a reminder of Derk.

The brothers had always shared certain mannerisms but age has fused them into an uncanny twinhood: running his fingers along the length of his beard, thumb and forefinger meeting at the point of his sharp-tipped beard. Tugging at his jacket to hide a small paunch resting on narrow belted hips. But where Derk's grin was rapacious, almost sneering, Gabriel's was raffish, mischievous; Derk's gaze intense and burrowing, Gabriel's warm, appreciative, designed to put one at ease. Gabriel had always been the real catch. But already caught.

The embrace at the airport had perturbed her, a discomforting sense of the familiar yet strange, but she had hidden her embarrassment, had driven home at an unnecessary speed to show she was light years from the schoolgirl he once lifted home. She hadn't meant to tell Gabriel about the last time she saw Derk, but he had always had this knack: he put her at ease, and her confession had brought a relief so acute she had momentarily wept, though she is ashamed to say the tears were not for Derk.

She glances at Paul who stands upright, muscular arms accentuated by the fact that he has them behind him, one hand clasped around the other. She hardly recognizes him. How is it possible? She would gouge both her eyes out with a knitting needle if that's what it required to save him, yet here he is, a board-stiff stranger.

If I could just get down, retrace my footsteps. If I could find my way back to you.

She bites her lip. There is no way back, not for any of them; the breadcrumb trail has long dissolved, trodden into the earth.

The lift drops them into the bowels of the hospital, the door opening onto a narrow windowless corridor, striplights illuminating four identical doors. She follows Gabriel, Paul trailing behind, through the swing door under the sign that reads MORGUE.

It is smaller than she expected, a low hum emanating from the wall of what looks to be a giant metal filing cabinet.

‘Can I help you?’ An officious voice in large tortoiseshell glasses.

‘We’re looking for Mr Derk Du Toit?’ Gabriel hands over the piece of paper they’d been given upstairs.

The woman frowns. She holds the paper out to Gabriel. ‘Is that a 5, or a 3?’

‘Looks like a 5 to me.’

‘Well there’s only one way to find out,’ she says, as if this is a lucky dip.

Heart thumping, Elsa looks down to study the two red toenails peeping through the halfmoon canvas of her platform shoes. She bites her lip so hard she can taste blood. The linoleum floor is almost the same green as the kitchen floor her mother had polished with such anger-fueled vigour. An anger that had finally devoured her, though the c-word was the whispered cause of death.

The woman gives a little grunt as she tugs at the door.

Elsa closes her eyes and reaches for Paul’s hand. His grip is tight enough to hurt. It feels good, like an anchor.

It is both worse and better than she imagined, seeing Derk’s corpse.

Better, because this was not Derk. Though his shoulders had been broad, his legs long and strong, the qualities that had once mesmerized her had never been physical. The curiosity, ambition, humour, decisiveness, honesty, hedonism, even yes, the selfishness and arrogance – whatever concoction that made up the man, the carapace before her was entirely empty of it. This was Derk’s husk, lying on a stainless-steel tray.

And yet. These were the very bones that had once swung her up in their early dance of wild abandon; the fingers that had traced her collarbone. These were the eyelids she had once kissed, the mouth that had once made her moan. The large blue-veined head attached to the shrunken corpse of a man who had once towered over her looked so cold.

Almost involuntarily, Elsa rests a hand on his forehead, covering the still visible bruise. Slowly she runs her hand over his crown, as she had once soothed him, before she had found him too repugnant to touch.

The movement elicits a strangled sound from Paul. She turns to look at him. Her tall arrogant son is hunched over his hand, a thumb and forefinger in each eye. Elsa puts her arms around him, pulls him closer with a determination she has hitherto felt too intimidated to show, and as she feels her stiff board of a son soften into her, as she feels him succumb, his arms wrap around her, he rests his head in the crook of her neck and starts to cry like the baby he once was, and she too starts to sob, and they cling together, each a life buoy for the other in the wreckage of their lives, a river of loss flowing over Derk's indifferent corpse.

WEDNESDAY, 31 MARCH

“Sixty eight years ago today the State of South Africa was born through a remarkable act of reconciliation. Two groups of people whose interests had clashed and who had engaged in violent conflict came together to sink their differences and found a new united nation...What is needed today is the same courage, vision and largeness of spirit ... Unity is strength.”

—*Rand Daily Mail*, 31 March 1978

Ray

Ray rips open the bag of breadsticks and shoves them into a glass. He supposes the funeral has been a success, in as much as Derk's remains are finally interred in the manner Elsa wanted. The audience, while small, was pleasant enough about his eulogy, though the brevity of their compliments less than satisfactory. Generally, in fact, he is feeling rather cheated. An emotion that had flared up like teenage acne with the arrival of Paul – right now rooting behind him in the fridge like a feral pig – and further inflamed by that smooth-talking bastard, Gabriel. Derk had always said his brother was amoral, with mistresses spread like butter across the Cape peninsula. Well, Derk was no fool. Gabriel, a relative stranger, had walked in with his 'special' wines and his smarmy grin, and somehow usurped Ray. It was *his* bloody idea to go and see Derk's corpse. He'd been a *real* brother to Derk, had stood by him, despite the terrible things he had done. He'd loved Derk, worshipped him even. He wanted to look after Derk's wife and son, was ready to step up to the plate, but with Gabriel's arrival the goal posts had shifted yet again, and he was being treated like an interloper.

At least there had been a sheet and pillow on the sofa this morning. There was that. But Gabriel's intentions are clear. The soil above his brother's buried head not yet settled. It was disgusting, a kind of incest. He shoves the last breadstick in so hard it cracks in half. He cannot bear to think of it but he can see it all: Gabriel sneaking off the couch, tiptoeing along the corridor, past Paul's room, and in to Elsa's. Hastily he drains the pickled onions, slices the cheese into cubes, then stabs a toothpick into each. Surely Elsa will turn him away. Surely she can see that he, Ray, is the one holding things together? That Ray is the only one here capable of looking after her?

He bears down on her with his plate of toothpick snacks, a newly opened bottle of wine in the other.

'C'mon m'darling, something to eat,' he says, holding the plate in front of her.

'Thanks Ray,' Elsa whispers, picking out a cube. 'Honestly, I don't know how I would have managed without you.' Her smile, sincere, disarms him. He only wishes Usurper over there heard it, but everyone is listening to Ron, the account executive who had worked with Derk in Durban.

‘—by now I think it was the fourth time the client rejected the campaign. No rhyme or reason to it.’ Ron shrugs. ‘He just told Derk he had to go back to the drawing board because’ – Ron’s two fingers look like horns cleaving the air – “it didn’t feel it right”. Well, Derk just lost it. He dropped to his knees. We leapt up, thinking he was having some kind of seizure – but Derk was on the move – he was literally scrambling forward on his knees to where the client, in a state of shock, was sitting. Before any of us could work out what was happening Derk had sunk his teeth into the client’s ankle. Jesus, what a hullabaloo, you can just imagine. The client screaming, “Get this madman away from me”; Dan Brown the MD trying to restrain Derk; Derk shouting, “Keep treating me like a dog and I’ll act like one.”’

‘Did he draw blood?’ Nigel, who has lost the moustache, has laughed the loudest, even though he has heard the tale before.

‘No, but there were bruises,’ Ray, wanting to claim something of the story, though no one had checked the client’s ankle.

‘Ah Ray, good man.’ Gabriel holds his glass out for Ray to refill. Ray would like to slap the glass out of Gabriel’s hand, smash it to the parquet floor, but everyone is watching, so he splurts in a few millimeters before replenishing Elsa’s glass to the brim.

‘Those were the days, eh.’ Donald, another account exec Derk always loathed, is shaking his head. ‘Couldn’t get away with that kind of thing now.’

Ray puts the bottle down. ‘I don’t know. Depends on the dog. Derk’s bark made up for his bite.’

A ripple of laughter; ‘Amen,’ he thinks he hears someone say. Ray nods, glad to have the baton, though his hands feel clammy.

‘Let’s face it, Derk always got away with things no one else could.’ Tom Luddick, the visualiser Derk had dubbed Mozart. Tom had loved the nickname, not knowing that the caustic soubriquet had nothing to do with his talent but had been earned on account of his pernicky nature, and height (even in the platforms he favoured, Tom was never more than 1.4m).

‘What about that time he was told he had to wear a suit?’

Donald snorts. 'Derk, in a suit?'

'Exactly,' Ray glances at Reg. 'Poor old Dan Brown. Called Derk in, hauled him over the coals. Said he wasn't running a holiday camp, and that Derk was to report to work in a suit the very next day, like everyone else.'

'So Derk arrives at work on a Wednesday in a full wet suit, mask, snorkel, the whole toot.' Recalling the sight of Derk, the whites around the eyes, that piercing gaze framed by the goggles, Rays starts to laugh, setting them all off. Everyone has heard these stories but they are hungry for more, the verbal rafts on which to send the dead into the unknown.

'And Brown? What did he do then?' Reg asks.

'Nothing.' Ray shrugs. 'Derk had joined the Durban office when it was just a backwater, a depot. The creative material was produced in Joburg or Cape Town, and Durban just changed bits of type, cutting and pasting in the addresses for all the Natal outlets. But there were a few clients willing to listen, and Derk sold them work they could actually see affect their sales. After a while they started moving chunks of the national accounts to Durban. It wasn't just Derk of course,' Ray looks into his glass. 'We were a team.' He raises it. 'Here's to you, buddy, and if you're at the pearly gates, well, may you still take all the credit.'

Another snigger of laughter.

'Ah, the naughty corner.' A raspy voice in a black dress that is perhaps a little too tight, he recognizes her from somewhere. A little unsteady on her feet, she puts an arm around Elsa. 'Aren't you going to introduce me to all of these gorgeous men?' she says, like this is a birthday party. Gap in the teeth. He remembers her now.

He smiles politely. 'Actually, we've met before.'

'Really?' she says, with not a spark of recognition. Which, given that he once wasted an entire afternoon trying to coax an authentic performance from her, is galling.

It strikes Ray again how unfairly the deck is stacked. He has always loved women, has always respected them. Treated them like ladies, porcelain dolls, princesses. Yet his efforts are like early-morning mist, burnt away within seconds by the rising heat

of cads like Derk, men who would ruin them with the casual indifference of a dog raising a leg to take a piss.

‘I’m sorry,’ the ash blonde says, offering a limp hand. ‘Lynne,’ she says. ‘And don’t mind me, I have the worst memory.’ She laughs, a low throaty sound. ‘Half the time I forget what I’m about to say next. But you know what they say, if it’s really important, it’ll come back to you.’”

Ray looks at his empty glass. ‘Yeah, that’s what they say about true love too. Anyone for another drink?’

Gabriel

Gabriel takes the front door off the latch, closes it quietly behind him, the pilfered cigarette dangling from his lips.

He’d taken umbrage at Ray’s dig, had slipped away with the story he’d been waiting patiently to tell, the one in which Derk – visibly bored by the two girls they’d picked up in the new Blue Waters bar – had suddenly excused himself, leaving Gabriel alone with their vapid conversation, until an muffled tap-tap-tap had made him turn back to see his brother, fully clothed, eyes wide open, waving his arms in the great blue behind the glass wall that separated the pool from the bar. Derk, the mad octopus. He’d loved him then. He loves him now. Gabriel puts a hand on his chest. His solitary grief. He buried his childhood today. They are all dead now – everyone who once lived together in that house in Harrismith, that foreign faraway place that exists only as a moth-eaten memory, thin and tatty now, no living witnesses left to help fill in the growing holes. He lights the cigarette, draws deeply.

He’s always thought Ray a bad influence – a toxic mix of sycophancy and hedonism that had only fuelled Derk’s bad-boy bravado. ‘Don’t be such a sanctimonious prick,’ Derk had said. He sighs. Maybe Derk was right about that. Perhaps Derk’s intention had never been to ruin his marriage and compromise his career, this had merely been collateral damage, the consequences of his real intent: to ensure that Elsa was permanently beyond Gabriel’s reach.

Gabriel drops the half-smoked cigarette onto the unkept lawn, steps on it. Perhaps a walk around the block will clear his head. He glances back to check that he has closed the door, then notices a shadow in the Datsun that is parked in the driveway – Paul, sitting behind the wheel of Elsa’s car.

He opens the passenger door. ‘Mind if I join you?’ he says as Paul shoves something in the ashtray, the unmistakable smell of marijuana in the cab.

Gabriel doesn’t comment, just sits quietly for a few minutes, contemplating the dashboard. ‘You ok?’ he asks.

Paul looks away, irritated.

‘You know anything about Buddhism?’

Paul shrugs.

‘According to Buddha, pain can be a great teacher.’

‘Yeah?’ Paul is sullen. ‘Well bully for Buddha.’

Gabriel looks back at the house. ‘Anger can too. Be a teacher, I mean.’

Paul says nothing. Sticks his little finger in his mouth and starts to nibble the edge of the nail.

‘Anger teaches you what you’re afraid of. Anger, twin brother to fear.’

Paul looks at him sharply, spits out a tiny nail shred. ‘I’m not afraid.’

‘That’s ok. I’m sure you aren’t. You’re courageous, I can see that.’ Gabriel nods. ‘But if you were, you shouldn’t be ashamed of it. Fear is useful. Keeps us safe. It creates anger to protect us. Of course anger and fear are not what you want to be experiencing all the time.’ He looks at Paul. ‘But if you don’t feel safe, you don’t really have a choice do you.’

Paul keeps his eyes averted.

‘That kind of shit won’t get you through one day in the army.’

Gabriel nods. ‘Learning to survive and kill, fighting a war that isn’t even ours. My boys – your cousins...’ Gabriel shakes his head, decides against talking about how his sons, both pacifists, are living in exile. He smiles at Paul. ‘But you’ll be out soon. And then you’ll be in charge. You’ll have to decide what it is you want to do.’

Paul jiggles his knee, runs a hand over his crewcut. He looks at Gabriel, smiles. It strikes Gabriel again how much he looks like Elsa, as if she had conceived him without any help from Derk. ‘And what is it you think I should do.’

‘Forgive yourself. Love yourself.’

A humourless laugh from Paul who now churns the window lever up with a degree of violence. ‘Love yourself? Dad had no shortage of self-love.’ He opens the ashtray and removes the joint he’d hastily stubbed out when Gabriel surprised him. ‘And look where that got him.’

‘Your father was arrogant, true, but he was also very sensitive. That poem he wrote: *“The heart is mute, it has no voice, in pain its speech is tears. Could it play some instrument, the sound would pull the stars down from the skies, and hell itself would turn away...”* I always loved that.’ He turns to look at Paul. ‘You have a favourite poem?’

Paul shrugs, looks uncomfortable. ‘Not really. I’m not into poetry.’

Gabriel feels an ache spread across his chest. ‘Look, I don’t know what happened between the two of you. I’m sure he was difficult. But anger can be contagious, addictive even.’ Gabriel shifts his position, flexes his calf muscle to alleviate the ache that has started up in his knee. ‘There is a Native American parable in which a grandfather is explaining how violence and cruelty in the world came about. “It’s as if two wolves are fighting in my heart,” he says. “One wolf is vengeful and angry, and the other is understanding and kind.” His grandson asks, “But which wolf will win?” and the grandfather answers, “The one I choose to feed.”’

Gabriel runs a hand over his head. ‘I was told this by a wise man, a friend who lives in Cape Town. Perhaps, when you’re finished with the army, you could come and visit me.’

‘Cool.’ How eager he sounds, like a schoolboy. Paul looks away, embarrassed.

They sit again in silence. A bird, unseen, starts up, its notes filled with yearning. Paul keeps his face averted. ‘So how come we’ve never met?’

Gabriel sighs. ‘Something happened. A long time ago, just after you were born. An argument. It’s not something I can really talk about.’

Paul turns on him with a snarl. ‘That is such *bullshit*. You sit here spouting all this crap about feelings and wolves and shit, but when it comes to something real, you won’t talk.’ Paul opens the door, clambers out the Datsun. ‘This family is so fucked up.’ Slamming the door shut he strides down the driveway and into the street.

Gabriel sighs, gets out and sets off after him.

‘Wait! Paul, wait for me.’

Paul ignores him, forcing Gabriel to break into a jog.

They walk side by side in silence for a while, past the single-storey houses that line Elsa’s street, their postwar facebrick detailing and teak frame windows overlooking stubbly yellow grass and flowerbeds denuded by the frost. ‘Listen, it’s just complicated.’

‘Yeah, tell me about it.’

‘Ok, hang on. Wait up.’ Gabriel grabs Paul’s arm. ‘The thing is, your mom and I—we knew each other long before your dad did.’

‘I knew it!’ He points a finger at Gabriel. ‘You more than just *knew* each other.’ He looks at Gabriel searchingly.

Gabriel bites his bottom lip, dry and chapped from the Highveld air.

Paul nods his head as he looks around unseeingly. ‘So, is this the bit where you confess—’ He locks eyes with Gabriel, chin raised. ‘The bit where you tell me that you’re actually my father.’

Gabriel holds his gaze, and behind the cold stare and rigid stance he can see hope, little fingers creeping around the doorframe. Derk’s beautiful boy, so desperate to shed him.

‘I’m sorry Paul.’

Disappointment flickers across Paul's face. Gabriel reaches out to squeeze his shoulder. 'I'm so sorry.'

Paul knocks his hand off. '*I'm* not,' he sneers. 'I'm sure you aren't either.'

'Listen, Paul I think I know—'

'You know fuck all. Why don't you go back, comfort your old girlfriend instead. That's what you're really here for, right?'

Paul turns and stalks down the road. Gabriel keeps pace like a well-trained dog. They walk in silence for another block, until they reach a busy four-lane intersection, where Paul stops, shoulders hunched, and stares at the fast-flowing traffic.

'Where are we going?' Gabriel asks, his voice gentle.

'I don't know,' Paul says, the fight gone.

Gabriel puts an arm around him. Feeling no resistance, he pulls him closer, hugs him.

'Let's go home,' he says.

'Whatever,' Paul mutters, but he follows when Gabriel turns to trudge back up the street.

They have not been long, 20 minutes at most, but all but two of the cars have gone when they return to the house, the evening light painting the façade in a more flattering glow.

The front door is open. Aside from two figures entwined on the sofa, the house appears deserted.

'Elsa?' Gabriel calls out as he walks into the kitchen where Ray, wearing yellow plastic gloves, is stacking glasses next to the soap-sudded sink.

'Where the hell have you been,' Ray glares at Paul. 'Leaving your mother at a time like this.'

'Steady on, Ray.' Gabriel cocks his head. 'We're all just trying to get through this.'

Ray turns on him. 'That's bloody rich, coming from you. Where have you been the last few years? In fact, where have you been the last few decades?'

Paul feels the leash unclipping. He steps forward. 'I don't think that's any of your business, Ray.'

Gabriel pats Paul's shoulder. 'At ease soldier.' Seemingly oblivious to Paul's mood, Ray continues, a glass in each gloved hand. 'My business is to take care of your mother, which by rights should be yours, young man. Thank heavens one of us was prepared to stay by her side, or she could have given herself a nasty knock.'

'What?' Paul is taken aback, looks around. 'What happened? Where is she?'

'She's resting. And I'll thank you not to disturb her.'

Paul balls his fists, speaks through gritted teeth. 'Who the hell do you think you are, telling me what to do in my house?'

'Who am I?' Ray's voice has gone from belligerent to shrill. 'I'm the one who has kept an eye on her; I'm the one who chose the tiles on *that* wall, who helped her install *this* sink! I'm the one who's made sure there's food on the table, wine in the fridge and toilet paper in the loo. I'm the one who is actually taking care of her. Question is, who are *you*? You, who thinks of no one but himself. You're just like your bloody father!'

Paul feels the pain shoot from his knuckles to his shoulder as they connect with Ray's cheekbone, Ray who goes crashing down, smashing the empty wine glasses he was holding in his hand, the shard slicing into his arm.

Gabriel leaps forward, kneels down next to Ray who is bleeding profusely from the cut. Anger evaporated, Paul looks down at the old man, mortified. 'Shit,' he says, one hand covering the sore knuckles.

'I need a clean cloth, tissues.' Gabriel has his hand under Ray's head. 'Are you okay?'

Paul runs to the bathroom, almost bowling Elsa over in his haste.

'Paul? What's happening?'

'An accident,' he says, grabbing a towel and toilet roll.

Ray is sitting up now, supported on either side by Gabriel and Lynn. He hands the toilet roll to Gabriel who is holding a blood-soaked dishtowel under Ray's nose.

‘Tip your head back,’ Lynn is saying. ‘Not too far back; that’s right.’

Paul gets down on his knees and spreads the hand towel over the globules of blood, picks up two large shards of glass, his shame a large thumping sore he feels a burning needs to lance. Ray is right. He is no better than his father. He closes his fist around the glass, feels it break, the burning sensation as it slices into his palm a kind of relief. He opens his fist. A few beads of blood along the palm, a tiny surface wound. God, he is so useless, he can’t even cut himself properly.

‘Paul!’ He looks up. Elsa. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m sorry, ma,’ he says, and drops his head, trying to hide his eyes, trying to stop himself from crying, but it’s impossible, the water is pushing up behind his eyelids and he can hear his father’s voice, Derk saying, ‘Don’t be such a bloody cry baby.’ Elsa is next to him now and she has her arm around him but it feels awkward; he is embarrassed, so he wipes his eyes with the back of his hand and gets up as Ray is being helped up, blood-soaked wads of toilet paper like red droppings around their feet.

‘I’m sorry, man,’ Paul says.

Ray, two rolled wads of toilet paper sticking out of each nostril, glares at him. ‘Forgiveness don’t come dat easy,’ his voice muffled as he tugs off a plastic glove. ‘Think you can just say sorry, and dat’s it? Wohds are cheap. You need help—’

‘Okay, okay.’ Gabriel’s voice is soothing.

Ray slaps the yellow gloves onto the sink. ‘Apology *not* accepted.’

‘It’s been a long day,’ Elsa steps forward. ‘Ray, I’m sorry about... this.’ She waves a hand in Paul’s direction. ‘But can we just please all get some rest?’ She clasps her hands together, grateful when Lynn offers to drive Ray home, Ray who won’t meet her eye as he folds his coat over his arm and marches out, clutching it to his stomach like a waiter with an oversized napkin.

Elsa

When Gabriel rolls off her, having hammered away in the missionary position for a few minutes, she lies quite still, staring into the darkness – she'd turned off the lights and Gabriel had not objected – before abruptly sitting up and reaching for her cigarettes.

'You're a bad influence,' he says when she offers him the pack.

Again he takes the lighter from her. It's faintly ludicrous, this insistence on taking away her fire only to offer it to her again, but she submits; clasps her hand around his, the flame briefly illuminating her face as she pokes her cigarette in.

She leans back in the darkness, exhaling while Gabriel flicks the lighter on. Staring into the small flame, he asks, 'Are you happy?'

'Happy?' she asks. 'What, are you asking for a progress report; a mark out of 10?' He says nothing. Elsa takes another drag. If Derk wasn't dead already, this would surely have killed him, which makes this a six at best.

Gabriel's teeth gleam in the ambient light. 'No. I mean, are you happy with your life.'

'Ah.' Elsa removes the foil from the pack, folds it to create a makeshift ashtray. 'You and Derk, always asking the big questions.' She takes another drag. 'I don't think like that. You just put one foot in front of the other, stay busy, get things done. What's to complain about?' She rubs her eye, yawns.

Gabriel switches on the lamp and leans over to pick up a pillow. 'You know you could have had your pick,' he says, sliding it behind her back. 'You could have married a rich man. Why did you have to choose Derk?'

Elsa shrugs. 'I'd never met anyone like him. He reminded me of you, in some ways.' She draws her legs up. 'But even though you broke a few, you liked to play by the rules. Derk was so totally free. Being with him was liberating. Anything could happen when you were with Derk.' She pauses to carefully ash the cigarette in her foil cup. 'I suppose it helped that he was living in another city. He wrote me such letters. Each one accompanied by a poem. He had this theory about loss, that longing for an absent other was the only measure of love.' She glances at Gabriel. 'He wrote that life was unbearable without me. "*How can a leg remove itself, go trudging round in streets*

where you don't go; How can a hand fly off and touch what is beyond your reach...”

She looks at her hand, the blue veins so prominent now, her father's hands. ‘No one ever needed me like that.’

They sit in silence then, Gabriel lost in his own reverie.

Elsa rests her chin on her knee. ‘Do you ever wish you could turn back the clock, start afresh?’

‘No, I don't want to start again.’

‘Does that mean you have no regrets?’

‘Of course I do.’ He turns to study her. ‘Doesn't everyone?’

She nods. ‘I wish I'd been a better mother to Paul. I should have protected him more.’

‘I'm sure you did your best. In some ways that's exactly what brought the whole house of cards tumbling down all those years ago’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, you wanted to check on Paul, remember? You were prepared to walk home in the rain to make sure he was ok.’

‘That was hardly what brought down the “house of cards”, as you call it.’

‘I know, but the point is, you were looking out for Paul. So don't beat yourself up about him.’

He reaches out and runs the back of his index finger along her breast, sagging now, the once pert nipple a distended teat. She feels surprisingly unselfconscious as he appraises her. ‘You need to start taking care of yourself, Elsa,’ he says, tracing the finger from her ribcage to the sharp protrusion of her hipbone. ‘You've been on your own too long.’

She snorts. ‘I like being on my own. You should try it sometime.’

‘Ok.’ He stops stroking her, reaches across her for a cigarette. ‘Maybe I will.’

‘What about the actress you said you’re living with? Emma, is it? Isn’t she looking forward to welcoming you home?’

‘Oh her.’ Looking at him then she feels a rush of real affection. Gabriel’s raffish smile, the cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth – it anchors her, this aged verisimilitude of the man she’d bedded 20 years ago. ‘Emma’s what you property moguls call a bit of bridging finance. I’m waiting for a real investment opportunity to roll in.’

She punches his arm. ‘That’s the problem with you Gabriel. You appear to be kind and considerate when actually you’re just a prize shit.’

‘Guilty as charged,’ Gabriel says with a grin.

‘Well, I don’t care about your bit of bridging finance but don’t you dare let Paul down. He says you invited him to come and stay with him in Cape Town when he’s done with the army. Will you have place for him?’

‘Of course, I’ll make a plan.’

She nods. ‘It will do him good. But let him down, and I will kill you with these bare hands. I’m not joking,’ she adds when he just smiles at her. ‘I’ll be done for murder.’

‘A mother and an uncle, lost in one fell swoop. After all he’s been through,’ he mock-teases.

Elsa yawns again. ‘Good night Gabriel,’ she says. They exchange a chaste kiss. Like an old married couple, they settle into position, each facing away from each other. Gabriel switches off the bedside lamp. It is comfortable and comforting, together but alone in the dark, and Elsa is wondering whether she should say so when she falls into the chasm of a deep and dreamless sleep.

THURSDAY, 1 JUNE

“Iedereen wil voortdurend verseker wees dat hy nodig is, dat daar ‘n sekere plekkie is
wat net hy kan vul.”

— *Die Burger*, 1 Junie 1978

[“Everyone wants constantly to be assured that he is necessary, that there is
certain place that only he can fill.”

Elsa

Out of order. The handwritten sign, taped to the lift door, suits her mood just fine. Back in the belly of this brute monstrosity, so utterly devoid of nature, she is reminded of how the last shreds of affection for Derk calcified in this concrete tube. The arrow light finally flickers off. The doors slide back to reveal that the lift floor is a ruler length below the foyer level. Elsa holds her breath. The fear is visceral, but she cannot face 52 flights of stairs, so she gingerly steps down into coffin-like box, half expecting it to bounce, a stomach-churning anxiety in her belly.

Gabriel had offered to stay on and help her pack up, but she woke this morning wanting him gone. It had been a pleasant enough goodbye, with promises to stay in touch and write with news, but she had watched him retreat with no sense of loss. Even saying goodbye to Paul had been easy, tempered by the sudden warmth of his embrace. Ray would stay away for a day or two; hopefully longer. She was fond of Ray, but he needed to understand: she did not need to be rescued, and she sure as hell wasn't about to become his happy ending.

She checks again. Yes, Derk's keys are there, in the bottom of her handbag. The last time she'd walked this concrete corridor she'd left her front door keys – both copies – on the glass coffee table, a silent message to Derk that she would not be back.

The lift doors open, and she steps up onto the 52nd floor, the curve of the brutal concrete hive visible through dirty steel frame windows.

She hesitates outside the familiar front door, Derk's keys in hand, poised to slide into the lock. She leans her forehead against the door, steadies herself, then unlocks the door.

The flat smells of Derk – burnt pipe tobacco, the inside of a drawer, an old unopened book, an undertow of rot. Preternaturally quiet, like a graveyard. For the first time since she last saw him alive, Elsa feels his presence.

'Hello Derk,' she says, closing her eyes. She waits for a few seconds. Feeling silly, she shrugs off her coat.

The flat is neat – other than a solitary wineglass on the table, a pool of crusted red in the centre, there is no sign of life. Derk, fastidious to the end, it seems. Elsa heads up the staircase to the room she and Derk once shared, pulls open the cupboard. Derk's clothes are arranged just as she remembered – according to function and colour; every shirt hanger identical in shape and facing the same way; every shoe neatly partnered. She pulls open the top drawer – socks, neatly rolled and colour coded. Every drawer reveals the same neat order. The second last is filled with neatly typed papers, annotated with pen. No sign of a will. She reads the top page.

I'm glad I'm not too like my father

And my son not

Too like me

Since we all make fuck-ups of our lives

And are defeated in the end

It would be too much to see

The same old fuck up

Again. The last line is illegible, crossed out; the word 'again' is scrawled along the top. Underneath this sheath of papers, she finds a pile of photographs.

Derk had discouraged the taking and displaying of photographs, 'the handmaidens of sentiment', so she has not seen these for years, had not in fact realized that he had kept them. Spreading them across the small desk she sees herself sitting at the Bistro 67 table that Derk had claimed as his. She remembers the photographer who had approached them, a fresh-faced young man with a cleft chin who said he was augmenting the meager earnings made from the crime beat. Unusually he had not asked them to smile; had in fact taken the photograph of them gazing at each other, an almost tangible current of energy passing between them. Derk's one hand is looped through her fingers; on the other he rests his chin. Next to this is a black and white photograph of Derk on his haunches, his lean and lithe body curled up on itself, intently focused on a small braai grid that he has balanced directly onto a few carefully arranged logs. Gabriel, deep in conversation with Alice, is leaning against a

willow, a tree that probably still weeps on the banks of that river, indifferent to the picnickers gathered at its base, their lives ethereal as butterfly wings. There are a few more of her and Derk, and then there is one that makes her want to cry. Paul, no more than two, naked and wet, is clasped against Derk's chest. His head is back and he is laughing at something his father has just said, his father who is gazing at him with the same electrifying current of love. Elsa puts the photograph against her chest. She feels the kernel of something open, like a seed yearning for the sun finally unfurling a delicate shoot. The ardent promises made and broken, love offered and denied – at the root there had been this.

The ringing phone pulls her out of her reverie. Elsa dreads the explanation she will have to give, but unable to ignore the insistent sound she answers it, still holding the photograph of Derk and Paul.

‘Mr du Toit?’

‘No, this is his wife.’ She can't quite bring herself to use the word widow.

‘Ah, Mrs du Toit, thank goodness. We have been struggling to get hold of Mr du Toit. My name is Philip Graff. We have compiled an anthology of the best contemporary South African poetry for the Department of Education and would very much like to include Mr du Toit's poem *One Often Sees A Peach Tree Grow*. There will of course be a royalty fee. If Mr du Toit is in principle happy to accept, I will arrange for the contract to be posted today.’

The déjà vu is so strong she feels almost dizzy. ‘I'm sure Mr du Toit will be delighted,’ she says, then gives him the address. She doesn't want to jinx it by telling him Derk is dead, not yet.

Elsa puts the phone down. She takes a deep breath. Looks around the apartment, a part of her still somehow expecting to see Derk. She closes her eyes. Banishing the image of the bruised and vanquished man in the hospital bed she addresses the man in the photograph. ‘Derk, are you here?’ she whispers, but there is nothing but silence.

Out where the railroad scores the Free State veld

One often sees a peach tree grow. On land

*That's flat and bare and brown, a tree like this
Delights the eye – especially in the spring.
Its blossoms form a fragrant faint-pink cloud
That hangs, like hope, above the starkness of
The railroad line. How good its roots should cheat
The iron and ash and stones, and filth spat out
By trains. How good – when man's misguided plans
Produce so much that makes for Death – how good
That Life should seize on careless human acts
(A peach stone, here, flicked from a passing train)
To yield, inexorably, more life and loveliness.*

Afterword

The characters in this novel are fictional. However, I have plundered certain events from the lives of my mother and father, Maureen and Philip de Bruyn, and twisted them to suit my plotline. Philip's brother, Godfrey de Bruyn, was marketing director of KWV but definitely not a Broederbond member, and they were certainly reconciled by the time of Philip's death. Alice and others are entirely fictional.

All of the poetry is by Philip de Bruyn, who would have wanted to be remembered as a poet rather than for the successful advertising career that derailed him (and wasted almost a decade of mine). He published two anthologies, the latter self-published after the first was a commercial failure.

The Broederbond induction was inspired by reading *The Super-Afrikaners* by Ivor Wilkins and Hans Strydom, while Paul's experiences in the SADF was inspired by *Troepie: From Call-up to Camps*, Cameron Blake's collection of excerpts from interviews with former conscripts in the South African Defence Force.