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This Mountain of Clouds

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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

Signature: _____ Date: _____

for the professors and the field assist

University of Cape Town

Alone

I wake up to a cold tongue licking my face. In the slow transition from sleep to awareness, I believe a dog is licking me. I struggle to get away, but I seem to be tied up. Everywhere I turn there are more tongues, each as cold and wet as the first.

I open my eyes. Grey, wet canvas billows around me, continually sticking to my face and peeling away. My sleeping bag fastens my arms to my side.

I realize two things right away. The first thing is, I'm the world's worst tent builder. I haven't been camping since I was a kid, and I guess that wasn't enough to teach me how to put up a tent the right way, even a silly, tiny, one-man tent like this. It must have collapsed sometime during the night. I struggle to unzip my sleeping bag and wiggle out of the tent.

The second thing I realize is that it has rained. This is the southern hemisphere. Mid-June is early winter, not early summer. It obviously rains at this time of year because although the pre-dawn sky is clear, my tent is soaked. It turns out it's not as waterproof as it promised, though to be fair, it's entirely possibly I missed some important assembly tip that would have covered it better.

Everything I own is damp. I pull my backpack and my sleeping bag out of the soggy tent to assess the damage. The ground is wet, and I have to unzip my sleeping bag all the way and lay it out like a blanket to give myself a dry space to unpack my bag. I strap my headlamp to my forehead because it's not light enough to see much yet. I unbuckle the straps of my backpack and carefully take out the contents.

My clothes are moist at the edges, but this backpack has a rubber coating on the bottom and the top flap, so damages are minimal. My toiletries are still sealed in their gigantic plastic bag. 'You don't know what they'll have there, I hear Africa is quite poverty-stricken,' my mother had said. If the airport was anything to judge by, I'd say they'd be able to replace everything in this bag and give me some things I've never heard of. I feel a bit foolish with the giant bottles of insect repellent, anti-malaria pills, anti-just-about-anything-a-mother-could-imagine pills, and a bottle of pepper spray. Even a million miles from home, I still feel like a prisoner of her worry.

The plastic bag has protected the toiletries. But I'm not worried about the toiletries. I'm worried about my notebook. Some people bring novels or games or puzzles on trips. I bring my notebook. I love to draw. My parents bought me a new set of pencils when I left. It was a 'congrats on finishing high

school' present and a 'we're so glad you chose higher education as your next step, even though it is only community college' present. It wasn't a surprise. I had to tell them the brand and the softness and the thickness. They just got me the whole set. The pencils are beautiful, sharp, and untouched. And tucked next to my notebook at the bottom of the bag.

They are safe. I sigh in relief, thankful that I wrapped them up in a black garbage bag. 'Just bring it, you never know when you'll need one,' my mom had said. She was right. The pencil case is dry, as is the notebook.

I open the notebook to the first page. It is blank, just like all the other pages. I think about drawing, but I'm not really in the mood. I've slept on the ground after a 30 hour flight, a confusing six hour bus ride and another hour of walking. There's no coffee and it's too dark to see anything by natural light, and everything I own is at least slightly damp. A more realistic task to consider is to pack up and get moving to my ultimate destination.

I pack up by the light of my headlamp and consider my current location. I am alone. Alone with a one-man tent in a field across a ditch from a poorly paved road. If you follow that road, it lands on the N2, a major highway that heads east away from Cape Town along the coast. At the intersection of this nameless road and the N2 is a decked out gas station, complete with nice bathrooms, several fast food joints, a small grocery store, and playground overrun by chickens. Buses come several times a day and deposit road-weary travelers there, the only building for several miles in either direction.

I waited there last night for about an hour. No one ever came. So I walked, which was a stupid thing to do. Somewhere in the kilometers to miles conversion I messed up and I found myself here as the dusk was gathering, not a house in sight. So I pitched my tent, which I now squeamishly squeeze the liquid out of before shoving it roughly into its bag.

I hop the ditch and start walking toward the distant mountains. The stars slowly wink off as the sky brightens with the dawn. The faint glow of the sky casts the land in relief, as if the earth is made of shadow and the sky of substance. I would like to believe that it is beautiful, but I can't stop thinking about the cold, wet bag I'm carrying and the long walk ahead of me.

The Job Interview

Professor Lindsay does not look happy when I introduce myself. In fact, he looks distinctly unhappy.

“I beg your pardon?” he says.

“I’m here for the job,” I say, again. “The job as field assistant.”

“The job as what?” He is clearly enraged, though I have no idea why. He wiggles his eyebrows and frowns. His entire appearance - puffed up, white-streaked hair, big pointy nose, and eyebrow hair so long that they come to peaks over his eyes - reminds me of an owl. A big, angry owl.

“Mariette,” he says. He turns on the secretary lady who welcomed me in. “Can I see you in my office, please?”

He storms into his office. Mariette excuses herself with a worried smile. I kick my bag when the door closes behind them and sit down in the nearest chair to fume. I’m really starting to hate this trip. A night in a soggy tent followed by a morning of hiding from vehicles. My mother warned me about hitchhiking, so I carefully ran from the road whenever I heard or saw a car. And I’m glad I did. Just about every vehicle that passed was a pickup truck carrying blue-suited convicts in the back. And now, safely at my destination, the man who is supposed to be employing me completely denies that the job I have been offered even exists.

Mariette is the only good thing about my morning. She was warm and welcoming when I showed up at the Info Centre. She apologized for failing to organize some kind of transportation, claiming to have mixed up the dates. She made me tea and gave me a few stale biscuits before the angry owl man showed up.

I hear him shouting. “But I didn’t ask for a field assistant!” I can’t hear what Mariette is saying, but I can hear her lilting voice take a tone of reprimand.

I glance around the Info Centre, trying to find some distraction from this irritating reality. There isn’t much to look at. The walls are covered with an odd assortment of animal posters and faded maps of Africa, South Africa and the Western Cape region.

“But I don’t want a field assistant!”

I stand up to inspect the Western Cape map, trying to pinpoint where I am. I find the gas station

and follow the road north toward the mountains.

“But I don’t need a field assistant!”

I find approximately where I slept – nothing for miles – and the small dot of Germane. Above the dot is a long line of mountains stretching east from Germane. A name I can’t quite get my mouth around arcs across the range – Wolkeberg. The way Mariette says it, it sounds like ‘polka’ with a ‘v’ – Volkaberg.

Mariette comes out of the room. She looks disheveled. Greying wisps of hair have come out of her tight, high bun, and her eyes are wide. But she smiles.

“Professor Lindsay will see you now now.” I hesitate, wondering at the repetition. She goes to her desk and takes bobby pins out of the drawer. She straightens her hair and hums to herself, a tune that reminds me of a conquering soldier returning from battle. I try to guess her age. She looks older than my mom but younger than my grandparents.

“Don’t be shy, my angel,” she says, “He’s not terrible.” She smiles kindly, eyes and brow wrinkling in reassurance. She doesn’t understand. I’m not afraid. I’m mad. What the hell is going on anyway?

“Come in,” says the owl man when I knock. He is seated at a large table covered with maps and papers and photographs. There are photographs and newspaper clippings covering every inch of the wall. It reminds me of those telephone poles in Portland that have had such a buildup of posters stuck to them that they now resemble trees with peeling paper sheets as bark.

The content of this bizarre wallpaper is fairly morbid. The headlines of the articles are either ‘Such-and-Such Person or Animal Killed by Feline Predator’ or ‘Such-and-Such Feline Predator Shot Dead by Farmer’. Most of the photographs are of mammalian predators and other animals, dead and alive.

I can see from the way he disdainfully looks at me over the rims of his glasses that he is sizing me up. I know he’ll see my red hair first. Then my plain t-shirt, patched, grubby jeans and never-been-used hiking boots.

“A bit small for a field assistant,” he mutters, leafing through the litter of papers on his table.

“Sorry, they were out of regular-sized field assistants.” He pauses in his shuffling. I didn’t mean for it to be a joke, but I see him smile slightly.

“Sit,” he says. I sit in a leather chair on the opposite side of the table. “Now tell me, what do you want?”

I want him to stop being so passive aggressive and vague. I want to be cut out of whatever drama is building in this bizarre little office in a nowhere town somewhere in South Africa.

“I want to know what the hell is going on,” I say. “I’ve flown all the way from the United States for a job that seems to be non-existent.”

He takes off his glasses and rubs his hands over his face.

“Yes, well, you see,” he says, “Mariette thinks I need a field assistant. Which I don’t!” He says the last part loudly toward the door. “In any case, what is done is done and I can’t really send you home, can I?” The question is almost rhetorical, but I recognize its hopefulness, a plea for permission to do so. I stare him down, arms folded against my chest.

“Well then,” he says. He sighs and smiles weakly. “Welcome to the Carnivora Feliformia Protection Centre, or the CFPC if you insist on an acronym. I am Professor Lindsay.” He stands up and reaches his hand across the table.

“I’m Erica,” I say, shaking his hand. He manages to force another smile and sits down again.

“I wanted to call it the Carnivora Feliformia Information, Outreach and Protection Centre, but Mariette thought it would be too much.” He says this toward the door again, but it isn’t as loud as the first time.

“The question I pose to you is this,” he says. “What interest do you have in the CFPC?”

“I want to work for the CFPC as a field assistant doing whatever I can to help the cause of conservation of big cats in the Western Cape.” I have this memorized from my application. I spoke with impassioned jargon in the mission statement I sent to Mariette, but I didn’t really care what job I got. I was just looking for an opportunity to get the hell out of Portland. I didn’t have enough money to go just for a holiday, so I applied for various employment or paid volunteer positions all over the world - au pair in Denmark, farm hand in Brazil, non-profit something-or-other in India, and many other random things. Though, if I’m honest, this was my first choice. I’ve always been interested in big cats and like the idea of living in a wild area, even if my tent-making ability is sub-par.

“Alright,” he says. “And tell me, what exactly do you have to offer to our little program?” He says ‘little program’ as if it is the biggest, most important program in the world.

“I’m organized, I can follow instructions, and I’m willing to learn.” This is also a fallback statement from my application. Professor Lindsay does not look impressed.

“Do you have any experience with working in the field? Any background knowledge of South African ecosystems?” I shake my head no. “Animal behavior?” Again I shake my head. “Predator/prey interaction?” Nope. “How old are you?”

“Nineteen,” I say.

“Oh dear,” he says. His horned brows nearly merge in exasperation. “That’s a bit young.”

“There was no age requirement in the application.”

“Perfect,” he says.

“Your eyes can get stuck if you roll them like that,” I say.

“Excuse me?”

He looks shocked. I am appalled. I can’t believe I just said that.

“Sorry,” I say. “Just something my mother would say.”

He squints at me.

“Right. Do you at least like hiking and the outdoors?”

“Yes, I definitely do. I’m excited to be in a place that’s so wild.”

He studies me for a while. Apparently he doesn’t find what he is looking for because he excuses himself and leaves the room to speak with Mariette. I’m left staring at a photograph of a mangled baboon in front of me on the desk.

Professor Lindsay’s face is pale when he returns.

“Miss Erica, I’m really not sure if this job is for you. It requires an intimate knowledge of the landscape, flora and fauna, not to mention the social complexities of South African society. And besides that...”

“Listen, Professor,” I say. “I’ve lived at home my whole life. That makes me naïve, but it also makes me passionate to explore and learn. It doesn’t matter what subjects I took in school or what grades I got or where I grew up. What matters is I am passionate enough about this job to have followed it all the way here and to be standing in front of you now. Please, just give me a chance.”

The ineloquence I heard in my speech must have been overlooked, because he treats my statement as something that contains charm and integrity. He thinks about it for a while, and then nods stiffly.

“Alright, Erica, you can stay,” he says. “But please keep in mind that this is a trial period. If I find you dim-witted or unwilling to work, you will be let go. Do you understand?” The owl man says this with curiosity, as if his very words are a test of my character.

“Yes, Professor. I’m sure you won’t be disappointed.”

Convicts

Germane is what most people would call beautiful. It has that appeal that small, old towns share - historic buildings, tall trees, and an aging population. The main road, the only paved road, has a church and a post office, three or four restaurants, a few art galleries, a pottery studio, a grocery store, and this Info Centre. The buildings along the road look perky and clean, with landscaped gardens and chalkboard signs advertising the daily specials.

I stand outside the Info Centre, the bastion of the pretentiously named Carnivora Feliformia Protection Centre. Mariette and Professor Lindsay are inside continuing to battle. At least I know that I have secured my position as field assistant. Professor Lindsay had me sign a hand written document that holds me accountable to several things - I will not be a nuisance, I will always do the dishes, and I will not gossip or otherwise share information. It's a pretty random list. There is nothing specific about what the job entails or how much I will work or when I will have time off - the normal things involved in a contract. But I sign anyway. Signing also means that I get lodging, food, and a weekly allowance that I can save or spend as I please.

"Are you ready?" says Professor Lindsay from the door. His lean, hunched body is shouldering a backpack.

"Sure," I say. "Where are we going?"

"Shopping," he says.

We get into the white pickup truck in the parking lot of the Info Centre. It is the kind of 4x4 you see in reality adventure shows on television. It has the CFPC logo printed on the side - the full name arcs over the abbreviation, with a pair of leopard eyes staring out from underneath. Professor Lindsay starts the car and drives out of Germane.

"Where are we going? Isn't the store that way?" I say when we reach the end of town. I point back to the Germane General Store, with an elegantly painted signboard and a stack of ornamental hay bales.

Professor Lindsay snorts in disgust.

"Definitely not, that place is far too expensive."

We drive out of town on the paved road, the road I came in on. We head west along the mountain range. I'm struck again by how abrupt the mountains are. The surrounding farms roll easily over the hills

until they come up against the steep cliff faces of the mountains. The farms climb for a short while, but end at an imperceptible line. It's either some unconscious respect to the mountain or simple laziness.

We stop for a group of men in blue suits, the same kind of people I spent my time avoiding on my early morning walk. They pile into the hooded bed of the truck, smiling menacingly through the window.

"Isn't this illegal?" I ask.

"Isn't what illegal?" he says.

"In America, it's illegal to give convicts rides in your car."

His expressive owl brows go from contemplative stewing to confusion to mirth in a matter of seconds. He can't even help hiding a smile and then an outright laugh. It echoes in the car. I'm momentarily pleased that I have made the owl laugh.

"Erica, are you *dof*?" he laughs. "These aren't convicts, they are contract workers and day laborers. The blue overalls are the cheapest, most common thing for laborers to wear." He smiles, snickering to himself. "Convicts," he says. "Hah!"

I want to tell him that I'm not *dof*, but I don't really know what that means. I want to remind him that it's my second goddamn day in South Africa. I want to explain that in California and Oregon, convicts perform manual labor tasks such as clearing brush from the side of the road. They wear suits that look just like the ones these guys are wearing, except they are orange instead of blue. And convicts are usually black, also like the group we're riding with now.

I want to tease him back or at least be able to laugh at myself, but I can't. Instead I unclip the radio that is attached to the top of the cab.

"Beam me up, Scotty," I mutter into the radio.

"Could you repeat that?" the radio replies.

Professor Lindsay grabs the radio and yells at me. "What do you think you are doing?" He checks the settings on the radio, then responds. "That was only Erica, checking to see how the radio works."

I hear the crystal laugh of Mariette. "Are you sure it is not a cry for help? You are being kind, Vincent?"

"I believe so," he says, glancing at me.

"Ag, well, you should be more certain."

He hangs up the radio and adjusts the rear view mirror. "You are very lucky, that it was only set on channel 1. If it was set for channel 3 you would have contacted all fifteen some-odd farmers in all of greater Germane."

Yes, I am lucky. So very lucky to be stuck with this jerk for all three months of my summer break.

Shopping

We turn off the road and follow a sign for Spieëlfontein. The turnoff deposits us onto an aptly named Main Street. Spieëlfontein is a dirty place. There are two wide lanes of run down cars, belching 18-wheeler trucks, garbage, smoke, noise, and people. People and cars lurch haphazardly through the intersections. Pedestrians don't bother to cross at cross-walks or traffic lights. Instead, they scamper when there is space, finding the straightest line possible from the starting point on one side of the street to the end destination diagonally down the street. The cars travel at a variety of speeds, from fast to so-slow-it-must-be-broken. Even the odd donkey carts are faster than the run-down cars.

Professor Lindsay does not balk or blink at the milieu. He navigates the gaggle of people and machinery with the elegance of a local. It makes me briefly miss my home town. In Portland, I know exactly how to get where I want to go and exactly what to expect when I get there. Here I know nothing.

We park the car outside Super Spar. The not-convicts disembark and a few drop coins into Professor Lindsay's hand. He shoves the coins into his pocket without looking at them and trudges toward the store with his backpack.

"Professor!" A man calls to us from a nearby storefront. He's the only other white person I can see besides myself and the professor.

"Ruan, so nice to see you," says Professor Lindsay. They shake hands. The man has a cigarette in his mouth and a carton of cigarettes under his arm. He reeks of smoke and sweat.

"Erica, this is Ruan. He farms in the Wolkeberg. One of the only intelligent farmers in the area, I must say."

"Ag, Professor, this is not so much a compliment. I shouldn't let you say it."

"You are far too polite. If only you didn't let the others bend your ear so much."

Ruan shrugs. Then he turns to me with an outstretched hand.

"Pleasure to meet you, Erica," he says. He smiles widely, cigarette stuck firmly in his teeth. He is a small, plain man with the kindest face I've ever seen. His handshake is firm but gentle and slightly greasy.

"How long will you be here?"

"I'm here for three months."

"Three? This is a long time to be far from home. Will you be staying in Germane?"

“She’ll be spending most of her time at camp with me,” says Professor Lindsay.

“Hah,” says Ruan. “Erica, come visit my farm. It will be a nice break for you. We would love to have you.”

“Thanks, I’ll consider it.”

We wave him off toward his truck. The crumpled exhaust pipe coughs to life and he chugs off down the obstacle course of a road.

The chaos inside the store reflects the chaos of the street. Attendants lazily pack plastic-wrapped vegetables into the open fridges. Barefoot children run in the aisles playing a game or maybe looking for something. Everyone is talking to everyone else as if they haven’t seen each other in ages, even though it is impossible that all these people are close friends.

They speak a language that is loud and confusing. Sometimes it clicks. Other times it squeezes out a harsh growling vowel from a partly closed throat. I’m surprised to find English words mixed up in the noise and wonder if there are several languages being spoken. I stand close to Professor Lindsay, hoping no one speaks to me. I’m sure I would mistake English for something else and feel foolish.

“Erica,” says Professor Lindsay. “Will you please get custard?”

“Sure,” I say. Not that I know where to find the custard or how to ask for directions to where it is.

I start cruising the aisles. I can’t help but compare this place to the clean, high shelves and spotless tiling of an American supermarket. Here I pace the grimy floors, through an unfamiliar and disproportionate array of products, looking for anything familiar. There are cans and tins of strange meat products, which outweigh the limited range of canned vegetables - beans I’ve never seen before, but no pinto beans, refried beans, or black beans. There is a whole section of milk, long-life milk, boxed up like the cartons of soup I would get at Trader Joe’s. This milk is so pumped full of preservatives that the expiration date pledges that it will last months instead of days.

They have chosen to put the custard in this aisle. I miss it the first time I walk past. I expect the little packets of powder from home, like ones for making Jell-o. But this custard is in a box, like the milk. There are three different brands and four sizes of each.

I grab a big carton of something and go to find Professor Lindsay. He is in the line at a cash register. He sees me and waves.

“Oh dear, I thought had I lost you,” he says, with a hopeful smile.

“Here’s the custard,” I say. He takes the box, raising his eyebrows.

“Is this all you got?” he says.

“Yup,” I say, looking at the display of foreign candy bars next to the cart.

“This definitely will not do,” he says, leaving the line and disappearing down the aisle where I had found the custard. I feel pretty useless, but at least I get to help by unloading the cart onto the conveyor belt. I smile at the lady at the cash register and start plunking down items.

The first things that I take out are four steaks. This is followed by three large coils of sausage, two whole chickens, about twenty packets of instant mashed potatoes, two cucumbers, a block of cheese, a bag of tomatoes, and a large sack of butternut squash.

Professor Lindsay returns with four boxes of custard - a different brand than the one I had chosen - and two big cans of peaches.

“Are you sure you didn’t forget anything?” I ask. I hope he has forgotten many things. He made it sound like this was the weekly shopping trip. He can’t expect me to live on steaks and instant mash.

He looks at the conveyor belt in horror. “Bread!” he squeaks, and runs off again. He returns with four loafs of brown bread, dooming me to a diet of meat and starch.

My only hope for something more is when we leave the store. He has me load the truck while he runs across the street. He crosses with the same panicked ease as the rest of the population. I watch his backpack bob nervously among the cars. He goes into a store - Spieëlfontein Drankwinkel. I imagine vegetables, grains, and pastries.

There is a group of girls in green, checkered school uniforms sitting at the bus stop. One of them puts up her hair in a way that is so familiar it stops my heart. She looks nothing like her but that simple movement makes me feel nauseated. I have to look away. I hope Professor Lindsay comes back soon.

When he comes back, he lays his backpack carefully in the back between the other grocery bags. It makes a clinking noise.

“What’s in the bag?” I ask. He glares at me.

“It does not concern you,” he says. “And remember what it says in the contract about gossip. It would be inappropriate to tell Mariette that we stopped here on our shopping trip.”

It doesn’t answer my question exactly, but at least I can assume he didn’t buy vegetables.

Camp

When Professor Lindsay says we are going up to 'camp', I remember the place my family camped on the Russian River when I was a child. It was always bitter cold and overstuffed with hot dogs and marshmallows. I think of that camp and transpose the image onto what might be in store for me - a clear spot on the ground with pine trees, a river, maybe an outhouse and a few permanent barbecues. My mornings will be much the same as this morning, waking up with the sides of a one-man-tent stuck to my face, without coffee, and grumpy. I'm so excited that I could just cry.

We head east out of Germane and promptly hit gravel. We rattle along the contours of the mountain, plastic bags of food rustling and shifting behind us. The furrows in Professor Lindsay's horned brow dissolve as he concentrates on navigating the bumps and potholes. He's silent for the majority of an hour and a half, occasionally humming some indistinguishable tune.

I watch the mountains from the jolting frame of the car window. From where I pitched my tent by the side of the road, they looked like an impenetrable wall of rock and sparse vegetation. From the cab I can see valleys that slice back into the mountains and occasionally mountain peaks beyond the immediate range. If someone were to walk into the mountains, they would be able to lose themselves completely in the folds of stone.

"Here we are," says Professor Lindsay. I can't see anything camp-like about this rocky rubble, but the turn in the road must signify that we are close.

Just as I brace myself for months of sleeping on rocks, I see a building at the end of the road. It's a plain white cottage with a decently kept garden in front. There is a carved sign above the door that reads Camp Feliformia.

Professor Lindsay gets out of the cab and takes a large ring of keys from his pocket. There are heavy metal bars on all the windows and a metal grid over the door.

"Is this a prison or something?" I ask. He rolls his eyes.

"It's for the baboons," he says. "The clever buggers like to steal food from the kitchen," he says. He unlocks the gate, then the bolted door. "Bring the packets out of the *bakkie* and start putting things away."

I find myself in the middle of a good-sized kitchen with concrete floors and counters. To the left

side of the door there are two fridges and a massive shelving unit. To the right there is a large gas stove and a sink. Two wide counters extend from the walls, effectively partitioning the kitchen from the rest of the space.

I bring in the bags of groceries and my backpack. I put things where I think they should go and then explore the rest of the cottage. Beyond the kitchen, there is a kind of lounge area - a couch, an overstuffed chair, and a coffee table arranged nicely on the right side of the room. The left side is empty. It looks like it is used for presentations of some kind because there are a bunch of folding chairs leaning against the wall and a pull-down projector sheet above them.

A brick fireplace is built into the wall of the lounge. On either side of the fireplace are bookshelves. The books on one side seem to be mostly sciencey. They are about fynbos ecology, plants of the fynbos, sun bird behavior, predator/prey interactions, history of South Africa, geological features of the mountains in the Western Cape. There are also tons of books on small mammals and feline predators. The shelves on the other side contain books that are more distinctly literary – several copies of something called Jock of the Bushveld by a Sir Percy Fitzpatrick, On the Origin of Species by Darwin, Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, and A Tale of Two Cities and other novels by Dickens. There is also Thoreau, Emerson, a few Russian authors, and a copy of the Bible. The bottom shelf holds a row of faded yellow National Geographic magazines.

This is the extent of the cottage – kitchen and lounge. There is nothing else besides the long curtains covering the windows that run the length of the far wall. Maybe I'll be stuck in a tent after all.

Professor Lindsay comes in through the open front door and inspects my unpacking job. He pokes a few things into place, but is otherwise pleased.

“Most of those aren't mine,” he says, pointing to the non-sciencey side of the bookshelf. “Marianne gives them to me to read, which I've told her not to. I'll never read them. Feel free to take anything you like.”

He points to a radio that is mounted to the bookshelf. “This is the camp radio, like the one in the *bakkie*. The names and organizations are written next to the numbers, which is hardly necessary since I have them all memorized. I suppose it is useful to you, though.” I look at the list – Cape Parks, Mountain Rescue, Police, and a list of individual names. I doubt I'll ever have to use it, but it is a useful tool to have since we're so far away from help.

“And now,” he says, “I must show you my mountain.”

He brushes open the curtains at the back, revealing a gated sliding glass door and the view. He quickly unlocks the gate, slides the door open, and ushers me outside.

The mountains rise up steeply on either side of this valley. A light layer of clouds brushes the tips of the mountains making them appear to go on forever. Water has cleaved a deep channel that runs to the left of the buildings, leaving haphazard pillars of stone that the water could not be bothered to clear away.

There is a light of wonder on Professor Lindsay's face and a fleeting glimpse of honest emotion. Between his expression and the intense beauty of the mountain, I feel like laughing, the way a child does when an adult tells them something far too serious.

"It's pretty cool," I say. "Where do I sleep?"

The rapture on Professor Lindsay's face dissolves into his regular gruff complexion. He grunts and indicates a path that leads down to a long building above the steep banks of the stream. I shoulder my backpack and follow him past a fire pit with benches around it and a set of stone stairs that lead up to a small building partly obscured by bushes.

"These are the dorms," says Professor Lindsay, opening the bars, then the door of the long house. "Showers are on the left, the bedrooms are down the hall. Pick whichever room you like, but try very hard to be tidy. You'll be moving out for a few days at the end of the week to make room for a research team that will be using the camp." He hands me a ring of keys. "This one is for the kitchen, this one is for the dorms, and these are for the rooms in the dorms. Always lock the doors and the bars. Dinner is in an hour. I'll be in my house if you need anything. Always knock."

I watch him go up the steps toward the top house. I don't know if I like him yet. I wonder if he is incredibly smart and lucky to live up here or if maybe he's just a grumpy old man who is a little insane to be here by himself.

I wonder what that makes me. My feelings are split. I'm elated to be on my own. I worry though. I hope my parents are okay without me.

The Mad Owl Man

I watch Professor Lindsay as he hikes up the trail. His spindly legs stick out from his shorts. They are muscular legs, but they look completely out of proportion to the huge pack he is carrying. He has a wide-brimmed, khaki hat perched on his head, which is the same color as his shorts, shirt, and pack. From behind he looks like a round, tan bird with stork legs.

I look down at my own legs, freckled and smooth. And painful. I don't like hiking nearly as much as I thought I would. I've hiked before, but nothing like this. Besides our occasional camping trips on the Russian River, we would take walks in the Columbia River Gorge and Forest Park. Those trails were nicely laid, with sufficient climbing and a lot of shade from the big trees. Some of the trails were paved, like the tourist-filled paths to view the waterfalls. None of them were like this – gravel, uneven rock, and deep sand.

We've been climbing straight up the valley from camp for at least two hours and, from what I can tell, we are nowhere near our destination. My calves are burning, my ankles hurt and my shoulders hurt. The winter sun is bright, and I can feel it burning my fair, unprepared skin.

Even though it is warm in the sun, my skin prickles. The emptiness of this wild, unfamiliar trail has a heaviness to it that makes me suspicious of some more tangible presence. It's not likely that anything is following us, but I feel somehow haunted, like there will be something there if I turn around.

I glance over my shoulder. Nothing is there. I continue to walk, watching my feet. I almost run into Professor Lindsay when he stops. Luckily, I walk so slowly that he probably wouldn't notice if I bumped into him.

"What do we have here?" says Professor Lindsay. He heaves off his pack and starts going through the paraphernalia hanging around his neck. He finds his camera and takes off the lens cap. "We'll need a picture of this one." He shoves the camera as close to the ground as possible, squinting at the screen.

"What is it?" I try to look over his shoulder to see what the fuss is about. Eventually he moves and I see several little indents in patch of mud.

"*Aonyx capensis*, one of very few in this whole mountain range. I haven't seen spoor this far up the valley before." He takes at least ten photos of this little scrape in the mud before handing me a notebook. "Take down these measurements please." He takes a pair of calipers from his shirt pocket and measures

the length and width of the print. Then he fumbles for the GPS. I don't know how he can keep track of all the things hanging off him. He has a radio at his hip, pens and measuring devices in the left shirt pocket, the camera around his neck and right arm, and the GPS around his neck and left arm. He takes the GPS and records the location of the print. Then he puts on his pack and continues along the trail.

We walk in silence until the trail levels out. Professor Lindsay takes a metal stake and a mallet out of his bag and starts pounding it into the ground on the opposite side of the trail.

"Erica, will you fetch the camera please?"

I want to point out that the camera is around his neck, but decide to check the pack first. I find a plastic case about as big as a laptop bag. Inside are two plastic boxes side by side. I pick one up and see that there is a lens in the center of the box and an arced piece of lighter plastic underneath the lens. I turn the camera over and see a number four on the back. The other one is labeled with a three.

"Do you want Three or Four?" I ask.

"Three," says Professor Lindsay. He finishes hammering and proceeds to attach the camera to the rod with zip ties.

I am quickly coming up with a list of things that annoy me about Professor Lindsay. One thing is that he never tells me what's going on. All he said this morning was that we were going for a hike. When I asked where, he pointed up the valley. When I asked where again and pressed him to be more specific, he said we were hiking to the ridge at the top of the valley. I asked how long it would take and he said that complaining wasn't becoming of a lady.

"So, is this why we are hiking?" I ask. "To put up these funny cameras?"

"It's not only to put up the cameras. We are also inspecting the quality of the trail and taking note of general mammalian presence." He finishes setting up the camera and puts on his pack. "Shall we continue on?" he says, already moving up the trail.

"Do I have a choice?" I ask. He ignores the question.

There is a patch of rocks before a steep climb up. From here, the path lies in folds, switching back on itself in an immense zigzag to the top of the ridge. Professor Lindsay takes off his pack again and sits down. He waits for me to catch up and looks at me expectantly.

"Well?" he asks.

"Well what?" I say.

"It's one o'clock and you have the sandwiches."

I take off my pack and take them out. I hand Professor Lindsay two plastic-wrapped sandwiches and put my two on the rock beside me. I watched him make them this morning. I've never seen so much

mayonnaise and so little tuna on a sandwich.

“So,” I say, unwrapping one of my sandwiches. “What’s with the camera?”

“Sorry?” He looks utterly confused by my question. Perhaps my American intonation and sentence structure did not register. I try again.

“Why did you put the camera there?”

“This trail is used by a variety of animals, like that otter we saw earlier.”

“We saw an otter?” I ask. “I don’t remember seeing any animals on the trail.”

He sighs.

“The footprint I found earlier belongs to a Cape clawless otter, species name *Aonyx capensis*. We've also seen many *bokkie* prints. These spoor indicate that this path is a thoroughfare for animals.” I look around me for *bokkie* prints and animals. All I see are rocky cliffs and strangely colored vegetation.

“Looks pretty empty to me.”

“Empty?” he says. “This is the fynbos, a biome of the Cape Floristic Region. There are 9,600 species of vascular plants which occur in the Cape Floristic Region, 6,200 of which do not grow anywhere else in the world. Besides the plants, there are 300 species of birds, 100 species of reptiles, 40 species of amphibians, and 90 species of mammals among which are leopard, jackal, baboon...” He continues to list the mammals before moving onto the birds, amphibians, butterflies, and lizards. Most of the names he mentions are the Latin names. I wish I had one of the guide books with me to see the pictures. I squint hard at the mountainside, finding it hard to believe that there is anywhere near that amount of life.

“So, the camera is to tell you which of those animals live in this particular valley?” I say.

“Of course. It also gives us an image of the animal, which in itself holds information of extraordinary value. By tracing individuals, we can estimate the population size in particular areas.” He puts down his sandwich and takes out the other camera. “You see, this is a motion sensor.” He points to the curved piece beneath the lens. “When an animal walks past, it captures a picture of the creature. When we retrieve the photos in a few weeks, we will be able to see the image and the time stamp associated with the animal’s movements. If we match this with the GPS location and the other pictures we have, we will have a snapshot of the mammalian demography of the entire Wolkeberg.”

“Hmh,” I say through a bite of sandwich. I chew it slowly, blanching at the too-much-mayo texture of the tuna. “Are we putting the next one at the top of the ridge?”

“Yes, of course, what else would we do at the top of the ridge?”

“I don’t know, you barely tell me anything about what we are doing.”

“I thought it was obvious,” he says, wadding up the plastic wrap of his second sandwich and

putting it in his pocket. “Now finish your meal. We need to get to the ridge in the next hour or we won’t make it back to camp before dark.”

He starts up the trail. I take my time, eating my sandwich slowly and massaging my neck. I decide to annotate the notes in the notebook, adding *bokkie* to the list of 'animals/tracks sighted', and adding another animal. I write down MAD OWL MAN.

The next hour of steep climbing kills my knees. Between physical exhaustion, jetlag, and fear of being left behind, I start to stumble. Professor Lindsay is nowhere to be seen and my internal monologue begins to take over reality with each turn in the path.

This isn’t really Africa, is it? I mean, it can’t be. Where are the rolling plains of grass spotted with little trees? Where are the animals roaming wild, far away from civilization? *Turn*. And where are the natives with their loincloths and spears? I mean, in Africa you are supposed to be afraid of being watched, darted, and cannibalized or something. *Turn*. Oh my god, did I really just think that? What a horribly racist thing to imagine. *Turn*. Am I being followed? I really feel like I’m being followed.

By the time I reach the ridge, I am so sure of the mountain ghosts that I am actually relieved to see Professor Lindsay.

“You certainly took your time,” says Professor Lindsay. “I’ve been waiting for you to take some notes.” He is crouched on the ground beside another metal stake which he must have just whacked into the ground. He is holding his calipers.

“Porcupine,” he says. “*Hystrix africaeaustralis*. Pace length 20cm, print length 4 cm, print width...”

He calls out measurements as I write them down along with the GPS location. I give him the other camera which he straps to the stake. Then he goes off to scout the ridge for more signs of life. I start to draw, illustrating the MAD OWL MAN entry. I draw an owl with crazy eyebrows and an open beak spouting numbers. I work very hard on getting the eyebrows just right, having them curl out at the ends in a way that is both intelligent and intimidating.

When I’m finished, I take in the scenery. The 'V' of the valley directs my eyes to the tiny roofs of camp. Beyond camp, the mountains continue to flow south until they meet with farmland. The freshly wet earth of the recently plowed soil covers the hills. There is a gentle rise beyond which I cannot see. But I know somewhere there is the N2, then more farms, another shorter mountain range, and the Indian Ocean.

“It’s a beautiful *kloof*,” says Professor Lindsay. He comes to stand beside me.

“Yeah, it sure is.” I’m not sure what a *kloof* is. Maybe he means the view or the camp or even the valley. I want to tell him that I’m disappointed. It is so far away from what I imagined Africa to look like

that it is perplexing at best.

“Come, see the other side,” he says. I follow him away from our vantage point, continuing up the gentle slope of the ridge. The ridge reaches a plateau and then starts to slope down. We are on edge of another valley. This one runs west to east, with the highest peaks on the eastern edge. I can hear the sounds of water below but can’t see a river or waterfall. That would require continuing over the edge of my vision to find a better view. But I don’t have enough knees left to venture that far.

“What’s over the next mountain?” I ask, pointing to the opposite side of this valley.

“The Wolkeberg continues for another 50 km as the crow flies before it reaches the Karoo.”

“Is that a desert or something?” I ask.

He sighs, shaking his head.

“It might be in the future, but it is very alive and beautiful at present,” he says. He turns back toward the camera trap and his pack. “Come, we should head down, it’s getting late.” He shoulders his pack and reaches his hand out to me, expectantly.

“What?” I ask.

“The notebook,” he says.

“Oh, right.” I fumble for the notebook in my bag. “Um, sorry, I didn’t write down the animal name. What was it again?”

“Porcupine,” he says, obviously annoyed. “*Hystrix africae australis*.”

“How do you spell that? And how can you tell?” I feign interest, trying to keep him occupied enough to not notice my fierce scribbling as I try to cover up the MAD OWL MAN entry and illustration.

“I’ve been in these mountains long enough to know what porcupine tracks look like. And besides, here’s a quill.” He stoops down and picks a long needle off the ground, holding it up for me to see. It is a little bit longer than my hand. It is thick, about the width of a pencil in the middle. It tapers at both sides, coming to a sharp point at one end and a softer cap at the other. The blunt half is cream colored and the pointed half is brown.

“Can I keep it?” I ask.

“If you’d like,” he says. He gives it to me and I put it in my pocket. I hand over the hastily edited notebook and we head off down the valley. Or maybe it’s a *kloof*.

To Do List

It's easy to get caught up in daily life and think that the time I have here is infinite. But I only have three months and there are things I've told myself I will do in this precious time away.

I write a to-do list in the back of my notebook to remind myself what they are -

- Call my parents once a week. No more, no less.
- Forget about her for good.
- Thirty sit-ups a day.
- See a leopard, free in its natural environment

I illustrate the to-do list with small leopard drawings. I try a bigger drawing, but can't get it quite right. I have to see and understand a subject before I can capture it perfectly. Until I see a leopard, I won't be able to do that. I would love to see any animal actually (otter prints and porcupine quills don't count), but a leopard would be extra special.

Fear of Falling

I think Professor Lindsay is trying to kill me. I arrive at this conclusion when the rock underneath my left hand comes loose and I am forced to scramble to find another handhold. I find it and pause to breathe, considering the evidence. He makes me wake up at 5am every morning by violently ringing the huge bell that hangs outside the kitchen. He makes me eat sludgy, flavorless oatmeal and instant coffee for breakfast, overly-mayoed tuna sandwiches with cucumber for lunch, and butternut squash, instant mash, and vast quantities of undercooked red meat for dinner. Every day I have to endure the bumpy drive to the head of the next trail and spend the whole day hiking. Not only that, but I am so badly sunburnt that my skin is falling off in sheets. And now this.

“How is it?” Professor Lindsay asks from above. I look up and see him leaning over the edge of the cliff to check on my progress. His round, beige, bird body with a billion instruments hanging off it looks particularly heavy from here. I swear he’s going to fall on me. I suck my body as close to the cliff as possible.

“Erica? Is everything alright?” he asks again.

“Super,” I say, as brightly as possible. It comes out sounding tight, probably because I am trying in vain to use my stomach muscles to grab onto as much of the cliff as possible.

“You know,” he says. “You don’t need to hold the wall quite so tightly. There’s plenty of room for you to walk normally.”

He’s probably right. The ledge is at least three feet wide, two feet at the narrowest, but I am determined to continue my mission with both hands firmly on the rocks, facing and leaning into the mountain for support.

“Can you see the cave?” he asks.

“No,” I snap, not even moving my head to look. If I even glance ahead, I’ll catch sight of the ground far, far below. Mesmerized, my head will gravitate toward the terrifying view. My pack will pull gently as I lean back. I will become unstuck from the cliff face and plunge to my death, the death Professor Lindsay has devised for me. I swear he is doing this on purpose.

“Erica, do you see where I am standing?” he says. I look up, making sure not to see anything besides what is above my head. “The cave is right here.” He points and I almost follow his finger down,

but stop myself, looking immediately back at the rocks in front of me. “Do you think you can make it?”

“Sure,” I say. I continue my side-stepping along the ledge. I reach for places to fit my hands, then move my feet to follow. I eventually get into a pattern and move a little more quickly until I am almost below where Professor Lindsay stands.

“Erica, you have plenty of space now if you want to let go of the wall.”

I carefully glance over my shoulder. The ledge has widened considerably in the last few yards. There is now so much space behind me that I can’t see over the edge. I breathe a little sigh of relief and let go of the wall.

The granite shelf is about as big as the patio at my parents’ house – large enough for an intimate, adult dinner party, but too small for all the friends I wanted to invite to my Sweet Sixteen. The far end of this patio is closed with a crumbling granite slope. Professor Lindsay said it was too steep and the stones were too loose for me to get to the cave on that side. Instead he made me come along the ledge. It hadn’t looked so bad when I started down. I fought so hard for him to let me set up this site that I wasn’t about to back down when the gentle slope got steeper and the path became a ledge.

I try not to think about the return trip and distract myself by inspecting the cave. It’s small, just large enough for me to climb into if I were on my hands and knees. The edges are jagged, but around the base it is smooth and sandy.

I squat down and stick my head into the cave.

“Hello!” I cry. There is a brief echo, then the rushing sound of wings. My eyes adjust to the darkness just in time to see a bat careening toward my face. I fall backwards out of the cave just as it swerves around to retreat into the darkness.

“Erica, that is completely irresponsible. There are animals living in that cave!” Professor Lindsay says. I can’t see his eyebrows from here, but I’m sure they are twitching. “Now stop *faffing* and set up that camera. Hopefully it hasn’t been damaged from you falling on it.”

He continues to mumble to himself as I take my pack off and remove the camera equipment. We’ve set up six of these together in the past three days and I’m getting pretty good at it. The problem with this site is that I can’t hammer a stake into a rock ledge. Instead, I tuck the camera into a small gap in the rocks just beside the cave, angling it outward so it faces the patio. I make sure it is wedged securely in the rock face. When everything is set up, I step in front of the camera. I can see the infrared light glow faintly as it switches on. Professor Lindsay assures me this is enough to light up the darkness just enough to get a good video of an animal that passes by.

“No, no, no, that won’t do,” Professor Lindsay cries from above.

“What?” I ask. “Looks fine to me.”

“This is absolutely and completely unacceptable.” I look at my handiwork and see absolutely nothing wrong with it. Any animal entering or exiting the cave will be captured by the camera. That’s what we want.

“What’s the problem?” I ask.

He glances down a few times, then away, as if ashamed of what he sees. I check everything again. Then I stand in front of the sensor to activate another video. The faint light turns on and Professor Lindsay goes berserk.

“You stop that this instant. How horribly inconsiderate. Take it down immediately.”

He really is trying to kill me. Why else would he have sent me out on the most dangerous possible camera installation all by myself and then call me back without completing the mission?

“You tell me why and then maybe I’ll take it down.”

“Can’t you understand why this is so offensive? Imagine how terrified those animals will be when the light turns on. In open spaces, where all the others are placed, they are allowed to run if they are spooked. But right outside their front door? It’s like sending the paparazzi! They may even abandon their home in order to escape the light. It’s just not right, we’ll have to put the camera somewhere else.”

“Are you saying I came down here for nothing?”

“Yes, you did,” he says. “Now pack up!”

I start to pack up. A large flake of sun-burnt skin falls from my shoulder when I put on my pack. It lands at the sandy mouth of the cave. I see something underneath the sand and pick it up.

“I found a porcupine quill,” I say.

“How big is it?” I can hear him rustling for the notebook.

“It’s about as long as my pinkie. And it’s really thin. Like pasta.”

“Pasta?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Like one of those thick spaghettis.”

“Interesting.” I’m not sure if he finds the size interesting or my description. “Well,” he says. “You had better come up now. We have to hike further along to find a different spot for the camera.”

I maneuver along the cliff back to the path. The fear of falling, combined with my anger about being there for no reason, puts me into a cold sweat. When I reach the path, I lie down in the rocky dirt, trying hard to breathe. I close my eyes to calm myself.

I remember climbing over the railing of the 2nd floor balcony as a child. I was reaching for something when the balance of my weight tipped forward slightly. I started to fall. She was there. She

grabbed the back of my shirt and pulled me back to safety.

I take the memory by the neck and throttle it. I methodically bury it deep in my psyche. I tell myself what I tell myself every time – just stop thinking about it.

A shadow falls across my face. I open my eyes. Professor Lindsay looks down at me.

“Are you alright?” he says. I give him two thumbs up. “I suppose the good news is you won’t have to go back that way again.” He starts to walk away.

“I also saw a bat,” I say. He stops and turns around. “Just thought you might want to write it down in your little book.” He nods, taking out the notebook and writing something down. Then he marches on up the trail. I slowly rise and come to standing, brushing off my pants. I finger the porcupine quill in my pocket. If he tries to kill me again at least I’ll have something to defend myself with.

University of Cape Town

Feeding the Animals

It's mid afternoon and the sun is shining through the windows into the lounge at camp. I rise from my seat on the couch and go to unlock the metal gate and slide open the glass door just a smidge, letting a breath of cool air into the stuffy room. It's the first day I've been here in the afternoon and I'm surprised at how bright and sunny the camp is. Professor Lindsay and I are up before dawn every day and we get back to camp sometime after the mountains have cut off light to the valley. But now we've finished setting up the dozen or so camera traps, and tomorrow a group of researchers is coming to use the camp for the weekend. And I have to move out to make room. Professor Lindsay has arranged for me to stay with Mariette in Germane. He's staying here to manage the camp. I did a silent dance of joy when I realized I wouldn't have to see him for a few days.

A baboon hooting in the distance reminds me that it's lunch time. According to Professor Lindsay, they come down into the valley around noon to forage and drink from the river. I haven't seen them yet. Maybe now that I have time at camp during the day I'll get to see one. It will be the first animal I've actually seen, besides the birds and a few ants and beetles.

I go to the kitchen to survey my dining options. Of course there is bread, tuna, and the last of a cucumber. Thank god we're out of mayo. It's all I've had for the last week. Now is my chance to be creative.

I stand in front of the shelves of dried and canned food. Beans, rice, flour, pasta sauce, milk - it's depressing, really. I would kill for a garden fresh salad or a gourmet deli sandwich with thinly sliced turkey and artichokes.

I pick up a jar of pasta sauce and a jar of herb seasoning off the shelf. I open the tuna and shake it into a bowl. I spoon some of the sauce into the tuna and add a liberal sprinkle of herb seasoning. I taste it. Not bad. Just needs some salt. Now some pepper. I ditch the cucumber and just focus on making the tuna as tasty as possible. Then I have a fantastic idea. I could grill the sandwich on the stove.

I've never lit a gas stove before. Professor Lindsay does the cooking and I have an electric stove at home. I've heard horror stories about people blowing up houses, burning themselves, or at least losing their hair. I decide to ask the Prof.

I go to the sliding door and stick my head out. Professor Lindsay is nowhere to be seen. I don't

want to disturb him when he's in his house. But I don't want to ruin my food either. I hesitate before deciding that I can probably light the stove myself if I try.

After some frustration, I manage a flame of decent temperature. I smother both sides of the sandwich with butter, adding some thinly sliced onion at the last minute. After the cast iron pan is hot, I throw on the sandwich. The thing sizzles as it hits the pan, filling the room with the smell of frying carbs. This will be the tastiest meal I've had in weeks.

I slave over the flames, turning the sandwich over every few minutes, careful not to burn it or let the tuna escape. It takes a good fifteen minutes of careful frying until I have the perfect sandwich. I lift my creation from the pan and place it gently on the plate. My mouth waters, but I manage to wait for it to cool. I take a bite. Heaven. Butter drips down my chin. I take another bite. Amazing. But if I don't get a napkin I will drown. Professor Lindsay believes napkins are wasteful and refuses to buy any. I have to go quickly to my room to grab some toilet paper, promising the sandwich that I will be back very soon.

I get my toilet paper and stop in the bathroom to wash my face. I'm half-way across the patio when I hear a crash from inside the kitchen. I run to the sliding door. The jar of pasta sauce is smashed on the floor and there is a hairy creature sitting on the counter. Its evil little eyes stare out at me from its uncannily human face. It's eating my sandwich.

"No!" I yell. "Put it down!"

The baboon looks startled, as if it hadn't registered me as a living creature until I spoke. It barks - *WAH-oo!* - and stands up on the counter. It is still holding my sandwich.

"Hey!" I yell louder. "Get OUT!"

I start to come in. It quickly hops off the counter and runs at me, baring its huge, ugly teeth. I scream and stumble backwards out of the doorway, tripping over the step and landing on my back. It is still after me and I scramble backwards. It steps out of the doorway and immediately yelps in pain. It rubs a spot on its arm and looks confused. I am confused too. Then I hear the *pew* of a pellet gun making a single shot. The monster cries - *WAH-oo!* - and holds his shoulder. It starts to move slowly away from the direction of the shot. I look for the source and see Professor Lindsay coming down from his porch holding a gun. He aims again, sending another perfectly aimed shot whizzing into the flank of the retreating baboon. I'm impressed with his accuracy. The baboon flees, sandwich in hand.

Professor Lindsay looks mad. As he should be. That stupid baboon ruined everything.

"Erica, I cannot believe you didn't lock the gate. I've told an uncountable number of times that the gate must always be closed. And you, you *dof*, arrogant, American child... *Ag!*"

He storms into the kitchen to survey the damage. I get up slowly and follow him.

“There’s baboon *kak* on the counter,” he yells. “And glass all over the floor, and tomato sauce tracked through the lounge. And besides all of that, you could have been bitten. I would have had to drive you all the way to town and found a doctor and all of this just before the researchers come and... oh dear.” He suddenly breaks from his angry tirade to look at me, concerned. My hope is for any kind of sympathy, but this hope is shattered when he says, “I hope the baboon didn’t stand on any of that glass. That could produce a serious wound and infection, hindering its ability to provide for itself. Oh dear. I must try...” he trails off, following the line of tomato sauce across the room, trying to differentiate between tomato and possible blood. Finally satisfied that there is no blood, he steps out of the house and slams the gate behind him. With the sliding glass door open, he sternly shakes a finger at me.

“I hope this teaches you a lesson. Now get this cleaned up.”

I look for some kind of soap and maybe a mop to clean up mean old Professor Lindsay’s kitchen. But when I catch sight of the empty plate next to the baboon poop on the counter, my lip starts to tremble. Stupid baboon. That was my sandwich.

Rubbish

I wait outside the kitchen door for the garbage man to collect me. The black bags of garbage start to stink when the sun hits them. Professor Lindsay hauled them out of the locked room where they keep the cans when I was packing. I have been made to watch over the bags to make sure the baboons don't tear them open. I haven't heard them hooting this morning, so I don't think they'll come down. Nevertheless, I have two big rocks clutched firmly in either hand. I'll be ready to defend myself this time.

I hear a rumbling in the distance and then the faint sound of music. The music gets louder, and I see the dust rising from the approaching vehicle. A dirty, lime green pickup truck comes into view. I chuckle to myself. That's right, stupid American, you go ahead and imagine that a real garbage truck is going to come all the way up into these empty mountains just to collect your small pile of bags.

The truck crawls slowly up the road until it almost reaches where I am standing. Then it turns around and backs up so the bed of the truck is close to the garbage bags. A small, dark-skinned man with a brown baseball cap hops out of the cab.

"Goeiemôre, Juffie!" he cries, extending his hand. *"Ek's Rubbish."*

"Uh, hi," I say. This must be something about the garbage, he did just say rubbish. "Are you here for the trash?" He looks at me, astounded.

"Don't you speak Afrikaans?" he says.

"Nope," I say. "Just American."

"Yoh!" he says, putting both of his hands on his cap. "She's American! The professor doesn't tell me these things! Let's start again." He walks back to the car and gets in. He turns on the car, blasts the music for a few seconds, then turns the car off. He gets out of the car and walks toward me.

"Good morning, lady!" he says. "My name is Rubbish!"

"Rubbish?" I say, shaking his hand.

"Yes, lady, Rubbish."

He grins. He's missing quite a few teeth, but it doesn't make his smile any less charming.

"Well, Rubbish, I'm Erica. It's nice to meet you."

"Good," he says. "Come in, come in." He motions me toward the pickup. I grab my bags and climb in.

The seats are covered with lime-green cloth. It is fuzzy and dreaded, like a shag carpet. The dashboard is upholstered in the same material. Nestled in the matted snarls of green, a collection of bobblehead dolls and figurines stare out at me. Hanging by a noose from the rear-view mirror is a troll doll with a cone of green hair that matches the shag.

There is a reverberating thump as Rubbish throws the garbage bags into the truck bed. The bobbleheads sway in anticipation. He comes around to the driver's side and hops in. "*Daar sy!* We go now!" He slams the door and turns on the car. Tinny music pumps out of the speakers. The bobbleheads jump in action, shaking and jiving as we bump away over the dirt road. The music cuts out in a few minutes when we hit a particularly large rock at a high speed.

"It's ok, it will be back," he says, patting the stereo.

"I like your car," I say.

"Ah yes, Kermit is a good *bakkie*."

"What's a *bakkie*?" I ask.

"This is a *bakkie*." He pats the steering wheel, also covered in green shag.

"So it's a pickup truck."

"Yes, lady."

"Then what's a *bokkie*?" I ask. He laughs.

"A *bokkie* is a little antelope," he says, letting go of the steering wheel to make little horns with his fingers. "Isn't that right, *bokkie*?" Taped to the middle of the steering wheel is a picture of a crying deer surrounded by flames. It has a slogan on it in English that says, 'Look what you've done! Please put out your cigarettes.' If Smokey the Bear had posters that morbid, I doubt anyone would visit the national parks at all let alone light fires in them.

"Where did you get all these?" I ask, pointing to the bobbing dancers on the dashboard.

"Friends, relatives. They know I like them. Now I have so many! Here, you can have this one." He pulls off a wooden porcupine with a huge, bobbing head. It is covered in painted toothpicks, striped white and black.

"Really?" I say.

"Yes, it is a gift. Welcome to South Africa! How have you enjoyed camp?"

"Professor Lindsay is a little strange," I say. By strange I mean rude and unsympathetic.

"*Yoh*, he is that, hey?" says Rubbish, navigating the *bakkie* down the steep section of gravel. The bobbleheads nod in sympathy. "Did you see any animals?"

I tell him the story of the mean, vicious baboon that stole my sandwich. He laughs so hard that he has to wipe tears off his face.

“*Yoh, yoh, yoh*, that baboon is so greedy! What a funny story, lady!” We go over a bump, and the radio comes back on. I’m so startled that my hands go immediately to my ears.

“We can change it,” he says, leaning for the dial.

“No, no, it’s fine.” I try to turn the act of covering my ears into a funny dance move. He laughs again, baring his mostly-toothless grin

“You should meet my nephew! *Yoh*, he is one who can dance.” Rubbish jiggles his hips and shoulders a little, trying to emulate the moves of his nephew.

“Where does your nephew live?”

“In Spieëlfontein with his mother, my sister. I live just down the road.”

“Do you like Spieëlfontein?” I ask.

“It is nice, hey? All my family is there. Sometimes work is not so good and life is hard, but that is what life must be.”

“I don’t know if I could live that close to my family...”

“*Yoh*, your poor mother. What will she do? Her child is so far away! There will only be worry.”

“With my mother, there only ever is worry,” I say.

“You must make sure to call your parents when you are in Germane. What will they do if they do not hear from you?”

“Yeah, I probably should.” I really don’t want to. I tend to regress around them, becoming the child they want me to be. But I can’t not call them. That would be horrible. I’m already breaking my once a week promise. It’s been about two weeks now, including travel.

“You promise,” he says. He sticks out his hand. “You promise Rubbish you will call your parents.”

“Alright, I promise.” I wind up in a convoluted handshake that ends in a kind of snap. Rubbish sings to the radio for the rest of the trip into town, teaching me some of the words to the songs.

Aloe

There is an aloe plant outside of Professor Lindsay's office window. It isn't like any aloe I've seen before. I'm used to the starbursts of thick, succulent leaves that the lady next door keeps in pots on her porch. This aloe is the size of a small tree. It has a thick trunk, no branches, and super-sized, green leaves the size of my arm. From the center, there are branching stems covered in red flowers.

I draw it into my notebook. Then I draw a stag, like the ones we have at home. I draw his antlers and find a red pen on Professor Lindsay's desk. I cover the antlers in red flowers so they look exactly like the aloes outside. By the time I finish, I've relaxed enough to make the call.

I enter the number from the phone card onto the land line. The voice from the receiver informs me that I have to dial the country code, then the area code, then the number. I dial, silently cursing Rubbish for insisting on taking me to the store for a phone card before dropping me off at the Info Centre.

Ring. Please let it go to voicemail. *Ring.* Please let it go to voicemail. *Ring.* Please let it ...

"Summer speaking."

"Hey, Mom." There is a silence and a slight echo as my voice fights the thousand mile journey to Portland.

"Sweetheart! It's so good to hear your voice! I've been so worried about you. There's been uprisings in Kenya."

It takes me a while to parse what she has just said. Then I reply, "But Mom, I'm not in Kenya."

"How would I know that? You only ever told me you were going to South Africa. You didn't tell me which country."

"Mom, South Africa..." I dig my palm into my brow in frustration. "Never mind. I'm fine. I'm in Germane. It's a town in the Western Cape Province of South..."

"Wait, let me get a pen. Grey! Talk to your daughter!" She doesn't bother to take the phone away from her mouth when she yells. "I'll be right back sweetie."

There's a rustling and then my dad picks up the phone.

"Hiya, Rick!"

"Hi, Dad." I hate it when he calls me Rick.

“What’s good in the hood?”

“Um, nothing, I mean, everything.” What does that question even mean?

“That’s good to hear. Oh, here’s your mother.”

“Hi sweetie, what’s the name of the village again?”

“It’s called Germane. And it’s a town, not a village.”

“Oh good, and what are the people like in this town? Are they nice? Are they taking care of you?”

I tell her about Mariette and Professor Lindsay and assure her that they are keeping me very safe.

“That’s good to hear. It doesn’t mean you should ever let your guard down, though, right sweetie?”

You take that pepper spray everywhere, ok?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Okay.”

There is a silence on the line. I can feel her anxiety dissipate and she begins to ask the questions normal people would ask. “How is your trip? Are you making friends?”

I explain that I haven’t had the opportunity to make many friends but that Rubbish is going to introduce me to his nephew.

“Oh, that’s a pretty name.”

“It is?”

“Yes, of course. Except I think of Robin as more of a girl’s name. Speaking of girl’s names, your second cousin Rita just had a little girl and...”

I smile to myself and shake my head. I listen to my mother babbling on about family news. The front door of the Info Centre opens. I lean over from my seat and see Mariette handing over some papers to a man with a cowboy hat. Must be one of the researchers. I wish I could meet them. The front door closes, and a car starts outside. I lean back and put my feet up on the paper-strewn desk. I hear Mariette return to her desk, pulling her chair in with a scrape.

“Tell me about your work, my sweet. What’s it like?”

I tell her about the organization and how we hiked this week to set up the camera traps.

“Traps? They don’t hurt the animals do they?”

“No, Mom, they just take videos.” I tell her about the porcupine quills and a little bit about living in camp.

“You live in a camp? That sounds so exciting. Is it safe up there? Have you seen any wild animals?”

She says wild as if the word is somehow very frightening.

"I haven't seen many animals, but I did see a baboon. It almost bit me, but Professor Lindsay shot it before it could get me."

"He did WHAT?"

"With a pellet gun, Mom, not a real gun." I laugh to myself. Most children would love giving their mothers heart attacks. I hate it.

"You know, sweetie, three months is a long time. We'll be happy to have you back at home whenever you want. I hope you know that, sweetheart."

"Yeah," I say. "We'll see."

"Whatever you want to do, Rick," my dad yells in the background. "We're behind you one hundred and ten percent."

"Thanks, Dad," I say. I want to tell him that it is impossible to be behind someone one hundred and ten percent.

"You know," my mother says, "you could still apply for the winter term at Portland State University if you hurry. I hear applications close in July."

I had been spinning a little in my seat, feet up on the desk. Her saying this makes me freeze completely.

"Mother," I say, "I told you already that I want to go to a community college."

"But you are so bright, sweetheart! Why waste your time with a bunch of high school drop outs?"

"As I have explained many, many times, I don't want the pressure. I don't want to commit to a major, and I can't afford a state school."

"You can always stay at home, sweetheart. We can help you."

"I don't want to stay at home, Mom! Lay off! I mean, Jesus, can't you ever give me a chance to figure things out on my own?"

"Erica Shelby, don't speak to your mother like that," yells my dad from somewhere beyond the phone. He doesn't even know what I'm saying. All he knows is that my mother is now in tears.

"I'm only trying to help, Erica, you don't have to be so mean to me." I can hear her sniveling. A good 30 seconds of my airtime is wasted on this woman crying about the same goddamn thing she always cries about - letting me go.

"I'm sorry, Mom," I say when the sobs subside. "I have a sunburn and I think it's making me a little cranky."

"Oh, sweetheart," she coos. "Do you want me to mail you some aloe? There is this really great organic stuff that Marsha next door makes..."

“Thank you, Mom, but no.” I look outside Professor Lindsay’s window, then at the drawing on the desk. “I have plenty. Listen, I’ve got to go. My airtime is almost out.” I can hear a beeping in the receiver, indicating the end of my time.

“Alright, sweetheart, you take care of yourself. Make sure you always wear a hat, your pretty face is particularly sensitive. But I’m sure you know that.”

“Yes, Mom.”

“When will we hear from you next?”

“I’m not sure. It’ll be once every few weeks, any time I’m back in town.”

“In Germane?” she says, obviously reading the name off some notecard. She sounds pleased that she can show off her new found information.

“Yes.” I hear another beep on the phone. The machine will flat-line any time now.

“Alright. Well, you take care sweetheart. Your father and I love you.”

“Love you too.”

I put the phone down and lie my forehead into my folded arms. I need a nap. Talking to her is more exhausting when we aren’t face to face. Over the phone, emotions are compounded and confounded. There is also guilt that I can’t be with her. But it is far better than the chronic exhaustion and anxiety of being near her all the time.

I lift my head and look at Mariette. The back of her head is busy, moving back and forth as she transcribes something in front of her onto her computer. Her movement makes me remember – I am here. I am not at home. I am here.

Mariette

Mariette's house looks like it has been cut and pasted from a fairy tale. Tall, leafy trees crowd the tiny yard. A stone path curves under an arch of wisteria and bougainvillea. A small wiener dog sleeps on the covered front porch beside a rocking chair. He is as motionless and uninterested as a cat. He only opens his eyes when Mariette unlocks the front door. One eye is brown, and the other is a milky blue. He exhales impatiently and closes his eyes again.

I expect the cottage to be gloomy from the amount of trees blocking out the sun. But the ceiling is perforated with skylights, making the small parlor bright. I set down my pack and we move to the kitchen. Large windows open out on an empty pasture, a neighboring house, and hills that roll into farmland.

"I used to have horses," Mariette says, filling the electric kettle at the sink. "Now all I have is my dog and a few chickens." I sit at the small table beneath the window. The dog comes in from the porch as if it has been called.

"What's his name?" I ask.

"Otto," she says with a smile. She stretches the syllables to fit an Afrikaans pronunciation – Aw-too. She picks up the dog, holding it like a baby. "He's my pirate dog. He's blind in one eye, you see."

The kettle makes a popping noise and switches off.

"Would you like some tea?" she asks, putting down the dog and taking two cups and a teapot from the cupboard.

"Sure," I say. I'd rather have coffee, but I see the sinister can of instant coffee on the counter and can't deal with that kind of disappointment.

"Normal tea or *Rooibos*?"

This gives me no clue as to what the options are, so I say the second, trying to pronounce the name. She makes a pot of tea and puts it on a tray with a creamer and a sugar bowl. She places the tray in front of me on the table beside a large tin.

"Tell me," she says. "Do you have rusks in America?" She opens the tin, showing me the rectangular blocks of biscuit poking out through the wax paper.

"I don't think so," I say, taking one.

Dry crumbs fill my mouth. I try to swallow, but the rusk dust has sapped all the moisture from my mouth.

Mariette laughs and pours me a cup of tea. I take a sip before she has a chance to add milk or sugar. The rich, earthy flavor washes away the grit. I swear, if red was a flavor, it would taste like this tea.

“*Ag, vaderland,*” Mariette says, still laughing. “That’s not how it’s done. Watch.” She dunks the rusk in her tea for a few seconds before biting off the soaked part. I add milk to my tea and do the same. This time the rusk tastes sweet and melts in my mouth like a soft cookie.

“Mmm,” I say. “Much better this way.”

“Good,” she says. “We’ll make a proper Afrikaner out of you. Now tell me, how are your parents?” I catch myself mid eye roll and look up at the ceiling. I should have closed the door when I was talking to them on the phone if I wanted to avoid this question.

“They worry.”

“But don’t most parents worry?” Mariette asks.

“Maybe, but my parents aren’t most parents. They are particularly clingy. I bet they would make my choices for me if they could.”

“Does it bother you?” she asks. Otto jumps into her lap and looks at me curiously with his one good brown eye.

“Of course it bothers me. I understand why they do it, but it doesn’t mean I like it.” I take another rusk and dunk it in my tea.

“Why do they do it?” Mariette asks.

“We have a history of bad choices in my family.”

I have a way of saying this practiced sentence that always chills the conversation. Mariette looks out over the pasture, scrutinizing some distant object. The dog’s nose twitches, eyeing the creamer.

“Anyway,” I say, “I love my parents. They are just very demanding and protective. I’m glad to be away, even if it is only for a few months.”

“*Ag, my angel,* they only love you. But I know such closeness is hard. But as the Good Lord says, ‘All happy families are happy in the same way but all unhappy families are unhappy in different ways.’ Erica, love, you may be unhappy sometimes, but at least you are unique.”

I don’t have religious upbringing, but I swear I’ve heard that quote before. I’m wondering if she is perhaps mistaken.

“Some ladies from the church are coming for tea tomorrow, maybe you would like to join us. They are so lovely and supportive and ... *Nee, Otto! Voetsek!*” Mariette lifts the dog up by the floppy scruff of its

neck just as it sticks its face in the creamer. “You naughty, naughty dog.” She puts him on the floor. She gets up, rinses the creamer, refills it, and sits back down.

“Now tell me, Erica, how is the professor?”

Ah, Professor Lindsay, the other bane of my existence. Can I say anything about him that isn’t inflammatory?

“We finished putting in all the camera traps,” I say.

“Oh good,” she says, bringing her hands together in a triumphant clap. “I bet that made him happy.”

“He never appears to be very happy about anything.”

“The professor is a hard man to understand,” she says. “I remember the first day we met. I had sent him an email about the horrendous leopard massacre the farmers were busy with. There was one leopard in particular that I wanted to protect, a young female who I would see every so often in the pasture, just out there. Professor Lindsay came from Rhodes University in Grahamstown to educate the Cape Parks employees and the farmers. I was in the audience for his first talk. *Jirre*, that man is passionate. I get chills when he speaks sometimes, just like when I am in church or when I read a good book. I told him about the leopard in the pasture and we put out a trap for her. She was the first leopard to be collared in the area. I got to hold her before she woke up. I will never forget that moment. There is a photograph in the Info Centre.”

“What happened then?”

“*Ag*, he comes and goes,” she says. I meant about the leopard, but she seems far more interested in talking about Professor Lindsay. “He is a difficult man to understand. But he loves the leopards, and the mountains that hold them.” She sighs, resting her chin on her hand, and gazes out the window into the empty pasture. The grey clouds have been lined with pink. We watch in silence as the light falters.

“Still,” she says. “I wouldn’t want him to be any other way.” She stands up and starts clearing the table. I take the cups to the sink and rinse them out. Soon everything is tidy and put away.

“Come,” she says. “Let’s get you sorted. I’ve prepared the guest room, and you should have everything you need.”

Just outside of the kitchen there is a short, narrow passageway leading to a small room in the corner of the house. Mariette opens the door, flicking the switch in the hallway to illuminate the room. There is a small bed, a desk with a chair, and a wardrobe. There is a window that looks over the pasture and the darkening sky.

“Please, you must use this room as you like. It will be your home away from camp. You may leave

things here when you go to camp. Do whatever you'd like to make the space yours."

"Perfect," I say. "Thank you so much."

"I'll be in the kitchen making supper. If you need anything, just shout." She steps out of the room, closing the door behind her.

I start unpacking some of my belongings onto the desk. It's one of those desks with the fold down table tops and the legs that curl at the bottom. Hanging on the wall above the desk, there is a portrait of a young Mariette with a handsome guy in a striped sweater. They are both smiling happily at me. Standing on top of the desk is a small, round photo of Mariette on a horse. Beside it is a cross-stitch of a circle of thorns. There is a cross in the middle and the words 'We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal' elegantly stitched across the bottom.

I set the frames to one side of the shelf. I take the porcupine bobblehead out of my pocket and set it on the other corner. Then I go to find Mariette.

"Mariette?" I say, sticking my head into the kitchen.

"Yes, my angel?"

"Do you have a small vase or something?"

"Certainly," she says. "Pick what you'd like." She opens a cabinet that is full of pitchers and vases of colorful glass and ceramic. I find a narrow, cylindrical vase of clear glass.

"This will do."

I go back to my room and put the vase in the corner of the shelf next to the porcupine. Then I take the two porcupine quills from my pack and arrange them in the vase. I sit on the bed and look at the shelf, pleased with the symmetry and contents. I lie back and close my eyes, enjoying the rare moment of calm and ease.

The Tea Party

I stand there and wait as all five heads slowly turn to scrutinize the intruder. If I had known there were going to be well-dressed Afrikaner women sitting in the parlor this morning, I would have been out early, before anyone arrived. I definitely would not have walked out of my room wearing my striped pajama bottoms and too-small sleep shirt with the motto 'Spooning Leads to Forking' printed across it. But I'm here now and have to deal with it. I can either be rude and immediately leave the room or offend these ladies with my freshly-slept hair and my smutty shirt.

Mariette takes away the option of a hasty retreat by addressing me.

"Erica, so glad you are awake!" I worry that she's going to introduce me to the group, but then she continues. "Come, let's get you some breakfast."

We walk quickly to the kitchen, leaving the women to their chattering.

"I'm so sorry!" Mariette says to me as she fills the kettle and takes cereal and rusks down from the cupboard. "I meant to tell you they were coming in the morning, but wanted to let you sleep. I hope you don't mind. Now, have some breakfast and get dressed. The ladies would love to meet you." She smiles at me brightly and leaves the room. I sit down to eat, a little disgruntled that leaving or sitting quietly in my room are not options that she presented.

I get back to my room and scramble to find anything appropriate to wear. I can see my good jeans and most of my other clothes have been hijacked and are flapping on the clothesline outside. They are most certainly not dry. All I have is a longish black skirt for special occasions and a floral top. I hate dressing up, but compared to what they are wearing, I suppose it's the most appropriate option.

"There you are," Mariette says when I return to the parlor. "Ladies, this is Erica. Erica, this is Lizelle, Lizette, Sonja, and Magdalena."

"Erica! It is so nice to meet you!" says Lizelle, reaching for a handshake.

"Yes, so nice to meet you," says Lizette, standing up and intercepting the hand I proffer for Lizelle.

"Lizette!" cries Lizelle, slapping at her arm. "That is terribly rude."

"My," says Lizette. "I didn't realize you would mind."

It's clear that they are twins. Mid-thirties probably, with fake blonde bobs and glittering lips. Everything about them is slightly childish from the cherry red nail polish on Lizelle's manicured hands to

the way Lizette twirls her hair around her finger when she's talking.

"Don't mind them," says Magdalena. "Come sit, there is a chair right here."

I pull a chair into the circle. Sonja smiles shyly at me, then returns her attention to Magdalena. She says something in Afrikaans that I don't catch.

"Sonja, that is very rude, we must speak English for Erica," says Lizelle vehemently.

"Yes, we must," says Lizette. "And we must include her in the conversation."

"You see, Erica," says Magdalena, "the son of John de Vos just proposed to my granddaughter and..."

Magdalena catches me up on all the drama of the town. She goes through several years of town history very quickly, like I would know the families of de Vos, Du Plessis, van Niekerk, and Strydom as intimately as I knew my own family. All the marriages, deaths, births, scandals (she says scanDAL, which sounds so much better), are added to and elaborated on by Lizelle and Lizette. Sonja pays close attention to everything Magdalena says.

"What did she say?" says Sonja, after Magdalena retells how the John de Vos asked her granddaughter to marry him.

"She said no."

"*Nee!*" says Sonja.

"Why?" asks Lizette.

Magdalena weaves a tale of a free-spirited, young girl bound unfairly by undying love. She explains how her granddaughter is only eighteen years old and wants so badly to go to university. But she vows to come back to him when her studies are finished.

"Is that a good choice, Magda?" questions Lizelle.

"It will suit her well," says Magdalena.

"Are you sure?" says Lizette. She and Lizelle look at each other, the condescending disapproval shared.

"Of course. I would like for her to do what she likes and be her own individual before entering into marriage."

Lizelle and Lizette look at each other again and glance away, shaking their heads.

"*Wat?*" says Magdalena sternly. Here they switch to Afrikaans, forgetting my presence in the room. Mariette leans over and translates for me.

"Here Lizelle says that maybe there is another man. Magdalena says her granddaughter is not that type. Lizelle... how to put this... Lizelle says something about there not being a future for her without a

man like de Vos. And now you see how mad Magda is.”

Magdalena has half risen out of her chair. Lizelle and Lizette are smiling. Sonja is not smiling.

“Stop,” Sonja says. “You must stop. The Lord would not like such petty bickering. You should be ashamed. Especially in front of guests.”

“Ah, forgive us Father,” say Lizelle and Lizette, but they are still smiling.

“I do apologize, Erica,” says a flustered Magdalena. “I’m sure you understand my need to protect the virtue of my granddaughter.”

“I’m sure she doesn’t understand why your granddaughter would make that choice,” goads Lizette. Magdalena ignores the comment.

“As the Good Lord would say,” says Mariette. “To each his own.” All of the ladies nod at this. Lizelle and Lizette seem to nod out of habit, like the bobbleheads in Rubbish’s *bakkie*. Sonja nods, but looks confused. Magdalena also nods, not because it is the word of God, but because it is for her cause.

“Erica, I hear you are working for Professor Lindsay,” says Magdalena in an effort to change the subject. Unfortunately for me, this means I now have the full attention of this terrifying bunch of ladies. They turn on me with sympathy that drips from their every pore.

“You work for Professor Lindsay? Shame!” says Lizelle.

“He is a very difficult man,” says Lizette.

“I do work for him,” I say. “He’s not all that bad.”

“If you need to talk, say anything you’d like,” says Magdalena. “We are here to provide stability, friendship, and support.” All of the women nod in agreement. Magdalena seems to have forgotten the recent tiff with the Liz’s.

“Has he been sober?” asks Sonja with genuine concern.

“Um, yes,” I say. “I’m sure he has been.” I can’t actually be sure, but he hasn’t had days where he’s any more or less the grumpy man I’ve come to know.

“Honestly, Mariette, I do not know what you see in that man,” says Lizelle.

“He’s rude, crude, and a drunk.” says Lizette.

“*Ongeskik*,” says Lizelle.

“*Ongespoets*,” says Lizette.

“I know he can be these things,” says Mariette, “but he is a good man at his core. He is very intelligent, and he does so much good for the environment and nature conservation.”

“It doesn’t give him an excuse to be rude,” says Magdalena. “And it doesn’t give you an excuse to be in love with him.”

Lizelle and Lizette both open their mouths to speak but can't. Magdalena's comment is too blunt to be followed.

"As the Good Lord says," says Mariette, "a flower cannot blossom without sunshine, and man cannot live without love." At the word of the Lord, the ladies force nods in agreement. Only Magdalena shakes her head the other way, articulating it with a resigned sigh.

"I would want a Christian man," says Sonja. "One that abstains from the use of alcohol. Alcohol is an object the devil uses to lure us into sin and gluttony."

"Rubbish," says Magdalena. "Alcohol is a legitimate social lubricant when used in small quantities. You might find that you benefit from it, Sonja."

"Don't be mean to Sonja," says Lizette.

"I wasn't being mean to Sonja, I was being ironic. Or don't you know what that means?"

"Are you calling my sister *dof*?" says Lizelle.

The conversation descends again into Afrikaans. I decide to make my escape.

"Mariette," I whisper. "I'm going to go do some work in the Info Centre. Where is the key?"

"Here it is." She hands me a key from her pocket. "And will you please turn the closed sign to open? I'll be there just now."

I leave, pondering what time frame 'just now' is based on. She looks pretty occupied to me.

Cyril

Professor Lindsay's office opens itself to me like a book. The newspaper articles, magazine clippings, maps, and photographs tacked to the walls tell me more about his work and his life than I would ever be able to drag out of him. There are grant proposals, reports on leopard behavior and predation habits, and every documented leopard sighting in the Western Cape in what seems like the last 20 years.

I find the photograph of Mariette holding the unconscious leopard. The limp body is draped over her arms. Mariette holds her easily. The size and droopiness of the animal reminds me of a large house cat rather than a small leopard. But the precise patterning of the spots is unmistakable - no one could confuse one for the other.

The five-years-younger Mariette is not looking at the leopard. She looks happily and lovingly to her right. Professor Lindsay stands there slightly behind her, almost out of the frame. He doesn't look at Mariette or the leopard. He looks straight at the camera. He is obviously annoyed, probably because the paparazzi are taking pictures of his leopard.

Documents, articles, and photographs like these fill three of the four office walls with solid information. The wall without papers has cabinets pushed up against it. I'm not usually this much of a snoop, but I find myself opening the cabinet doors. The first one swings open a row of files. There are about twelve in all, each one labeled with a different name. I take down the first file. 'Clementine' is written on the front. The first page opens to a photograph of a leopard. She looks over her shoulder at the camera, like a model might. She shows off her sleek coat with its little rosettes of spots and her recently acquired piece of jewelry - a thick, heavy collar with some sort of radio transmission device attached to it. She is caught in the second that she glances back before slipping off into the bushes.

The next page is a topographic map of the entire mountain range, grey lines charting the altitude changes. Behind the map is a transparency with the title 'Clementine 2010' across the top. The page is filled with little blue dots. I take this out and overlay it on top of the map. The dots cover about a tenth of the map. A few dots wander into the farm lands to the south of the mountains and there are one or two dots in Germane itself.

I sit down at the desk to get a better look. I lay the map out with the transparency on top and look at the next page in the folder. It's a stats sheet.

Clementine: 52cm, 32 kg, tip of right ear missing. Collared 21 August, 2008. Three known litters of two cubs each. Two cubs (see files Roger and Hammerstein) have survived. Range between Byekloof and Germane, 130 km² (see transparency for exact range). Collar/battery damaged May 10, 2011. Current whereabouts unknown.

I look back at the blue-dotted transparency and shiver. I have hiked up some of those *kloofs* with the professor to install camera traps. I go back to the cabinet and pull down two more files. This one is named George. I skip quickly to the transparency and place it over the other. This one is dotted red and the range is much larger. It's from the same time period. None of the dots overlap. This one stays deep in the mountains, far away from the towns and the farms.

Verreaux is the next one. His dots are orange and litter the slopes above Germane and Spieëfontein. The dots move across the entire northern border of the farms in greater Germane. Some of the farms he crosses into - some with rather appalling frequency. I wonder if the farmers know.

The northern extent of Verreaux's range, which is documented as 240 km², is the border of George's range. No orange dots overlap with red dots. There is a clear no-man's-land between the two territories. But when I take George's sheet away and replace it with Clementine's, she seems to be spending a lot of time within Verreaux's territory.

I get up again to grab more folders. I take the rest from the shelf and then open the next cabinet to look for more. I find myself staring into the soft face of a wide-eyed leopard. I jump back, dropping the files on the floor. It doesn't move. I don't move. Then I see that it is nailed to a board. I am just about to sigh in relief when I get another fright - a sudden burst of laughter coming from the door behind me. I turn, nearly jumping back toward the leopard. The laugh belongs to a smiling black guy a little older than I am.

"I see you've met Tripod," he says, coming into the office. He's wearing a baby blue, button-up shirt. His khaki pants have clean, brown hiking boots poking out from the cuffs.

"Oh *this* is Tripod. Hello, Tripod," I say. "I wasn't expecting to see you there."

"And I'm Cyril," he says, reaching his hand toward me.

"I'm Erica," I say. We shake hands. I know I am blushing. He starts picking papers off the floor. I follow suit, but find myself again startled by the leopard.

"Ah!" I say. "Why do they have it in a cabinet? Just to freak out the snooping field assistants?"

"I don't know why it is lurking like this," he says, considering the leopard. "The professor is supposed to use it as an educational tool. Here." He lifts it out of the cabinet and sets it on the floor. It's sitting on its haunches, looking up at me. Its head comes up to about my waist.

"It's huge," I say, marveling.

"*Nee*, you're just short," he teases.

"What happened to his leg? Bad taxidermy job?" The right leg is gone from the knee down.

"*Ag, nee* man, it's such a sad story," he says, bending to pick more papers off the floor. "This leopard lived in and out of the reserve. We don't know where it happened but somehow it got caught in a snare or a trap. But these things are strong, hey? It got away by pulling its own leg off."

"That's terrible," I say.

"*Ja*, no, I know, hey? Some people." He finishes picking up the papers and straightens them. He's a good head taller than me.

"*Ja*, but this one is so strong. He lived for years, for *years*, safely inside the reserve. He got old and sick and we had to put him down. But here he is, still protected by Professor Lindsay." He puts the papers on the desk and sits down, starting to organize them back into their proper file and order.

"I see you've been looking at the ranges," he says, pointing to the map.

"It's amazing," I say. "And I didn't even realize there were real leopards here." He looks at me with confusion and amusement.

"Well, I mean," I say, "I've never seen them out and about, but from the ranges, it looks like there are tons of them everywhere."

"*Ja*, there are, hey?" he says. "They are very shy and will stay far away from people, especially in the daylight. I've only ever seen two in the wild. That's not counting Tripod, who was practically tame and stayed very close to the ranger station."

"I hope I get to see one," I say.

"I hope so, too, they are very beautiful creatures." He looks me in the eye when he says it. I blush again.

He sits down and opens another file, taking out a transparency. He places it on top of the map, removing all the other transparencies.

"You see," he says, "the females have individual ranges."

I lean on the desk to look over his shoulder.

"You can see here," he says, pointing to the overlaid maps, "these dots barely touch. They would never have met. But then you have the male." He takes Verreaux's transparency and lays it on top. "He is in this area, but you also see him here with the ladies. Each male will have two or three ladies in his range."

I reach for George's map and put it on top of the others. His range just barely touches the ranges of the other females.

"Would George have ever come into contact with Verreaux's two females?"

"Maybe by smell or even by sight," he says with a shrug. "But they would never have mated. If Clementine raised her cubs in the range of a male who was not the father, the cubs would be killed."

"That's pretty harsh," I say.

"It's the truth," he says. "Leopards are very territorial animals."

I stand leaning over him as long as I can. I eventually force myself to move and find something else to do. I adjust Tripod so he is in the middle of the room.

"Well," I say, "not sure who you came to see, but Professor Lindsay is up at camp, and Mariette is having some kind of a tea party."

"That's ok," he says, "I came to see you."

My heart skips a beat. Then I get a little creeped out. How does he even know I exist?

"Why?" I ask.

"Rubbish sent me."

Then I remember the conversation.

"Are you Rubbish's nephew?"

"Yes, he sent me here to see you."

Rubbish should have told me his nephew's name. I wouldn't have made such a fool of myself.

"I must be making a terrible impression. Sorry about the leopard thing. That must have been hilarious watching me freak out."

"*Ja*, it was," he says with a smile. He picks up the files and returns them to the cabinet. "I'm surprised the professor did not show you these, hey?"

"I'm not," I say with a sigh. "He doesn't show me anything. I didn't even know all that stuff you just said about leopard ranges until now."

"*Jirre*, serious? Shame, the professor is a funny man. Very secretive. I do not know why he does not like sharing."

"I don't know either. He's such a stodgy old grampus."

The front door slams. Mariette comes in. Just the presence of someone else in the room makes me blush again.

"Tripod!" she says with a laugh. "I haven't seen you in ages!" She reaches down and strokes the leopard's nose. "And Cyril, how are you? How is your family?"

“They are fine, *dankie*,” he says.

“That’s good to hear. Now, Cyril,” she says, suddenly changing her tone from friendly to commandeering. “I need you to do something for me.”

“Yes, *Tannie*,” he says, also in a more serious voice.

“I need you to run an errand for me.”

“Yes, *Tannie*, I can run an errand *Tannie*.”

“I need you to give Erica a tour of Germane.”

“Yes, *Tannie!*” He almost starts laughing, but manages to hold onto his very formal tone. “I can do this thing for you, *Tannie*. I was going to anyway.”

University of Cape Town

Coloured

Cyril and I walk down the main street in the crisp, cold sunlight of the winter-in-June weather. I don't really pay attention to the buildings he points out – the library, the various restaurants, and whatnot. I listen to his voice. He has a different accent than the very proper English accent of Professor Lindsay and the Afrikaans-sounding, but nevertheless proper, accent of Mariette. There is a lot more variation in his voice - his syllables catch more highs and lows. It's nice.

"This is basically the end of town," he says. We've reached the part where the road crumbles off into gravel and dirt. I look off jealously in the direction of camp. I would have liked to meet the researchers.

"And just over there is the veterinary clinic," says Cyril. "A very nice man, that one, very good with animals."

"You seem to be pretty good with animals, too, Cyril," I say. "How do you know so much about leopards?"

"Ag, man, it's a long story."

"I like long stories," I say.

"Alright," he says, shoving his hands in his pockets. We walk back toward central Germane and he tells me the story.

"Mrs. de Vos got me a job with the professor when I was out of school."

"Who's Mrs. de Vos?"

"Ah, but Mrs. de Vos is your Mariette, she is Mrs. Mariette de Vos, except Mr. de Vos has now passed away, God rest his soul."

"But you were calling her *Tannie*."

"Yehehe, *tannie* is auntie, Erica, I always call her *Tannie*. It's a term of respect. You see, my grandmother worked for her mother." He smiles at me. The smile is not for any particular or suggestive reason, but I find myself blushing again. "Anyway, she got me a job with the professor. We tracked leopards, put up camera traps, and even collared a few of them for the project."

"It sounds like you're doing what I'm doing."

"*Daar sy*. Mrs. de Vos said she was going to get someone else when I left. It's been a few years

though. Professor Lindsay isn't here all the time. He does spend some of his time at the University."

"What do you do now?"

"I work for Cape Parks. The professor wrote me a letter when I left telling them how much I knew about nature. They were very good to hire me. Now I work as a junior manager and am very happy."

Entering back into the town, we pass a few cutesy cottages and a run-down looking bar. A light breeze comes up my legs and under my skirt. It makes me shiver. I pull my sweatshirt closer.

"Shame, man, you must be cold," he says. "Should we go inside for a coffee?" He points to the building next to the bar which has a purple door and large windows. The sign outside says *Café a la Sonja*. I wonder if it's the same Sonja I know.

I almost decline Cyril's offer. I really want to get back to the Info Centre and escape my perpetual state of blushing. But then someone comes out of the café and I smell it – coffee. Not this instant crap that I've been subjected to for the last while, but real, roasted, ground, aromatic coffee.

"Yes," I say quickly, already walking toward the shop. "Let's get coffee."

We sit at a wooden table with a floral tablecloth. A woman with a matching apron comes to take our order.

"I'll have a coffee, please," I say. "With the milk on the side."

"Warm or cold?"

I'm not sure what she's referring to. I say warm just to make sure she's not going to bring back an iced coffee or something.

"And I'll have normal tea," says Cyril.

"Black or white?" she asks.

"White please," he says. Now I'm very confused. Mariette only had one kind of normal tea. White tea is quite a rarity, even in the nicer tea and coffee shops in Portland. I'm surprised they have it at such a small shop in the middle of nowhere.

She comes back with a tray. She puts a cup of coffee and a silver creamer down in front of me. The milk in it is warm and frothy. I guess I should have ordered cold. I like cooling my coffee down with cold milk.

She puts a large mug of tea in front of Cyril. It smells like English Breakfast.

"What makes that white?" I ask.

"The milk," he says. I realize immediately how stupid I must sound.

"So white tea is just regular black tea with milk in it?"

"Yes," he says.

I pour the steaming milk into the coffee. I touch the outside of the mug, wishing the contents weren't too hot to drink.

"I think white tea should be called something different," he says. "I think it should be called coloured tea."

He looks at me expectantly, waiting for me to laugh.

"I don't get it."

"Come on," he says. "This tea is coloured, not black and not white. It's like me."

"You're not black?" I ask.

"*Nee*, I'm coloured. Don't you know coloured? Your president is coloured."

"He is?"

"*Jissis*, yes, man, he is coloured. You see, there are the blacks and the whites and then there is the mix of that called the coloureds. That's what we are. That's what we are called."

"Interesting," I say. I have always thought of African-American people in the states as black people, not really as a mix between black and white.

"Are those labels politically correct?" I ask.

"*Ja*, most people use them. Only a few mind, but not in a big way. Of course there are bad words for coloureds. But that's the same with black, English, and Afrikaans people."

I touch my mug again and know that it's the right temperature for a taste. I bring it to my lips and sip. It is a gorgeous earthy blend, smooth and acidic. This may be because I have been deprived, but it tastes just as good as any micro roaster in Portland.

"Tell me, Erica," says Cyril, "what brought you to South Africa?"

"Oh, it's a long story," I say. By long story I mean, I don't really want to tell it.

"I like long stories," he says with a wink. I squint at him, trying to gauge whether or not he would understand my unhappiness. I've never found someone who has. I've also never tried to express it. It doesn't matter though. Today is not that day. I'm too perplexed by his presence to try on the truth.

"I ran away."

"You ran away from your home?" he asks. His eyebrows raise with concern.

"Well, not really ran away, but it looks like a rash decision to them."

"Come now, Erica, tell me straight what happened."

I change my voice so it sounds like the narrator of a movie and begin the story that I've rehearsed. "It was a Saturday like any other in the Shelby household. Mother and Father were working around the house. Erica was getting ready to go to work, one of the many jobs she had to hold down in order to save

for college and earn enough to finally move out of the house that she'd lived in all her life. She ran to the car because she was late, pulled out of the driveway, and promptly ran into her father's car that was parked directly behind her. It was not a big smash or anything, just a little ding. Erica's parents were angry and told her that she must pay for the damages. Erica argued that the reason why one has insurance is so that the damages pay for themselves. But Mother believed that the cost of insurance would go up so dramatically that it was not worth reporting the damages to the insurance company. So they practically overhauled the car at their daughter's expense."

"That sounds unfair for the parents to do," says Cyril. "And then?"

"And then I went into my bank account to pay out what I owed them for damages. I realized that I did have quite a lot of money saved, but little things like this kept eating into it. I had enough to get a flat and live on my own for a little while if I could find a different job that paid a bit more. That was pretty exciting to realize, but it excited me more when I decided I could also just travel. I'd need to work, but I could leave the country, experience something new, get out for a little while, and still be able to start a new life when I got back."

"So you left?"

"Not before I killed the cat," I say. Cyril starts laughing.

"Nee, Erica! You killed a cat?"

"Not any cat. I killed *the* cat. The ancient, 18-year-old, family cat that they probably loved more than me."

"How did you kill *the* cat?"

"Well, that week I had been sending emails to all corners of the globe asking about positions I had found online. When I heard back from Mariette saying that they would love to have me, I booked a ticket on the spot, before I could back down, and sent her my flight details and an acceptance. I was driving home, wondering how I was going to tell them that I was leaving. I pulled into the driveway. I saw the cat lying there and I knew it would move. Then I heard the bump and my mom scream. I had run it over."

Cyril laughs so hard he almost falls off the bench.

"You killed the cat! What did your poor mother say?"

"She said I was grounded and had lost my driving privileges. The stupid thing was probably dead already, just baking in the sun."

"Erica, that is such a funny story."

"The funny part for me was that I had already planned to leave. But when I told her about it, it sounded like I was reacting to her being completely ridiculous about the cat's untimely death."

“Yehehe, Erica, that’s not such a long story. But you could make it better with a little bit of lying. Here, ask me.”

“Uh, so what brings you to South Africa?”

Cyril leans back takes a drag from a fake cigarette. “I killed someone and had to leave.”

“Cyril, that’s ridiculous,” I say, laughing.

“But very funny.”

I smile to myself as I finish my coffee. I like that I made Cyril laugh with my story. I’m good at making up stories. I’m so good that if I told him the truth now, I doubt he’d believe it. He believes in the cat, the cars, and the unforgiving parents. I wouldn’t tell the real story half as well. And it wouldn’t end in laughter.

University of Cape Town

Mr. Strydom

“Did you enjoy your coffee?” asks Mariette when I return. She is sitting at her desk. It looks like she’s been waiting. The smile on her face puts the moon-sized grin of the Cheshire cat to shame.

“How did you know we had coffee?”

“Well,” she says. “The barista saw you and told Sonja’s daughter, who runs the shop on the weekends, who told Sonja, who told Magda, who told me.”

“That sure was fast,” I say. It appears that everyone in this town knows who I am, and I know absolutely nobody.

“It sounds like you had a wonderful time. And with his salary, I’m surprised he paid. You must be very special.” She smiles that gargantuan smile of hers. If she were my mother I would throw a fit. This whole snooping, prying town saw us. My romantic coffee date wasn’t even my own, it was everyone’s. But this isn’t my mother, I’m not at home, and I’m an adult now. And I have to suck it up and appreciate the new information - she thinks I’m special to him.

The front door of the Info Centre opens, as if a gust of wind has tossed it wide. In steps a huge, mean looking man. Mariette stands up from her seat at the desk.

“*Wat is dit?*” He holds up one of the camera traps Professor Lindsay and I placed last week.

“*Praat Engels, Mr. Strydom,*” says Mariette. “Erica is from America.”

He squints at me. His eyes almost disappear into his massive face. Everything about him is massive. His bulbous calves protrude from his knee-length shorts and root themselves in huge hiking boots. He could probably wrap his entire hand around the camera and crush it.

“Did you put this in *my eiendom?*” he says, thrusting the camera at me. He is holding it by the strap we used to fasten it in place. I can see the number seven etched in the side. I remember seven went in at the base of the trail we took that went up to the cave. We were pretty close to some kind of pasture, but it didn’t look like the land belonged to anyone besides the mountain.

“Professor Lindsay said it was Cape Parks property.”

“Ag, Professor Lindsay knows nothing,” he says with a sneer. “This are on *my eiendom*. I should keep it. Tell me, Erica, are you a communist?”

“Uh, no sir.”

"You are not a communist? Mariette and Professor Lindsay, they are communists, you know."

"Um, no, I'm not a communist, sir."

"*Meisie*, if you are not then you should know," he says, jabbing his finger at me again. "These people are communists and they use these to spy on *my eiendom!*" Spit flies. The camera jolts back and forth. I'm afraid he will drop it. "They have cameras, they take pictures of me, of *my eiendom...*"

"Don't be absurd, Mr. Strydom, you know we're not spying on you," says Mariette. She seems calm, hands folded respectfully in front of her.

He turns quickly to point at her. The camera follows his trajectory, spinning wildly.

"Don't talk to me about it, I know what you people are. You want to catch me killing leopards on Parks' *eiendom*. Yes, I kill the predators, but it is not a crime when it is on my land. I have a permit, they are on my land, I will hunt them. I do not let my sheep in the reserve, do not let your predators on my farm." He slams his fist on the table, luckily the fist not holding the camera.

"Mariette, I know you," he says. "You and me, it is almost like family. Why do you help these people? You know farmers must hunt the jackals, the *rooikat*, the baboons..."

"You hunt baboons?" I ask.

"Yes," he says, turning on me, ready for a confrontation. "And you cannot stop me from it."

"Good. I'm glad you hunt them. I hate baboons."

His face, squinted in anger, opens up. I can see that his eyes are blue, and one of the lines on his forehead is actually a scar.

"I hate baboons," I say again. "They are vicious and mean and steal things. I hope you kill all of them." This last part is maybe not entirely accurate, but I'm hoping that maybe he'll stop shouting at me and Mariette. Sure enough, he actually smiles, thin lips curling up at the ends.

"*Goed, dis goed*. Extreme, but *goed*. Maybe you can teach the communists to hate baboons too."

"Maybe. Professor Lindsay seems to love all the animals. Even the bad ones. He'll be hard to convince."

"I think that you are right." His grin becomes toothy, even white teeth parting his thin lips. "You know what I think," he says, "I think these conservationists are mad. They like nature more than people." He notices that he still has the camera dangling from his hand. He unloops it from his fingers and hands it to me.

"You make sure these communists do not spy on *my eiendom, klaar?*"

"Yes, sir," I say, holding the camera tightly.

"*Goed.*" He pats me on the back. "Goodbye, Mariette, let me know when you are no longer a

traitor.” He waves at her and leaves.

After the *bakkie* starts, Mariette says to me, “Erica, check for the memory card.”

I open up the case and see the blue memory card sticking out.

“It’s here.”

“Let me have it.” She takes the memory card and goes to Professor Lindsay’s office and turns on the computer. She sticks the memory card in a reader and downloads the files from the card to the computer. There are 3 video clips that appear on the screen.

“Wow, it actually worked,” I say. The prospect of seeing the animals that have walked past the very spot where I set up the camera excites me.

The clips are daylight shots. In the first one, Mr. Strydom’s massive calves walk past with a pack of dogs and the butt of a big gun. In the second, he is walking in the other direction with the dogs, dragging a canvas sack. In the third clip, you see him bending over, angry face clear in the camera, pulling the camera out of its hiding place in the shrubs.

“No, Mr. Strydom,” whispers Mariette. She sighs and takes the memory card out of the computer, putting it back in the case. “The professor is not going to be pleased. We’ll tell him when he comes down at the end of the week.”

Portraits

I spend the mornings relaxing in my pajamas, just like I would on summer break at home. In the afternoons I get dressed as prettily as I can with my limited wardrobe and go to the Info Centre. I read the articles on the wall, look at the spec sheets from the different files, or pine for Cyril, hoping he comes to ask me out again. Mostly I draw.

Lizelle and Lizette are easy. They lend themselves to quick, exaggerated caricatures in thick pencil. I see Sonja and Magdalena as the Marys in the Bible. The former I draw as the pious, virgin mother, hands clasped in prayer. The latter I draw as a woman of cruder disposition, as the others must see her. What other woman would advocate for education over marriage, drinking over cleanliness?

Mariette is more difficult. I want to draw her with a smile, that one she showed me when I returned from my date with Cyril. She holds it like she was born to be the happiest person on earth. I can see in her other expressions that she is disappointed it didn't work out that way. The things that drive her to sadness are unclear. She is a widow, but for how long? How much does this affect her? Professor Lindsay means something more to her, but what? Has he paid her similar attention? Mr. Strydom called her a traitor and hinted at former closeness. What was that about? Does this bother her?

I draw her with my softest pencil, so soft it is almost charcoal. I draw her full smile, her twinkling eyes, the lines that are beginning to crease her skin, and the wispy bun of greying hair. Then I take a tissue and lightly smudge the whole thing. When I'm finished, she looks like herself – young, but not that young, and happy, but not that happy.

Cyril is impossible. I try several times but can't without giggling or getting distracted by some remembered moment. To be honest, I haven't had the chance to study his face as much as I study other faces. I can't bring myself to look at him for too long.

I give up on Cyril and draw an owl instead. I draw it in sharp, crisp lines with precise details. It is a very realistic and convincing owl, but the details are so specific that anyone would be able to see the resemblance.

I label it anyway - Professor Lindsay.

What Is

We hear a car pull up outside the Info Centre. Mariette goes to the porch, and I follow. It's Professor Lindsay, down from the mountain to collect me and the supplies Mariette has bought for him. My bag is packed and waiting for me on my bed in Mariette's house. I'm basically ready to go.

"Professor, Mr. Strydom has been here," says Mariette. She has her arms crossed over her chest, and she is frowning. She looks older when she frowns.

"Oh?" he says. "And what did the old bastard want?"

"He returned one of your cameras. He said you had put it on his property."

"I did no such thing," said Professor Lindsay. "What number was it?"

"Number 7," I say.

"Let's have a look."

He comes inside and sits at his computer. The stuffed leopard is still in the middle of the room. I stand next to it, nervously stroking its ear.

"I knew it," says Professor Lindsay after watching the video. "He's been poaching on the reserve."

"But the video was taken from his property, Professor," says Mariette.

"No, no, we definitely placed this camera on Parks' land. I'll call the Parks board immediately."

"Vincent Wallace Lindsay, you will do no such thing." She says his full name the way a mother might to reprimand a naughty child.

"And why not? It may be filmed on his land, but he's walking in the direction of Parks' land. Look at that bag, I'm sure it's an animal that this man has hunted with his dogs and killed with his gun. It only follows that he has been illegally hunting in the reserve."

"*Ag, nee*, Professor, you *know* that land you are talking about is public land."

"Yes, you are right. And it's right next to the reserve. In all likelihood, he went through onto the reserve."

"As the Good Lord says, 'A man should look for what is and not for what he thinks should be'. Your accusation is not based on any truth. You are looking for ways to get him in trouble because you don't like him and don't agree with him. You are acting like a child, not a man. In fact, you both act like children. He accuses you of being a communist, you accuse him of being a poacher."

“That’s because he is a poacher.”

“He is very good about hunting on his own property *with* a permit.”

“Not in this case,” Professor Lindsay snorts, leaning back in his chair. “He’s a brutal, vicious murderer who needs to be brought to justice.” He lifts the receiver to make a phone call. Mariette unplugs the phone from the wall.

“You take this too far, Vincent. You always take it too far. I am tired of your games. The farmers have lived here in these mountains longer than you have. You don’t even try to understand their position. To you, you are right, and they are wrong. Sometimes I believe what they say about you. You care more about animals than about people.”

Mariette walks out. I can see her face as she leaves. For her sake, I hope she doesn’t cry.

Professor Lindsay sits there, looking deflated.

“Get your things,” he says. “We’re leaving.” He doesn’t move from his chair, just looks in the direction that Mariette has gone. I leave to get my backpack from the house. When I come back a few minutes later, he’s still there at his desk, staring out into the distance. I have to knock on the door to get his attention.

“Alright then,” he says. “Let’s go.”

Sugar Birds

I wake up to find myself in fog. I wonder if maybe I'm still dreaming, but the wet, cold air prickles my skin. I can only see a few feet in front of me. Having been away from camp for a week, I am no longer familiar with the path to the kitchen from the building that houses my lonely room.

"You're late," Professor Lindsay says when I get to the kitchen. He's standing over the stove making oatmeal.

"Sorry, had a bit of navigation trouble. We seem to be living in really thick fog."

"It's a cloud, actually," he says. "You shouldn't be surprised that the mountain takes after its name."

"What's its name?" He rolls his eyes and serves me a bowl of oats. In Professor Lindsay's book there is always such a thing as a dumb question.

"Wolkeberg," he says. "It means the Mountain of Clouds."

"Right," I say. I find the cinnamon and honey that Mariette and I secretly added to the shopping list and doctor my oats. I can see him eyeing my technique with interest.

"So what are we doing today, Prof?" I ask.

"Retrieving the camera at the top of the pass."

"Ah, this again," I mumble. More killer hikes and vague directions. And this time we get to do it in a cold steam-bath of cloud.

"No, it's not this again," says Professor Lindsay. "This time I'll be taking the videos off the cameras. I'll have data to analyze." He takes the honey and adds some to his bowl.

"Does that mean that by the end of the day we'll have videos of animals? Not just Mr. Strydom and his dogs?"

"We should do."

"That's exciting," I say.

"It is," he says sternly. "Now let's get moving. The sooner we start, the sooner we'll be warm."

* * * * *

The cloud hasn't lifted by the time we start up. The persistent grey fills the nooks and crannies of my vision, giving clarity only to the path in front of me and plants to either side. I can just see Professor Lindsay's stork legs and bird body ahead of me on the path.

"Professor," I say. "What animals will we see on the videos?"

"Kudu, klipspringer, and I hope to see the Cape clawless otter whose spoor we saw the other week."

"How long does it take to get all the videos off the camera? Will we be able to see them tonight?"

"We? You won't be seeing them, Erica."

"What? Why the hell not?"

"It's very uninteresting really, just looking at the videos, cataloguing animals. You'd be much better off relaxing, reading a book, or a magazine, or whatever teenagers do."

"But I'm here to help. Even with the uninteresting stuff. I promise I'll find it interesting."

"Thank you, but no. I won't be requiring your assistance for this part of the project. Besides, my lodge is far too cramped for two to be comfortable with data entry."

I shouldn't care that he is excluding and insulting me. I shouldn't care about this project, it's not like I'll be here for very long. I'll be perfectly happy to have time away from the professor and all his irritating qualities.

"Professor," I say, "why does Mr. Strydom hate you?"

"Because he's an ignorant farmer and I'm an academic."

"I see. And why does he think you are spying on him?"

"Think of it as an admission of guilt, Erica," says Professor Lindsay. "He obviously has something to hide. Otherwise he wouldn't mind being watched."

"So... you are watching him."

"I watch everything, I'm a scientist." His body begins to fade in front of me, dissipating into the cloud.

"But why *him*? There are plenty of farmers along these mountains. What did *he* do to *you*?"

"He's a dirty, criminal poacher with no respect for the wildlife that has been in these mountains for hundreds of years before his great-great-grandfather even thought about coming to South Africa." His body completely disintegrates into the fog, losing all shape and color until he is gone.

"That doesn't exactly answer my question."

"No, it doesn't." The disembodied voice doesn't bother to clarify, and I'm alone again. Cloud

particles condense on my jacket and face. I feel the moisture pearl up on my eyebrows and hair. The stones beneath my feet are slick. I walk carefully, enjoying that I seem to have struck a nerve with Professor Lindsay.

The cloud thins by the time we reach the first camera. Professor Lindsay continues to walk past.

“No point in stopping, it’s not lunch time yet. We’ll get it on the way down.”

We enter the long, winding, uphill section with no break. It isn’t nearly as hard as it was when I first attempted the climb two weeks ago. But my mind is no less busy.

“Professor Lindsay?” I ask.

“Yes?” he says. He’s at least a turn ahead of me and walking fast.

“Why did Mr. Strydom call you and Mariette communists?”

“You shouldn’t listen to Mr. Strydom, he hardly makes any sense. He thinks a communist is anyone who tries to change the way things are, especially if it encroaches on his God-given right to destroy anything he wants.”

“He also said Mariette was a traitor.”

“Yes, that’s a bit of a touchy subject really.”

I wait, hoping for a better reply.

“Mariette grew up in this area and married into the de Vos family. The de Vos family is a large farming family. For her to be working for any cause other than farming ... the whole community makes it hard for her.”

I’ve almost caught up with him now and can see his heels disappear around the next turn.

“Well you certainly don’t make it any easier for her,” I say, “what with the spying accusations and all.”

I turn the corner of the switch and proceed to walk into him. He is facing me, having stopped cold in the trail. I wince, expecting some reprimand for being too forward.

“No,” he says. He has that faraway look, like the one he had in the office before we left. “No, I suppose I don’t make it very easy for her.”

I can feel his mood change. It’s worse than the torrent of anger I expected. He takes down the first camera in silence, undoing the straps, switching it off, and handing it to me to pack away in my bag. The sadness clings to us like the cloud, as we make our way down to collect the second camera and proceed to camp.

* * * * *

We break through the cloud a little ways from camp. From above, I can see the corrugated tin roofs of the long building I stay in, Professor Lindsay's bushed-in house, and the kitchen building. As we get closer, I can make out that the gate to the kitchen is standing open. I'm immediately seized with terror.

"Looks like we have a visitor," says Professor Lindsay. I get ready to apologize, but then see what he has seen – a Cape Parks *bakkie* parked next to the building. Surely baboons don't drive *bakkies*.

"Howzit!" calls a figure from the door as we approach the building. My heart nearly careens through my chest when I recognize Cyril, smiling at the two of us.

"Cyril, what on earth are you doing here?" Professor Lindsay looks happy to see him. I'm surprised he could be happy to see anyone.

"I promised Erica I would visit," he says, shaking Professor Lindsay's hand. He then turns to me. "Hello, Erica. How was the hike?" How do I answer that? Annoying, clammy, mysterious, sometimes I hate working for this man.

"It was cloudy," I say.

"I can see," he says, looking up at the mountain.

"Fairly normal for this time of year, isn't it Cyril?"

"*Ja*, this cloud is pretty standard," he says. Then he turns to me and winks. "But no less impressive."

Inside, Cyril has laid out the makings of a feast. On the counter are eggs, ground beef, raisins, bay leaves, saffron, rice and some kind of chutney.

"Are you staying for dinner, Cyril?" says Professor Lindsay.

"I'm making dinner, Professor. With your permission."

"Permission granted," he says and walks back out the door, heading straight to his house.

We are alone, just me and Cyril. He carefully unwraps the ground beef from its paper packet. His hands are long and slender, but tough. The sleeves of his green Cape Parks sweater are rolled to his elbow, showing the muscle in his forearm.

I explode into a fit of coughs when I realize he's looking at me.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, fine, I have to shower."

I walk out and go to my room. I grab my towel, my nicest shirt, my sexiest underwear (just for the confidence sexy underwear provides), and my skirt. Then I think twice, knowing that if Professor Lindsay

noticed (which he would), he would tease me to no end. Also, I've already worn my skirt in front of Cyril. I exchange it for pants.

I give myself a pep talk in the shower until I have a huge ball of conversation threads I could follow with Cyril. I'm sure I know what I'll say, what he'll say, when he'll laugh, and how I'll feel when he smiles at me.

Unfortunately, Professor Lindsay is sitting at the counter when I return to the kitchen. He's at a bar stool, watching Cyril cook. He gives me a bit of a once over when I come in, the hint of a smirk in his cheeks.

"Wine?" he says, pulling out the other bar stool. There are two bottles sitting on the counter. One is open.

"No thanks," I say.

He pours red wine into my glass anyway, continuing his conversation with Cyril. I might have a few sips, but I won't drink a whole glass. I have had very little practice with alcohol.

"I'm just worried, Cyril, it's been months since I've seen her."

"Ag, Professor, she'll come back to you. You mustn't worry. That one, she is very smart."

I swirl the wine in my glass. Since my curiosity poisoned the conversation on our hike, I decide to keep quiet. Instead I speculate – is he missing a daughter or a lover? Can't imagine a lover, and definitely not a daughter.

"You know the high trail that runs the length of the ridge above Mr. Strydom's farm?" says Professor Lindsay.

"Is that the one with the cave below?" says Cyril

"Yes that one. I swear I saw her tracks. I would have scouted around a bit more for spoor but..." He glances at me, then looks back at his wine glass. Of course he's missing a leopard, he could never care that much about a person.

"You saw tracks?" I say, taking a small sip of my wine. Professor Lindsay finishes his glass in a large swallow and pours himself more before continuing.

"Yes, yes," he says, waving away my comment with the back of his hand. "Anyway, Cyril, I'm hoping the camera catches her, but she really doesn't like the cameras. But if it does catch her, I'll never be able to place a camera there again."

"Where did you see tracks?" I say.

"Oh, just on the ridge, above where you were standing. But really, they could have been anything. But Cyril..."

“Why didn’t you show me?” I shouldn’t feel hurt. He must have a good reason not to show me.

“You were distressed, I didn’t want to excite you more,” says Professor Lindsay, nose in his wine glass.

I shouldn't care. I shouldn't feel left out. I'm not here for very long.

“How could you...” I say.

“Supper’s ready! Erica, would you set the table?” Cyril pulls a casserole dish out of the oven and sets it on the counter. It smells of baking and curry. I use this opportunity to cool down, taking long breaths and willing my face to return to its normal white-freckled hew. I take plates, knives and forks to the coffee table in the lounge. Professor Lindsay sinks into the tall-backed easy chair with his wine glass. Cyril sits on one end of the couch and I sit on the other.

Cyril serves us plates of rice and the steaming ground beef concoction. I take a bite, loving the combination of the strongly seasoned meat and the custard-texture eggs.

“What is this?” I ask.

“It’s *bobotie*, proudly South African.”

“I must say, I’ve missed your cooking,” says Professor Lindsay quietly from his chair. “And your wine.”

“Mariette’s having a bad influence on you, Professor,” Cyril says.

“Hardly,” says Professor Lindsay. He looks at his glass for a minute, then sets it on the table, pushing it to the farthest corner. He picks up his plate and starts to eat.

We sit in silence, eating our food and ignoring each other. Eventually the silence is broken by the sounds of knives and forks scraping at nearly empty plates.

“So,” says Cyril, putting down his plate. “Shall we watch the videos from the cameras? Erica, you must be excited.”

“We’re not watching the videos,” says Professor Lindsay with a sigh.

“Why not?” says Cyril.

“Because you don’t work for me anymore. You work for the government. And the government has different ideas about conservation than I do.”

“Professor, that is hurtful,” says Cyril. He looks more nervous than hurt. “You think I would spy on you?”

“Of course not,” says Professor Lindsay. “But ever since you’ve started working for Cape Parks you’ve been getting these funny ideas that working with the farmers might somehow benefit the leopard. You might use what you see for your own benefit.”

“Professor, it’s not about that at all. I just want to show Erica how to watch and catalogue the videos.”

“No,” says Professor Lindsay.

“Why?” says Cyril. Professor Lindsay looks at Cyril, then at me, then back at Cyril. He is losing his resolve either because of the wine or because of Cyril’s smile and charm.

“Because,” he says. “There’s no space in that house.”

“Ag, that is a poor argument,” says Cyril, clearing the plates. “Come, let’s go.”

“It’s getting late.”

“Ag, *nee*, man, you’re not old yet. You can rest while we watch. Come Erica, I’ll show you the house.”

I remember visiting my grandparents’ house when I was very young. Every holiday we ate the same food, wore the same fancy clothes, and used the same tablecloth. I only saw the rooms I was lead to and sat in the chair I was told to. Then one year I was asked to go fetch a blanket to put on my grandmother’s lap because she was cold. This meant going to her bedroom, a room I didn’t think existed. I remember the feeling of the cold, foreign doorknob, and I remember how the bed was white and creaseless. It smelled of mothballs and lilies. I was both enchanted and terrified. I hurried back to the familiar parts of the house as soon as I found the blanket.

She’s not in that memory, so I hold it close, making sure she doesn’t run through it, making me bury the few I have that are only mine.

Cyril leads me to the door through a bower of shrubs. He’s holding my hand. If it weren’t for his touch, I would be tempted to flee, the same way I did as a child.

The wooden door creaks open and Cyril pulls a cord hanging from the ceiling. Warm light emanates from wall sconces, illuminating two desks facing opposite walls. Past the desks are the twin of the chair in the lounge and a bookshelf. The whole room is a clutter of plant and animal parts. Bundles of flowers hang from the two beams that run the length of the room. Small mammal skulls line the shelf above the desk. There are jars of small animals preserved in alcohol on the bookshelf, collections of insects framed on the wall, and a big stuffed owl beside the chair. There are even porcupine quills in the pen jar. Although the high concentration of dead things is a bit creepy, the room has a strangely homey quality.

Cyril flops into the rolling chair at one of the desks.

“This was my chair,” he says. “Ag, I fought so hard to have a work station of my own. Perhaps it will be easier for you.”

"I don't know, Professor Lindsay doesn't seem to like me very much." I look around for a chair. I know instinctively that the chair at the other desk is off limits.

"Ag, Professor Lindsay isn't as difficult as you think. You just need to push him a little, pretend he's given you permission already." He laughs to himself, shaking his head and twisting around in the chair. "He gives up easily, man. Especially with the wine."

"It seems a bit cruel to use wine against an alcoholic," I say. Cyril doesn't respond. He fumbles beside the desk and pulls out a folding chair, setting it down next to him. I almost sit down, but then realize we're missing something.

"Where's Professor Lindsay?" I ask. He hasn't followed us in from the house.

"He's doing the dishes."

"Really? That's supposed to be my job."

"Did he have you sign that thingy saying you'd do the dishes? *Nee*, man, that's another funny thing about the professor. It's about equality. He'll do them if you cook. You just have to get there first. Three months of raw steak and smash, then I find this out."

He turns on the ancient desktop computer and waits for it to boot. I sit down and look at the row of skulls on a shelf above the desk. They are arranged by size, from a tiny mouse skull with even rows of teeth to a skull that looks like it could have belonged to an alien child.

"It's a juvenile baboon. Scary, hey?" says Cyril. I tuck my chin down slightly and continue to study the skulls. I wonder if he's still looking at me.

"*Daar sy*," he says as the computer makes the final motions of waking up. He rolls to Professor Lindsay's desk where both the cameras are neatly in their cases. He opens the box, removes the memory card from one of them, and brings it over to our desk.

"If you will be doing this job, you must remember that Professor Lindsay likes the videos stored this way." He shows me how to insert the card into the card reader, and how to move the video files into appropriately labeled folders. He then takes a stack of data sheets from behind the computer.

"You see, Erica, this really does become a boring job. You must record everything onto these sheets. Especially if you do not know the names of the animals, it is difficult." He stands up and goes to the bookshelf, taking down a guide book on mammals.

"Come, shall we begin?"

The grey, grainy video opens to an animal, a real animal. Not a baboon, not a man and his dogs, but a rabbit. I hold perfectly still, thinking it might run if I breathe. It stops and looks at the camera. The pupils of its eyes glow white, reflecting the dim light of the camera. The right ear flicks, then it moves on.

“Oh, Cyril, that’s amazing!”

“Ja, it is, hey? These little boxes catch so much.” He hands me the data sheet and a pencil. “Here, Erica, you write. The video is 5.6 seconds long. It’s a scrub hare, the species name is *Lepus saxatilis* and the description is that it is hopping at a slow pace, stops, looks at camera, twitches ear, and moves on. Also it is ...” He clicks on an icon that overlays a scaled grid onto the video. “It is 520mm tall and I say it is female.”

We follow the animals through the videos. A small, black mongoose scuttles quickly in and out of the frame. It is long and sleek. Its movements are nearly serpentine. Cyril tells me the species name and what to write down, then moves to the next video. It’s a tiny, stout deer with straight, short horns. He calls it a grysbok, *Raphicerus melanotis*. In the guide book it is reddish with white spots, but on the camera it is simply grey with light spots. The next video is also a grysbok. And the next one.

The door behind us opens, and Professor Lindsay steps in. His face is sagging. It looks like the wine has sapped him of energy or willpower for any kind of enthusiasm or facial expression.

“Anything interesting?” he says.

“Yeah!” I say. “We saw a rabbit, a mongoose, and three grysbok!”

He squints, as if I’d just said something in a different language. He looks to Cyril for the translation.

“No, Professor, nothing interesting,” says Cyril.

“Good. I’m going to bed.”

Four grysbok idle in the grey dusk of the next video, glowing eyes glancing up every once in a while. They must live in the area because I think we are seeing the same ones over and over again. Cyril is transfixed. I try to focus on the video but find myself watching Professor Lindsay as he staggers around the room. He straightens a picture frame, rubs his finger along the bookshelf looking for dust, and pats the owl on the head. He enters a door next to our desk. Seconds later there’s the sound of running water and the scratching of a toothbrush. The toilet flushes. Besides the bathroom door, there are no other doors in the room.

“Cyril,” I whisper. “Where does he sleep?” Cyril does not glance away from the screen but simply points to the ceiling.

Professor Lindsay comes out of the bathroom.

“Goodnight, Cyril,” he mumbles. “Thank you for supper. You are welcome to stay if you’d like. Plenty of room in the dorms.” He shuffles to the center of the room and yanks on a knotted rope hanging just above his head. A stair case folds out from the ceiling. He starts to climb, then stops.

“And goodnight Erica. See you in the morning.” He climbs the stairs, pulling them up after him.

“*Jaislaike*, that video!” says Cyril, rubbing his knuckles into his eyes. “Four minutes and fifty-four and a quarter seconds. Four grysbok browsing.”

He takes the sheet from me and writes down the rest of the descriptions as I cue the next video. There are birds, twenty or so, flitting in and out, heaving around their absurdly long tails.

“This camera should not have picked up these sugarbirds, they are too small and too far away.”

“Sugarbirds,” I repeat.

“*Ja*, Cape sugarbird, *Promerops cafer*. Maybe the sensor is *opgefok*. We’ll skip this one.” He moves the computer mouse to exit the video.

“No,” I say, reaching for his hand. I barely touch him. “I’d like to watch them. They are beautiful.”

I take my hand away and he lets go of the mouse. We watch the birds. This one is a daylight shot and it has more depth in the shades of grey. Their black shapes bound in and out of the lighter patterned foliage. One without such a long tail sits on a bare branch. Another comes swooping up, hovering in the air above, flicking its tail feathers madly. The tailless one looks on.

There’s something about the stillness of the room, the absolute lack of any movement. I glance at Cyril just in time to see him turn his head quickly away.

“That little plain one is a female,” he says. “The male, the pretty one with the tail, he is ... ah... courting...”

He stands up when the video ends.

“I’m going now.”

“Do you have to? The professor said you could stay.”

“I do, Erica, I must drive back. There is work tomorrow and things to do before then.”

He saves the bird file and closes down the computer. We leave Professor Lindsay’s house and I walk him to his *bakkie*. He gives me a hug when we get there. It lasts for a long time. I can hear his heartbeat, muffled by his sweater. He finally let’s me go.

“Good night, Erica,” he says. He smiles at me. I see him hesitate. Then he shakes his head and laughs, opening the door of the *bakkie* and stepping inside.

I stand there long after the *bakkie* pulls out onto the road and rumbles away. I look at the sky. The clouds have opened, making room for the pixelated rush of stars.

Her

Professor Lindsay stands at the base of the trapdoor steps, glaring at me. He's only wearing boxer shorts. His slight paunch hangs out over the elastic waist.

"Good morning, Professor!" I say. I try to channel Cyril's couldn't-care-less attitude that he used last night to get us access to the videos.

"How did you..."

"I made you coffee and oats, they are on your desk."

"Oh. Thank you. But why..."

"Can you tell me if this is a female or male mongoose?" I point to the video. It distracts him from his annoyance with my trespass into his room. I'm glad to have distracted him but immediately regret calling him over. He should go back upstairs and change.

He shuffles toward me and looks over my shoulder.

"A female, I believe." I write it down on the data sheet. He picks up the few that I've completed. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Yes," I say. "Cyril showed me how to do it."

"Right," he says. He winces, rubbing his head. He finished the two bottles of wine that Cyril brought in under two hours with a half-glass of help from me and no help from Cyril.

"Well then," he says, moving toward the bathroom. "It looks acceptable. Carry on."

I click on the next video and take a luxurious sip of real coffee. When Sonja found out how much I like coffee, she brought several bags to Mariette to give to me. I used some of my spending money to buy coffee filters. Now I'll feel alive in the mornings.

I feel eyes on me. I spin around, but it's only the creepy stuffed owl in the corner. It has its head cocked to the side as if it is listening for something. I listen, too. The shower water is running.

The next video is of a huge antelope with long curled horns and broad stripes across its back. The scientific name trips out of my mouth as I sound it out – *Tragelaphus strepsiceros*. Common name – kudu. According to the guidebook, the Wolkeberg is the south-easternmost extent of the kudu's range.

This is so much more interesting than memorizing names out of a text book. I can see the animal in the video, I can look it up in the guide, and I can identify it by its looks and features. I'm learning and

being practical at the same time. Why isn't more education like this?

Professor Lindsay comes out of the bathroom in a towel. I quickly avert my eyes, but not before he reminds me of another bird – a big, plucked turkey, white skinned and goose-pimpled. The similarity makes me shudder. Luckily he goes upstairs, and I am able to return to my work.

I watch, open-mouthed, as a porcupine trundles across the screen. I've never seen one before, not on the videos, not in museums, not on hikes with Professor Lindsay. I've only seen the slender quills left behind like a dog's shed fur. It is beautiful. I can see that it is walking on four legs, but the way the bi-colored spines ripple and move reminds me of a spiky caterpillar undulating along the ground. I watch it again when the 12 seconds pass.

"Did Cyril stay?" asks Professor Lindsay, coming back down the stairs.

"No, he had to leave. Work in the morning."

"Shame. I wish he had stayed. He is very good with animal identification. I suppose you'll just have to do." He sighs, rolling his eyes at me just before he sits down. I sigh too, but for a different reason. I sip my coffee, suddenly very aware of how my lips hold the rim of the cup.

"Which are you working on?" Professor Lindsay asks.

"The first one, the one that we walked past on the way up."

"Ag, Erica, must you do them out of order?"

"I am doing them in order," I say.

"No, you're not. They're supposed to be in the order of collection, not installation."

"Does it really matter?"

"It matters to me."

I can hear him type a little bit, then take a noisy slurp of coffee. There is a quiet grunt of approval and satisfaction. I smile.

By my third cup of coffee, it is late afternoon and I am buzzing. Although I recognize that a large part of this is due to the caffeine, an equal part is due to being enthralled by the images on the screen. I've logged over fifty videos of fifteen animals I've never seen in the flesh. The last one I recorded was a huge, ambling tortoise. It's amazing to see these animals roaming around on trails I've walked.

Professor Lindsay has been quiet. Every once in a while, he'll say 'Seen anything?' and I say 'No' and we return to silence. His question has an edge of anxiety that I don't quite understand. Other than that, it's almost pleasant to work in this bizarre but cozy room, watching videos and drinking coffee.

There are two videos left in the file. I stretch my arms out and arch my back.

“Two videos left,” I say, not bothering to turn around.

“Excellent, you’ve done very good work today,” he says. I almost laugh. Nothing surprises me more than getting compliments from Professor Lindsay.

“Thanks, I think I’ll go for a walk or something after I’m finished. Feels strange to have sat here all day.”

“Good. I’m making more coffee. Would you like some?”

“No thanks,” I say.

He leaves, and I open the second to last video. I expect one of the animals that would be present in early dawn, perhaps the hare loping through. But instead I see Professor Lindsay and myself. He walks into the frame without looking at the camera. I stop, look at the camera, and continue to walk. My brow is furrowed.

“This can’t be,” I say to myself. This is supposed to be the last video, not the second to last. That means something big came past after us.

Cyril. It must be Cyril. He could have walked up to find us, to find me. It’s an easy walk to that spot, he very well could have done it, especially if he knew he was going to be waiting for long. But why wouldn’t he have followed us all the way up?

I open up the last video, expecting Cyril to smile at the camera, at me. Instead, there is nothing. A six second clip of nothing. I watch it again. Nothing crosses the path, there are no birds, nothing. How is that possible? Maybe the sensor really is *opgefok*.

I down the rest of my coffee and lean closer to the monitor. One more time, Erica, there has to be something there.

And it’s true, there is something there, just on the other side of the path, obscured a little by the haze of cloud and the tall shrubs. I know because it is darker and some of the bushes wave as if something is moving through them instead of being blown by the wind.

I watch it again and pause it. I find the zoom function and enlarge the section. The definition of the camera is so fine that I can see the detail in the bark and leaves of the plant. I can also see fur. I finally find a gap in the branches that shows the fur in more detail – a rump of black and dark grey rosettes on a light grey back ground. A leopard’s fingerprint.

“Professor Lindsay!” I say, slamming open the door of the kitchen. He’s busy spooning sugar into his coffee.

“What,” he says, not bothering to look up.

“I found something interesting.”

He comes with me, leaving his coffee on the counter. I show him the video and then show him the enlarged frame.

“Yes, keep it there.” He grabs a book off his desk and starts madly going through the laminated pages. He sits in my chair, studying the photographs of leopard haunches and the close ups of their spots, comparing each one to the one on the screen.

The strange thing is, he’s not having fun. It’s not an exciting discovery, like it is for me. Its anxiety driven, brows furrowed in a silent prayer for the missing one to be found. I recognize this face. It’s the same face my parents wore every time the phone rang that year. That look makes my muscles turn to jelly, my eyes blink back dampness.

“I have to go for a run, Professor.” He doesn’t hear me.

“Professor?”

“Hmm?” he says, nervously fingering the laminated pages of the book.

“I’m going for a run.”

When my breathing starts to get heavy and ragged, my heart a quick-time metronome, and my forehead squeezes together so tight that I start to get a headache, I know I’m having a panic attack. So I do what I’ve done any time I’ve had a panic attack – take myself for a run. I decide to run on the road. I go down to the main road and run, away from Germane. *Left, right, left, right, in, out, in, out, breathe, Erica, breathe.* When I was younger, finding places to run had been more difficult. That was when my parents wouldn’t let me leave the house or be out of their sight. Back then I would run in the hall or do short sprints in the yard until I was exhausted. They never questioned it. Doesn’t matter. Keep running.

I’ve never run in hiking boots before. They are heavy and cumbersome. The soles have too much traction. Still, they crunch away at the unpaved road until they’ve eaten about a mile. I come back down from my panic and stop. I breathe hard and massage my calves, looking out at place in which I’ve landed. It’s funny how pain makes color and texture more vivid. The dark grey hills roll down from the road and run into the needle points of green poking up in the patchwork of patterned, furrowed soil. I can feel the fields waiting for the next kiss from the moist mouth of winter.

Professor Lindsay would probably criticize the field and say that it should be fynbos. What a painfully jaded man.

I head back, thinking only of the present. The sky gets pink and the sun is about to set. I look

forward to walking part of the way in the dark and watching the stars come out.

I sigh at the rumble of an approaching vehicle. Unfortunately for me, South African farmers are really quite nice.

Sure enough, the *bakkie* passes me, stopping just ahead of where I am walking. It is Mr. Strydom.

“*Kan ek jou ‘n lift gee?*”

I look at him blankly.

“Ag, sorry Erica, do you need a lift?” His round face folds into a smile.

“Sure,” I say. “Thanks.” I step into the cab. I expected it to smell like motor oil and wet sheep, but it is very clean and well kept.

He starts up the engine and soon we are bouncing along toward camp

“How are camp?” he asks. He winces, realizing his grammar mistake too late. Mariette has told me that there is no distinction between *is* and *are* in Afrikaans.

“Fine,” I say. Not only is Professor Lindsay a grumpy old man, he also seems to be an alcoholic being driven slowly mad by some animal that has gone missing.

“*Goed, dis goed,*” he says. “And he is still a communist?”

“Still a communist,” I say.

“Good,” he laughs. “Some things will never change. He is a good man, but stubborn. And not good with people.”

I want to agree with him, but I can’t bring myself to say anything nasty.

“He works very hard,” I say.

“Hah,” says Mr. Strydom with a frown. “Works hard to make farming hard work.”

I look out the window into the gathering darkness. I feel a little sorry for Mr. Strydom and his battle against whatever ridiculous obstacles Professor Lindsay must be putting in his way. But somewhere out there is a porcupine trundling along, a kudu grazing, sugar birds sleeping in their nests. There is even a leopard on the prowl, evading detection. I’m glad Professor Lindsay makes this possible.

“Have you seen a leopard yet?” Mr. Strydom asks.

“Nope, only in...” I stop myself. Professor Lindsay told me not to gossip. “Only in books.”

“*Goed, dis goed,*” he says. “I hope they stay where they should. Then we won’t have trouble.” He pulls over when we reach the short road that goes up to camp. “Good night, Erica. Keep well.”

I find Professor Lindsay in his house. He’s sitting in the easy chair next to the owl with a tumbler of whiskey in his hand.

“Only for emergencies,” he says, toasting my entrance. “Would you like some?”

"No thanks." I say. "Wrong leopard?"

"That is correct," he says. "It was only George, cheeky bastard. I'm glad he's still around, but I was hoping it was Clementine."

"Is that the one with the collar that ran out of batteries?"

"How did you know about that?"

"I read her file."

"Hmph," he says. "Yes, that's Clementine. I wish she weren't so good at avoiding people. It's a good thing where farmers are concerned, I suppose, but it's bloody irritating when I need to help her."

"Don't worry, Professor, I'm sure you'll find her," I say.

"Professor," he says disdainfully. "What a useless title and position. It's gotten me nowhere, I tell you." He's hunched in his chair, glaring at the whiskey as he swirls it in his glass. I don't know what to say. I could argue with him, but I'm not sure what I'd be arguing about.

"Can't you quit?" I ask, rolling a chair up and sitting opposite him.

"Don't be absurd," he says. "It's a great honor to be a Professor. It gets you noticed, it gets you grant money and other funding for research and living. It also gets you a nice office at the University and research camps like this one."

"What's the problem then?" I ask.

"Bureaucratic nonsense. They demand reports. They ask me to feed information to undergrads who should already know what I'm talking about. They make me teach courses with young people who don't know their elbow from their asshole. They want papers published before the research is done, students advised, and all this other *kak* nonsense that no academic should ever have to do. Academics are born to conduct research, not waste their time marking monotonous exams and pracs, writing letters of recommendation, advising students, and teaching teenagers for God's sake."

I try to picture this man in a button-up shirt and tie in front of a hundred students sharing his knowledge about the world. It doesn't fit at all with the grumpy old man in front of me now in khaki shorts and an old t-shirt who secrets away as much information as he can.

He stands up and gets the whiskey bottle off of the shelf. I swivel back and forth in my chair, watching him as he pours another large glass.

"Twenty-five years of frustration. I cringe to think of how many more I'll have to endure. All you teenagers..."

"But I'm ..."

“Bah, whatever you choose to call yourself, it cannot be an adult. So many irritating questions and general ignorance.”

I spin in my chair watching him. I try to imagine Professor Lindsay as a twenty-something, some kind of bright-eyed and bushy-tailed stereotype overlaid on the bird-man in front of me. That image doesn't work either.

“The moral of this long-winded story is that the title "Professor" stings. I hate being called Professor.”

I try out his first name in my mind. *Vincent*. Oh *Vincent*, what's that animal called? *Vincent*, I've been consorting with Mr. Strydom. But don't worry, I didn't tell him anything.

“Would you rather I called you Vincent?” I ask.

“Absolutely not! I worked hard to earn that title and now you want to strip it from me? I am a Professor, damn it. I deserve the respect, the title, and everything associated with it.” He says this proudly and forcefully. He is definitely a professor. He's taught me so much, most of which has been on the subject of how to deal with crotchety old men.

“Fine,” I say. “Professor it will be.” I rise from my seat. “Well, I'm going to make dinner. Do you want me to call you when it's ready?”

“Fine,” he says with a sigh. “I suppose I'll just wait here.”

When I return from the kitchen half an hour later, Professor Lindsay is fast asleep in his chair. I watch his chest rise and fall and listen to the air whispering out of his mouth. The room has started to get cold and I look around for a blanket. I find one folded neatly in the bottom of the bookshelf. I unfold it and lay it gently over Professor Lindsay.

“Goodnight, Vincent,” I say.

“Goodnight, Mariette,” he says. He mumbles a few words in his sleep and pulls the blanket tightly around himself. Then he starts to snore.

Apology

We're about to leave on a hike when Rubbish's *bakkie* comes roaring up the driveway. It manages to roar in a few ways – the engine struggles, the body creaks and groans, and the tinny music screeches. I am relieved when he pulls up and turns off the noise.

“*Hoezit, Prof!*” he says. “Hello, Erica!” He comes around to the passenger side of the car and opens the door. Out steps Mariette.

“Mariette!” I say. “What a wonderful surprise!” I look eagerly at Professor Lindsay. He does not share my enthusiasm. Neither does Mariette it seems.

“Hello, Vincent,” she says.

“Mariette,” he says.

“I haven't come up to clean since Erica has arrived. We've had a lot of guests and we are expecting more. I'm just here to make sure everything is tidy and neat.”

Professor Lindsay nods.

“Will you excuse me?” he asks. He doesn't wait for a response and goes up to his house, slamming his door behind him. Mariette turns to go into the kitchen. I've been deserted. Even Rubbish has disappeared. I stand there waiting for someone to tell me what I should be doing. Finally I give up and go to find Rubbish.

He's around the side of the house, pulling the garbage cans out of the locked room that protects them from the baboons.

“Rubbish?” I say. “Do you know what is going on?” Rubbish smiles at me with his goofy, tooth-challenged grin.

“This man, this woman, so much to talk about, but neither will say it. It's a shame they aren't more suited to get along.”

“What do you mean?”

He taps his temple with his finger.

“I know Mariette well. She is a proud woman. She will never say that she is unhappy. But I know she only asks for me to take her up to camp when she is looking for something. I think that this time it is an apology.”

“What is she upset about?” I ask.

“Who knows with women, hey? The only thing that is true is that they are right.”

He hands me a garbage bag, and we walk back to the *bakkie*. No wonder Professor Lindsay was acting weird. He is also proud. I can't imagine he would ever admit an apology.

I go up to the house after I help Rubbish with the garbage. Professor Lindsay is sitting in his overstuffed chair watching the door. He nods when I enter, then continues to stare at the door. I sit down at my computer and turn it on. Nothing happens. I start to freak out, thinking the computer has crashed or something. Then I notice all the power cords are gone.

“Professor,” I say. “Where are the power cords?”

“I hid them,” he says.

“What? Why?”

“Mariette only comes up here when she is looking for something. I don't know what it is this time, but if it is on the computer, I don't want her to be able to get it.”

“Are you crazy?” I say. “No offence, but it's mind-blowing how stupid you can be sometimes, Prof. Isn't it obvious that she came here for an apology?”

I walk out. I am disgusted that he would assume that Mariette could be so conniving when it's obvious that she is upset and giving him a chance to apologize. I get my notebook from my room and shove it in the backpack I had packed for today's hike. I am prepared for a hike, and that's what I intend to do. I tell Rubbish that I'm leaving and head up into the mountains alone.

I haven't hiked by myself before. It holds a paranoia that I wasn't quite expecting. What if I fall and nobody finds me? What if a hunter accidentally shoots me? What if I'm being followed?

Eventually, the physical strain of the climb calms me and wipes away almost all of the worry. The only thing that remains is the sense of being followed. It is not a tangible fear, only a sense. Like a child afraid of the dark, I find myself seeing things in the empty space around me – a leopard in the shadows, a baboon sitting on a boulder, a snake instead of a stick.

When I have this feeling, I find myself looking for her. I turn a few times on the trail, expecting to see her there. It was the same feeling I would get at home. If I was having dinner at a friend's house, I would tell my parents that I was getting a ride home. I would tell the friend that my parents were picking me up. Then I would walk home alone in the dark. Every time, I felt haunted, followed, like she was just behind me. Sometimes I would look, turn suddenly, and hope to find her. Other times I would keep

walking, allowing her ghost to follow me. When I did this I could believe she was actually there.

Now I let her follow me up into the mountains. I take her from the valley where a petty silence is being kept, up the winding path to the cloud-capped peaks of an uncomplicated wilderness.

I return from the sun-warmed path and enter the icy cold of the kitchen. Professor Lindsay is reading a newspaper that Rubbish brought for him, and Mariette is washing the dishes. I imagine they've been like this all morning.

I sit across from Professor Lindsay and stare at him. He looks up from his paper. I hold his gaze and shake my head. He swallows.

"Thank you for cleaning, Mariette," he says. I roll my eyes.

"Oh, well, thank you for noticing, Vincent. I do clean up after you, don't I? I clean your home, I tidy and edit your reports, I make apologies when you offend people. You must think I'm very useful." She pushes the dishes loudly into the drying rack

"Yes, well," he says. I can see him planning a witty retort so I pull the paper from his hand and hit him with it. He stares at me. Then he stands up. He looks so mad, I'm afraid he'll shout at me.

Instead he goes to the kitchen. He takes a dish towel and starts drying the dishes that Mariette has washed.

"I know you are angry with me, Mariette," he says.

"Ag, that much should be obvious," she says. "And I am certain you do not know why." She shoves a damp dish at him. He takes it from her, dries it, and puts it away.

"You are angry about what I have done to Mr. Strydom. I am sorry for spying on him. I am sorry for having put you in an uncomfortable position. I am sorry for compromising our goals toward conservation by aggravating one of the main instigators."

Mariette looks genuinely shocked. I am too. I've never heard him apologize to anyone about anything.

"Do you mean that?" she says.

"Yes I do. And I promise never to spy on Mr. Strydom again. It was wrong. I should not be so difficult."

She looks like she is about to cry.

"Oh Vincent, I'm sorry for being so hard on you. I'm sure I've overreacted, but you know I care very much about everyone getting along."

“That is an entirely noble thing to care about,” he says. They finish washing and drying the dishes in silence. When they are done, Professor Lindsay pats her shoulder and says, “You’ve been here all day. I’m sure your dear dog must be lonely.”

“You’re right,” she says, “I definitely should be going. Shame, Rubbish has been waiting for me for hours!”

I help her gather the things she brought with her to clean and load them into the *bakkie*. Professor Lindsay doesn’t help us and walks back up to his house. When he is out of earshot, I start laughing.

“Marianne, how did you do that? I’ve never seen him apologize to anyone.”

“Well,” she says, “as the Good Lord says, ‘A good indignation brings out all one’s powers.’” She gives me a hug and a smile. Then she steps into the explosive din of Rubbish’s *bakkie* and they drive away.

The second they are gone, Professor Lindsay comes tearing out of the house, fully dressed for hiking.

“I thought she would never leave,” he says. “Hurry, we really must get these cameras back up today.”

We only manage to get one of the cameras installed before dark. Professor Lindsay is irritated as ever to have the day stolen from him. At some point I try to remind him of what I saw as a productive moment.

“I thought it was big of you to apologize to Marianne,” I say.

“Oh, that,” he says. “That woman would believe anything if she heard it from me.”

I am astounded. I didn’t think him capable of such mind games, given that it takes a certain amount of awareness of the human condition. Even so, I notice that we’ve avoided replacing the camera that was on Mr. Strydom’s property.

When we get back to camp I go to my room to change. Marianne has made my bed and swept the floors. She even wiped down the windows so the view is no longer spotted by dust and water droplet imprints. She has left my overflowing suitcase untouched. Clothes spill from it onto the floor. I can see the dust outline where she swept around the pile. I appreciate her respect for my privacy.

I dig out a shirt from my bag and find some things I shouldn’t – two bottles of whiskey, a bottle of wine, and the power cords for the computers. I laugh so hard that I collapse on my bed. Then I carry them to the kitchen where the professor is making dinner.

“You are one sneaky old man,” I say. “I don’t exactly appreciate you hiding shit in my suitcase, but well done for knowing she wouldn’t go there.”

“Yes, well,” he says. That is the extent of his response. But he makes sure that we have custard for dessert. I see it as a silent thanks for my cooperation, but I don’t think I’ll ever really be sure of what I see in Professor Lindsay.

The Menagerie

I collect animals like a little boy collects baseball cards. With every video of a new species, I collect a still frame in my mind. I transpose it to paper with my pencils, complete with specs, biographical blurb, and trivia. My favorites are -

Oreotragus oreotragus - klipspringer. They are cutest of the antelope. They are extremely agile on rocks, hence the Afrikaans name meaning 'rock-jumper'. They are often seen in pairs, one looking out while the other eats. Even with their vigilance and agility, they still end up as meals for eagles and saddle blankets for humans.

Hystrix africaeaustralis – Cape porcupine. Biggest rodent in Africa, weighing in at 18 – 30 kg. The males and females are about the same size and have spines that easily fall off if they shake their body or if a predator attacks them. They eat bulbs, tubers, bones, fruit, and crops. They are my favorite.

Papio ursinus – Chacma baboon. An evil animal that is half my weight. They come in troops of 20 -100. The troop in our *kloof* has 36 individuals according to Professor Lindsay. Baboons are omnivorous, eating fruits and some meat. They do not eat carrion, but they do eat sandwiches.

Procavia capensis – Rock dassie. Funny, fat little animals, weighing about 3 or 4 kg. They remind me of my cousin's guinea pigs, except much bigger. They enjoy sunbathing, and their closest living relative is the African elephant.

Raphicerus melanotis – Cape grysbok. Small, solitary antelope with tiny horns that don't seem to grow past their huge, leaf-like ears. They are red with soft grey streaks that give them the appearance of greying.

Panthera Pardus – Leopard. Cape leopards are half the mass of the average African savanna leopards, weighing about 34kg for males and 20kg for females. They like rocky slopes or shady *kloofs* and have unique rosette patterns like a human fingerprint. Favorite foods are klipspringer, dassie, and Cape grysbok. They are solitary and shy, moving within well-defined territories. Because of this, we don't know how many there are. It is thought that there are less than 1000. Of that 1000, I've seen a fleeting, obscure glimpse of one through a camera. I hope I get to see more.

Leopard Ladies

Professor Lindsay and I spend the sunny days hiking, putting cameras up or taking them down. Rainy days we spend indoors. Although Professor Lindsay is not opposed to hiking on rainy days (we've done it several times), we're more likely to find ourselves inside, cataloguing the videos that we collect. I'm starting to get used to following cloudbursts rather than days and times.

Today it is raining and cold. Professor Lindsay has built a fire, and I have discovered Golden Syrup. South African stores don't have affordable maple syrup readily available, but they do stock a syrup made from distilled cane juice. It is thick and pure and I put it on anything. I've decided that there is nothing better than Golden Syrup on toast with a cup of coffee.

Professor Lindsay comes in and stands in the doorway. I look up at him from the desk. His hands are pink and prune-skinned from doing the dishes. He makes no move toward his computer to do his own work. He's staring at me with this awkward, pained expression.

"What," I say through a mouth full of toast.

"There is a group coming to use the camp for the rest of the week and the weekend."

"What?" I swallow the mouthful too quickly and cough as the sweetness burns my throat. "When do they arrive? How long are they here for?"

"They are here for four nights. They arrive at noon."

"What!" I look at the computer. The time in the corner of the screen shows 8:19am. "I haven't even packed yet! How am I getting to Germane? Is Rubbish picking me up? Does Mariette know I'm coming?"

Professor Lindsay continues to look at me, his lips pinched tightly together. He shifts his weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

"Erica," he says. "I was wondering if you could please stay for the weekend and help me manage the camp while the group is here."

"You want me to stay?" I ask.

"Yes, Erica, that's what I just said. Were you even..." He stops and takes a deep breath, focusing on a dried bundle of flowers hanging from the rafters. "Yes, Erica, please stay. I need your help."

I pretend to seriously consider what he's said, but already know my answer.

"Yeah, sure Prof. I'll stay."

“Good.”

He turns abruptly and walks out. I stand up and do a victory dance, the happy melody of ‘I Need Your Help,’ featuring the impenetrable Professor Lindsay singing in my head. I feel so victorious that I skip down to the kitchen through the puddles for a celebratory spoonful of Golden Syrup and a fresh cup of coffee.

I still have work to do. Especially with a group coming through, I should finish the videos before they arrive. Then I’ll have plenty of time to socialize, entertain, and help with whatever field work they are doing. I take my coffee back to the house and play the next video.

It’s a jackal. The fluffy tail slopes down from the curve of its rump. It looks quickly at the camera, ears pricked in dog-like awareness, before moving on. Maybe the researchers are studying jackals. Maybe I’ll learn more about their behavior. Or learn to track them or trap them. Maybe I’ll get to touch one. Fat chance of doing that with a leopard. I’ve only seen one in a month and it was on a video.

A month. So much for calling my parents. Though, to be fair, I haven’t made it to town, so it isn’t really my fault. I hope they aren’t worried.

At about 11 o’clock I pack my work away and go to the dorms. Everything needs to be in order for the research team that is coming through. Researchers associated with a prestigious foreign university will definitely need clean hand towels in the bathrooms. Then maybe they will realize how brilliant I am and ask me to come work for them.

As I tidy, I wonder where Professor Lindsay has gone. I haven’t seen him since he came to speak with me. He would have told me if he was going to Germane to meet the group. On the other hand, it’s not unusual for him to go missing for hours. He probably just went for a walk.

When everything is in place, I stand in the road and listen for the vehicles. The rain has turned into a light mist, and the sun is showing thinly through the clouds. I practice running back to the kitchen door and walking toward the road with a self-assured wave. This way it won’t look like I’ve been standing around waiting for them to show up.

They don’t give me very much time to practice. I hear the rattling of a vehicle coming up the hill. I run for the house and walk out toward the road, smiling and waving, just as a plain white *bakkie* bumps into view. It’s Mr. Strydom’s *bakkie*. He waves back and slows down.

“Hi Erica, how are you this morning?”

“I’m fine, Mr. Strydom. Just waiting for some researchers who are visiting camp this week.”

“Hahah, is this what they are calling themselves? *Jissis*.”

“Have you seen them?”

“*Ja*, they are coming up the road now.”

“Is Professor Lindsay with them?”

“*Nee*, Erica, he wouldn’t be with them.”

“Why not?”

“Because *hulle is ‘n klomp wilde buitelandse stadsjapies wat niks in ‘n plek soos dié verloor het nie*.”

This happens all the time – Afrikaans becomes English, English becomes Afrikaans. I’ve learned to just go with it.

“Okay. Well, you have a nice day, Mr. Strydom.”

“Alright, Erica. *Sterkte*.” He leaves, bumping away in his *bakkie*. Our conversation leaves me feeling unsettled. But I have no time to think about it because I can hear another vehicle coming. I don’t even have time to sprint back to the house and do my greeting walk to the road. Instead, I stand there stupefied and watch the approach of the strangest vehicle I’ve seen in South Africa.

It’s a van, I guess, one of those 12-seater touring vans that they call a *kombie*. I’ve seen *kombies* before and those minibus taxis in Spieëlfontein. But I’ve never seen one quite as pink. It is a strong, pastel pink, unsubtle and proud. The sides are splattered with mud, and it heaves itself over the last few potholes before coming to a jolting halt in front of me.

Across the door is written “Discover” in large curling letters and “Women’s Retreat” in a smaller font beneath. I hear squabbling from behind the tinted, muddy windows and someone trying to open the door. Finally the sliding door jumps open, and a woman in a pink poncho stumbles out of the car into me.

“Jeepers, I’m so sorry,” she says, steadying herself by holding onto my shoulder. She is wearing aviator sun glasses and a straw hat. And pink galoshes.

“I’m Tina,” she says. “Who might you be? Are you part of the staff?”

“I’m Erica, and yeah, I guess I am part of the staff.”

“Excellent.” Middle-aged to older-aged women emerge from the vehicle. Each of them is wearing a standard issue pink poncho and pink galoshes. They look around themselves as they step out of the *kombie* like they’ve entered a brand new world.

“Ladies,” Tina says. “This is Erica. She is a member of the staff here at Camp Leopard and will be showing you to your rooms. Please collect your bags from the boot.”

She turns and walks swiftly into the kitchen before I can explain that it’s not my job, that I’m a

research assistant, that I am supposed to be helping researchers, not herding pink-clad women around my camp. But here I am, and here are a dozen women waiting to follow me around. I lead them to their rooms. Then I go to find Professor Lindsay.

He is hunched over the computer in his house.

“Erica, you don’t strike me as a careless person. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t let the door slam against the wall next time you open it.”

“And I’d appreciate it if you gave me more warning about who was coming to visit the camp.”

“Ag, are they here already? I was hoping to do more work on my presentation.”

“They most certainly are here. And I don’t know what you would present to them, unless it’s instructions on how to deal with menopause.”

“Professor?” a voice calls from outside. “Do you have any extra blankets? It’s much colder than we expected it to be.”

Professor Lindsay turns to look at me very seriously.

“Erica, I will pay you R50 to take care of these women.”

“No! This isn’t my job!”

“Fine, I’ll pay you R100. Per day.”

I stare him down, trying to calculate what R100 is in dollars. It’s slave wages, but it’s still wages. He must think I’m about to say no because he continues.

“And I’ll teach you how to track animals.”

“Even leopards?” I ask.

“Even leopards.”

“Sold,” I say. We shake hands, and I leave the house to attend to the pink ladies.

Tina, the pink poncho head honcho, wants to kick me out of my room and put her stuff there. She likes the view and has paid for the best room. I point out that the room at the other end is actually much nicer and much warmer.

“Professor Lindsay gave me this room because it isn’t very nice,” I lie. “The floor boards are rotting at this end and there is a colony of spiders in this corner that comes out at night.”

“Jeepers!” she says. “I didn’t realize this building was so poorly maintained.”

“It’s not about maintenance,” I say, trying my hardest to channel a hippie attitude and voice. “It’s about being one with nature and choosing not to destroy a single soul for our own comfort.”

“Oh,” she says, completely buying my rational. “Well, in that case, I’ll take the room on the end.”

The ladies come together in the evening around the fireplace in the lounge. Professor Lindsay has me set up a projector and a screen on the opposite wall for his presentation. He arrives at the exact time his presentation is supposed to begin.

“Ladies,” Tina says by way of introduction. “This is the first lecture of a series that will be presented to you. They will help us with our mission this retreat. What is our mission?”

“Discover our inner leopard!” the ladies say in unison. Professor Lindsay and I look at each other. I want to laugh.

He launches into a lecture on the history of leopards in the Cape – the difference in size from usual leopards, the way they raise their families, the amount of area they cover, how they choose a mate, how they hunt, what they eat, and what happens when they come into contact with humans. He describes a very lonely animal, one that travels long distances without much contact with other leopards. They are self-sufficient and raise their young until they are old enough to fend for themselves, then the family separates. He is a very good lecturer - stern, commanding, and knowledgeable.

Many of the women furiously take notes, nodding at what he has to say. One woman listens, her pen still in her hand. Her eyes have a thin film of tears wobbling to stay in place. She blinks and two lines draw themselves down her cheeks.

Professor Lindsay concludes his speech and leaves the room. I’m left standing in the corner watching as the room slowly dissolves into tears.

“Ladies,” says Tina. “This is not your fate, this is your fortune. You are strong, independent, beautiful women. I want you to write in your diaries tonight about what your inner leopard has done to make your life the beautiful creation that it is!” Tina speaks jubilantly, but many of the women remain gloomy and depressed. Tina hugs each one of them as they shuffle out of the door to go to their rooms for the night. I sneak out the front door to avoid the hug and find Professor Lindsay in his house.

The lights are on, but there is no answer when I knock on the door.

“Professor?” I say, pushing open the door gently. He sticks his head around the doorway of the bathroom.

“Ah, it’s you, thank God.” He comes out of hiding and sits down in his chair.

“Who else would it be?”

“One of the others. Every year I get one of those lonely, divorced women rocking up at my door.” I laugh. He looks so unhappy that I almost feel sorry for him.

“So they are all divorced?”

“Yes. That crazy woman Tina brainwashes them into believing that they are happy when they are alone and that being a divorcee has something to do with their inner being fighting for its freedom or some *kak*. Some of them take the metaphor too far and extrapolate that because I am the male in this territory, I have certain, ah, obligations.”

“Oh dear,” I say. “Poor you, surrounded by a dozen lonely women.”

“Don’t tease, Erica, it’s really very serious.”

“Yes, of course, my apologies.”

He pulls a book off the bookshelf and starts to read. Perhaps he hopes this will dismiss me. I sit down in my chair and spin a little, looking at him.

“I’ll pay you at the end of the week Erica, you can go now.” He doesn’t look up from his book.

“Professor, you say Tina is brainwashing them. But you are a solitary person. Surely some of these women could identify as independent people.”

“Erica, you can be quite daft sometimes. I’m not saying that some of these women aren’t solitary. I’m saying that to compare oneself to a leopard is preposterous. Human’s are far more social than leopards and gain more from being social than from being alone. She’s essentially lying to these women.”

“But it gives them strength through a hard time.”

“That doesn’t make it scientifically factual, does it?”

“What about you? You loathe company.”

“Yes, I do,” he says, closing his book. “And, if I were a leopard, I would have entered into many physical altercations with you about being in my territory. But, because I am human, I am socialized to ask you to leave instead of throwing you out.”

“Fine,” I say, getting up from my chair. “I’ll leave you alone then.”

Outside the wind has picked up. The patchy clouds move across the waxing moon. I watch the sky, wondering what it would be like if we were more like leopards, able to exist alone with minimal interaction with our species. Would it be easier, eking out an existence alone, no arguments or sarcasm, nobody to help or to hurt you?

In the soft blue light outside the kitchen, I see a shadow shift and a figure take shape. It is a Cape hare. It is slightly smaller than the scrub hare that I saw on the first day of video collection, but it has the same funny fringe of jet black hairs on its ear tips. It hops slowly, sniffing at the ground. It looks up and freezes. Its satellite ears rotate, picking up more sounds and signals than I’d ever be able to hear or interpret. Another rabbit hops into view, freezing in a similar pose. Eventually the first drops its head and

carries on, being followed by the second. I stand still until they are both gone from sight. Then I make my way to the brightly lit building that holds my room and the rooms of a community of women.

Jump

The ladies spend their days hiking, cooking, eating, and bonding. Professor Lindsay and I hide in his house working on the videos and making more presentations. Every evening we join them for dinner and for a presentation. Professor Lindsay has several admirers that make him supremely uncomfortable. I would laugh, but I have several admirers of my own, and I know his pain.

“Erica, come sit next to me,” Jean says as I come to the kitchen to help with dinner. “I want to hear all about Africa.” I grudgingly join her, wincing every time she speaks. I have either become unaccustomed to the American accent, or she just reminds me of my mother.

“Have you seen a leopard?”

“Nope,” I say. “They are very good at keeping to themselves.”

“That’s too bad,” she says. Then she launches into how she is going to get a tattoo of a leopard when she is back in Miami. Apparently, her former husband doesn’t like tattoos.

“Not that he would have noticed. He didn’t even notice when I had my eyes done.”

“You had your eyes done?” I squint at her face, trying to find evidence of a lift or nerve-killing Botox.

“Yes indeedy,” she says. She opens her eyes wide and points to the lip of her eyelid. Her eyeliner is tattooed on.

“Great,” I say. “Guess you don’t have to do makeup again.”

“Exactly. I am an empowered woman. If I don’t want to wear makeup, I don’t have to.”

These women are everywhere. They are in my bathroom in the morning, brushing their hair and trying to explain each other’s dreams. They are in the kitchen eating my food. They are on my hiking trails taking photographs of anything and everything. All I want is for it to be over, for the women to go home, and for things to return to normal.

“Erica!” Jean calls. I had made the blunder of leaving the house without peering out of the windows first. “Come for a walk with us!” I would say no, but Professor Lindsay has threatened to lock me out of the house if I don’t entertain them in some way today. So I go with them.

We walk down the road to where the water from the mountain streams beneath it. You can't tell from inside a vehicle, but on foot you can see the big pipe running under the road and the minimal support beams fashioning a shallow bridge. Here, Tina takes us off the road and into the bushes, much to the excitement of the women. We bushwhack our way down a steep, muddy ravine until we come to a pool. The mountain has formed a ring of rocks that catches the water coming down from the mountain. The water is clear and deep, with a deep tint of brown-red from the soil and the tannins of the mountain plants.

"Ladies, I have brought you here to bathe. Cleanse your soul of the plaque that has built up over the years, and leave your shame and self-consciousness behind."

Tina starts to take off her clothes. The others giggle and nervously follow suit. I am stunned. I didn't sign up for a swim with a bunch of naked old women in the middle of winter.

"Come on, Erica," says Jean. She's taking off her pants and folding them on a rock.

"It's cold," I say.

"That's the point, shock all the bad things out of your system. Besides, its summertime, this is really the warmest weather you'll have for swimming. I didn't think Africa would be so cold."

I can't bring myself to point out how flawed her logic is. Instead, I take off my clothes and find a rock along the edge of the pool. I look around at the other naked women. Their bodies are very different shapes – round, thin, full, sagging. They are strange looking, but beautiful. I look down at my body and wonder how on earth it got here.

"Ladies, on the count of three, we will jump together. Before you jump, I want you to clear your mind, entering the water as a woman free of any constraints. Are we ready? One, two ..."

I don't hear three. All I hear is the splash of bodies entering the water around me. I close my eyes and jump.

Air catches in my lungs and I feel suspended over the water. Then I am engulfed completely. The shock of the cold pushes everything out of my mind. I struggle under the water, trying to surface. When I pop up, the air is warm and fills my lungs with sweetness. I float on my back, ears under the water. I can't hear the other women, all I can see is the sky.

I can hear her speaking to me from my memory. "Erica, Erica, let's jump together." I watch her in awe, flying high up into the air, tips of her hair floating as she jumps on the trampoline. She stops and comes to the edge of the trampoline, holding out her hand, smiling encouragingly. I quickly climb out of the pool and join the other women before she has a chance to grab me.

* * * * *

When we get back to camp, Tina asks us to share the first thoughts we had after jumping into the pool. Most people say they thought of a moment when they were intensely happy or intensely sad. I say that my first thought was of watching the sky out the window of the airplane on the way to South Africa. I remember the noise of the plane and the people around me dampened by the overwhelming joy of soaring above everything on my way to someplace new.

Later in my room, I draw a dozen naked ladies falling from the sky into a deep pool of water. I try the different shapes and poses, so much more telling of a person than how they dress.

I think about why I lied, why I couldn't be as beautifully naked in truthfulness as they were. All these women poured their hearts out. Why couldn't I? Tina would have told me that I'd found my inner leopard, secretive, suspicious, and ultimately lonely. I would have told her to bite me.

I look at the drawing when I'm finished. The pool is dark, not looking quite so much like water anymore. The women look weightless, not like they are falling. I add legs to the pool. Now they are all jumping on a trampoline.

Guilt-Tracking

It's strange, but I'm sad when they leave. It's like walking through an empty market square the day after a festival. The little noises you've been used to and overwhelmed by are now absent. The people you saw are gone. And there is debris and detritus everywhere – a romance novel under the bed, a hair dryer by the sink, a pink poncho behind the sofa. Of course, there is also the garbage room that is so full that the door can barely close.

I miss Jean especially. The few moments we shared, that I tried to avoid, warmed me. She made me homesick for an earlier time. She was affectionate but light-hearted, just like my mother used to be.

Professor Lindsay looks exhausted and relieved. I don't think he would have survived a marriage. His inner leopard completely opposes company.

"Alright," he says, stalking into the kitchen with his backpack. "Back to work."

We load up the *bakkie* and drive out to the trail that winds around the contours above Mr. Strydom's farm. We walk in silence, enjoying the silent void of nature.

I am inevitably the first one to speak.

"So, Professor, when are you going to teach me about tracking?"

"I'm not going to teach you about tracking."

"Sure you are, you said you would. After all, I took very good care of the leopard ladies this weekend. You owe me."

"Yes, I do owe you. I owe you money. But I don't owe you tracking lessons. You had a lovely time with those women. I knew you would enjoy it."

"So, you tricked me into staying by promising to teach me how to track because you had my best interests in mind?"

"That is correct."

"Right."

Around the next bend of the path, there is a wide view of Mr. Strydom's farm. It is far below us, the square, white farmhouse facing the mountain. Some of the land is cultivated, some holds the scattered white flecks of sheep. A thin strand of dust rises from a departing *bakkie*.

“Oh Professor,” I sigh. “Mariette will be so disappointed when she hears that you lied to me about tracking lessons.”

“I did not lie, Erica.”

“Denial is not going to make it any better, Professor. She’s going to be heartbroken.”

He flings his arms above his head, a big grumpy bird trying to fly.

“Alright, I’ll teach you to track. But you will listen to me and not make my job hard by asking stupid questions.”

He stomps along, muttering to himself. We pass the slope that leads down to the ledge where the cave is. Professor Lindsay doesn’t stop. I walk close to the edge, looking down until my vertigo kicks in. We pass the spot where the cave would have been directly below us.

“Hey, Professor,” I say.

“Hmh.”

“You have to teach me to track.”

“No, I don’t. I have to teach you to track leopards. And we haven’t seen any tracks so there is nothing to teach.”

“What’s that then?”

I point at the ground. There in the damp sand of the trail is a perfect print. It is slender and pointed, the length of my longest finger, with claw marks at the end of each padded toe.

“That’s a jackal,” he says. “*Canis Mesomelas*.”

“How do you know it isn’t a leopard?”

“Because it’s not the right size.”

“How do you know it’s not a small leopard?”

“Because, Erica.” He rolls his eyes and squats to the ground. “The first and most obvious indication that it is a jackal is the toenails. Cats have retractable claws. Dogs do not. Only species in the canine family leave claw marks with their prints. And even if it were an old leopard that was unable to retract its claws, the dimensions are all wrong.” He draws a box around the print. “It is longer than it is wide, and the toes are about half the size of the central foot pad. Leopard prints are much more squat, and the toes are about a third of the size of the pad.”

He stands up, wincing as he straightens. “Besides, and I reiterate, this is much too small. The footprint of a Cape leopard would be about the same size as the palm of the average hand.” He turns and continues to walk. I stretch my hand over the print and press it down. When I lift it up, I can still see the faint outline of the jackal paw. It fits well within the outline of my small palm.

As we walk, I start to see more things in the freshly damp sand of the path.

“Is that a leopard?”

“No, Erica, look at the size.” It was even smaller than the last print, by a half.

“But it’s a cat, right? It doesn’t have claws.”

“Yes, Erica, it is most likely a genet.”

In the walk up to the plateau where we placed the camera, I see five more sets of animal prints. Professor Lindsay identifies them all. He might hate stupid questions, but it’s clear that he can’t help answering them.

“It’s just a beetle, nothing interesting,” he says about a line of tiny pinpricks that cross the path in front of us.

“It’s not a small lizard?”

“No, don’t be ridiculous. Didn’t you see the line going down the middle of the lizard tracks? That’s its tail. Beetles don’t have tails to drag around, so they don’t have lines.”

We collect the camera and walk back down to the *bakkie*. On the way down I look for signs of George. Maybe he followed us here. It’s unlikely, given his range, but I am still hopeful. Unfortunately, there are no big cat prints on the way down, only large boot prints and small boot prints.

Ericas

We arrive back at camp to the welcomed sight of Cyril's *bakkie*.

"More food!" Professor Lindsay says when we come into the kitchen. "Where did you get the recipe for kudu pie? And where did you get the kudu?"

"Both are from Ruan," Cyril says, taking a steaming casserole dish out of the oven. "Hello, Erica, how was the mountain today?"

"Beautiful! Professor Lindsay is teaching me how to track."

"Hardly," Professor Lindsay snorts. "I'm merely answering your obvious and inane questions."

"See?" I say to Cyril with a smile.

I notice a bunch of plant cuttings in a glass on the counter. The branches are woody with needle-like leaves. Although the stems and leaves look the same, the flowers on each branch are vastly different - white, pink, orange, yellow, red, purple, and of a variety of different shapes. Some are as big as pen caps and shaped like trumpets. Others are the size of tiny ball bearings and shaped like pin cushions.

"Where did these come from?" I ask.

"They are a gift from the mountain," says Cyril.

"What are they called?"

Professor Lindsay comes to investigate.

"This one is *Erica fincoidese*. The one with the red flowers is *Erica coccinia*. The yellow one is also an *Erica coccinia*, it is just a different morph. In fact, all of these flowers are from the *Erica* genus."

Professor Lindsay sits in the large chair by the fireplace and pages through a romance novel one of the ladies left behind. I join Cyril in the kitchen, arranging plates on the bar and setting out the silverware.

"Are they for me?" I ask Cyril.

"Ja, Erica, they are for you."

"Why?"

"Because they are all *Ericas*!" I want him to take the question seriously, tell me why I deserve flowers from him, but the food is ready. We lay it out on the bar instead of bringing it to the lounge and Professor Lindsay joins us.

“So, what’s the occasion, Cyril?”

“Ag, Professor, you know me, hey? It is a favor.”

“Mm, a kudu pie-sized favor. Carry on.”

Cyril serves us large slices of the meat-and-vegetable-filled pie. We pull stools around the bar and start eating.

“I am giving this talk, you see. I want you to come.”

“What is the talk about?”

“Ag, it is about the reserve and these things happening in the reserve and about conservation and some other plans and leopard...”

“Leopard? What about leopard?” Professor Lindsay puts down his knife and fork and stares down Cyril. If Cyril had a tail, it would be between his legs.

“It’s not a big thing, hey? Just a small bit about what seems to be happening with the population and what kind of conservation measures we are intending for the future.”

“But I know all of this. Why do I have to go?”

“It would be nice, hey? A friend in the crowd. And you’ll understand the science. It makes an excellent contribution.”

Cyril pulls out a bottle of red wine from underneath the counter and uncorks it. Professor Lindsay watches as Cyril pours him a taste. Professor Lindsay swirls the wine high up the sides of his glass and sniffs it before tasting. He looks surprised and checks the label.

“I’m impressed, Cyril. A fine wine, and a good match for the kudu.”

After the meal we move to the lounge. Professor Lindsay and Cyril chat about the pros and cons of legalizing Rhino horn trade. I get my notebook from my room and listen to the conversation. I try to draw the Ericas. I’m not very good with still life. It’s just too still for me. I end up drawing girls dancing, each one with an absurdly full skirt made of these flowers.

“I must say, Cyril, you’ve learned a lot under my mentorship. You think more like a scientist every day.”

“Thank you, Professor,” says Cyril. They are halfway through the bottle of wine, which means Cyril has probably had a half glass and Professor Lindsay has had the rest.

“Oh, fine, you’ve convinced me,” Professor Lindsay says, draining what’s left in his glass. “I’ll go to your talk. We haven’t had enough real science in these presentations. Far too anthropocentric.”

He gets up and stretches. He smiles pleasantly at the two of us and nods goodnight. I don’t think he realizes he is still clutching the wine bottle. He leaves with it.

Cyril gets up and clears the bar. He fills the basin with hot water and starts washing dishes. The room becomes humid. Little drops of water steam up the glass in the window.

"I thought you said Professor Lindsay would do the dishes if you cooked," I say. I don't look up from my drawing. I don't want to be caught staring.

"Ja, he would. But this way he won't step down from his promise."

I think about it. Cyril brought wine and food. He asked Professor Lindsay for something in return. Now he's also done the dishes to hold him to his word.

"That's a bit tricky isn't it?" I say. I look at my drawing of the happily dancing flower girls. Cyril brought me flowers. I wonder what I owe him.

"Professor Lindsay's the tricky one," he says. It doesn't answer my question. I look up at him. He is drying his hands. I may not be reading him right, but he looks a little guilty.

He comes around the bar and sits next to me.

"What are you drawing?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Just some doodles."

He pulls the edge of the notebook so he can see better. I make no effort to hide what I'm drawing. My artistic ability is one of the few things I am entirely confident of.

"These are impressive," he says. He touches each figure lightly. "May I write the names?"

I hand him a pencil. In neat, small lettering he writes the names of each girl, first name and last. The one I like the best is *Erica plukinetti*. When he is done writing the names, he flips to the front of the book.

"Ag, Erica, these portraits are so funny!" he says. He laughs at Lizelle and Lizette and nods in agreement of Magdalena and Sonja as the two Marys, virgin and otherwise.

"Have you drawn my portrait?" he asks.

"Not yet," I say.

"Why not?" he asks.

"You're too complicated," I say. "I haven't been able to figure you out yet."

"I'm sure whatever you see is there," he says. He looks me in the eye. He has light brown eyes with a halo of green around the pupil. He looks back down at the notebook. In profile, I can see that his eyelashes are long, giving his eyes a slightly feminine flare. They cast a faint shadow. That shadow makes me doubt him. How can I see him fully if we can't look eye to eye for very long?

"You draw animals just as well as you draw people," he says. He's paging through my menagerie. "Any leopards?"

“No,” I say.

“What about this one?” he says, holding up the picture of George. I wonder if Professor Lindsay told him about the sighting. I decide it’s better not to gossip.

“Just a vision. Do you ever feel followed when you are hiking?”

“Ja, especially if I’m alone.”

“Me too. I like to think that a leopard is following me.”

He smiles, looking quizzically at the drawing.

“He looks somehow familiar,” he says.

“Maybe he follows you too!” I say, forcing a laugh. He closes the notebook and looks at me again. The green halo now has a slightly orange tint to it. He looks at me for a long time before taking my hands and leaning forward. He gently kisses my cheek.

“Goodnight, Erica,” he says. “Thank you for sharing your drawings with me. You are very talented.”

When he is gone, I touch the spot where his lips left moisture on my skin. I feel guilty for not entirely trusting a man so sweet. Still, I can’t help but think that this guilt is what he wants.

Bulbs

We have a camera trap on the mountainside above Spieëlfontein. I like hiking there because there is a steep fire road that goes almost all the way to the top. This means there's not a lot of climbing when we get out to hike.

The turn off to that road skirts the periphery of the town. There are always dogs and children in the road, and row upon row of identical houses with washing lines, scruffy lawns, and dirty windows. It's a relief, actually, from the absolute cleanliness of Germane. It's grittier, more human, less self-conscious.

At the top there is a gate, which I open and close behind the *bakkie*. It's locked with a key that we keep in the *bakkie*. I find it strange that this is one of the only parts of the reserve that is fenced and locked. It makes sense for a farmer to fence in their sheep to keep them safe from the predators, but out here, what are the fences for?

"Erica, the cameras," says Professor Lindsay sharply. I realize that I have taken my bag out of the back, but not remembered to put the cameras inside it. Professor Lindsay has to unlock the cab again and wait for me to fish them out.

"I don't know where your head is today," Professor Lindsay says curtly, and I remember the flowers and the kiss. "You must pay attention to the task at hand."

Professor Lindsay doesn't like this site. I'm not sure why. He fears it somehow and is always telling me to be careful, pay attention, stay sharp. And if I see any people, I must let him know. I don't know what this is about. In the time that we've been trekking these hills, I haven't seen a single soul. The tourists don't seem to traverse the trails we pick. Maybe they are too hard, or it's not hiking season or they are just so far off the beaten track that they aren't worth the effort.

The hike is winding, but not steep. The short shrubs on either side of the path are dotted with white and black sandstone rocks. Some of the rocks are huge, round boulders. Others are smaller and hang out in groups. There's one in the middle of the bush, part way up the hill, that is shaped like a pillar.

Then it moves. I stop, thinking I've seen a ghost. I squint at it, and the pillar moves again, shuffling to the left.

"Professor," I call out. He turns and I point up at the hillside. The pillar has sprouted arms and is spinning slowly in circles. Then I hear it singing. It is joyful.

Professor Lindsay leaves the trail and advances up the hill. I follow from where I am. I'm glad that he reaches the figure first, because I would have had no idea what to do. It's a man dressed in coarse grey wool. He has thick, black dreadlocks hanging down to his waist. His eyes are closed and he is singing something in a language I don't understand.

"Excuse me, sir, but what on earth are you doing here?"

The man stops singing and slowly opens his eyes. His pupils consume his irises and the whites of his eyes are pulsing red.

"Ai!" he says, smiling. His teeth are very white against his dark lips and exposed gums. "The man has come. He is here." He closes his eyes again and continues to sing.

"What are you on about? Do you have a permit?"

The man stops singing. This time he doesn't open his eyes.

"I have the permit of God," he says quietly. He sways back and forth. "And mama ehrth, and the soil, and the plants, and the wota."

"Bloody poachers," Professor Lindsay says, reaching for the small plastic bag at the man's feet. The man frowns when he hears the rustling of the plastic but still doesn't open his eyes.

"Ai, baas, what is this? You are taking what the ehrth provide me? No, man."

"Yes, man, I'm taking it. You do not have a permit to hike or collect. Therefore, you are trespassing on private property and stealing. I should report you to the authorities."

"No, man, I am safe from such things. The ehrth and God is kind and will protect me from youuuu..." He wags his finger at Professor Lindsay. Professor Lindsay is irate.

"Do you understand what kind of trouble you are in? You have stolen from the reserve! People like you are responsible for the destruction of biodiversity. How can you so completely disregard nature? Do you see this bag?" He shakes the bag in front of the man's closed eyes. "This bag is much more valuable out there in the *veld* than the money you will get from selling to some bogus witch doctor." Professor Lindsay opens the bag and looks inside. I can see his anger melt a little as he examines the contents.

"I see you have three bulbs, two porcupine quills, and a small rock."

"Yebo, yes, man. These things are gifts from the ehrth."

Professor Lindsay rolls his eyes and hands the bag to me.

"I'll let you off this time, sir, but if I catch you here again, I will contact the proper authorities and report you."

"You will fail, man. Because I am the ehrth, and the ehrth is me, and you cannot catch the ehrth."

I look in the bag. The bulbs are completely spherical, with little hairs radiating from all sides. They don't have any leaves.

"You are wondering, sista," says the rock-colored man. His eyes pop open, black and bloodshot. "How did I find them? They have no leaves!" He giggles and points at the sky with one hand and at the earth with the other. "They did it, it was not me. I am only a messenga of God."

"Come, Erica, we have work to do," Professor Lindsay says, dismissing the man and heading back down toward the trail. When we reach the trail, the man starts singing again.

"What is that guy on?" I ask.

"*Dagga, tik*, who knows. These *bergies* are always high on something."

"Seems to be more of a spiritual high than a drug-induced one."

"What's the difference? For rastas, to be spiritual is to be high, and vice versa."

"He read my mind, you know," I say. "At that exact moment I was wondering how he'd found the bulbs."

"That is fascinating, Erica," says Professor Lindsay.

"So what do we do with this stuff?" I ask.

"I'll give the bulbs to Mariette so she can grow them and figure out what endangered bulb the *bergie* destroyed this time. You can keep the porcupine quills if you'd like."

"Well, if I'm taking them home anyway, couldn't I give them back to the.. ah.. the *bergie*?"

"Absolutely not. He doesn't have a permit."

I don't quite follow Professor Lindsay's logic, but I know it is worthless to argue. I look for the rock man when we come back after collecting the camera, but I can't see him. He is either gone or he is invisible in his camouflage of rock. Or perhaps the earth and God has hidden him from us again.

Some Nerve

We drive through town after collecting the cameras and stop at the Info Centre to check in with Mariette. She's watering the potted plants on the porch with a metal watering can.

"Erica, you're back! What a nice surprise. Are you staying with me tonight?" I wasn't planning on it, but Professor Lindsay steamrolls my response.

"Yes, if you don't mind, she will. I have to attend a meeting tomorrow, and I'm sure she'd prefer staying here. Won't you, Erica?"

"But I want to attend..."

"Don't worry, Erica, you stay here with me. I'm also going to the meeting."

"Oh are you?" says Professor Lindsay. "I wasn't aware that it was open to just anyone."

"What are you saying, Vincent? That I'm just anyone?" Mariette doesn't look at him, she just continues to water the plants. The corner of her mouth is flickering.

"Oh, not that. I just thought it was exclusive."

"Of course it is. The meeting has been called just for you. And everyone else who has an opinion about conservation and natural resources. I happen to be one of those people. I'm not just anyone." She walks back into the Info Centre, letting the door bang shut. Professor Lindsay looks at me, stunned. Then he frowns, storming back to the *bakkie*. I wait for the engine to start and for him to speed away over the gravel road. Instead, he grabs the *bergie's* bag from the front seat and walks into the Centre. I stay outside.

"Mariette, I honestly can't understand why you are upset. Please be reasonable..."

"Reasonable? And what do you know about being reasonable, Vincent?"

"I am trying to apologize, Mariette, that statement was unacceptable."

"Why?"

I can tell from the pause that he doesn't really know how he has hurt Mariette's feelings. Professor Lindsay says something that I can't hear. I lean a little closer to the open window.

"What did you say?" Mariette says. Apparently she didn't hear him either.

"I said I'm sorry. I am sorry for comparing you to just anyone and thereby placing your value as a human being below mine. To be honest, I thought the meeting would be more technical and scientific

and not advertised to the select group of people you just mentioned, among whom you are surely the finest and brightest.”

I roll my eyes. This man sure knows how to cover his ass. He says it with a mechanical precision in the exact same calculated tone he used the last time he apologized to Mariette. Yet somehow she doesn't see it.

“Do you really think that?” I can tell from the lightness of her voice that she believes his compliment and is just trying to get him to say it again.

“Absolutely,” he says. “Oh and I brought you something.”

The room is quiet. I want so badly to look through the window and see what is happening, but that would be wrong.

“Oh, bless, these are precious. What are they?”

“That is for you to discover. I know how much you like mysteries and watching things grow.”

“Thank you, Vincent.”

“Am I forgiven, Mariette?”

“Of course. I can't stay angry with you for very long.”

He's in there for a few more minutes. It's killing me. I'm not sure if he's in his office packing up some stuff or if they are quietly making out or something.

He comes out of the Info Centre looking tired. He looks at me. Perhaps he's curious to know if I've heard their conversation.

“Well, come along then.”

“I thought you said I was staying.”

“Oh, that. I suppose you can if you really want to. We're all going to end up in the same place anyway.”

“I'd like to stay here. With Mariette.” He looks at me strangely, as if wondering why. Then he shrugs.

“Whatever it is you prefer, Erica. See you tomorrow.”

I wake up the next morning to a gaggle of ladies in the sitting room. This time I make sure I am presentable before I walk out of my room.

“Hello, ladies,” I say. They say hello and then look back at Mariette. She switches to English for my benefit.

“He said I was the finest and brightest.”

“Finest and brightest of what?” says Lizelle.

“Finest and brightest of all the ladies in Germane?” says Lizette.

“Actually, he said I was the finest and brightest of all the conservationist,” says Mariette. I can tell she is proud to say it.

“Hah,” says Magdalena. “That is hardly a compliment. All the others are men.”

“That’s not true,” says Sonja. “There is Mrs. Cloete.”

“If Mrs. Cloete wasn’t married to Mr. Cloete, I would think she was a man as well.”

“Magda, be kind,” says Sonja. “I think Professor Lindsay must have some feelings for Mariette. He gave her flowers.”

“Well, they weren’t exactly flowers,” says Mariette.

“They weren’t?” says Lizelle.

“Then what were they?” says Lizette.

“They were bulbs.”

“Hah!” says Magdalena. “*Jissis* that man has some nerve.”

“Magda, you must not use the Lord’s name in vain,” says Sonja, but nobody listens to her.

“No, no,” says Mariette. “I love the bulbs. I think they are even more wonderful than if he got me flowers. You should have heard what he said. He said he got them for me because he knows I liked a mystery and a challenge. Isn’t that sweet? He knows me so well.”

Magdalena laughs and laughs. “*Ja*, he knows you well. I know you well too. That man is your mystery and challenge. *Ag*, I don’t see it. Besides being a reclusive, self-centered, mountain man, he also manages to get on the wrong side of just about everybody.”

“That is only saying that he is human and makes mistakes,” says Mariette. “As the Good Lord says, ‘The only man who never makes a mistake is the man who never does anything’. At least he is doing some good in the world.”

Lizelle and Lizette bob their heads to the word of the Lord. Magdalena rolls her eyes.

“Are you sure that is from the Bible,” asks Sonja timidly. “You must be careful Mariette, as the Good Lord says, ‘The devil can cite scripture for his purpose’.”

“You know what the Good Lord also says, Sonja?” says Mariette. “He says, ‘We are like chameleons - we take our hue and the color of our moral character, from those who are around us’. If I am the devil, what does that make you?”

Lizelle and Lizette immediately defend Sonja who looks like she is about to cry. I discretely leave

the room and go to the kitchen to make breakfast. Mariette has planted the bulbs in two small pots and placed them on the windowsill. I'm glad I decided against telling her where Professor Lindsay got them.

In the afternoon, Mariette and I get ready for the meeting. She tells me I don't need to wear anything fancy, but then puts on a businesslike dress and heels.

"How are we getting there?" I ask. I'm pretty sure she doesn't have a car, and I can't imagine her walking very far in those shoes.

"Ruan is giving us a lift."

We walk down to the Info Centre and stand outside. There is a cool breeze, and clouds are piling up in the west. It will definitely be raining by tonight. A *bakkie* comes to a rumbling stop in front of us. Three Jack Russell terriers whine and yip for attention in the back of the *bakkie*.

"*Môre, Mariette!*" says Ruan. He steps out of the cab and gives Mariette a big hug. He is in a clean, collared shirt, and his hair is slightly damp.

"Ruan, how nice to see you. Who's beautiful dogs are these?" Mariette goes and pets each small head that pokes out over the rim of the truck bed.

"*Ag*, they are belonging to Piet. They were running wild in the road so I took them with me. I did not want them to be hurt, and I know he'll be at the meeting."

"You are a good man, Ruan," she says.

We pile into the cab and thunder off. I'm in the middle, and I find it a little hard to breathe. Cigarette fumes permeate the air of the cab. I can feel the nicotine being absorbed through my pores.

"Do you smoke?" Ruan asks, offering me a cigarette.

"No," I say. He looks a little disappointed and tucks the box back into his shirt pocket. "But I don't mind if you do."

He looks at me to make sure, then takes out a cigarette, lighting it. My eyes water and I lean closer to Mariette who has her window rolled down.

One of the dogs yips unhappily in the back.

"Sparky! *Voetsek!*"

The smallest dog is humping one of the larger dogs. The larger one starts to growl and snaps at the smaller one. The smaller one retreats, tail between legs. A minute later, it's back doing the same thing and receives the same response from the bigger dog.

"Sparky, you *moffie*, your friend doesn't like that," says Ruan.

“Ruan, that isn’t a very nice word,” says Mariette.

“I know,” he says, “but it’s true! He always does that. *Moffie* dog.”

She sighs. I would sigh, but I’m afraid of getting a lungful of smoke. I spend the rest of the drive trying to breathe only through my mouth. At least then I don’t have to smell it.

Lines

I've been to the Cape Parks reserve a few times to hike with Professor Lindsay, but I've never been inside the offices. We follow the arrows to the conference room. The place is packed. From what I can tell there are farmers, Germane people, Spieëlfontein people, and conservationists. I'm impressed with the turnout. Twenty people may not be an impressive meeting size by Western standards, but for a small town, it seems like everyone.

"Hello, everyone," Cyril says. He stands on a small podium and is speaking loudly into a microphone that doesn't seem to be working. "Please find yourselves a seat!"

People find places to sit in the staggered, semi-circle of folding chairs. Professor Lindsay sits in the front row. I end up sitting a few rows back with Mariette to my right and a coloured guy to my left. He looks a little nervous and fidgety, but he seems to know Cyril. He watches Cyril as he moves around the room, greeting people and asking them to sit. I watch Cyril too, smiling every time he looks my way.

"Thank you all, I'm glad you have decided to come today," says Cyril. "It is good to see how many people care about this issue." I looked across at Professor Lindsay. The way his seat is angled, I can see his profile. I wonder how many of these people have had their arms twisted with wine or favors.

"Cape leopards, as you know, are very rare, and we don't know much about them. This means that there is a significant danger of having them gone from the planet if we do not sit up and take notice. We must protect and preserve both the leopard and the leopard's habitat."

The audience is quiet, but some people are uncomfortably shifting in their seats.

"I see you are skeptical, Mr. Strydom. How many animals did you lose to predators this year?"

"About 250, Cyril. They were sheep."

I wince.

"How many of your animals were taken by leopard, Mr. Strydom?"

"Only three."

"You see, the leopard is not as destructive as some other animals in the *veld*. As an apex predator, they control other predators in the area. To have a leopard on your property is good luck in many ways. They will keep the populations of more destructive predators, such as jackal and caracal, to a minimum."

I remember what Mariette said about the first time she heard Professor Lindsay speak. I know

what she means. I get shivers from the power of Cyril's voice and his words as he thumps his fist down on the podium like a preacher.

"If you kill a leopard, it creates a niche for another one to come and fill it. With that gap, there is often a population explosion, and unfamiliar leopards will come through to occupy it. They will often cause more destruction as they seek to define their territories."

Cyril expounds on leopards and leopard physiology. He talks about leopard eating habits, habitats and the structure of their territories for another half an hour. The farmers and community members sit there politely listening to his presentation, but it's clear that the power of Cyril's delivery is not affecting the rest of the audience the way it is affecting me. Only the man beside me is on the edge of his chair, listening even more attentively than the professor, who is slouched in his seat, squinting at Cyril.

Cyril finishes his talk with suggestions for how to manage the leopards. "There are several options for how farmers can protect their livestock from leopard and other predators. You can train dogs to stay with the animals and protect them. You can have small camps of livestock that you routinely move around to prevent overgrazing. This allows you to protect your animals more easily. Also, there are collars you can put on the sheep to confuse the leopard and prevent it from snapping its neck. All of these are options. I would like to see them put into action to preserve our natural capital. It is in the best interest of the community, the farmers, and the conservationists."

Cyril looks proud, expecting some kind of response to his closing remark. I almost start clapping but the rest of the audience is silent.

"Are there any questions?" Cyril asks.

"I have a question." Ruan stands up in the middle of the group of farmers. "We've spent a lot of time thinking about these options. None of what you have said is new. They are all theories, and they will all take time to implement. And they all cost money. Many of us have tried these methods. They do not result in controlling our predators."

"It's not about control, Mr. van Wyk, it is about management. Predators are a problem, and they will continue to be a problem. These solutions help us manage the problem, not control or wipe out the predators."

"Management still requires investment. It is often more immediately cost effective to kill the problem than to protect against it."

"I can see your point. But then you lose something beautiful and you are seen by the rest of the world as a killer."

"You've started farming with cattle, isn't that right Ruan?" says Professor Lindsay from his seat.

Cyril looks at him nervously. Ruan nods.

"Many of your associates still farm with sheep," Professor Lindsay continues. "It may be stating the obvious, but maybe sheep aren't the best creatures to work with in this environment."

I don't know if Professor Lindsay is trying to sound insulting, but he manages to make it sound as if he is talking to a child.

"I farm with sheep, Professor," says Mr. Strydom. He stands up beside Ruan, towering over him. Ruan tries to get him to sit down, but he keeps speaking. "It are my profession. Do not tell me what to do with my land."

"It's hardly your land, Mr. Strydom. The leopard has more business there than you and your sheep."

"What the professor is trying to say ..." says Cyril.

"This conversation are becoming unproductive, Cyril. You should do a better job at controlling your predators," says Mr. Strydom. He looks meaningfully at Professor Lindsay, then turns back to Cyril. "I am telling you, you can do nothing. Even Professor Lindsay can do nothing. Nobody can tell me what to do on my farm." With that, he leaves the meeting. He makes a great show of edging past people and walking out. A few of the other farmers follow him.

"Thank you for coming everyone," says Cyril. "I'll keep you all updated with any new information."

The people in the room slowly disperse. The farmers grumble amongst themselves outside. Mariette goes to talk with Professor Lindsay, and I find Cyril. I am second in line. My neighbor got there first. He is a little shorter than Cyril. He has his hands in his back pockets, shoulders shrugged. The way he stands makes him look like a school girl talking to a much-admired teacher.

"Erica," says Cyril, calling me into the conversation. "Thank you for coming to the party."

"Party?" I say.

"*Ja*, it's always a party because it always gets crazy."

"I call it a party because it's always fun," says my neighbor, hands clamped shyly in his pockets. "I love listening to Cyril talk."

Cyril's cheeks get faintly pink from the compliment.

"Erica, this is Mark. He's my father's best friend's nephew."

"Pleasure," he says. I shake his extended hand. There is something feminine to his touch that makes me shiver. Weak handshakes have never been my thing.

"Did you enjoy the talk?" says Cyril.

"Yes, you speak very well," I say. "I learned a lot. I hope other people take in this information and understand it."

"Not with this lot," says Mark. "If one proves the other wrong in the Wolkeberg, they just hate each other. No one changes."

"Ag, that's pessimism, Mark."

"Yes and it's true. Change is not possible for these people."

I see Mariette walking out with Ruan.

"I think my ride is leaving," I say.

"Ja, Erica, you go catch your lift."

I look behind me as I leave, hoping to catch Cyril watching me go. He's having an animated conversation with Mark though, and doesn't look my way.

Outside, Ruan is giving the dogs back to their owner, and Mariette is talking to Mr. Strydom.

"He doesn't mean to be rude, Mr. Strydom."

"Ja, Mariette, sure. It is in his nature to be this way. And for this he is communist."

"It is both irrelevant and unfair to label him that way. I know what you are trying to say, but he's a good man. He cares so much about the environment."

"And people? People are more important and he shows no respect, you understand? He thinks to exclude people and make the environment separate from people. It is in our history that apartheid doesn't work."

"Yet you still expect you will be able to exclude predators from your farm."

"Yes. I'll kill all of them. Ag, Mariette, this is useless to argue. You are one of us and will come to our side if we call."

"Yesterday you called me a communist!"

"I know, I know, it was joking. But I knew your father, and he was a good man. I know he raised a good daughter."

When we get back to Germane, Mariette goes to her house for an afternoon nap. I go to the Info Centre and copy the map of the Wolkeberg from the wall into my notebook. When I have a good sketch, I call my parents.

"Summer speaking."

"Hi Mom," I say. "Sorry, it's been while, wanted to call and say..."

"Erica! So good to hear your voice! I wish you were here, sweetie, these last few weeks have been quite something..."

She babbles on about the house, and Dad, and her parents who have just moved into a nursing home. She tells me about the strangely cool summer and how the tomatoes aren't doing very well. I let her words wash over me and I allow myself to be drawn into family life while I draw details into the map of the Wolkeberg - houses, people, and animals.

"And it was Dad's birthday last week, so we had the Petersons and the Kings over for dinner. You remember Gordon King, he used to read you Beatrix Potter when you were small. Anyway, the yard was perfect - the sun was shining, the roses had just opened..."

I would have been so close to these events if I had been at home. I would have still had a child's crush on the man who had told me stories. I would have had to trim the rose bushes into perfection and argue with Mom about what cake to make Dad. The whole event would have annoyed me, even though I'm sure I would have had fun. But from this distance, it sounds perfect, like one of those photographs you see in a magazine that is so beautiful that it makes you ache to be there.

"That sounds lovely, Mom. You guys sound like you are having an amazing time."

"We are, actually. I'm quite pleased with how the summer has gone. Except for the cool weather, but nothing can be perfect."

"Hiya, Rick, what's shakin' bacon?" Dad's voice comes in, a little crackled, but audible. He must be using the corded phone in the den. "How's the trip? Seen any leopards?"

"Yup."

"Really?" says Mom. "You actually saw a leopard?"

"Yup," I say. "We've been putting out traps and caught our first one last week."

"Oh, oh, are these the *camera* traps you told us about?" She must be reading from her notes on our last conversation. Once this woman writes something down, she never forgets it.

"Yes. We've been placing the cameras in the mountains and have a video now of a leopard that walked past."

"That's pretty exciting, Rick."

"And just plain old pretty," I add. "Leopards are beautiful animals."

"Wait," says Summer. "Does this mean the leopards are walking in the same places you are?" I can see where this is going right after she says it and prepare for the volley.

"Yes."

"Erica, surely it's not safe to be walking around with leopards."

"It's entirely safe, Mom. Leopards only attack if they are provoked. They would never hunt a human."

"Oh, Erica, don't think you can fool me. I've been reading. There have been plenty of deaths caused by leopard attacks in the country of South Africa."

"Mother, these are *Cape* leopards. They are tiny compared to the ones you read about. They only take out calves and sheep."

"You are hardly bigger than a calf, Erica."

"Summer," says Dad, "I'm sure Erica has some way of defending herself. Erica, didn't you say Professor Lindsay has a pellet gun?"

"Yes, but he doesn't..."

"Great, Grey," says Mom. "Now you've got me worried about my little girl wandering around in Africa with lions and tigers and leopards and men with guns." She's becoming hysterical, and my head is starting to hurt. "And I've been reading about crime in South Africa, and from what I've read, it's the rape capital of the world!"

"Mother, you are overreacting," I say. "Please calm down, those are just statistics."

"You told me you were safe, Erica. How can you be safe in a country like that?"

"Mother, stop. I want to be here. You have to deal with that by yourself and stop giving me every possible reason to be afraid."

I'm too loud when I say it. I can hear her sniffing on the other end of the phone.

"Don't talk to your mother like that," says my dad. "Now you've upset her."

"No," she says. "She's right, Grey. You're right, Erica, I just miss you and worry about you."

"I miss you, too, Mom."

"Well don't go disappearing into Africa forever, Rick." He didn't mean to say that, but we are all quiet for a while after he does.

"I won't, Dad. Don't worry."

"We'll try not to, Erica," says Summer. "But I'm still going to send you some bear spray."

"Bear spray?"

"Yes, bear spray. It's like pepper spray, except it's for bears. Then you can protect yourself from the leopards and sexual criminals at the same time."

I put my forehead in my palm.

"My calling card is about to run out. I've got to go."

"Alright. Why not give me the number there? Then I could call. Oh and the address, you forgot to

give it to me last time. I still need to send you aloe and bear...”

“This is going to cut out any minute. Bye, guys, love you.” The line cuts before I hear their response, their love for me floating somewhere in the ether.

I study the map before me - the farms, the reserve, the people, and the animals. I look at the solid lines that edge and separate the spaces. I think about the talk this afternoon. The lines seem much more permeable now. I start erasing and smudging the borders. Everything becomes connected, flowing into each other. Even I am connected. A piece of me has been drawn out and used up in this place, becoming imbedded in the landscape and the people. Yet still I am connected to my home, though the solid lines of borders, oceans, and roads separate me from it.

University of Cape Town

Shaped

Professor Lindsay stays late at the Cape Parks offices. I'm restless and decide to walk. I leave a note with Mariette saying that I've started making my way up to camp. Professor Lindsay will pick me up when he's done what he has to do at the Info Centre.

The pavement ends and the gravel begins. I am lost in thought and time until I see it ahead of me in the road. It has been run over by a car. Its small body is flattened in the dust, tail curled in an impossibly perfect spiral. I've never seen a chameleon before, which I suppose is the point. I expected it to be a reddish brown, the same as the gravel of the road. But in death, it takes on a violent green color. Whatever chemical process that shaped it to the surroundings has now given up, no longer caring to provide the protective camouflage.

I think about what Mariette said to Sonja about people being like chameleons. Each one of us is touched and changed by who we talk to, where we live, what we see. To not be affected is to not be alive. Only in death do we escape being colored by our surroundings.

I look at it for a long time, debating moving it out of the road. I can't bring myself to touch it though. I leave it behind and continue up to camp.

Verreux

We have a backlog of videos that we have to get through. With the minimal work we were able to do when the leopard ladies were here, we have four cameras to process. Luckily, it's raining again, and there's no draw to be outside.

I pick the cameras that were situated above Mr. Strydom's farm and above Spieëlfontein. Professor Lindsay does the other two. I know they are the ones he really wants to do. They are both from shady crevices in the mountains. According to the blips of the tracking collars, leopards spend most of their time in places like that.

I load up the videos from Spieëlfontein and begin. The first few are night scenes of kudu with their giant, twisted horns. I'm sure Mr. Strydom or Mr. Van Wyk would love to know that these beauties are wandering just above Spieëlfontein in the evenings. Mariette says hunting season is about to begin and to watch out for Professor Lindsay getting screamingly mad at hunters.

"That was a pretty interesting group that attended that talk," I say to Professor Lindsay. He's sitting behind me, working on his batch of files.

"I'm not quite sure what you mean by interesting, Erica. I found the information plain and the company generally thick and irritating. I'm sure you've attended much more sophisticated talks in the States where people of some intelligence come and contribute."

"That's a bit harsh, Prof. They made some good points."

"Hardly. This community will stick to their conservative ideals regardless of other thoughts presented. If only they could embrace the facts we have worked so hard to provide."

"Well, if you hate South Africa so much, why are you still here?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Erica. I love South Africa. It's the people I can't stand."

I think about the map I drew in my journal and realize that Professor Lindsay would fight tooth and nail to keep those lines solid, to keep humans (except for himself, of course) off the reserve and in their proper place.

A leopard comes stalking into the frame. My breath catches in a gasp. It walks straight up to the camera, getting larger until its whole face fills the screen. I find myself leaning away as it sniffs at the device, triangular nose bumping the lens slightly. Then it turns its face away, shining eyes becoming a

wedge in profile. It stalks out of the screen.

I watch the video again, savoring the secret. I am the only human to know that this creature walked on this path at this time of night. It is a discovery that I've made that only I know about.

"Anything interesting?" Professor Lindsay says. It's automatic, he says it about every hour or so when we work on these together. I sigh and relinquish control of my secret.

"Yeah, got a live one," I say. Professor rolls his chair over to my desk and watches the clip.

"That is incredible!" he says, playing it again when it is finished. "Look at how smart he is! And possibly foolish to investigate a faint light in the middle of the night, but still. What a wonder."

I reach for the book that has the laminated photos of leopards.

"There's no need for that. I know this one. This is Verreaux. His first appearance was when he killed a Verreaux's Eagle-Owl, also known as the Giant Eagle Owl, *Bubo lacteus*. Those birds are very rare in these parts, vagrants rather than residents. Anyway, it was standing on a rock pulling apart a rodent it had just hunted, and this leopard comes out of nowhere and kills it. I saw the whole thing. After he caught it, he dragged it off into the bushes. We found it later. It was battered as if it had been played with, but none of it was eaten. Quite an eccentric animal."

The next video starts rolling before Professor Lindsay has a chance to get back to his desk. It is a daytime shot of a group of barefoot children. They are running and skipping. Some of them see the camera and wave. One of them pulls down his pants quickly and shoves his bare ass at the camera. Then he runs off, mouth open in laughter.

"Those insolent little..." Professor Lindsay's face gets bright red. He doesn't finish his sentence.

"They're just kids, Professor. It's not like they tampered with the camera or anything."

"I would never have shown such disrespect at that age. The parents probably don't even know that these children are trespassing on the reserve."

Outside, there is a rapid-paced bleating of someone punching their car horn to a rhythm. Professor Lindsay steps outside.

"Ah, Rubbish is here."

I leave my desk and follow the professor as he walks toward Rubbish and his *bakkie*.

"*Hoe gaan dit*, Professor."

"*Kan nie kla nie.*"

"Yehehe, but you will anyway!" He laughs and laughs. "And how are you, Erica?"

"I'm fine, just watching the videos from the camera above Spieëlfontein."

"Oh hey, anything interesting?"

“No,” Professor Lindsay says before I have a chance to respond. “Only some very naughty children sticking their bums at the camera.”

“Yehehe, sounds like something I would do.”

“I hope not, it is very rude.”

“Pha, it is only kids, hey? You cannot be upset.” He undoes the latches of the garbage room and opens it. He pulls each bag out and heaves them into the *bakkie*.

“You’ll tell us if there are any leopards near Spieëlfontein, hey Professor? We have kids and lambs now that we should pen if there’s those things around.”

“I’d definitely tell you. You should probably pen them anyway, though. Township dogs can be nasty pieces of work as well.”

“*Ag, ja*, you’re probably right.” He pushes the last black trash bag into place in the bed of the truck and stretches a scrappy piece of netting over the top to secure it.

“I’m going now. Bye, Erica!” he says with his signature grin. “Take care of this Professor, hey?”

We wave him off and go back to the house. I sit at my desk and watch the clips roll by. I’ve lost my ability to think about work. I can’t stop my mother’s worry from leaking into my thoughts. I think about the poor unsuspecting children and lambs of Spieëlfontein being reduced to bloody corpses by the adorable animal I have just encountered. If that leopard could take down a large bird of prey, it could definitely take out a weak child or a lamb. God, there were even children on the path! They could have been killed!

“Prof, you have to tell Rubbish about the leopard.”

“With all due respect, I do not have to tell him. And neither do you. And you shouldn’t either.”

“But Professor, you heard what he said. There are children and lambs in the town that could be killed!”

Professor Lindsay turns in his chair. His sharp, bird-like face is cocked in a question. Then he laughs.

“Oh, Erica, you are confused. He said kids and lambs. Kids are baby goats, not children. Oh goodness no, a Cape leopard would never take a child.”

“I don’t care. I still don’t think it’s fair to lie to Rubbish. He has every right to know that there is a leopard roaming about above the town.”

“If only you weren’t so judicial in your views of right and wrong. You would be much more useful.”

I turn my chair slowly toward him to face him.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that there are some times, particularly in government, when the people can’t be told the truth about the matter. Say there is a threat of a nuclear war or some such catastrophe. The government has a better chance of dealing with it if the people are kept calm and out of the loop. If the people were told of the impending, inescapable disaster, they would panic, and that wouldn’t help anything. This case is the same. If the people in Spieëlfontein are told there is a leopard, there would be widespread panic that would be mostly unnecessary. The chances of an animal being taken are slim. Also, the panic might result in a witch hunt to bring the leopard, who hasn’t done anything wrong, to justice. That would be far worse a loss to the world than a couple of township kids.”

I can see his point, however dark it is. Most likely, nothing will happen. If something does happen, it probably would have happened anyway. It puts the leopard in unnecessary danger to disclose its whereabouts. Still, Professor Lindsay isn’t the government. And I doubt he would tell the authorities if he was asked to. He is acting as a vigilante, trying to do the best for the world that the government can’t accomplish on its own. I’m not sure how I feel about that.

By late afternoon, I have most of the videos from that camera logged. Professor Lindsay gets up to make dinner before I can preempt his move. Guess I’ll have to do dishes tonight.

Verreaux wanders across the screen. I recognize his facial markings and the way he looks at the camera, knowing that it is there. He steps into the center of the screen and bows his head to the ground, nudging the top of it into the dust. He does a lazy somersault-roll and flops onto the ground. His legs kick up in the air as he squirms. He must be smiling.

He stretches himself against the ground and slumps to one side, letting his legs fall away from the camera. His body is perfectly still. I admire the dark and light patterns spotting his back, tapering in size toward the neck and the base of the tail. I imagine he must be holding his breath. He is so still that I can’t see the inhalation and exhalation moving his ribs. The only movement is his tail. He moves like Professor Lindsay when he is reading in his chair. His eyes close, his head bends and sinks, and then he suddenly jerks awake, only to do it again a few seconds later. The tail is also drifting to sleep and jerking awake on the screen.

Verreaux pushes himself onto his front legs. He looks over his shoulder. Round white eyes gleam at the camera. He turns away with what looks like a sigh, heaves himself up, and wanders off into the night.

* * * * *

Professor Lindsay comments at dinner that I've been absurdly quiet for my loud American nature. I tell him I'm thinking. I'm sure he assumes I'm thinking about what he said. I'm actually thinking of Verreaux and the way he looked away from the camera. There was a longing in that expression, the cat-like facial expression that begs a tummy scratch or some affection. But to sigh like that and turn away. He knows he can never have that from anyone. He is independent and made for loneliness. There's no chance of companionable warmth.

I haven't shown Professor Lindsay the video. I don't think I will. He knows about Verreaux, why bother him with the details. I give him the vague label of Bird on the computer, just in case Professor Lindsay starts snooping. Maybe it's not my secret to keep. But if the professor can keep secrets from Spieëlfontein, I can keep secrets from the professor.

University of Cape Town

Mood

How do you draw clouds? Any time I try, I have to stop. They change by the second, never the same, never repeated. The angle of the sun changes, the speed of the wind, the very denseness of the mass. They are like a mood, subtly shifting as the day changes. I try to capture it, but can't. To draw a cloud is to take away its malleability, its moodiness. I would not want to cheat such a strong personality of its depth.

University of Cape Town

A and B

I can't find Professor Lindsay, and I've looked everywhere. He isn't in his house, the kitchen, or the dorms. Unless he's gone for a walk, he must have some secret hiding place that I don't know about.

Then I discover a hidden path leading through the brush surrounding his house to a clearing some distance away. There he is in a wide brimmed hat kneeling in a bed of leafy squash. The garden is varied and colorful. Red, yellow and green-stemmed chard flank a horde of minute beet sprouts.

Professor Lindsay sees me and stands up slowly with the awkwardness of an ostrich rising to his feet. He stares at me as if wondering whether he's been spotted.

"Professor, you have to see this."

He follows me back to the house. I play the clip that I've already watched about ten times. And I already looked in the book and think I know which leopard it is.

"Clementine," says Professor Lindsay. She walks through the view of the camera, glancing suspiciously at the light and quickening her pace. Professor Lindsay reaches for the mouse to play it again, but the video isn't finished yet. Two cubs follow her. The first one stops abruptly when it sees the light, and the second one walks into the first one. The first one bats at the second one, and they fall to the ground in a tussle. They roll there for a while until their ears prick, and they look in the direction that their mother has gone. After listening for a few seconds, they scamper away.

Professor Lindsay takes over my desk space. He grabs a pad of paper and a pen and starts opening computer files and taking notes.

"Professor?"

He doesn't answer. He has some problem, even though I have no idea what it is, and he is trying to solve it. I have nothing else to do but sit in his chair and wait until he figures it out. I pick up a book about *Ericas* and try to find the ones Cyril gave me. This proves to be difficult. It turns out there are 800 species in the *Erica* genus. I guess I'm not so special after all. I get bored and go to the kitchen to make lunch.

A few hours later, Professor Lindsay emerges. I've never seen his eyes sparkle so much.

"I've got it," he says. "I've figured it out. Can I run this by you?"

He doesn't wait for a response. He starts setting up the projector that we used for the leopard

ladies and pulls down the screen from the wall opposite the sitting area.

“This is Clementine’s collar trace for the two months before the batteries ran out.” The screen shows a series of red dots running along the contours of the mountain. “The only male in this area is Verreaux, shown here.” He clicks his mouse, and a series of green dots appear on top of the red ones. The green and red do not overlap, but if you look at the dates and times that the information was recorded, they look like they are moving toward each other. “It is entirely feasible for Clementine to have had some contact with Verreaux in the period just after her collar ran out of batteries. This means that Verreaux is the father of the cubs.” A picture of Verreaux flashes onto the screen. The photograph was taken through the windshield of the car, the large body of the animal, sunk low to the ground, trying to move quickly and stealthily out of the headlights.

“These are the cubs, Cub A and Cub B.” He shows a still frame from the video. The one in front is labeled A and the one behind is labeled B. “Given their size and the approximate period of conception, they are six months old. Cub A is female, Cub B is male. They both look healthy, though Cub B appears to be a bit of a runt and has a strangeness to his gait that might be from an injury or a genetic defect.”

Professor Lindsay clicks a again and the slide of the cute cubs fades. The next slide is of a bloody leopard caught in a trap. “Erica, we must not tell the farmers of these cubs. They will put up traps, they will take their guns, and they will kill them. We can’t afford to lose any more leopards. They are just too precious to the gene pool.” The light of the projector glances onto his face casting sharp shadows on his already angular features. He looks serious and threatening.

“Ok, Professor, that’s not a problem.”

“Good. Now what’s for lunch?”

Professor lets me name them. The small male, cub B, I name Brutus. I name his bigger sister, cub A, Amelia.

Moffie

Early the next morning, we leave for Germane and Spieëlfontein to restock supplies and place a camera above Spieëlfontein. Professor Lindsay believes that we'll get more footage of Verreaux in the same location. He knows Verreaux to be a bit of a showoff. I've seen more of him than the professor thinks I have, and I find his description apt. Still, I think we should be concentrating on getting cub footage. I suspect that the real reason Professor Lindsay wants to go this way is so that he can tell Mariette about Clementine and the cubs on the way back.

As we go through Germane, I see the lean figure of Cyril going into the Info Centre.

"Can you just drop me here, Prof?"

"Why on earth would you want to be dropped here? We have to shop, and we have work to do."

I think quickly for excuses.

"But, Professor, it's Sunday. My parents like it if I call them on a Sunday. And I haven't had a real break in weeks. Can't I have the day off?"

He slows the *bakkie* to a stop a few houses away from the Centre.

"Ag, it's just as well. I'll do the shopping before the shops close and bring the supplies back here. Then we'll go place the camera. But not a word to Mariette about Clementine and the cubs, alright?"

"On my honor, Professor." I smile. I think it's cute that he wants to be the one to tell Mariette.

I get out of the *bakkie* and half run half walk to the Info Centre. I come up the steps just as Cyril is leaving.

"Erica!" he says. "It is unexpected to see you! What are you doing here?"

"I have the day off. Professor Lindsay has gone to Spieëlfontein for supplies. I'll be here all day." I hope this sounds suggestive enough. Cyril seems to catch on.

"Come, Erica, we'll go have coffee."

We walk to the café together. I feel a little guilty for not saying hello to Mariette, but I'm sure she'll understand. It will also make it easier for me to keep my promise to the professor.

The day is clear, a bright winter day between storms. Cyril, gentleman that he is, lends me his coat when he sees I am cold. We order coffee at the café and sit outside under the artificial heating coming down from the stand-alone heaters.

“Cyril, I loved your talk. I can’t imagine presenting such controversial material to people who don’t want to listen to it.”

“Ah, Erica, that is a misconception. The farmers are just afraid. Change comes hard to all people. But they are slowly seeing that they can’t control the problem the way they have in the past. There are too many rules and not enough money.”

“Well, I think it’s very brave of you to keep at it and try to change people’s minds.”

“It is something I care about, and it has to be done. Besides, it is my job.”

I watch a family walk past the café. They have a little one scooting along on a big plastic tricycle. They look so happy together.

Cyril must be watching them too. He puts his hand over mine on the table.

“Erica,” he says. “Would you like to come to Sunday lunch at my house? I’d like you to meet my family.”

My face trembles as a smile spreads across it.

“I would love to meet your family.”

Our beautifully romantic moment is interrupted by a car coming to a screeching halt at the corner by the café. It is blasting some kind of rap in a language of slurred syllables and clicks. The bass is pumping loud enough to rattle in my chest. The other diners look up from their spoiled meals with disgust. The car inches through the stop sign. The person in the back seat whistles out the window.

“Ai! Cyril!” Cyril is completely unembarrassed and waves to his friends. There are at least six people in the car. It is silver and dented and sinking so much that it almost scrapes the ground. The person in the back leans out the window almost to his torso.

“Ai, Cyril, you *moffie*, what are you doing with a *cherrie*?” Everyone in the car laughs hysterically. Cyril was smiling but now he is not. He makes a kind of backwards peace sign at them and they laugh.

“*Nee, jou ma se poes, moffie*,” the guy in the back says. The car then jolts into motion and speeds away. The rest of the diners have turned back to their meals, actively ignoring the exchange. Cyril looks miffed. I’m annoyed these guys have ruined our date.

“Let’s go,” he says. He pays the bill and leaves a large tip. I’m not sure if it’s out of gentlemanliness or guilt. I suppose it doesn’t matter.

“Isn’t it wonderful, Erica?” says Mariette when I come into the Info Centre. It is most definitely wonderful. Cyril kissed my forehead when he left.

"I'm showing her the video," says Professor Lindsay. They are very close to each other looking at the computer on Mariette's desk.

"She is so beautiful," Mariette sighs. "Come look."

I lean over them to watch the video. Clementine appears and walks rapidly across the screen. I wait for the cubs to enter, but the video has been shortened.

"Isn't she wonderful? I wonder what she's been doing all of these months. It's fascinating to think about."

I look at Professor Lindsay. His eyes are cold and hard, unmoving in their command to keep his secret.

"She definitely is wonderful, Mariette," I say, locking eyes with the professor. "I hope she finds a man to treat her well." The professor's eyes are less cold now, but just as fierce in their reprimand. He looks away.

"Wouldn't that be exciting?" Mariette says. "Cubs for Clementine! She hasn't had babies in far too long. Maybe she is too old now."

"Are you coming with me to set up the camera, Erica?" says Professor Lindsay. He grabs his keys off the desk.

"No," I say. I know he wants me to go so that he can shout at me for almost giving away the game to Mariette. I want to go so I can yell at him for being so selfish with beautiful things. "I need a break today."

"Suit yourself," he says.

Mariette and I have tea at her place. She's baked ginger snaps. They are extra crunchy, like all cookies I've had in South Africa. We sit at the table looking out at the back pasture. There are two Egyptian Geese wandering through, picking at the mud for food.

"There is a church bazaar today, if you'd like to come along. The ladies from cell group are going to be there. And a few other people I'm sure you'll like."

"Actually, I've been invited to Cyril's house for lunch."

"Serious? *Ag*, Erica you must be quite special to Cyril. Coloured Sunday lunches are quite a big thing. *Jirre*, I wonder what his parents will say, a white girl showing up with their son. *Ag*, but it won't be a big deal, this is the new South Africa, none of this nonsense of discrimination of couples. I want you to know though, Erica, Cyril and his family do not live the way we do. Do not judge him by his

neighborhood. As the Good Lord says, 'A man's felicity consists not in the outward and visible blessing of fortune, but in the inward and unseen perfections and riches of the mind'."

I laugh, amazed to have caught this one. I always thought English classes were fairly random in high school. One of the more random lessons to prepare us for some SAT or AP test was on Scottish writers during the Victorian era. I had to do a report on Thomas Carlyle and whined the whole time about having to learn about something that was so completely irrelevant. Little did I know that my education was preparing me for a witty comeback to a South African lady who attributes literary references to the Good Lord.

"Yes," I say. "And clever men are good, but they are not the best."

"Very good, Erica!" Mariette laughs. "I'm glad you are familiar with the words of the Lord."

"Isn't that a bit misleading?" I ask. "I mean, you are a religious woman. Surely it's a bit blasphemous to misquote God?"

"I like to think of it a bit differently. After all, it was the Good Lord who said 'All mankind has done, thought or been - it is lying as in magic preservation in the pages of books'. Who could accomplish such a thing but the Lord? It is He who inspires our words."

I get dressed in my skirt and a nice top Mariette lends me. She wants to do my makeup as well, but I say no. I've seen the way she and her ilk apply makeup, and I have no wish to look like a doll. She convinces me to at least wear mascara. I somehow skipped the makeup phase as a child, so I don't know the right way to do it. She helps me.

"Mariette? What's a *moffie*?" She nearly stabs me with the brush.

"Erica! Where did you hear that terrible word?"

"Mr. Strydom used it on his dog, remember?"

"Yes, I do, and it was very rude of him."

"Well, what does it mean?"

"It's a rude name for men who like men. You know, someone who is gay."

I laugh to myself. The quintessential insult among men and boys has its own word in South Africa. In the states, I've heard fag or faggot be used almost as a term of affection when it is a jibe among friends. Maybe the word is stronger here. Cyril took such offence to it.

"When was the last time you went out on a date, Mariette?"

"Ag, I don't even remember," says Mariette. "My husband died eight years ago. There have been a

few since then, but nothing stays. Only Professor Lindsay remains. I don't know what he is waiting for, but we both know there is something. I do enjoy being his secretary and confidant, but I wish he could admit that I mean something more. *Ag*, I'll just have to be patient."

"Mariette, I'm nervous," I say. I can feel tears welling up in my eyes getting ready to ruin my mascara.

"Don't worry, Erica," she says. "Men are like mountains. It is a hard climb to the top, but once you make it, he is yours."

I walk to Cyril's house with directions from Mariette. I climb the shallow hill that separates Germane from Spieëlfontein. I stand at the top of the hill and look down at either side. Germane is dotted with lush trees and roofs of grey slate or thatch. Spieëlfontein is bare with houses condensed into even blocks. The roofs are waves of rusted or painted metal, some with solar-powered water heaters attached to the top, compliments of the government. I like the perspective from the hill and wonder how many people have stood here, looking at both of the towns as if they are side by side. It's almost like they set the towns up like this on purpose, with the hill in the middle, so that one could not be seen by the other.

I descend into Spieëlfontein and take the first road to the right. I walk along, looking for number 9. The front gardens of the houses are tidy but under vegetated. A few have long lines strapped across the yard with piles of clothing pinned up with pegs. A dog barks from one of the houses, and the people standing in the front yard look at me blankly. One waves. I wave back. They continue to watch me as I walk by.

A group of children follow me. They are bare-footed and dirty. One child has no pants on and is sucking his thumb. They call to me.

"Hello, lady." I say hello in response.

"Sweeties," says the oldest one, "you have sweeties."

"No, I don't have sweeties."

"Yes, sweeties, give us sweeties."

They follow me for a while and then give up when I reach the house and go in through the gate. No one answers when I ring the bell. There is loud music blaring in the back yard. I resort to pounding on the door. No one comes.

I walk around the side of the house, disturbing a hen and her flock of chicks. They scatter, squawking and chirping. I stop before I go around the corner. I lean against the cool bricks of the wall

and smooth my skirt, taking a few breaths.

I look around the corner. There are a few bushes, which I'm glad of because it means I am partially hidden. I can see a woman, head thrown back in cackling laughter. A bunch of children are sitting in a group, secretly eating a bag of marshmallows that they hide from the adults. I can see Rubbish talking seriously with a group of men on the far end of the yard, standing near the grill where meat is being cooked. Women wander in and out of the house with bowls of food, placing them on the table.

I hear Cyril's voice. It is low, talking softly to someone. I look around and see him at the back of the yard, close to the fence. He's nearer than I thought he was. I move closer to the wall to avoid being spotted. He's standing with Mark. The grass in the yard is tall, coming up to their waists. They are holding hands. They push against the wall to hide it from the others, but I see. I see how Mark acts, eyes low, soft smile, the feminine quality of his voice. And Cyril, slightly taller, leans toward him and looks at him with a lust I've never seen him direct at me.

I leave. I want to run, I want to cry, but the whole town is watching me. The dog barks as I walk back past its house. The people standing on the porch watch me again, and we exchange waves. The children descend on me. I want to be left alone.

"Sweeties, give us sweeties."

"I told you, I don't have sweeties."

One of the older ones must know English a bit better because he understands.

"You don't have sweeties?"

"No, I don't have sweeties."

"Bread then, give us bread. We are hungry."

I am followed to the main road with the chorus of 'bread, give us bread, I am hungry'. They give up as soon as I reach the hill going to Germane. Just before the top of the hill, a few men sitting in the shade call to me.

"*Hei, my lanie*, you want sweeties? Come sit on my lap, my darling." They laugh, drinking beers from a plastic bag on the ground.

I reach Mariette's house feeling disgusting and disgusted. I'm glad she is still at the church bazaar. I don't want her to see me like this. I run to the phone to call my mom. I hold the receiver against my ear and listen to the dial tone. I imagine her voice on the other line, her concern, her care, her worry. I don't want that right now either. I just want to be alone.

I quickly change out of my nice clothes and put on jeans and a sweatshirt. I deliberately mess up my hair and put it in a sloppy pony tail. Then I go for a walk.

The back pasture faces the foothills that roll into farmlands. I walk out across the grass. I start to run. I don't know when the grass changes to shrubs, but I discover this when I lie down and cry. Small, sharp branches poke at my back. I squeeze my eyes tight but it doesn't stop the tears. I am ruined. My place in his heart never was, and his place in mine is aching.

My sobs even out to deep gasps for breath. My heartbeat slows. I open my eyes. The dark blue sky fills the space I see. I know there are clouds over the mountains, and to the West there will be clouds as well. But above me it is blue.

I stand up and look around. Germane is far away, and there is a river running close by, I can hear the water. I walk away from Germane to look for it. When I find it I realize why I couldn't see it. It is carved deep into the rocks. It must come from the pool I swam in with the ladies.

I follow it downstream until it slows down and levels out with the ground. I step through the shallow, cold water to the sandy bank in the center. Water seeps into my boots chilling my toes. There is a pile of debris in the middle of it that I go to investigate. Perhaps there is some treasure from further upstream deposited here in the sand.

As I get closer I see the blood. And the fur. Deep grooves in the damp sand show the movement of the scuffle. I close in on the body and find that it is the corpse of a thrashed baboon. I thought I would be happy to see one of the kin of the sandwich stealer dead at my feet, but this is no way to die. His face is contorted in permanent agony from the pain that carried him to his death. Her, actually. I can see from her distended belly that she is pregnant.

I know this killer - sloppy, no consumption of the parts. This has Verreaux written all over it. He even signed his name with paw prints leading away from the corpse and down toward the water where they disappear. From what Professor Lindsay has taught me about tracking, I can tell the prints are recent, within the last hour. I would have heard a baboon scream from Mariette's house.

"Where is your troop?" I ask the corpse. "Why didn't you scream?" I kick it. "Answer me!" I kick it again, harder this time. It wobbles from the impact, lifeless under my boot. "They could have helped you. I could have helped you."

I dig a shallow hole in the sand bank. I find a large stick so I can push the body into the hole. She rolls in and I cover her with sand. I smooth out the sand bank until the blood and furrows are erased. I consider marking the grave with a stone or a stick or something, but I know the river will push the sand bank around and eventually send the body off down the stream. Instead, I write 'Verreaux was here' in the sand with a stick. I wash my hands and trudge back to the house in my soggy, bloody boots.

* * * * *

Professor Lindsay is waiting on the porch of the Info Centre when I get back from my walk. He looks at his watch and back at me as I approach.

“Come, Erica, we must use as much of this daylight as possible.”

Professor Lindsay doesn't like driving in the dark. The few times we've had to do it, he's gotten all fidgety and nervous. I like it. Not his fidgety nervousness, but the feeling that we are the only spot of light in an infinity of black. Objects materialize on the road only for us.

It's not that dark yet, though. The clouds are beginning to crust over with pink, and the mountains are losing their definition. I press my face against the window ready to count the stars as they appear.

“You're awfully quiet,” says Professor Lindsay.

“So what?”

“Feels unnatural for you not to be asking questions, especially since you weren't on the camera installation expedition today.”

“How was installing the cameras?” I say.

“It was fine, except that you weren't there to help, and that strange man attacked me again. And when I was coming down, I ran into some people from Cape Parks, and they didn't even ask to see my permit!”

“But they know you.”

“It doesn't matter that they know me! They should be asking everyone. I can't imagine how many people they let...”

The stars arrive one by one to their places above the mountain. I count them as they gather. I pretend the *bakkie* is a vessel on the sea and that I am mapping our course using the complex but predictable constellations.

The cab is silent. I can feel the weight of a question hanging in the air.

“Sorry, what did you say?” I ask.

“Marianne said you went to Cyril's for Sunday lunch. How was it?”

“It was fine.” He looks at me, waiting for more. I should have just told him that I didn't go. “There were a lot of people there.”

“Yes, Cyril's family is rather large. Did you meet his mother? She's such a warm woman, don't you agree? She must have put together an amazing meal. What did you have?”

“Oh, I don’t remember, but it was really tasty. So what’s the plan for tomorrow? Are we going out to place the cameras?”

The *bakkie* jumps suddenly and the engine cuts out.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Look!” he whispers.

In front of us, there are two bat-eared foxes. They are walking slowly down the road in the same direction we are going. The *bakkie* rolls toward them, but with the engine cut and only the dim lights on, we are able to get very close before they notice us. One, then the other, looks at us. Their ears are enormous, forming a three-pointed star with the face. They turn back to the road and pick up their pace to a trot, then a dead run. Professor Lindsay turns on the engine and accelerates to keep them in sight. Eventually they realize that the road is not the best place to hide and they take off into the bushes.

We sit in silence for a while, savoring the sighting of wild animals in their natural place. I could have spent the rest of the ride in silence, but Professor Lindsay speaks.

“I’m very sorry Erica, what were we talking about?”

I smile.

“We were talking about what the plan is for tomorrow.”

“Right.” He launches into the plan for the next few weeks and I tune him out. I return to staring out the window. This time I look at the ground instead of the sky, searching for marginally lit animals in the peripheral vision of the headlights.

People Are Cruel

I'm up before the bell, so I walk down to the pool that the leopard ladies showed to me. I haven't been down here since that strange week of time where they invaded and disappeared. The shrubs have grown larger along the path and pierce my legs with their knife-like leaves. I would take a clipping or make a drawing for Cyril to identify, but that's not feasible.

I reach the water and find the rock where I stood. I strip down and leap in. I am calm, suspended over the still, dark water, body held in a loose ball. I wait for my body and mind to be pounded into the high of cold-watered shock.

Water slaps the backs of my thighs hard. It startles me into gasping a small mouthful of water as I plunge beneath the surface. There are no thoughts. Only a cold, all-encompassing sadness.

I climb weakly onto the rock, coughing. I didn't bring a towel. I'm freezing. The little scratches on my legs are burning. I start to cry. I lie on my back on the rock chattering. My blurred vision captures a crow as it makes its way across the sky. What would it say if it saw me? Why did you do that, Erica? Did you think it would help to be too cold to move? Buck-up Erica, you're a big girl.

I understand Professor Lindsay's hermetic behavior. People are cruel. Whether they mean to or not, they let you down. You work together to build expectations of each other, and one way or another, someone fails. It's easier to be out here, alone in nature. The birds and the plants will never let you down.

Professor Lindsay is packing the *bakkie* when I get back to the house. He cocks his head as he packs, judging where the next item should be packed most efficiently. He flits from item to item, shifting and rearranging, intent on building the perfect nest.

"Erica, why on earth are you wet?" he says when I pass the *bakkie* to enter the kitchen.

"Went for a swim."

"Why would you do that?"

"Just because."

"That answer is most unsatisfactory. I may be off my mark, but let me just say that emotional self-flagellation is most unbecoming of a lady. Now get changed. We're leaving in an hour."

After my shower, I eat breakfast and wash the dishes. Then I throw my daypack into the back where Professor Lindsay seems to have emptied (however neatly) the entire contents of his house.

“Is that all you are bringing?” he asks.

“Yup.”

He looks at me curiously.

“What?” I ask. “Did I miss something?”

“Obviously you did. I explained to you on the drive last night that you are going to Germane for a week. After we install the last few cameras, I’m going back to Rhodes to live in bureaucratic squalor. I did not expect to be returning at all during the winter season, but for once I am opting to go back rather than being summoned. There are things I need to get done.”

“I thought you wanted to get more footage of the cubs.”

“Trust me, Erica, this is far more important than footage.”

“What could possibly be more...”

“And it will give you a nice break. I know how much you love Germane.”

I feel the heavy weight of the morning swim returning.

“I’m not going.”

“Come now, Erica, we don’t have time to argue. Get your things.”

“No, I’m not going. I’m staying here.”

“No you are not. Not by yourself. What on earth is the matter?”

I don’t respond. I just stare out into space until my eyes are blurry with tears.

“Alright, fine,” says Professor Lindsay. “If you insist on being difficult, I suppose I could arrange for Cyril to come stay with you at camp.” I wince at the thought of being trapped here with Cyril. Both of my options are going to kill me. I decide that it’ll be easier not to fight.

“It’s too late for that now, Professor. I guess I’ll have to go to Germane.”

I storm off to pack for a week of hell. All I want is to be home with a cup of soup, a soft blanket, and some peace. I’ll at least get some good drawing done. Angst has always been good for my creative soul.

We hike the high trail overlooking Mr. Strydom’s farm where we’d seen the cubs. Professor Lindsay has it in his head that we need to be scientific about the camera placement. This means a ‘random’ spread of cameras over the area. This will increase our understanding of leopard traffic. This makes sense. What

doesn't make sense is placing a camera in a dense stand of proteas.

"Prof., you are wasting a camera by putting it there. It's obvious that a mother is not going to drag her babies through bushes that are too dense to travel through."

"This might be true, but it isn't scientifically proven. We'll show that she doesn't by setting the cameras here."

"But it's such a waste! We could be getting footage somewhere else!"

"It's not about footage, it's about random distribution. It is equally important to show where the leopards aren't."

He takes a camera from his bag and hands it to me.

"Here, you choose a place for this one if it'll make you happy."

As irritated as I am, I appreciate the gesture. I find a small, shaded stream some ways into the mountain. It is quiet and dark, a perfect place for a cat to nap. I strap the camera to the tree and switch it on. I imagine the black and white vision of the camera and the dim light activating as the predators pass. They pause and look at the light before moving on. A perfect shot of patterned backs as they leave the scene to hunt up river.

Anxiety hits me full force as we drive down from the site past Mr. Strydom's farm. We'll be in Germane in an hour. I would rather be anywhere else.

"Professor, do I have to go to Germane? Can't I stay at camp? Or could I go to Rhodes with you?"

"What is wrong with Germane? Has something happened that makes you not want to stay there?"

"Of course not. There's just nothing to do."

"You whinge about nothing to do at camp, but you've never complained about Germane. You should tell me, give me your real reason for not going, and I'll consider it. You can't keep avoiding things, Erica, or else..."

"... or else what? I'll end up like you? An angry, bitter old person with no real friends who completely denies the value of all people besides himself? I doubt I'll die as lonely as you, Professor."

Professor Lindsay stares at the road. A few times he looks like he'll say something, but he never does. I look out over the fields as we rush past. It's late afternoon, and the fields of canola flowers glow neon yellow. The black-bodied cows stand sentinel in their distant pastures, props in the panorama of farm life. They don't know the sad cargo that travels past them on the road above, stubbornly barreling forward.

The engine cuts. I look at the road, expecting some fantastic animal to be running from the vehicle. There is nothing there, and the *bakkie* lurches to a stop. We rock to a complete standstill. Professor Lindsay is holding the steering wheel with both hands, staring dejectedly at its center. Eventually he tries to start the engine again. It fizzles and grinds and coughs, but nothing happens. He sighs. He reaches up for the radio that is clamped to the ceiling above the rear view mirror. He switches it to channel one.

“Professor Lindsay here,” he says. “My *bakkie* has broken down on R737 between Mr. Strydom’s farm and Mr. van Wyk’s farm. Is anyone in the area able to sort us out?”

After a short silence, there is a response.

“Dag, Professor. Do you have a problem? You are lucky that we have not gone to town today. Most everybody in the area is away.”

“I’m glad you are home, Ruan,” says Professor Lindsay. He looks relieved. “I can’t start the engine.”

“That road is quite uneven, Professor. It is probably a spark plug that has come loose. Have you had a look?”

Professor Lindsay closes his eyes and rubs his forehead with his thumb and forefinger.

“Ruan, I’m an academic. I wouldn’t be able to tell you which was the sparkplug and which was the carburettor.”

“No need for loud words, Professor. I can come help you now. Over and out.”

The car sinks back to its previous uncomfortable silence. Professor Lindsay stares at the steering wheel. I crack the window, hoping to dissipate the gloom. When that doesn’t work, I open the door.

“I’m going for a walk.”

He doesn’t say anything. I leave.

I walk up the road in the direction we came from. The mountains rise up to the left, the road neatly separating the fynbos from the fields. On the margins of the road there is a mix of domestic invasives and noble fynbos originals. The fields must be just as disapproving as the mountain of these Romeos and Juliets of the roadside.

I take a turn-off onto a road leading down into the fields. I watch my feet, avoiding beetles and fat, black centipedes. I become mesmerized by the intricate insect life beneath my feet. It is as if there is an entire metropolis trying hard to evade notice.

I see the pine needles before the trees. They pave the lanes travelled by ants and caterpillars,

making a continuous surface for busy insect travel. I pick up a small bunch of needles still attached to a branch and look up from the path. I am immediately in Portland on a path in the piny hills of Forest Park. Once a week, my mom would drop my sister and me off at the beginning of the trail before going to her yoga class. We had an hour to run in the park before she picked us up. It was bliss. We escaped from the city noises and dissolved into the woods, taken in by the smell of perpetually wet earth and decaying wood.

These woods are alien. The trees are all the same width and are arranged in rough rows, nearly equidistant from each other. Where ferns and green bushes should be, there are leucadendrons and daisies and a few stray strands of wheat. But the smell is the same - damp pine-forest perfume of decay and rebirth.

It makes me want to run. Soon I am cruising along, still conscious to avoid the beetles. My breath is initially ragged but evens into the pattern I know - in, in, in, out, out.

Amelia always said that twenty minutes was the perfect amount of time for exercise. She had learned about it from the P.E. teacher. She was 16 and knew a lot of things. I mostly listened to her. You have to listen to your sister when she's 16 and your 13. It's just one of those things. So we would run for 20 minutes and walk back, always getting back to the road just before Mom came to pick us up. Every time we ran we marked a little X in the tree with her Swiss army knife that she carried everywhere. Every day we ran a little faster, marking a tree a little farther down the path.

I tire quickly and stop running. I turn to go back, wishing I had something to mark the nearest tree. But someone has already done it. There, just off the path, a tree bares long grooves. They are deep marks that have been repeated. Some are fresh, a lighter color than the rest. On a patch of needle-free ground, there is a pile of white feces, another marking from the cat that used this oversized scratching post. I kneel and poke the spoor with a stick. It is mostly hair, with bits of bone, fragments of hooves, and rodent teeth. I find more just off the trail. Clearly this forest belongs to a leopard. I respectfully leave, walking slowly back to the *bakkie*.

Amelia was always behind me when I ran. I took long, regular strides, competitively determined to beat my previous mark. When the time ran out, I would stop and catch my breath, watching her slow, deliberate jog as she came to where I was. She would smile and congratulate me and mark the nearest tree.

That day was sunny, though it was cool and dim in the forest. Light came in orange through the

branches, sending glowing trails through the dusty air.

“Erica,” she said. “Do you ever think about dying?”

“Not really,” I said. “Or at least I try not to.”

We walked quickly, knowing that the farther we ran, the quicker we would have to walk back in order to get to the road on time. There was a slight breeze that bent the tops of the trees toward each other in conversation.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about it.” I wasn’t surprised. A girl in the grade above her had just died in a car accident. “I just want to say that no matter how much we fight, I love you, no matter what.”

She stopped me in the trail and gave me a big hug. I wish I could remember how she looked that day. I wish I could remember saying, 'I love you, too'. But besides her words, all I remember is the light in the forest and the talking trees.

University of Cape Town

Ruan

From the slight rise in the road, I can see another *bakkie* parked in front of ours. Hood to hood, it looks like a standoff, like big white bulls fighting for territory. I can hear the engine of one humming steadily while the other whirs and whirs and never quite starts.

A collie bolts from between the *bakkies* and comes careening toward me. I stop walking, not out of fear, but to brace myself for impact. The collie stops short, wagging her tail and barking. I start walking toward her, hand extended. She backs up, still barking happily, but can't back up fast enough and tips over, rolling onto her back. She looks expectantly up at me. I stoop to rub her belly.

"Bella!"

The collie's ears perk in recognition of her name and she is in a dead run from a passed-out position in a matter of seconds. I watch her fluid motion as she runs, wishing for that kind of grace.

I walk down to the vehicles, coming around to where Professor Lindsay stands with Ruan. Ruan acknowledges my presence with a smile, then goes back to staring at the engine, sucking thoughtfully on his cigarette.

"Professor," he says, "it must be that your clutch is wet. We will have to wait for it to dry. You also have something else that is wrong. Perhaps we have flooded the engine."

Professor Lindsay has returned to his normal irritated self. He throws his arms in the air and scoffs.

"This is absolutely ridiculous. I had this in for service at the beginning of the year. How is it possible for so much to be wrong?"

"You see, the wet clutch is the fault of the rain and the road. Sometimes too much speed into a pothole gets water in the bonnet. This is why the clutch is wet."

He goes to the back of his *bakkie* and takes out a length of rope.

"We'll have to give you a tow. You can make arrangements for repair on the farm. I'll ask one of my hands to see what we can do."

Ruan turns his *bakkie* around and backs up until he is very close to Professor Lindsay's bumper. He lashes the *bakkies* together with the rope and gets in his cab. Bella jumps into the back, excited for the ride. As we bump to a start, Professor Lindsay's pointed eyebrows furrow in hard concentration. The

vehicles are travelling very close. The uphill is easier for us to navigate, but I can feel the tension in the rope and cross my fingers that it doesn't snap. On the downhill, Professor Lindsay has to be careful to keep gravity from sending us into Ruan. He has to keep his foot poised over the brake and watch for the brake lights ahead to flash.

Eventually I have to look away. The closeness of the vehicle is making me a little bit nauseated. Instead I focus out the passenger side window.

Besides my recent foray into the forest, I've never been on this side of the road before. Professor Lindsay and I always do our work on the mountain side of the road. All I can see is patchy, green grass, bordered by the strip of pine trees in the distance. We dip into a shallow valley, crossing a wide cement bridge, and rise up through more fields.

The *bakkie* swings to the right and then stops. We're outside a large, empty barn with a corrugated metal roof. Cows graze in the field above the barn. Where the ground becomes too steep, the field ends and the fynbos returns, capping the hill with red, grey, green, and yellow.

A man comes around the side of the barn, approaching Ruan, cap in hand. They speak in Afrikaans and Ruan motions toward Professor Lindsay's vehicle. Eventually the man bows slightly and turns away.

"Professor, Rudolph is fetching tools and will see to your *bakkie*. We must wait for him to tell us what is wrong. Come, let us have supper."

We follow Ruan away from the barns and up a little path toward an old, white farmhouse. It has a picket fence lining the front of the house. I question the purpose of the fence. It makes no effort to enclose anything. It simply prevents you from walking toward the house at a particular angle. Anyone could walk around it. Nonetheless, Ruan opens the gate, holding it for Professor Lindsay and me to enter.

The second the gate latches, there is a booming bark from inside the house. The collie, which had been sniffing around by the barn, comes tearing down the road toward the house. The door opens, and a fat basset hound comes out onto the porch, followed by a lady with similar proportions. They say that owners sometimes resemble their pets. This is true for Ruan's wife, Mrs. Anneke van Wyk, but she isn't nearly as friendly as her dog. She stares us down as we approach. I deliberately look away, watching her dog instead.

The basset's tail thwaps as it heaves itself down the steps of the porch. The collie launches over the fence and continues racing for the basset. It is joyful collision, the basset tripping over its ears as the collie slams into her side. They race around the yard, playing with an exhilaration that only dogs have.

I seem to be the only one interested in the dogs' antics. Ruan and Professor Lindsay have joined

Anneke on the porch. She doesn't seem happy to have guests. She also doesn't seem to be put off. Anneke's scowl is so opposite from the perpetually kind-looking Ruan. It seems like her default expression, like that evil-seeming librarian everyone was afraid of in middle school, even though she was actually a very nice lady.

I follow them into the house. The front door opens into an impossibly long hallway. The air is heavy and stale. Every so often, there is a closed door, an ancient piece of furniture, or a muted painting of a ship, dog or person. We head toward the light and noise at the end of the hallway. The light ends up being the large windows of an airy kitchen. The noise is from the adjacent room. A television broadcasts the nasal whine of an American talk show. There is a small boy watching it. He must be about six years old. He is wearing pajamas with multicoloured airplanes on it and is holding a tattered blue blanket. He watches the show with interest and scrutiny, sometimes mouthing the words.

"Pascal, it is time for supper," says Ruan. The boy looks up with bright, intelligent eyes. They must be asking something, because Ruan says, "No, we are eating now, Pascal."

Ruan ushers us into the room adjoining the TV room. We sit at a dark, wooden table, perfectly set. Ruan sits at the head, while Professor Lindsay sits at the opposite end. I sit by myself on one side, across from Pascal and Anneke. A coloured lady with an apron and cap brings a casserole dish.

"That's rabbit stew," Pascal says. "Pa shot it himself."

Professor Lindsay looks irritated. I can tell he wants to voice some moral objection to hunting, but his sense of guestly duty gets the better of him.

"I'm sure it is very good," says Professor Lindsay.

"No," Pascal says. "I don't like eating animals that haven't been raised to be eaten." The coloured lady places a separate dish in front of Pascal.

"His English is good, *né*?" says Ruan. "He learns from all this television he watches. Pascal, did you know that Erica is from America?"

Pascal looks up from his food with wide eyes.

"I know all of the states. Alabama, Alaska, Arizona..." He gets through all fifty states in alphabetical order without missing a single one.

"That's very impressive, Pascal," I say.

"I also know all of the presidents. Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison..."

"Finish your food," Anneke says gruffly. "Then you can talk of presidents."

I have never seen such a small child eat so quickly. Soon he is finished with his food and off on his recitation of presidents who have no bearing on his personal history or upbringing.

“...and of course Obama. Who is a coloured man.”

The clock on the wall starts to chime. By the strike of eight, Pascal has kissed his mother and father, shaken Professor Lindsay’s hand, and given me a hug.

“Goodnight!” he says.

“*Lekker slaap, skattebol,*” says Anneke. “Don’t forget the guests when you say your prayers.”

We move to the next room after we eat. Anneke sits in a rocking chair and starts crocheting. Ruan sits in a well-worn, stuffed chair, takes out a newspaper, and lights a cigarette. I sit tentatively on the couch. Professor Lindsay paces in front of the fireplace.

“How long will this take? We really must be going.”

“He’ll be here now, Professor. Would you like a drink?”

Professor Lindsay nods. Ruan pours Professor Lindsay a drink from the crystal decanter on the side table. After he hands over the drink, he opens up the newspaper and starts to read. The room is silent except for the soft creak of the rocking chair and the occasional paging of the newspaper. I look to Professor Lindsay for a clue as to how I should be fitting in with this scene. He is staring at the liquid in his glass with the same intensity that Pascal studied the television.

I decide to take off my shoes. No one seems to notice or care. I tuck my feet up onto the couch. Someone coughs and I nervously put them down. But I realize it is only a cough, not a subtle judgement of my actions. So I tuck my feet up again and sink into the couch. It is a comfortable couch. It has a faint scent of roses underneath its soak of cigarette smoke.

I’m not sure how long my eyes have been closed before I am startled by a shout from Professor Lindsay.

“What do you mean nothing to be done? I have to leave for Grahamstown tonight!”

“The best we can do is call for a tow, Professor.”

Professor Lindsay is standing over Ruan, shaking with anger. Ruan, although he is physically smaller, does not shrink at the presence of this looming man.

“Let me find the telephone book, and we will make a plan.”

I roll away from them, snuggling into the back of the couch, pressing my body into the smoky old upholstery.

* * * * *

The next time I open my eyes, I hear Professor Lindsay yelling from the other room.

“I said Wolkeberg, not Overberg, you idiot! And no, I can’t be towed to Swellendam, that is the opposite direction I should be going. I do not give two shits, sir, you will find a way of getting it done, or...”

I feel a heavy, dog-shaped weight climb onto my legs. Rosie walks the length of my body until she finds the perfect place to curl up between my chest and the couch. She lays her head on my neck with a sigh. One big basset ear flops over mine, muffling the outrage from the other room. I drift into a sleep where dogs smell like roses and little boys in airplane pajamas ride rabbits through the fynbos.

University of Cape Town

Pascal

The light in the room is too bright to ignore. I slowly open my eyes and find that sunlight is streaming through the open curtains. I rub my eyes and sit up. The dog is gone, and I have acquired a dark red crocheted blanket. I have an unpleasant taste in my mouth from breathing in the smoky couch and not brushing my teeth last night. I get up and fold the blanket, laying it over the armrest of the chair. Then I go on a hunt for the bathroom.

The sitting room has three doors. I can't remember which one I entered through. I was tired and wasn't paying much attention. I try the one opposite the couch. I catch sight of the edge of a four poster bed and close the door quickly and quietly. Maybe there is still someone sleeping. The next door opens onto the long hallway we entered through yesterday. I step out into the hall.

After much trial and error, I find the bathroom. I also find the computer room, another bedroom, Pascal's bedroom (with insects printed on the sheets), and a pantry. After the bathroom, I find my way to the kitchen for something to drink to get this horrible taste out of my mouth. I find a pot of coffee on the stove next to the back door and pour myself a cup.

"Môre, Erica, lekker geslaap?"

The sun is rising through the screen of the door, and Anneke is hanging laundry in the yard. I step into the sunshine, guessing an answer to the question.

"I slept well, thanks. Where is the professor?"

"Ag, that man. He arranged a tow that didn't come before 3am. He left with it to catch a bus to Grahamstown. We thought we'd let you sleep. He wasn't going toward Germane in any case. When Ruan gets back, we'll make a plan. You are welcome to stay."

"I don't want to impose," I say. I like it here, but I don't know if I'm welcome. She's still scowling.

"Not at all," she says. It's just as gruff as everything else she says. "Now help me with the washing."

I help her hang the rest of the clothes, studying her as she moves. She has a lithe quickness to her that I find odd for someone of her size. Not that she is unnaturally huge. I'm just used to my bean-pole parents with their hippie vegetarianism and iron deficiency. In a lot of ways, she must be healthier than they are with all this farm-fresh food, mountain air, and the type of work that needs to be done on a farm. Her only health hazards are her weight and the second-hand smoke, which could be quite significant.

After we finish hanging the laundry, she takes me inside and gives me a bowl of porridge for breakfast. I take it to the TV room to sit and eat. Pascal is there watching a show about reptiles on the Discovery Channel, clutching the same blue blanket he had yesterday. I half watch the show and half look around the room. There are papers and magazines cluttering the space. It borders on being messy. With the addition of the noxious cigarette fumes, the place feels dirty.

“That’s the longest snake in the world,” says Pascal, pointing to the screen. “It doesn’t have any venom, so it has to squeeze its victims to death.”

We watch as a reticulated python wraps itself around some poor wild animal. Next on the screen is a silver snake. A close-up on its face shows that the inside of its mouth is dull black.

“That’s a black mamba. It’s the longest venomous snake in Africa. Its venom is a neurotoxin, which means that it kills your nerves and your brains instead of rotting your flesh.”

“Great,” I say.

“Yes, it is great. Snakes are *lekker*.”

“You sure know a lot about them.”

“Yes I do. I am a reptile enthusiast. Can I show you my collection?”

He turns off the television, and I follow him to his room. He has one large terrarium and two small ones. The large one is full of black lizards with white stripes on their backs. There are a wide variety, small and large, with and without tails.

“These are skinks. I caught them all on the farm. Sometimes they fight though.” A recently severed tail twitches on the floor of the cage. I shudder as Pascal sticks his hand into the container and picks it up.

“Sorry, *skattebol*,” he says. “Get bigger so they won’t hurt you.”

The two smaller terrariums have more exotic-looking lizards, one with a blue head, one with a red head. Pascal says they are Agama lizards and tells me where he caught them, what their diet is, their sleeping pattern, and their natural habitat. This kid has an encyclopaedic of knowledge of just about everything. It makes me a bit worried. He must get teased at school. Then I wonder if he even goes to school. I can’t imagine that it’s viable to transport a child to Germane every day. In that case, does it even matter that he’s a nerd?

“Do you go to school, Pascal?”

“No,” he says. “I’m not old enough. I’ll start boarding school in February.”

Boarding school is something I only ever considered as a fairytale punishment. My mother would say, ‘If you girls can’t behave, I’ll send you to boarding school and be rid of you for good.’ I would be

scared, in the way that kids are of ghosts and witches, which you eventually realize don't exist.

"Are you happy about going to boarding school?"

"Oh yes. I'm going to one in Grahamstown. I've never lived in a town before, except on holiday."

"Aren't you going to miss your family?"

"Of course. And I'll miss my lizards. But I'll see them on weekends. And I really want to go."

"That's interesting. I never went to boarding school. And I've only ever lived in a city."

"Really?" Pascal looks at me with his wide, inquisitive eyes. "You've never lived on a farm?"

"Nope. I've never even visited one. Except for this one, I guess."

"We have to give you a tour! Come, Blanket, let's show Erica the van Wyk farm."

We exit the house through the front door. Pascal has his tattered blanket tied around his neck like a cape. He picks up a stick and starts pointing things out - the chickens, the pastures with the beef cattle, the shed with the tractor that they share with Mr. Strydom, and the tool shed with its odd assortment of tools. There are a few workers in their blue uniforms sitting in plastic chairs outside the shed. Pascal greets them in Afrikaans. The man with the hat, who looked at the *bakkie* yesterday, hands him a small, paper bag with a wink. Pascal looks excited and thanks him. We take it back to the house before continuing with the tour.

"What was in the bag?" I ask.

"It's grasshoppers! I will feed my skinks so they stop fighting."

We climb the hill behind the house. Pascal shows me the holes in the fences where we can squeeze through without having to follow the road through the gates. We pass a few rusted out cars and a pile of tires before we come to the cow pasture. The cows that looked like small chessboard pawns yesterday are huge. I've never been this close to a cow. Pascal finds this hard to believe.

"It's just a regular-sized cow, Erica," he says. He stands several feet from the cow, staring up at it. My instinct is to rush him and pull him out of harm's way from the giant, perpetually chewing animal. I manage to casually pull his hand instead. He holds on and starts pulling me up the hill.

"Come," he says, "I want to show you the lookout spot."

We climb through another hole in the fence and enter the fynbos. Pascal chatters away about the size of the farm, how many animals there are, how many workers, and how much land they have. He also tells me what kinds of snakes and lizards live here - from puff adders and Cape cobras, the most dangerous, to the thin, harmless grass snakes and flat-headed agama lizards that look like rocks and do push-ups in the sun. I follow his unfaltering steps up to the top of a hill. Sure enough, he's made a small wall encircling the flat, rock cap of the hill. I stand and look out over the farm and the mountains.

The last time I saw the mountains from this distance, I had just arrived. I've been up in them since then. I didn't realize that my proximity had robbed them of their majesty. When you are up a mountain, you can't see it in its entirety and don't see how big and beautiful it really is. Here, now, they stop my breath and remind me of a god I don't believe in. We are small beside these giants. They take no notice of our toil. They merely sit and wait.

"Do you know why I call it the lookout spot?" Pascal asks. The answer is so obvious that I laugh.

"It's so you can survey your land and look out over the farm."

"No," he says. "What a silly idea. It's because I yell 'Look out!' when I battle with the mice." He quickly crouches down, pulling at my hand. I squat behind the wall and wait. Pascal takes a small rock and looks carefully over the wall.

"Look out!" he screams. He hurls a rock at a small mouse which scurries for cover. He misses it completely, and the rock bounces off down the hill.

"Maybe you would hit it if you didn't make quite so much noise," I say.

"But I don't want to hit it. That would hurt the mouse. That's why I yell look out before I throw the rock."

He does it a few more time. It may just be my imagination, but it looks like the mice know to run away when they hear him say 'look out'.

Two *bakkies* appear on the main road, sending up dust signals. They turn off and head toward the house, bumping over the wide, cement bridge. I can see several men standing in the back of each *bakkie*.

"Pa's home!" Pascal chirps, dropping his rock and walking off down the hill. I follow him. Anneke said they were hunting this morning. I wonder if they've shot anything.

We're still quite far from the house when Pascal screams, "Snake!" I've never heard anyone scream snake before, but I didn't think it would be so full of glee. There in front of us is a fat snake about twice as long as Pascal. He runs up to it.

"Pascal, no!" I can't move to save him or myself.

"It's a puff adder, Erica, don't worry."

"But you said earlier that puff adders and Cape cobras are the most dangerous and venomous snakes in the area!"

He walks beside it, only a few feet from its body.

"Yes, but look at how far away I am. They can only strike at a distance about a third of the length of their body. And it's winter. They are lazy in winter. Isn't that right, *slang*?" He starts talking to the snake, cooing to it like a child would coo to a teddy bear or a doll.

“Shouldn’t we kill it?” I ask. “Won’t it hurt the animals or one of the farm workers?”

Pascal looks up. His cape-blanket makes his wide eyes look extra blue.

“No, Erica,” he says as if he were his own mother reprimanding a misbehaving child. “It did not hurt you. You should not hurt it.”

He walks off toward the house. I back away from the snake slowly to get a safe distance before I turn around. I hear the collie bark. I turn a little and see that she is running for me.

“No, Bella!”

She doesn’t listens and runs straight up to me without seeing the snake. When she sees it, she yelps and runs back to the house, tail between her legs. I decide to run, too, laughing at myself for being such a scaredy-cat.

University of Cape Town

Eiendom

Pascal goes around the house and heads for the barn. The men have all gotten out of the *bakkies* and are milling around importantly. I can see Ruan and Mr. Strydom standing at the front of the vehicles. When Ruan sees us, he waves and walks toward us. He has his arms low to sweep Pascal up in a hug. Pascal tries to walk around him to get to the barn.

“*Nee*, Pascal.” Ruan catches him in his arms. “I don’t want you to go in there. You know it upsets you.”

“But I’m showing Erica the farm,” says Pascal. Pascal already looks upset, possessed by that childish urge to seek out that thing that bothers him most. He’s staring at the *bakkie* where the horns of some dead animal poke out over the top. Ruan looks at me for help.

“It’s okay, Pascal, I don’t really want to see it.” Pascal looks at the ground. He doesn’t struggle to get away from his father, but he also doesn’t move to go back to the house.

“Really, Pascal, I’m afraid of blood. I see blood and I fall down.”

“Really?” he says.

“Really, truly. Why, Ruan, is that blood on your arm?” Ruan looks at his arm. There is a streak of dried blood on the side of his shirt sleeve.

“It is,” he says. “Probably from lifting one of the *bokkies*.”

I theatrically put the back of my hand to my forehead and collapse onto the ground. Pascal explodes into a fit of giggles.

“Erica’s afraid of blood!”

“Yes, I am. Now quick, Pascal, let’s leave before I see any more.”

I grab his hand, and we run back to the house. Anneke has made sandwiches and potato salad for lunch. We sit in the TV room and watch another nature show. I find myself completely absorbed by the sonorous world of bats until I hear a light snoring next to me. Pascal has fallen asleep on my arm. I move carefully away and manage not to wake him.

I go to the kitchen for a glass of water. I see outside that Ruan and Mr. Strydom are sitting in plastic chairs drinking beers.

“Join us Erica!” Ruan says, seeing me through the window. I step out of the house quietly closing the door behind me.

“Pascal is sleeping,” I whisper. I put my water glass on the ground and take a seat.

“Don’t worry,” Ruan says. “That child is *uit soos ‘n kers* between one and four.”

“He’s a bit touched, hey,” says Mr. Strydom. “What boy does not like a gun?”

Ruan shrugs.

“All of us who are in touch with nature are slightly touched.”

He pulls a cigarette out of the blue-scripted cigarette packet and lights it.

“You have him come learn how to shoot with my boys,” says Mr. Strydom. “It will teach him more realistic. No more lizards and mice.”

I try out the strange grammatical puzzle he lays out and can’t make sense of it. I find that I judge people who can’t speak English properly. It makes me assume that their thought processes are stunted. I hate that I think that way. It’s such a double standard, since I can’t speak a word of Afrikaans.

“Erica, why are you here?” Mr. Strydom asks.

“Professor Lindsay had to go to Grahamstown. We broke down on the way to Germane and he had to leave me here.”

“Grahamstown,” says Mr. Strydom. “Is this where he’s getting us money?”

“I don’t know,” says Ruan. “He didn’t say anything to me. Maybe it is so.”

“What money?” I ask.

“Professor Lindsay has this idea of paying farmers for damages done by leopards. He calls it ‘incentivizing conservation.’” Ruan blows a thin stream of smoke into the air. A breeze blows it in Mr. Strydom’s direction. Mr. Strydom waves it away.

“It won’t work,” says Mr. Strydom. “We have too many damages. And they have never paid me before. Why would they pay me now?” He moves his chair upwind of the cigarette smoke.

“Is it possible they have realized we have needs?” says Ruan. “I have seen them change. And you can’t deny that we’ve started to see a point to conservation.”

“Bah,” says Mr. Strydom. “The point of conservation is to make life difficult for the farmers.”

“You hear these things Cyril and the professor have been saying about niches and overgrazing,” says Ruan. I wince when I hear Cyril’s name. I don’t like being reminded. I wish he would just go away, disappear from this place, from my heart and mind. I suppose he, like the leopard, was here first, and he will be here long after I am gone. And I couldn’t get away with shooting him like the farmers shoot the leopards.

"I tell you," Ruan continues, "I have listened. I have completely removed my cows from some of this land to make room for the duikers and other small animals. This gives the predators something to eat and I get fewer attacks from caracal, jackal, and leopard."

"That's only because you have switched from sheep to beef, and that was because the sheep were too difficult. Do not be fooled, Erica, this is a lazy man," Mr. Strydom says, pointing at Ruan. "He will act like he is a converted environment communist. Really, he is just lazy, too lazy to put all of his land to good use. His productivity decreases, and now he tries to tell me what to do. But he can do nothing. Nobody can tell me what to do on my farm."

He turns away from us, putting his feet up on an adjacent chair, looking out over the pastures and the mountains. One of the farm hands is forking bales of hay off a truck. He throws them into feeding troughs for the cows. The troughs are ingenious. They are inverted big-rig tires, the perfect height for the cows. From here it looks like the cows are eating out of hand-crafted, black, clay bowls.

"Your cattle are successful, Ruan," says Mr. Strydom. "I know it is not just laziness, this easy cattle farming. I really thought you would lose more money. But I see also that cattle have less input and not as much harm comes to them. My sheep, I tell you, they die like flies."

"You could farm cows too, Kobus."

"I am a sheep farmer. I like to work hard. Like my father and his father previous."

I remember Cyril's talk and all the ideas he has on how farmers can manage the predators. I may hate Cyril, but he has a lot of ideas and is good at getting people to listen.

"Have you tried fitting collars on your sheep to deter predators?" I ask.

"Yes. And these are very smart animals. It stops them only until they find a way around it."

"What about sheepdogs?"

"Why must I make sacrifice?" he snaps. His bulbous face is just as red as mine sometimes gets. I'm not sure if it's the anger or the beer. "I farm sheep. I buy a fence. In my fence I keep my home, my sheep, my children, and my wife. *Dit is my fokken eiendom*. My neighbor, Professor Lindsay and the green guys from the Parks, they farm predators. I keep my sheep on my side of the fence. If my neighbor wants to farm predators, they must keep them on their side of the fence. I shoot trespassers on *my eiendom*."

He turns away from us and sips his beer, his fierce scowl obscuring his features. I turn to Ruan, expecting some visual reprimand for upsetting his guest. But Ruan still wears his usual kind, sedate expression. He jabs his cigarette butt into the glass ashtray on the table.

"Stop complaining, Kobus. Speak about solutions."

Mr. Strydom sighs, taking another sip of his beer.

“You have all convinced me to take my animals off of that *kraal* on the mountain.” He waves his hand in the direction of the mountain. “I have lost too many on that place. I just need to finish my fences and they will move to the other side.”

“And this money from Professor Lindsay?”

“We run a high-risk enterprise. Compensation for losses might help. If we are paid, we will stop worrying. But where will this money be from? City people and foreigners? We are not poor farmers begging for money. These people from the city and these foreigners, they will not understand.”

“I don’t think it’s like that,” I say.

“Then why give us money?” says Ruan. I’m surprised when he says this. I thought he understood. “We have always had problems with predators. Why would they pay us now?”

And so the conversation starts again. Ruan takes the side of farming this time and Mr. Strydom takes the side of conservation, trying to convince Ruan that accepting compensation for not killing predators would benefit everyone. I’m confused by the reversal. It doesn’t help when they slip into Afrikaans.

I stop following the conversation and wonder why Professor Lindsay never tells me the real reasons why he does things. He told me he was sifting through bureaucratic nonsense at the university, not arranging a bribe plan for the farmers. He never tells anything straight. I’m not surprised the farmers don’t trust him.

Eventually I stand to leave.

“Please excuse me, gentlemen, I’m going for a walk.”

“Enjoy!” Mr. Strydom says, holding up his beer in a toast. “I’m sorry if our arguing has bored you.”

“Not at all.”

In fact, it’s done quite the opposite. I feel like something has slipped in my mind, like they’ve oiled a cog that has never worked before. Something I thought was very simple is much more complex than I could ever have believed.

Death

There is a pile of guts next to the barn doors. They are oily looking, slick with bodily fluids. Several lazy black flies have found their way to the meal and hover over the parts. The *bakkie* looks as if someone drove through a pothole of blood, and it splashed over the part where the back folds up. The barn doors are open, and I can see the bodies inside on meat hooks. I step inside to get a closer look. Something skitters across the floor, and I flinch. Rats? I realize it is actually a barn swallow when it pulls up into the air. The corrugated metal rafters are spotted with their muddy nests.

The concrete floor is smeared with blood, rust-colored swipes where the bodies were dragged and hung. I look up where they are splayed spread eagle on the hooks. The spiked hook is through the ankle. The rest of the leg has pulled away, making a gap between the tendon and the bone. The haunches have also been pulled apart, dark red muscles exposed beneath the fur. They are split down the middle, chest cavity open, innards removed. Watery blood pools inside the cavity. Every so often it drips on the tarp below.

Their faces look alive. Their black eyes still have a shine one would expect from a living creature. The flared eyelashes and closed mouths make them look pensive and friendly. This compared to the rest of the body, which hangs stiffly from the hook. I pat the center of one of their foreheads and stroke the little horns.

A swallow swoops close to my head and rushes away. It sweeps out through an open door at the back of the barn and flits back. I walk through the echoing barn to see where the bird is going. It's a large laundry room. There is a washing machine and a dryer in the corner. There are also two large sinks. One of the sinks has a pair on black, plastic boots in it. They are still wet. I imagine they've just had the blood washed off them.

At the back of the room there is a door leading outside. Beside the door is an open cabinet and a table. The cabinet is full of cast off household items. There is an old gramophone with its flower-like speaker and a box full of baby toys. An old tattered dress hangs on the door. It feels like tissue paper.

The table has an array of natural artifacts. There is a small pile of sandstone trilobite fossils and a bottle of sea-shells. A large pile of porcupine quills sits beside a huge tortoise shell. There is a cardboard box as well. It says 1974 on the outside.

Inside, there is a leopard skin. I lay it out on the table. The hide is grey and thick. The fur is coarse at the base, but the tips are soft when it is pet. The way the animal has been skinned, the downy underside of the belly, frames either side of the back. The legs are wide and speckled, leading down to the rounded tops of paws. One of the legs is cut off before the paw, and the tail is missing.

Its face is much less alive looking than the meat hook counterparts in the other room. There are holes where its eyes used to be. The ears are squashed down, flattened to the rest of the face. It is so different from the taxidermied leopard at the Info Centre. The one in the Info Centre has some breath of life still in it. It looks preserved, real. This one, without a doubt, has been robbed of its substance.

I lay the skin back in its box and step outside. I need to sit down. There is something in my eye, and I can barely see. I stumble toward a blossoming tree, ready to collapse at its base when I arrive. I find that there is a bench there, ready to hold me. I want to cry, but I can't. A cool breeze is saving me from the crushing sadness I've been trying to avoid. My vision clears and I see the expanse of the farm and the startling mountains. This land has seen so much death and sadness. Yet the mountains haven't crumbled. The land hasn't dissolved. It holds the sorrow, sowing it back into the ground, sprouting innocence that will decay and grow again.

"It is a beautiful spot," says someone behind me.

I turn and see Ruan walking up, hands in his pocket, cigarette behind his ear. I look for Mr. Strydom and see that his *bakkie* is on its way up to the road. I'm surprised I didn't hear it start.

"Yes, it is," I say.

I scoot over to make room on the bench. Ruan sits down beside me.

"Ruan, how did the leopard in the laundry room die?"

He sighs.

"By the sin of my grandfather. Come, let me introduce you."

I follow him down a path that leads to a second bench, just out of sight from the first one. It is in the middle of an outcropping of tombstones. It's a strangely comforting sight. Ruan's whole family is here, from many generations.

"This is my grandfather." The tombstone reads Cornelius van Wyk, 1894-1976. "He lived to be very old for a South African farmer at that time. I was a small child and don't remember the events, but the story he told was that he came upon the leopard when he was walking with his dogs. It attacked him, and he beat it to death with a *knopkierie*. Anyway, this was his boast. But he was very old. My father believes he found it in a trap. That would be a more likely way of killing it with a *knopkierie*. And it would explain the missing paw."

“What about the tail?”

“Ag, one of the dogs chewed it off as a puppy. It was still in the house until my father passed away. I put it in the box so it wouldn’t upset Pascal. He is very sensitive to cruelty. He finds death cruel. He especially doesn’t like hunting.”

“You seem to enjoy hunting.”

“It is a guilty pleasure, like the cigarettes. It is one way that I experience nature. You become very close to animals, and very much like an animal when you hunt. I would never give up that feeling.”

“Would you ever hunt a leopard?”

“No,” he says. “I would never hunt a leopard. They are too special, too much like us.”

The ladies from the camp were only told of the aloof loneliness and wildness of leopards. I think about Verreaux and his incredible personality. You don’t get that kind of human individuality in a kudu or a dassie.

A question is drawn quietly out of my sub-conscious. I let it sit, debating whether to push it away as I always do.

“Ruan?” I say. “How do you deal with death?”

Ruan turns away from the tombstone and looks at the mountain. I can’t tell if he is sad because he is still wearing his faint, soft smile.

“I believe in God,” he says. I’ve heard many people utter this sentence in my life. I always roll my eyes because it is said with such conclusiveness, as if it can explain away any problem or justify any action. But the way Ruan says it, he sounds tentative. It is a hesitant belief.

“I believe in God because there are so many small things that have details I cannot understand without faith. Science and evolution for example. To make it easier for me to understand such complexities, I believe it has been designed. Death is the same. To believe that one day we will cease to exist is harder to put my mind around than to believe we will exist indefinitely. Besides, there are so many miracles on a farm. I need to thank someone.”

He points to a bush at the edge of the small graveyard. A mongoose scuttles out from underneath, raising onto its legs to look at us. He looks from me to Ruan and back to me. Then he returns to his business, unphased by our presence.

Faults

I feel comfortable here. I didn't expect for a broken down vehicle to feel like a vacation. I don't have to think about anything, I just exist. I've been helping Anneke around the house, doing odd jobs with Ruan, and entertaining Pascal as much as I can bear. He is exhausting. He has an insatiable curiosity and a capacity for fact-regurgitation that I've never experienced in a child or an adult. But he is extraordinarily disinterested in learning his letters or numbers.

"He should know some of these basics when he goes to school," Anneke confides to me. She has begun to open up to me, and I can see she is just as sweet on the inside as Ruan is the whole way through. Anneke is nervous about sending Pascal to boarding school. It causes her to crochet incessantly. "It takes my mind off the child's future. My hope is that he is well liked. He is extremely small and a bit of a *snip*. A bigger child could take advantage of this."

It is morning, and the birds are flitting to and from their nests in the eaves. She and I sit on the patio soaking in the sun. Anneke has brought her rocking chair outside and is crocheting socks for Pascal's school uniform. I have my sketchpad out, and I am drawing her portrait. There is a "Whistler's Mother" quality to the scene. It is, of course, more contemporary, with loud patterns and no cap. I hope I can capture the subtle anxiety she holds in her stern scowl.

There is a distant rumbling that causes us to lift our heads from our work. The beautiful thing about the positioning of this house is that you can see the comings and goings on the main road perfectly. Mr. Strydom went to town this morning. Rubbish passed on the road with Kermit, heading who knows where. Now a Cape Parks *bakkie* is on the main road. It takes the turn off and heads down the hill toward the house.

I groan. My mental vacation is about to be ruined. Why can't I just ignore things forever? I work so hard at it. Surely I should succeed?

"I'm going for a walk," I say to Anneke and walk away up the hill.

The problem about the positioning of the house is that people from the road can see the house just as well as you can see them. After Cyril politely greets Anneke, he comes straight up the hill after me.

"Hello! Erica! Where are you going?"

I don't respond. I'm just going. My thought process is only to not turn around, to keep going.

Maybe he'll give up. Maybe I'll find someplace to hide.

I get all the way to the lookout spot by the time I realize how ridiculous I'm being. I have nowhere to go, nothing tangible to run from, and I'm still carrying my drawing pad.

I sit down cross legged on the rocky plateau of the lookout spot. I prop my notebook on the wall and start a hurried sketch of the landscape. Cyril comes up the hill, out of breath.

"Jissis, meisie, you've got quick legs."

"What do you want, Cyril," I say. I try to be cool, concentrating on my drawing. Maybe he'll forget I was less than cool by running away from him.

"Professor Lindsay has asked for me to take you back to Germane."

"Well, I'm not going. The van Wyk's said I can stay."

"That is very kind of them," says Cyril. I glance up at the mountain and back at my drawing. Cyril is looking at me, but I refuse to pay him any attention.

"Are you sure you don't want to come back?"

"Super sure. Is that it? Because you can go now if that's all you want."

He stands there, unmoving. I shade thick shadows onto the slopes of my mountains. Every crevice is enveloped in a sinister grey smudge.

"Why didn't you come to my house on Sunday?" asks Cyril.

"I did come to your house."

"You did? Nobody saw you. A few people saw a girl who could have been you in the street, but no one saw you at the party."

"Oh, I was there. I saw you. You were in the back of the yard. Holding hands with your boyfriend."

I look at him for emphasis. He is frozen, lips curled back in horror. I notice that his mouth is far too big for his face. It hardly fits with his absurdly tiny and pointed nose. How could I have ever been attracted to this boy?

"Boyfriend? I don't have a boyfriend."

"What do you call him then? You were holding hands with Mark and staring adoringly into his eyes," I say. "I was so dumb to think you might like me."

I go back to drawing my mountain. I darken the sky so it looks like night, allowing an unshaded space on the tops of the mountains to make them stand out.

"But I do like you."

"Not like that. If you liked me like that, you would have kissed me by now. You've had plenty of opportunity."

“In my culture, that is impolite.”

“Bullshit, Cyril. You wouldn’t have kissed me because you are gay, not because you are impolite. Answer me honestly, Cyril,” I say, looking up from my sketchpad. “Are you gay?”

He looks like a rabbit, one of the ones we follow in the road with our headlights, darting back and forth, too stupid and scared to escape the onslaught. He could lie to me right now, he could confess his love for me, kiss me and maintain this strange charade. But he’s too smart to lie. He knows I would see through him.

“Yes, it is very possible that I might be gay,” he says.

“That’s not good enough Cyril.”

“Fine,” he says. “I’m gay, Erica.”

He sits down, then lies back on the rock and closes his eyes. I take an eraser from my pencil case and start changing the shape of the mountain tops.

“Feel better?” I ask.

“No,” he says plainly. “I don’t want to be gay.” His eyes are still closed. He doesn’t look very happy.

“Why?”

“That is not a fair question. The answers are too many. My religion, my family, my friends, my neighbors, my co-workers, not a single one would like this information.”

“Mark would like it.” He ignores me and continues.

“Everyone will call me a *moffie* and...”

“Everyone already calls you a *moffie*...”

“...And I will be judged and outcast. This will change who I am seen to be. I have tried all my life to be respected and liked. And now that will fall away.”

His eyes are open now, looking up at the sky. His hands are crossed over his green, pastel, polo shirt. I can’t help but feel a bit sorry for him, even though I’m still mad. Most of his excuses are just that, excuses.

“I think you’ll find that by being yourself, you’ll be just as respected and liked as you are now. You might even have the self-respect of being honest with yourself.”

He shakes his head slowly, rolling it from side to side on the ground.

“You don’t know what it’s like, Erica. You live in America. It’s different here. And you aren’t gay. How could you know what it’s like to be in my shoes?”

“Everyone has secrets, Cyril.”

“And what’s yours, Miss Erica America,” he says.

I look down at my drawing. Through erasing, my drawing has become a profile of Cyril's face. I study it. We are all mountains, and we think we will never crumble. But most of our faults are written clearly in our features.

"I had an older sister. She disappeared on her way home from school when I was thirteen. We haven't seen her since. I've never told anyone about her. I carry it with me every day."

The shape of the mountain blurs. I try to blink the tears away, but they come too fast. I find his arms around me and cry into his shirt. He holds me, and I sob harder. I'm not really crying for her. I cry because I hate being pitied, and I hate Cyril and his stupid infatuation with men. I also cry because I am far from home with strange people with stranger problems.

"I'm sorry," he says. I'm not sure why he says it, but it's the right thing to say.

"It's okay, Cyril." I say it from a place of forgiveness, not because I am alright with my pain. I don't know how I'll ever let her go.

We sit there for a while, holding each other. Not the kind of holding each other I ever imagined, but it's nice nonetheless. We look at the mountain, lost in our separate thoughts.

"Hey, it's me!" says Cyril, seeing the notepad. He holds my drawing and turns it on its side so it also faces the mountain. He poses with it, blinking seriously into the distance. I stifle a giggle, but he catches me.

"Come on, you can't hate me anymore. I'm too charming," he says, tossing his head and striking a supermodel pose.

"Yes, fine, I'm not mad at you. Still a little in love with you, but not mad at you."

"Shame," he says. I sigh.

He helps me to my feet and gives me a big hug. We walk off down the hill together.

"So," he says, "how do you know he likes me?"

That makes me laugh hard.

"Are you blind! He has the hots for you, let me just say. When we were at the talk you gave, he couldn't keep his eyes off you..."

We walk down the hill hand in hand. I squirm a little, not really ready for the physical contact. But the look on Anneke's face when we get back to the house is priceless. Her scowl has melted into drop-jawed disbelief. I would love to see how much more shocked she would be if I shouted 'It's okay, he's gay!' But that's not my place.

Lazy

Days pass and I fold into the land. I enjoy how things get done constantly but are never rushed. I feel calmer here than I've felt the entire trip. Maybe it's because of the loud things I've experience on this trip that make me feel the quiet more acutely. In any case, I'm enjoying the break.

Mr. Strydom calls on us often. Sometimes I think it's because I'm here, or because he is bored. All he and Ruan do is argue about one thing or another. Today, Mr. Strydom is harping on about why Ruan should go back to farming with sheep.

"You say all this about the environment. And the guys of the fishes and animals say that your cattle are worse than my sheep."

Ruan is fixing the fence on the far side of the farm close to the road. A few of the cattle have been milling around in the road, and he and I spent the morning looking for the hole.

"How many sheep do you have?" asks Ruan.

"I have two thousand sheep," says Mr. Strydom. He looks proud.

"I have 300 cattle. Which do you think is worse for the environment, 300 cattle or 2,000 sheep? And we farm on the same size of land. I'd say you have much more risk of overgrazing."

"Cattle produce methane," Mr. Strydom says.

"Yes, and I still have my forest," says Ruan. He uses a sledge hammer to pound a stake into the ground while I hold it in place. He articulates each argument and counter argument with a whack from the sledge hammer. Mr. Strydom just watches us. "Trees take the carbon out of the air."

"Ag," says Mr. Strydom, throwing his hands up in the air. "Don't tell me this story. You are just too lazy to cut down your trees. They are an invasive species. It's much better if you take them out."

"Maybe I will," says Ruan with a smile. "I've been considering planting *spekboom*, instead."

"Hah!" says Mr. Strydom. "You believe too much in these Parks pamphlets. These green guys and the carbon guys, you only pretend to listen. You are more likely to stop smoking, which would be much more effective at reducing your carbon."

Ruan ignores the jab. "With the right investors, we can make money with the *spekboom*. The green economy puts natural capital back in the *veld*."

"What is the value of this? I want it to be green in my pocket, not the *veld*. If we had some big

players, with money, it might work. Without them, it is too much risk.”

“Farming is risky business. It is all about adapting and managing.”

“It is about control. I will control my farm and make it so that it is profitable.”

Ruan finishes hammering in the fence post and pauses for breath.

“You have my best wishes,” he says. He ties a piece of red cloth around the post and heaves the sledgehammer over his shoulder, smiling at me. “We’ll leave the rest for the laborers. Now they will know where it needs the fix.”

“Because he is too lazy to finish the job himself,” says Mr. Strydom.

Mr. Strydom stays for lunch, then drives back to his farm. Pascal and I design lizard traps until he goes down for his nap. You could set a clock to Pascal’s naps. At one o’clock, no matter where he is or what he’s doing, he yawns. Within five minutes, he’s found someplace to curl up and sleep. His favorite spots are the couch in the TV room and the couch in the lounge that I slept on the first night. Now that I’ve moved to the guest room, he’s reclaimed it as his nap spot. But I’ve also seen him fall asleep in the shade of a tree, and even on the kitchen floor, out like a candle.

I take his nap time as my alone time. I go to the bench above the graveyard and draw. It is a nice escape. People don’t look for me here. If I need to be away from Pascal, I also come here. The barn and the graveyard silently push him away with their omnipresent ghosts.

This place pushes away more than just Pascal. The ghosts and feelings that follow me fall away when I am here. The subtle feeling of being haunted retreats. There are too many ghosts here to make room for more. I know that feeling will return when I leave this spot, but for now, I can be objective, look it in the eye from the safety of a graveyard.

I haven’t dealt with it well. I forbade the world from mentioning her name, and buried her inside myself, protecting what was left. To let go is to lose. I fought the pity I saw in people’s faces. I was brave, I knew what they said. Everyone talked about me, about her. There goes that girl, it must be so hard, she deals with it so well. Right. Because trapping a feeling for all this time is healthy and productive.

It’s easier to think about her from this distance. I’ve said her name to myself, named a leopard after her, remembered parts of our childhood together without pushing it away.

I turn the page of the drawing pad. I can see her there, her face invisible in the white paper, waiting to be uncovered and revealed by my pencil.

Maybe someday.

A Third Dimension

Ruan and I take a late afternoon walk to Mr. Strydom's house. We get ready quickly, hoping to make our escape before Pascal wakes up. Ruan's rational is that Pascal always wants to walk with him, but is too tired by the time they leave to walk back. Ruan is then stuck carrying Pascal or asking for a ride back to the farm. It's not too much of a burden to ask for a ride, he just likes the walk.

The dogs come with us. Bella and Rosie chase and play until Rosie is tired and falls into a lumbering lope just ahead of us. Bella continues to run and run and run, going ahead of us, then racing back, over and over again. Any time she gets close, Rosie barks with joy. This leaves Rosie panting.

By the time we reach the bridge, Rosie is too tired to continue. Ruan pats her head and we cross the bridge. Rosie stays behind, howling mournfully for her companion. What a funny dog.

The climb to the road is steady, but not difficult. We soon pass the stake Ruan pounded into the ground to mark the hole in the fence. The workers have already been there and four new stakes are pounded in beside it, with barbed wire strung between them.

"Why do you and Mr. Strydom fight?" I ask.

"Ag, he is like a brother. Siblings fight. Our whole lives we have been this way. Friends, enemies, everything in between. And it's not fighting, it's a sussing out of what's the right thing to do. Like these sheep. He argues because he sees my success and wants to know if it's right for him. What better way to figure that out than to argue the opposite?"

We turn onto the road and head up the hill toward the bordering forest and Mr. Strydom's farm. Below us, safely behind the fence, two of the cows look up at us placidly.

"So, he's interested in your cattle?"

"Incredibly so. At first he was irritated. He had an increase in predation and I had no losses. He accused me of shoving all the predators on him. But he is slowly seeing that I am succeeding."

"Why did you switch?"

"To avoid predators. I can see that sheep farming is not right for this area. Maybe in the Karoo, but not here. Sheep are too small, too many bad things lurking that will eat them. Even people. We had sheep stolen every year."

"Really?" I try to imagine the process I would have to go through to steal a sheep. My mind

doesn't exactly make it around how I would pick it up.

"Ja, everyone steals them – strangers, farm hands, neighbors. Years ago, around Christmastime, one of my farmhands was stopped by the police for reckless driving. There were four of my sheep stuffed in his boot. Can you imagine? R6,000 of sheep stolen by my own workers! I am lucky not to have big gangs come. They steal by the hundreds."

"That's a lot of money."

"Yes, they are very rewarding animals to farm with, for financial and enjoyment reasons. But they go lame, die of disease and predation, get stolen - all of this by the hundreds every year. I did not want to fight this losing battle. I can see from farming in this place that sheep are not the right thing. So I try cattle."

"Are they working?" I look back at the cows, critically. They are still staring off, chewing constantly.

"Yes. Not as profitable as sheep yet, but with no attacks from predators, I am spared from loss and heartache."

We pass the road that descends into the forest. I think about the claw marks on the tree and how close both Mr. Strydom and Ruan are to the territory of a predator without even being aware of it.

"Do you think your success will convince Mr. Strydom to change?"

"I'm not in the business of convincing anyone. Mr. Strydom may change, and he may not. He is a master of his land and beats it back when it rises against him. He doesn't not always listen to what it says. And he does not feel the same way about nature that I do."

We pass the trees and have a view of Mr. Strydom's farm. I have never closely observed the makeup of the farms and am surprised by the differences. Before, I saw all farms as haphazard patchworks of multi-colored land. I can now see the differences between Mr. Strydom's farm and Ruan's farm. Ruan's land appears smaller for the thick band of invasive pines and the hills behind the house which are mostly uncultivated fynbos. His fields are square blocks that peter out at the edges. They have a ragged, distracted feel, like a man in a collared shirt who hasn't bothered to tuck it in. Mr. Strydom's land is the opposite. It is immaculately organized. The pastures are parceled into regular sections, some of which look used, some of lay fallow. The sheep congregate on the other side of the property and on the hills behind the buildings. Everything looks very intentional and purposeful.

"Hello! You have come just in time," says Mr. Strydom. He is standing in the road talking with one of his workers. "I'm finished here, and we will just be going up for tea."

He dismisses his worker and walks with us up to the house. We pass a flock of sheep in a pasture

beside the road. I have to say, I can see the appeal in sheep. Their woolly faces are very expressive, if not slightly angry. They are much more intelligent-looking than the ever-chewing cows. And their babies are adorable. Two lambs with fluttering, fluffy tails are following their mother, bleating pathetically. If they come close to the fence, I swear I will reach over and scoop one up and raise it at camp.

“So, Erica, what do you think of this farm?”

“It is...” I pause, looking for the right word in the expanse of neatly kept fields and sheep. “It is... impressive. You must work very hard.”

“Ja,” he says. “I do. We have 2,000 sheep here and on that lot above the road. We have a vegetable garden behind the house. There are also these fields of hay and the silage pits. I sell it to my neighbors who are too lazy to grow their own.” Mr. Strydom looks meaningfully at Ruan when he says this. Ruan doesn’t argue.

We cross a cement bridge that is similar to the one on Ruan’s property and hike up the road toward the house. We are met on the road by the prettiest sheepdog I have ever seen. She is fluffy and golden-brown with a white mane and underside. She has a fox-like face and bright, kind eyes. Bella comes bounding toward her, yipping and jumping. The shy sheepdog crouches down timidly, tail scooped but obviously wagging.

“You see, *meisie*, I may live in the mountains, but I am not made of rock,” he says, knocking his fist on the top of his head. “I try everything to be successful. I bought this dog to be a guardian of my sheep, and now? Most useless animal I’ve seen. She is scared of everything, even wind in trees. So she does nothing and eats my food.”

I want to point out that pets are valuable for emotional reasons, but he doesn’t seem like a terribly emotional guy. Instead I laugh. He seems to appreciate my laughter.

The house looks like it is straight out of a van Gogh painting. The curled top of the Dutch façade shines white against the early evening blue of the sky. The veranda stretches out beside the front doors and is heavy with towering pink bougainvillea.

We sit outside around a large round table of polished dark wood. Tea is laid out. A large pot towers over the two tiny tea cups. I sit facing the mountain, enjoying how it is framed by the maroon, teardrop flowers.

“*Jirre*, Kobus, you didn’t say we’d have guests.”

The voice is musical. I turn to see a woman come out of the sliding glass door behind us. She has wavy, brown hair down to her waist and dark shining eyes. She is beautiful.

“Charlie, fetch two more cups,” she calls back to the house.

“But Ma, I just laid everything out!”

“Come, *seun*, do you expect me to do it myself.” She turns, and I can see that she has a crutch. “That is the delight of this thing,” she says, motioning to her crutch. “I can get my boys to do anything now.” Ruan and Mr. Strydom both stand as she approaches the table. Ruan kisses her hand coyly. Mr. Strydom shoos him away.

“Down, man, let a man kiss his wife.” They kiss cheeks and she sits with us. A boy of about eight comes with two teacups that match the others. She tussles his hair.

“Thank you, my *engel*. You can go back to your games now.” He leaves. Seconds later, I can hear the tinny sound of video game gunfire. Mr. Strydom gets up and closes the sliding door. Annabelle asks Ruan about his wife and about Pascal. The conversation turns to boarding school and slips naturally into Afrikaans. All I understand are the tones of comfort being spoken from parents who have two children in boarding school, to a parent whose only one will soon be leaving. I’m left with my thoughts and the view of the mountain.

It is easy to see in two-dimensions. The classroom, the office, the home - you forget the little details that make it interesting and, instead, skim over the mundane representations you’ve created of your life. You cease to marvel at the individual dust particles on the surface of your computer screen and dust them off absently without recognizing their texture. You begin to only see the facades of your world instead of its depth.

The view I have of my mountain reminds me how textured my world really is. The levels attach themselves to my perception and I can see the places I’ve walked in relation to other things - to the farms, to the forest, the people who work so hard to keep their land and their livelihoods fruitful. And I remember the camera traps and the leopards and how close everything is bound to this beautiful mountain and the lands that sit under it. Its hugeness makes my heart ache.

Annabelle leaves the table after we finish our tea. She carries the empty teapot and teacups out by looping her fingers through the handles. “Can’t ask too much of my boy.” I listen to the dull strike of the crutch against the tiled veranda as she leaves.

Mr. Strydom and Ruan immediately jump back into the question of sheep.

“I know you still have sheep on that piece up there, and it invites these things to happen,” Ruan says. He points to the mountain. I squint. I see the road Professor Lindsay and I sometimes travel and see the fence. In the fence are the fluffy bodies of sheep. I can also see the trail wind up and up, and I know, somewhere on that trail, one of our cameras captured Clementine and her cubs.

Mr. Strydom folds his arms over his chest.

“You think this is not on my mind?” he says. “I know well what danger it are. This fencing will take some time to be ordered and built. Then they will be moved.”

“Where will you put them?” I ask.

“On the other side,” he says. “Just over the hill, there is more land. Not as nice, but more safe. Maybe.”

Mr. Strydom looks out over his land, critical and brooding.

“You must understand, Erica,” he says. “When we go to the meetings with Park greenies and this professor and that manager and whatever, we do listen. The problem is that no one has any options we have not been thinking already. Electric fencing, sheepdogs, GPS locating, moving the sheep every day, locking them up at night. We’ve spent generations answering these problems. But the solutions are not always affordable or reasonable.”

“Maybe the professor has found the solution,” says Ruan. “Maybe with money, it will stop us from worrying.”

“*Miskien*,” says Mr. Strydom. He stares out over his land with an intense concentration. I find his wisdom and bizarre intellect sound, though disturbing. It worries me that he could be right, that there is no solution, that they have all been thought of and proven wrong. He has such a grasp of how his land functions. How could he be mistaken?

Ruan starts to cough. He lights a cigarette. Breathing in the smoke makes the coughing disappear.

“You van Wyks are always smoking,” says Mr. Strydom. “It is bad for your health, Ruan, and bad for the boy too.”

“I know,” he says. He purses his lips and blows out a stream of smoke. Then he gets to his feet. “It is getting dark, we should walk back.”

“Let me lift you,” insists Mr. Strydom, rising to his feet.

“*Nee*, we came by the road. I want to show Erica the forest.”

“*Ja, dis ‘n lekker paadjie*. Well, Erica, I hope you have enjoyed my farm.”

“Yes, I really have,” I say. “It is so beautiful, and your house is stunning. You should make it into a guest lodge. If you got some walking tours of the mountain and some tours of the farm, I bet people would pay big money to spend time in such a beautiful place.”

Mr. Strydom looks up at the mountain. He looks startled. Something I said has changed some way he views this place, added a dimension to it that he couldn’t see without the suggestion, something that might change his mind, save some poor predator from annihilation.

“What is beautiful about that mountain?” he asks. “My sheep are on that mountain. I must climb

that mountain to collect my sheep. There are leopards on that mountain, and jackals, and *rooikat*. They eat my sheep and cost me tens of thousands of rand in damages every year. Where is the beauty in that?"

Ruan laughs with clever Mr. Strydom. I blush. It was stupid to think that I could have a unique thought that could possibly impact this world that is so radically different to my own.

We say our goodbyes and leave Mr. Strydom's *eiendom*. The shy sheepdog escorts us partway along the trail, sniffing at my hand as we walk. I manage to pet her head a few times before she decides that she has come far enough. Then Ruan and I walk off through the forest.

I find the forest more strange for the company. I fell so quickly into Forest Park when I was here last. Now it is difficult to make room for the collie and the man. I make an uneasy transition between the Pacific Northwest and the Wolkeberg pine plantation.

"What you said is right," says Ruan. "We are blessed with a beautiful area."

"I don't know how Mr. Strydom doesn't see it."

"He is more interested in people and production. This forest used to be twice as wide. He cut his half down and sold it to make room for more sheep and pay for some upgrade on his farm. I love this forest as it is."

Ruan lights a cigarette and sucks on it thoughtfully, looking out at the orderly trees. Then he continues to walk.

"I think," he says, "you must respect nature, finish, *klaar*. There is nothing like a drought or a flood that will make you appreciate those stuff. I tell you, there was a fire, probably ten years ago, on that mountain. It cleared three of those big slopes. I went walking there just after it happened. The silence was so big. There was none of this birds or shaking of leaves in branches. It was only quiet and still, and the ground was unnaturally soft. Each time my foot came down it sent up a low, white cloud. The soft layer of ash would stick to the boot. My footsteps behind me were black. Everything was black and white, with a few larger bushes that still held some brown colors to the bark. Everything was dead.

"I tell you though, I came back in spring. I have never seen so many flowers. Daisies, bulbs, and small green shoots of I don't know what it was. It was like the whole mountain was on fire again, with bright yellows, reds, golds, but also pinks and this lavender purple. It is things like this that change your outlook, that change your perception. Nothing will change a farmer's mind quicker than having a drought, having it rain, and the next morning."

I try to think of when I've experienced this. The only drought I've ever suffered I'm still suffering

from. Though, when I think about it, I wonder if this is as true as it used to be.

“Do you think something like that would change Mr. Strydom’s mind?”

Ruan stops briefly. He raises his foot up, tamping out his cigarette on the bottom of his shoe. He tucks the butt in his pocket and walks on.

“It might. But Mr. Strydom believes in the dominance of man very strongly. He is almost as religious as Professor Lindsay.”

I laugh.

“Professor Lindsay isn’t religious.”

“Oh, but he is, Erica. He’s the biggest believer of all of us. He believes in conservation, very religiously. If he could, he would exclude people from nature. Me, I believe that people are a part of nature.”

The path we’ve been following crosses a road. Bella is standing in the middle of the road. Her fur is pricked up, eyes wide. It is not fear exactly, just an affliction of heightened awareness. We stop next to her. Ruan squints up the road where Bella is staring. It takes me a while to realize where we are. It’s the road that comes down from the main road, the one I ran on. We are farther down from where I ran, but probably close to the scratching post I found. Please let him not see her, please let him never find her prints or her clawed marks.

“What is it?” I ask. I break the spell. Both the man and the dog turn to me. Ruan smiles.

“Maybe it is a leopard!” He laughs and crosses the road, joining the path on the other side. There is something in that laugh that tells a larger story. I think he knows that she is here.

Bella definitely knows. Ruan has to whistle for her twice to get her to follow us.

Territorial Animals

It's my last day. Professor Lindsay has phoned to say he will be collecting me. Pascal and I take a last walk to the lookout spot, and Anneke makes a large breakfast with bacon and eggs and fried tomatoes. I capture a few more scenes from the farm into my notebook – an agama lizard sunning itself on a rock, the rusted out body of an ancient *bakkie* in one of Ruan's pastures, and the cute little lambs of Mr. Strydom's farm.

We are just finishing coffee when the CFPC *bakkie* comes up the road, painted leopard eyes staring at us from the side of the vehicle. Professor Lindsay hops out of the vehicle and walks toward us.

"Good morning!" he says. "Fine day for having breakfast outdoors." He is smiling. It looks slightly creepy when he smiles. It's like those commercials where dogs are given human teeth and lips to smile with. In this case, it's a smiling bird. It's so much more natural for his eyebrows to furrow in a frown. He chats with Ruan, rolling his weight from the backs of his heels to the points of his toes.

"It was successful in every way," he crows. He touches his nose, and Ruan nods. I assume the gesture is the secret of funding, which seems to be only a secret from me. I'll get it out of him eventually.

I load my backpack into the *bakkie* and shake hands with Ruan. Pascal comes running from the house to give me something. It is a box made of porcupine quills. It would sit on the palm of my hand if it weren't so sharp. The way he has tied the quills together, they come out sharp on every side.

"There used to be a skink in there," he says. "He got away. But I know you'll find another one to go in it."

"Thank you, Pascal. I love it." I give him a hug. Then we are on our way. Bella and Rosie chase after us. Rosie stops at the bridge as usual, howling as we leave her behind. Bella follows us to the road. I watch her from the side mirror until she fades into the dust.

"Have you been smoking?" asks Professor Lindsay.

"No," I say.

"Are you sure? You smell horrible." He's right. Ruan's habit has soaked into my clothes, my pores, and my hair. I wonder if I'll ever be able to scrub away the smell.

"How was your trip?" I say.

"Very productive," he says, grinning again. I shudder.

“Does that mean you got funding for paying off farmers?”

“Who told you that?” A frown crosses his eyebrows, but he’s in too good a mood to be his regular old, pompously secret self. “Ag, it doesn’t matter. Yes, we’ve found an interested donor who is contributing to a fund that will compensate farmers for damages to property in return for conserving leopards.”

“So you’re paying them to not kill leopards.”

“Yes.”

“That kind of makes it sound like they are mafia hit men that take bribes for not whacking someone.”

“They are a bit like the mafia, aren’t they. Very clannish and old fashioned, and they do mercilessly kill anything that upsets them. What an apt comparison.”

I look at him skeptically. He’s still smiling. I have always been aware that Professor Lindsay is a bit crazy, but after spending time on the farm, I realize how warped his reality can be. Ruan is right. He’s so religious that he doesn’t believe that there is another side to the coin.

“I don’t think they’ll go for it. Not if you make it sound like they are criminals when you pitch it to them.”

“That brings me to my next bit of good news. I don’t have to pitch them anything. I’ve been given a master’s student who is keen to be the go between. She’ll be dealing with the farmers. She has a whole regime and teaching method to enlighten these *boere*. And she’ll be explaining the process and making the payments.”

“She?”

“Yes, clever girl, very interested in conservation of mammals. I think she’ll do a great job.”

I am dumbstruck. I’m being replaced. She’ll get to know all the places I’ve discovered and call them her own. The farmers and Mariette’s friends will get to know her and bring her into their fold. They’ll forget about me. She’ll be the only one who was ever here. She’ll sleep in my room. And by the sounds of it, she’ll have a better relationship with Professor Lindsay because she is ‘clever’. I doubt he’ll make a ‘clever’ girl do the dishes.

I look up at the mountains as we drive. They are my mountains. And now they will be someone else’s, free to take on new meanings that will be bestowed.

It wouldn’t be so hard if she wasn’t a girl. A guy I could brush off. He’d attach different meanings, he wouldn’t appreciate the mountain the way I do, he wouldn’t understand the depth of awesome beauty that exists here. Or maybe he would. But I wouldn’t believe that he would, so it wouldn’t matter. But a

female? There is something that irks me about having a female in a space I used to occupy. An inherent jealousy fills me. It makes me possessive. I don't want her to be here.

When we get to camp, Cyril's Cape Parks *bakkie* is there.

"What is he doing here?" I ask.

"I wanted to share the good news with him and discuss what could be done. Do you have some sort of problem with this?"

"No," I say. And I don't really. It's just that it was so easy to forget about him on the farm when I didn't have to see him. Now I have to be polite and act like we're still good friends while his very presence puts me in a fever of attraction with cold chills of disgust. Unrequited love is an ugly illness.

He's cooking, of course. It's *tamatie bredie*. I had it once at Mariette's. It's a potato-tomato stew with chicken pieces in it. He's just adding the chicken – thighs, drumsticks, and wings – before putting on the lid and letting it simmer.

"Congratulations on a successful funding trip, Professor!" says Cyril. He smiles at me cautiously, hopeful of acknowledgement. I nod.

"Thank you, thank you, it was far easier than anticipated."

"You do have a quite charismatic subject."

I laugh. They look at me strangely. I realize Cyril is pointing out that leopards are charismatic, not Professor Lindsay.

"Wine?" I say.

"Ah, yes, what an excellent idea. I'll fetch a nice white from my room."

Professor Lindsay goes off in search of the wine, leaving Cyril and me alone in the house.

"How are you, Erica?" His bright, concerned eyes search my face.

"Been better."

"Do you want me to leave?" It's a kind offer and I contemplate taking him up on it. But the very question traps me. Of course I can't ask him to leave.

"That's sweet Cyril. I'd actually rather you were here." He smiles, beaming. I quickly cover, not wanting him to think that we're friends again. "You are very good at getting answers out of the professor. I still haven't figured out what's been happening exactly."

Cyril laughs.

"The wine will also help that one."

Professor Lindsay comes back from the house empty handed.

“My wine is gone,” he says. He cocks his head to one side, staring Cyril down. “Have you been here while I was away, Cyril?”

“Not at all, Professor. And I would not take what is yours.”

“Me neither,” I say. “I’ve been at the farm the whole time.”

Professor Lindsay pays no attention to my alibi and continues to stare at Cyril.

“Did anyone else pay a visit to the place that you know of, Cyril?”

Cyril is sweating. His smile is still there but it has faded. He lifts the lid of the pot and stirs, pretending to think.

“You know something, Professor,” he says. “I believe Mariette said she would come through for some cleaning while you were away.”

Professor Lindsay punches the bar. If it were made of wood, it would have made a nice noise to articulate his frustration. Instead, the cement sounds dull and Professor Lindsay winces and massages his hand.

“I can’t believe you let her in here!” he says. “That is my room! This is my camp! And she has taken my belongings from the place where they belong without permission.”

“Professor, you must understand. Her late husband was an alcoholic. She is merely concerned for the health of someone she cares about.”

“Are you insinuating that I am an alcoholic?” He says it in the most menacing voice I’ve heard him use. His eyes look like they are about to pop from his head.

“No, Professor,” says Cyril. “I am merely suggesting a psychological reason for the behavior of a female member of your species.”

Professor Lindsay stalks out of the room with his keys. I can hear him open the door of the *bakkie*. He comes back carrying three bottles of wine.

“It is a good thing I had the foresight to visit the shops on the way back from Grahamstown. Erica, get the glasses. Let’s celebrate the success of this project.”

Things learned

As I drink with Professor Lindsay and Cyril, I learn three things. The first is, I leave in three weeks. I don't quite know how I'd lost track of time. My stay has seemed fairly infinite.

The second is, I don't have to meet this girl. She arrives after I leave. This is a huge relief. I don't mind being forgotten as much as I mind watching someone take over the place I'll soon be leaving. I'd have to listen as they sing her praises. I'd have to hold my tongue while she made the same mistakes I did when I arrived. I've never been good at sharing. Even when Amelia was around, I had my space and my things and didn't want her around them. It makes a big difference to me that I won't be there when this girl is stepping into the space I've created.

The third is, Cyril is sneaky. He asks Professor Lindsay close, exact questions about the funding, questions he would never answer without alcohol. Professor Lindsay tells him that the funding came from a private donor. It was given directly to Professor Lindsay, not to the University or to the organization. He can use the money for whatever he likes. He is accountable to no-one.

"That's amazing," says Cyril. "What are you going to use it for?"

"I'm going to buy a yacht."

"Be serious, Professor."

"Fine," he says. "I'm going to use it to buy off the farmers, giving them an incentive to not shoot the cubs."

"Cubs?" says Cyril.

"Sorry, did I say cubs? I meant leopards."

"Right, of course. So you'll use the money to protect the leopards," says Cyril. "And I suppose you've told the farmers about the cubs."

"Of course not," says Professor Lindsay. I can see the hole he's digging, and I'm too liquored to stop him.

"Why haven't you told them?" says Cyril. He keeps a straight face, but he has the smirk of someone who has won.

"I haven't told them because there are no cubs," says Professor Lindsay. "You are twisting my words, Cyril. I don't appreciate it."

I don't realize that I'm drunk until I stand up to get the third bottle from the bar. The room shifts and I am giddy when I realize I walk in an even straighter line when the floor is being tricky. I proudly bring the bottle and sit down next to Cyril. I don't realize that the two of us are alone until I pour wine into Professor Lindsay's glass.

"Um, Erica, Professor Lindsay left. He said he was going to bed. I don't think he'll be back."

I quickly drink the wine I poured in it and sit back with my own glass. I hiccup. In most countries, including South Africa, the legal drinking age is 18 and many start well before that. In the United States, the drinking age is 21 and, although I'm sure many people start before that, I never did. It just wasn't something I was into. I am unprepared for being so uninhibited so close to Cyril.

"You're a fuckhead, you know that?" I say, pointing at him and closing one of my eyes. Closing one eye helps to keep his face from moving around.

"*En jy's gesuip*," he says, smiling.

"I don't know what that means, and fuck you for using your stupid language to insult me."

"I did not mean to insult you. It just means you are drunk."

"Yes, well, that doesn't make you any less of a fuckhead. You are using Professor Lindsay. Don't think I don't see that. And you are using me to try to get to him. I wish you knew what that felt like. You wouldn't have strung me along so bad."

"If you were a boy, I wouldn't have."

"How do you know I'm not a boy?"

He leans forward and kisses me. I close my eyes and kiss back hard, pretending not to be surprised. He falls back onto the sofa, pulling me on top of him. Our teeth come together painfully on impact. I bite his lip. He pulls my hair until it hurts enough to separate me from him. I open my eyes. His eyes burn in a way that is cold and aggressive. They look how I feel.

"That's how I know you're not a boy," he says. "You don't kiss like one."

I look down at his belt. I can see the crotch of his pants pulse.

"He don't seem to mind," I say. I start undoing his belt. He stops me, pulling both of my hands away and pinning them to my side.

"No, Erica," he says. His eyes are softer now. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Well, you've already done that. The least you could do to make up for it is fuck me."

He pushes me off him and gets up. He tucks in his shirt and tightens his belt again.

"Good night, Erica."

I don't say anything. He lets himself out. I consider going out with the empty wine bottle and throwing it at his *bakkie*. Don't bother, I think. He's drunk. He'll probably kill himself on the road anyway. Instead I tuck my feet up onto the couch and pass out.

Traps

I wake up with Professor Lindsay looming over me and a small bird trying to peck its way out of my skull.

“Up,” he says. “We have to work.”

I take my coffee in the *bakkie*, and we drive into the mountains. The colors flashing by the window are too bright. I wave half heartedly to a farm hand outside of Mr. Strydom’s gate.

As we climb into the mountains, I look down on the valley. I didn't notice before that all the farms are ordered in a long line spanning the narrow river that runs through the center of the shallow valley, the center of each farm. It’s not much of a river, but from the wide, cement bridges on Mr. Strydom’s land and Ruan’s land, I imagine it floods occasionally. It makes me wonder if there isn’t some natural disaster in store there for Mr. Strydom, something that will make him see nature in a different light, like Ruan said.

We hike to the points where we placed the camera traps. Some are hard to find, even with the help of Professor Lindsay’s GPS.

“I must say, I don’t remember this particular patch of Proteaceae. Could it have been in the leucadendrons across that rocky patch there?” Professor Lindsay is on his hands and knees going through the bushes looking for where he placed his camera.

“Well, I found mine,” I say, swinging the camera back and forth on its strap. Then I say in my most proper English accent, “Perhaps it would be prudent to consider the retrieval of the device upon its placement.”

“You make a fair point, Erica. I’ll definitely consider that when we put out the traps.”

“Traps?”

He continues to rummage through the brush, still not able to find the very thing he put there.

“Yes of course. We need to catch Clementine so we can replace her collar. We also must catch these cubs and tag them while they are still in the area. If Clementine is behaving as she should, she’ll be moving her den every week or so. They could be gone very soon, if they aren't already.”

I know the collars he is talking about - those thick, radio collars that give location. Still, I can’t help but imagine catching these big cats and giving them the same tinsel collars as the housecats in

town. Clementine would get a pink metallic heart with her name engraved on one side and Professor Lindsay's details on the other.

Professor Lindsay finally emerges from the bushes. He is victorious, camera in hand, smiling crazily. His hair is in disarray, his exposed knees are lightly scraped, and he is covered in debris. There are even small twigs caught in the tufts of his eyebrows.

"It is not polite to stare, Erica," he says, brushing himself off. "We often have to sacrifice our appearances in the name of science."

I'm pretty sure Professor Lindsay would sacrifice more than just his appearance in the name of science. He strikes me as the type to take to the trees if anyone threatened to chop them down, or take revenge on behalf of a wronged species or individual. In my opinion, that makes him crazy. It also makes him incredibly brave.

University of Cape Town

Of Passwords and Moths

My computer is locked. There is a bubble that pops up on the screen asking me for the password.

“Professor, what did you do to my computer?”

“Oh, that,” he says. “It was to protect the cubs from Mariette. She took my alcohol, didn’t she?”

“What? How is Mariette going to hurt the cubs by getting onto my computer?”

“If she knew about them I’m sure she’d want to say something. That’s her way of protecting things - being open with people, working together. How *dof*. That would never work in a place like this.”

“So you locked the computer?”

“Yes. Like I took the power cables last time.”

“Well, what’s the password?”

“You already know what the password is.”

I’m about to contradict him when I figure it out. I laugh at the simplicity, the absolute completeness of the inside joke. I type in the password and the computer unlocks itself. I’m willing to bet his password is Brutus.

The most irritating part of this whole business of cataloguing film clips is that, even when you can see that it’s not a leopard, you still have to write down the species and movement pattern of the animal on the clip. I apparently installed my camera in a very popular hotspot for the locals. I go through grysbok, klipspringers, duikers, and porcupines. Last month, it would have been an inspiration to see how species rich this mountain really is, how unique in the composition, and how amazing the actions of the different animals. Now, I’m impatient. I want to find the leopards and see how they’ve grown since we’ve been away.

Professor Lindsay is also agitated. He huffs and puffs as he goes through the clips, painstakingly marking up the data sheets as the animals move across the screen. “Why?” he grumbles at one point. I look over my shoulder and see a pair of klipspringers grazing. The clip times out after five minutes, then starts again. And Professor Lindsay watches every single minute of it. Who knows when a leopard might appear?

At 10:35 and 46 seconds, Clementine enters my menagerie. She looks at the camera, white eyes glowing. She crouches at the stream and laps at the water. I study the wariness of her position and the twitch of her ear. It is striking to me how in tune she is with her surroundings. People are so lazy when it comes to observation.

A large, furry rosette blocks my view of Clementine. The whole screen becomes a fuzzy blur of darker and lighter spots. The movement settles, and the majority of the screen is blocked by the out-of-focus round of the back of a leopard cub's head. In the background, I can see the other cub. Only the sleek back legs and gently twitching tail can be seen in the gap. I imagine that they are facing each other, arguing like siblings do about some petty thing that they'll both forget about later. The disembodied back legs crouch, then launch toward the turned head. The head ducks out of the screen, but not before the cub, now in full view, grabs hold of its neck, tugging out a small bit of fluff. Both cubs roll away from the camera into full view. They stop rolling and come to a stop, lying side by side. They face each other, neither one with a good head shot in the camera's view.

I wish there was sound on the video. They both perk their ears and look up in unison. They hadn't noticed, as I hadn't, that Clementine had long since disappeared from their playground. They rise to their feet and shake themselves before trotting off to follow their mother.

"What an amazing family," whispers Professor Lindsay. I nearly jump out of my seat. Talk about poor power of observation. I had no idea he was there. "I'll have to get moving on that if we are to capture them and tag them before Clementine changes location."

He pushes his chair away and stands up. My heart is still pounding in my chest.

"Erica, did I give you a fright?"

"Of course not, Professor."

"Oh good," he says. He yawns and stretches his arms above his head. His shirt comes up, showing the little hairs on his belly. Then he casually leaves the room on some mission, perhaps to the kitchen or for a walk. I return to cataloging.

There are two more videos of leopards on the camera in between the videos of hares and jackals. Both are of Clementine's family.

The first is a tail. Just a tail. It flicks away on the edge of the screen, like a spotted snake tasting the ground. It is maddening that I can't adjust the angle of the camera and capture the scene. Maybe they have caught something and are eating it. Maybe the cubs are playing hide and seek, and Clementine is

watching. I'll never know. The video ends when the tail twitches out of the frame. Who knows how much longer it sat there for and what it was doing. I cannot follow it. I cannot know where it goes next. I also cannot know what is on the periphery, just beyond the scope of the motion sensor. It makes me realize how little we really see with these cameras. There could be a city's worth of creatures bustling about the busy nightlife. There could also be nothing. Either way, I'll never know.

The second is a moth. It is large and flutters weakly above the ground. It lands occasionally, only to push itself back into the air where it fails again to accomplish a viable flight. It looks injured or perhaps old. And it is being followed. Spotted paws pad up behind it. The adolescent cub is low to the ground, ears flat, shoulders moving like slow pistons. Its large, glowing eyes are focused on the moth. It stops moving for a fraction of a second, then springs forward. The moth dissolves beneath its front paws in a puff of grey powder. The leopard opens its paws. It obviously isn't impressed with what it finds. It turns and walks off the screen, haughtily. Just as its head leaves my field of view, its whole body jerks. Then it keeps walking. I hit the desk with the palm of my hand and laugh. Man, if only I had been able to catch the leopard sneezing on film.

To Forgive

We spend a few days recording the contents of the camera. Then we go to Germane. Professor Lindsay is expecting a package. He hasn't told me what it is, but I found a note on his desk. "Traps arrive day after tomorrow. Get to Germane to intercept them". I roll my eyes when I read it. I already know about the traps, you silly man. Why are you still playing this game?

We pull into the Info Centre in the afternoon. Mariette is waiting for us on the porch. She always seems to know when we'll be arriving, even though I'm sure Professor Lindsay doesn't tell her in advance.

"Welcome home," she says, giving me a hug. "I trust you are well?" That question is directed more at Professor Lindsay than me. She looks nervous. Professor Lindsay looks irritated. I wonder if he'll confront her about the missing alcohol.

"Any messages?" says Professor Lindsay. He walks past her into the office.

"Yes, quite a few. One from the University, another one from..."

She follows him into the Centre. I consider asking her permission to drop my bags at her house, but I realize that I've been here for so long that it is expected that I do so. I walk along to her house and throw my bags onto my bed. I rummage around for my sketchbook and go back to the Info Centre. I want to sit on the porch and draw, but the clouds are threatening rain, and it is a bit chilly. Instead, I sit inside on a chair in the waiting area. Mariette sits at her desk happily chatting to Professor Lindsay, who is in the other room. They have apparently resolved their differences, silently forgiving each other their trespasses.

I draw. There is an image stuck in my mind that I must paste to paper. It is the expression on the faces of the two leopard cubs when they look up from their tiresome, playful quarrel. They look up in unison, responding to some noise, perhaps the sound of their mother's voice. It strikes me as intelligent, conversational, almost human. And so I draw, trying my best to capture their individual personalities in the shared response.

A *bakkie* comes to a stop outside the Info Centre. I am so focused on the drawing that I don't hear its approach. I look up at Mariette. She doesn't seem to have heard it either, or she would have already run

to the door. I glance out the window and, to my horror, see the very familiar Cape Parks *bakkie*. Suddenly I am running for cover, saying, 'Tell him I'm not here,' to Mariette and slamming the door of Professor Lindsay's office closed behind me. Professor Lindsay looks up placidly from his work.

"You are an odd bird, Erica," he says.

"It takes one to know one," I say. He blinks at me a few times, sighs, and bends his head back to his work.

The front door of the Info Centre opens. I lean against the office door, breathless, listening.

"*Hoe gaan dit, Mariette,*" says Cyril with his familiar lilt. "May I speak with Erica, *asseblief?*"

"I'm sorry, Cyril," says Mariette. "She isn't here." There is a silence. I expect it to be followed by the door of the Info Centre closing as Cyril leaves again.

"What's that then?" he says. I wince. I left my sketchbook on the chair. He knows that I'm here.

It takes Mariette a while to answer. When she does, it is in a kind voice.

"I don't think she wants to see you Cyril."

There is a pause. I hold my breath, waiting for him to break down the door.

"Oh," he says. "Can you see that she gets these?"

"Of course, dear."

The door closes. The *bakkie* starts. The wheels gently churn the gravel parking lot. Then there is silence.

I stand there until there is a timid tap at the door.

"Erica? You can come out now. He's gone."

I open the door and come out of the office. Mariette holds out a bundle of flowers and a plain white envelope.

"You should put these in water," she says. I take them and leave the Info Centre, collecting my sketchpad and pencils. I walk to the house and put the flowers in a vase. I put them in my room next to my growing collection of porcupine quills. I study the envelope. What I should do is tear it up. Whatever he has to say is not what I want to hear. But I'm a scientist now. Curiosity opens it for me -

I am not a bad person. I do not steal information from Professor Lindsay out of malice or ill will. I feel guilty for doing it, but it is something I need to do. I do not share what I find with others. I do it for myself...

The whole letter is a justification for why he manipulates Professor Lindsay. Not a single word is about me. I fold the letter and tuck it into my sketchbook. I was hoping his words would stir my anger.

But you can't be angry with someone who just doesn't get it. You can't make them feel the way you feel any more than you can make a farmer understand why a predator has value. I can only find anger with myself for trying and even that is mild.

Conversation With Gods

The next morning, Mariette's living room is once again overrun by chatty women. For once, I'm glad. It gives me an excuse to put off calling my parents, which I know I haven't done in a while.

Lizelle and Lizette are on opposite sides of the room, trying their hardest not to talk to each other or for each other. Something about a set of china dishes and what that had to do with 'the children'. I don't know. In any case, it's amusing to see them fighting to stay away from each other.

"Tell me," says Lizelle. "How is the professor these days?"

"He's fine," I say.

"He's not troubled about anything?" says Lizette. Lizelle looks like she's going to strangle her.

"He's troubled about plenty of things," I say.

"Too bad he can't..." says Lizelle. She pauses dramatically, but Lizette takes it as her cue to finish the sentence.

"...drink his troubles away!" Lizelle tries to look angry, but they both find the joke very clever and titter away together.

"I'm sure a trip to the liquor store would solve those particular troubles," says Magdalena. She glares at Mariette who has just come in with the tea.

"I must admit, that was quite childish of me," says Mariette. "It's hard to let someone you love do harm to themselves."

They hear the 'L' word and private smirks are shared. Mariette covers it up with words from God.

"As the Good Lord says, 'There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so'. I don't think I did anything wrong."

"The Good Lord also says that 'A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone'." This invocation comes from Magdalena. Lizelle, Lizette, and Sonja nod in agreement. Mariette looks irritated.

"Yes, but the Good Lord also says that 'a great man is always willing to be little'."

"That doesn't mean you should belittle him. The Good Lord says 'An excellent man, like precious metal, is in every way invariable. A villain, like the beams of a balance, is always varying, upwards and downwards'."

Lizelle, Lizette, and Sonja look back and forth at each other and at the two voices of God as the verbal sparring continues. I don't believe Mariette when she says all words are the words of God. Surely, contradiction is a symptom of humanity, not an intension of the Creator.

"Freedom is nothing but a chance to be better," says Mariette vehemently, standing up from her seat. I'm not sure what this has to do with the argument anymore. She just seems to be trying to win at a game she invented and Magdalena is giving her competition she did not expect.

"And our best thoughts come from others," says Magdalena, looking up at Mariette with irritating coolness. Mariette looks like her head is going to pop off.

"Mariette, sit down," says Lizelle.

"Yes, sit down," says Lizette. "This is foolish."

Mariette's eyes sparkle, and a smile twitches to her lips. She makes a big show of taking a big breath and sitting down demurely.

"You are right, ladies," she says. "As the Good Lord says, 'A man lives by believing something, not by debating and arguing about many things'."

All the ladies nod except for Magdalena, who rolls her eyes. Mariette has won. I don't think Magdalena was even trying to beat Mariette at anything. I think she was just showing her that she wasn't the only person in the group who was well read and was trying to put her in her place. Mariette obviously didn't get it.

The subject is tactfully changed and comes full force on me.

"Someone has an admirer," says Lizelle, winking at me.

"Who's that?" I ask.

"Well, I heard that a certain gentleman caller came to visit while you were at the Strydom farm. He even had the nerve to hold your hand."

"And that same gentleman caller," says Lizette, "was seen taking flowers into the Info Centre today."

They stare at me, blinking their matching blue eyes, tilting their heads curiously. They look just like the leopard siblings, just a lot more vacant and a lot less striking.

"Yes, he's a good friend of mine," I say. "And he is a good friend of Mariette's and the professor's."

"You should have seen her," says Mariette. "She ignored him!"

"Excellent," says Magdalena, clapping her hands. "Do you know what the Good Lord says, Erica? 'A man is like a cat. Chase him, and he will run - sit still and ignore him, and he'll come purring at your feet'."

Mariette glares at her. Lizelle and Lizette nod.

"I agree," says Lizelle.

"Yes," says Lizette. "But are you sure he's right for you?"

"Wouldn't you prefer some nice Afrikaans boy?" says Lizelle.

I can see where this conversation is going and quickly wrack my brain for something to ask, something titillating to distract them from their pointed interrogation.

"Why does Annabelle Strydom use crutches?"

Sonja, of all people, takes the bait. Perhaps it is because she genuinely cares about the well being of others, unlike the two sisters.

"Ag, shame, Annabelle is such a sad story. Years ago she has come up with this disease called Multiple Sclerosis. It is causing much damage to her body and to her poor family."

"Poor," says Lizette. "You must be confused with some other Strydoms."

"Sies, Lizette. Mr. Strydom works very hard for his family. He may have fortunes, but he is very unfortunate."

"I heard he spent R50,000 on this last trip to the hospital," says Lizette.

"I hope it did some good," says Magdalena. "It's a shame to spend so much and get nowhere."

"The Lord works in mysterious ways," says Sonja with a sigh.

"It's not that mysterious, Sonja," says Magdalena. "It's a disease, hardly has anything to do with God's work."

"You aren't being fair to Sonja, Magda," says Lizelle.

"The Lord is in all things, Magdalena," says Lizette. They all start speaking at the same time - Magdalena in protest, Sonja in consolation, and Lizelle and Lizette joined together in their symphony of judgment. Mariette joins with Magdalena, and they are off into the wonderfully guttural syllables of the Afrikaans language.

I sigh and sip my tea. I watch the show for a little while, then go to the Info Centre.

"Summer speaking."

"Hiya, Ma." Forgive me, mother, it has been at least four weeks since the last time I was in Germane, not including the time I didn't call on account of Cyril.

"Erica! We haven't heard from you in so long! Have you been eating well?" It's a strange question. I wonder what she's worried about now, malnutrition in Africa?

“Yeah, I have been eating well, but I’m not use to all the meat. I’ve had steak, pork, rabbit, Kudu…”

“Kudu? That sounds nice. Is that a fish?”

“Uh, no, not really.”

“Sweetheart, I’m so excited that you are coming home soon. But really, three months hasn’t been that long at all. I thought it would feel longer, but it really hasn’t.”

“Uh-huh.” I feel like I’ve been away for an entire lifetime. What would she understand about my relationship with Cyril? How could I explain Professor Lindsay, the drunk, secretive researcher with an obsession, and the group of oddly intelligent but stubborn farmers?

“Have you thought at all about what you’ll do when you get back? Any change of heart?” she asks. There is an edge of concern, bordering on hopefulness.

“I’ve been dealing with other things,” I say. “My future isn’t any clearer, which means community college is what I’ll be doing.”

There is no argument, no tears, just a sigh of resignation, the sound of progress.

“Erica, I accept that and respect that. I hope you understand where I’m coming from, though. Don’t get me wrong. I know I am overprotective, but it’s more than your personal safety that I am worried about. I just don’t understand why you want to go to community college and be out on your own when you could have the stability of a real degree and living at home. This lack of direction is very concerning.”

I smile. Stability is the last thing I want or need.

“Look, Mom. You don’t need to worry about me just because I don’t know what I want to do. I’ve always tried things out and gone with things on whims. It suits me. I’m not like Amelia. She always knew she wanted to be a vet. I’m still figuring it out.”

The line is silent, and I’m afraid it’s cut out. But then I hear her breathing.

“Mom?”

“Yes, sweetheart, I’m here. I’m so proud of you, and I love you so much.”

She sounds like she’s about to cry.

“I’d better go,” I say quickly. “I’m using the secretary’s land line and a call is coming in.”

“Alright, Erica, I love you so much. I can’t wait for you to come home.”

I hang up after saying goodbye. My face feels flushed. I haven’t said her name aloud to my parents in five years.

Man Is A Mountain

A flatbed truck (they call them *lorries*) rolls to a stop outside the Info Centre. Professor Lindsay and I come out to the porch. Two big men get out of the cab. One of them starts undoing the tarp that covers the contents.

“Professor Lindsay?” the other man says. He has a red baseball cap and scuffed shoes.

“Yes, sir, it is I,” says Professor Lindsay. I turn an outright laugh into a sharp exhale. I fully expect him to say *Yes, sir, it is I, Professor Lindsay of the Wolkeberg*. He definitely holds himself in that high of regard.

“Sign please,” the man says handing him a clipboard. Professor Lindsay signs his name with a flourish.

When the tarps have been pulled back, two massive cages are revealed. The men stick a long pole lengthwise through the cage and lift it off the *lorrie*. They struggle a little with the awkward load, but the cage makes it to the ground without them dropping it.

I’m short, so the height of the cage is right up to my waist. The grid size of the cage reminds me of the chain-link fence around my elementary school. The walls do not block out any light, but provide an invisible, sturdy boundary between the contents of the cage rest of the world.

The second cage comes down a bit harder than the first. They want to show Professor Lindsay how the cage is opened and how it is set, but Professor Lindsay already knows and waves away the demonstration. I would have liked the demonstration, but Professor Lindsay seems agitated, so I don’t ask.

“And here is the tagging device,” says the man. He puts a case on the ground at Professor Lindsay’s feet. I wonder how two collars and a battery fit in such a long, narrow case. “Do you need a demonstration for that one?”

“No, I do not, thank you,” says Professor Lindsay.

“Alright, please sign here.”

Professor Lindsay signs and takes the case into the Info Centre. The man checks over the paperwork and walks back to the *lorrie*. The other man folds up the tarp and gets into the cab with it. They drive off.

“Erica, don’t just stand there,” says Professor Lindsay when he comes back out of the Info Centre. “Help me, quickly.”

They have left the pole behind and Professor Lindsay threads it lengthwise through the cage. I lift the end of it and am surprised when it comes off the ground. It isn’t as heavy as I thought it would be. I just hope I don’t have to carry it very far.

“There, on the other side of the house,” he says. He picks up the other end and we walk together to the side of the Info Centre. It’s shady there and cluttered with plants. We get it as close to the side of the house as we can and drop it down. It is almost hidden by the tall grasses. Professor Lindsay pulls out the pole and we go back for the other one. We almost have it around the side of the house when Mariette sees us.

“What on earth?” she says. She is walking up to the Info Centre from the other side where her house is. We stop in our tracks.

“Why, hello Mariette!” he says with his best smile. “We’re just moving this cage around.” At a standstill, I can really feel the weight of the cage. My arms start to burn.

“I never heard anything about any cage,” she says.

“Ah, yes, well, it came with the funding. Part of the package. Can’t really say no to that, can I?” He starts to move the cage again, but Mariette protests.

“You will tell me exactly what is going on, Vincent, and, only then, will you be moving that anywhere.”

We gently put down the cage. If we had stood there any longer I might have dropped it.

“Mariette,” says the professor kindly. “I was hoping to replace Clementine’s collar. There is no need for hysterics, I’m not doing anything wrong.”

Mariette looks very upset. I feel horrible. I’ve become overly loyal and trusting of Professor Lindsay’s motives and find myself an accomplice in an action that has upset an angel. Her eyes are slowly filling with tears. She turns and quickly walks toward the Info Centre. I look at the professor, but his eyes are focused on her back. He looks mad.

“Don’t, Mariette,” he says sternly. Before she makes it into the house, two Cape Parks *bakkies* pull up. Mariette turns, looking surprised.

“I was just going to call you,” she says to Cyril as he steps out of his *bakkie*. “Look what he’s done now.”

I feel extra foolish now. We live in a small town. Of course some aware citizen or gossip queen would have called Cape Parks to ask why two enormous cages had been delivered to the Info Centre. I

step away from Professor Lindsay, afraid to be associated with his misdemeanor. What exactly he has done that is so wrong is still unclear to me, but I'm sure he knew it would be wrong or else he wouldn't have been so secretive.

Cyril steps forward. He looks rather militaristic in his green and khaki uniform. He is followed by two men in similar uniforms from the other *bakkie*, one with an impressive mustache and a broad chest. None of them look amused.

"Professor Lindsay," Cyril says. His address is formal and stern. "Why have you had cages delivered without informing Cape Parks?"

"There was no need, really," says Professor Lindsay. "I am performing a routine collar swap on an individual whose collar has been broken. There's no need to call in the army or inform the authorities for something so simple."

"I do not believe that collaring a leopard has ever been a simple task," says Cyril. "It requires a full support team to ensure that it goes well. Your team must consist of a Cape Parks official to oversee and a vet to make sure that the leopard is properly handled. I suppose you have the veterinary experience needed to put down a leopard and make sure it is safely positioned when it is unconscious?"

"Cyril, I've been at each collaring performed in these mountains," says Professor Lindsay. "I definitely understand how to do my job properly."

"Ah," says Cyril. "Then you should also understand how unethical this is and how necessary it is to prevent you from completing the actions you intend."

Cyril steps back, nodding to his men. They lift the cage by the poles and carefully place it in the back of the Cape Parks *bakkie*. I can't read Professor Lindsay's face. It is stony, reading neither rage nor sadness. Cyril hands him a thin booklet.

"I suggest you read up on the protocol our organizations agreed to follow in capturing and collaring leopards."

I wait for the men to come back with the pole and fetch the other cage. Instead they get into their *bakkie*. I catch Cyril's eye. He glances at the corner of the house, then back at me. Then he winks. It isn't a flirtatious wink, but a subtle, serious one. He knows our secret. I hope that he's the only one who knows. That's the only way Professor Lindsay will be able to carry on with whatever mysterious plan he is bent on. I'm not sure if I would support the plan if I knew what it was, but I'll follow along eagerly until I can figure it out.

The *bakkies* pull out onto the road, leaving Mariette, Professor Lindsay and me standing in their dust. The morning sun has become brighter and more pronounced, sending birds singing from tree to

tree. A photograph might show this scene as a small town in a rural part of the United States, with a sweet old couple watching the departure of relatives who stopped by for a visit. I wish it were true. These two deserve such happiness.

“Why don’t you trust me?” says Mariette.

“I do trust you,” says Professor Lindsay.

“Then why can’t you ever be honest with me?”

Professor Lindsay goes into the Info Centre without responding, without even looking at Mariette. The front door slams shut behind him, then the door to his office. Then it is only Mariette and me.

“Mariette, I’m so sorry, I didn’t know...”

“It’s ok, dear,” she says. “We all want to do right by him.”

She sighs and walks back to her cottage. I don’t feel welcome to follow her. I also don’t feel welcome in the Info Centre. I decide to go for a walk to clear my head. Maybe when I come back, other heads will be cleared.

I walk through the pasture behind Mariette’s house out to the river. I try to find the site of the baboon kill, but the water has risen since the last time I was here. The river now rushes over the rocks that could have been used as a crossing. It sings loudly as it tumbles along. The riverbed is wide, and the rocky sand banks on either side haven’t been swallowed up yet. I look up the river toward the farms and marvel at the shift in the season. When I arrived, the fynbos was dry, with a healthy-looking dust of tiny pink flowers that seemed endless. The winter rains brought the leucadendrons in their bright green foliage and the proteas with their colorful mandalas of thin petals, completely alien looking to me, but known and loved by South Africans.

I look up at the mountain. I’m sure some have felt awe at its beauty. Some have felt angry with it. Others have felt inspired. Some have even loved the mountain as I have. But it is foolish to believe that the mountain loves you back. The mountain cannot love you, it cannot build your strength, it cannot share secrets with you. It is a mountain. The only thing you see there is what you want to see.

Mariette and I have a quiet dinner together. She barely eats anything. I feel helpless. How do I talk to a grown woman about the complicated relationship she has with the strangest, most confusing man I know?

“If you need to talk about anything...” I say. I can’t figure out how to finish the sentence so I don’t.

“Thank you, dear,” she says. “I think I just need to let him go. As the Good Lord says, ‘Man is a mountain. You cannot appreciate it while standing at its base. You must throw miles between your eyes and it before you can catch the symmetry of its sides and feel the majesty of its colossal dimensions’. Just so it is with Professor Lindsay. He needs space to execute his noble plans. Only then will people understand how wonderful he really is. I just need to trust him, and let him go.”

“He loves you,” I say. She looks at me across the table. The corners of her eyes, with their sharpened lines, highlight her age and the depth of the emotions she carries.

“I hope you are right,” she says. I hope so, too.

University of Cape Town

A New Tool

At about 2:00 am there is a tapping on my window.

“Fuck off, Cyril!” I say. Half of it is a dream, but as I gain consciousness, I believe it is him, continuing to torment me.

“It is I!” says Professor Lindsay in a loud whisper. “Get your things, we have to go.” I’m confused and pack up my things quickly. I make the bed and head for the door.

“No, no, she’ll hear you! Come out the window.”

The window is large and close to the ground, so I have no trouble getting out. Professor Lindsay motions me to follow him, and we walk slowly and silently around the side of the house and off toward the Info Centre. Professor Lindsay leads me to where we’ve hidden the second cage. He’s found another pole and we lift the cage out of the grass and walk it to the front of the Info Centre. Professor Lindsay has backed the *bakkie* into the gravel. We lift it onto the flatbed. It barely fits under the canopy. When we push it to the back, it scrapes loudly against the bottom of the bed. Somewhere, a dog starts barking. Professor Lindsay and I stand still until it stops. Then he puts the car in neutral and we push it onto the road. The slope of the road helps us roll away from Mariette’s house. When we are a few houses away, he starts the engine, and we’re off.

“We made it,” he says. “I’m surprised we weren’t seen. We could have been in a lot of trouble, you know.”

“Great,” I say.

“I need to get this cage up to camp. It was incredibly fortunate that this one wasn’t taken as well. Otherwise, we’d have to follow the rules and endanger the lives of those cubs.”

“From the sounds of it, they’ll be in much more danger if you try to collar them without the help of a vet and other important people.”

Professor Lindsay rolls his eyes.

“That’s not true at all. Firstly, I’m not collaring them. Secondly, I haven’t told anyone but you that the cubs exist. If other people were involved in the capture, they would know, and the word would spread. Farmers hate leopard cubs even more than adult leopards. All sorts of nasty traps would be put out, wreaking all kinds of havoc. Thirdly, it is nearly impossible to reach a consensus with all of the

interested parties laid out in the handbook to accomplish the capturing and collaring of any leopard, especially leopard cubs.”

Professor Lindsay is driving fast. I’m afraid we might hit some unsuspecting animal that becomes visible too late in our headlights.

“So what, you’re going to go all vigilante? Do all the work yourself?”

“Yes, now that technology has given me the option, I think it’s the best chance of protecting the leopards.”

“What about your master’s student? Isn’t she supposed to be assisting with the people side of conservation?”

“She’s going to fail in her aims. These farmers are foolish about change. And besides, there is no ‘people side’ of conservation. Humans have no part in nature.” This coming from the man carrying a leopard-sized cage to a research camp on conservation property. “Still, it’s better to let her try, and make it look like I’m trying to be reasonable.”

I’m too tired and confused to know how to continue the conversation, so I leave it. Three weeks, I think to myself. Three more weeks of this madness. I hope I can keep Professor Lindsay from getting me in trouble. I also hope, for the cub’s sake, that he doesn’t try anything stupid.

“Erica, let me show you something,” Professor Lindsay says at breakfast. He brings out the case that was delivered with the cages. He puts it flat on the table. There is a combination lock that he spins into place. Then he clicks it open.

“Holy shit,” I say. Inside are the disassembled contents of what looks like a sniper rifle. “What the hell is that?”

“It’s a riffle. It shoots tracking darts.”

“Tracking darts?”

“Yes. It inserts a small GPS device just under the skin of the victim.”

“That’s way too cool to be real, Professor. I thought those things only existed in the movies.”

“Well, your government is very innovative.”

All sorts of scenarios grip my mind. We could have been able to find my sister if we had her darted. My parents would be able to know exactly where I was now. But there are so many ways someone could abuse that. Professor Lindsay could dart Mr. Strydom and follow him whenever he went into the park to allegedly poach animals. Mr. Strydom could dart Professor Lindsay and catch him trespassing on

his property. And if the technology left the community, it could go anywhere. How many secrets, political or otherwise, could be exposed with this gun? Does anyone really want to know what is hidden?

“Don’t you need a permit for that?” I ask.

“Probably,” he says. He takes out the pieces and carefully assembles the rifle. It is a big gun, long, sleek, and metallic black.

“Do you know how to use it?”

“Of course I do,” he says. “I was in the army.” I doubt this means they had guns like this in the army, but I guess it’s a little comforting to know that he has some experience handling a gun.

He walks out the front door and crosses the road, heading into the bush. I know what he’s after. The baboons have been screaming all morning and he wants to experiment. I stand outside the house. My skin is prickled with goosebumps. It might be from the cold morning. It might also be from excitement and fear. Professor Lindsay is pretty scary-looking carrying a gun, even if it’s a non-lethal kind.

I listen. All I can hear is the chirp-chirp-chirping of the birds and the nearby grumbles of the baboon troop. There is a scream, nearly human, that sends the whole troop into hoots and hollers. The noise dies down in a few seconds, returning to the pleasant grumbles of baboon family life.

Professor Lindsay climbs out of the brush and crosses the road. He is smiling.

“Was that it? I didn’t hear a gunshot.”

“You wouldn’t, it’s very quiet,” he says. He strokes the gun lovingly and brings it inside. After he has it disassembled and in its case, he opens a secondary compartment in the case and slides out a slim laptop. It is very simple looking. He opens it up and keys in a pin. A window opens, and the *kloof* is laid before us. I expect it to be black with neon green details, just like the movies. Instead it looks like a more elegant version of Google maps – white with beige contours. There is a blinking red dot labeled “unknown_1”. Professor Lindsay changes the name to “KloofTroup_Alpha_1”.

We watch the red dot. It moves short distances in a limited area and is mostly still. We are nevertheless spellbound by the dot.

“Erica, this is such an excellent conservation tool,” Professor Lindsay says. “Imagine a world where our protected animals could be monitored in this manner. We could know where every leopard in this whole mountain range lived. We could conserve their habitats better and learn more about their movements. If we could measure temperature or heart rate in addition to location, we could know if they have been killed and where. We could more effectively catch poachers and make them pay for their crime.”

He's right. He's crazy, but he's right. This is the best way to monitor the cubs. It may even save them one day. They are too small for collars, and they are at their most vulnerable. This gun may be the answer he's been looking for.

Trapped

I struggle with the weight of the cage. It was fine on the short trips behind the house and into and out of the *bakkie*, but now we are essentially hiking with it. Every hundred yards or so, I have to put it down. It's a perfect time to use the phrase, 'Are we there yet?' but I know exactly where we are and how far it is to our destination.

I'm amazed we haven't been spotted. I guess there's no real reason we should have been. In the early hours of the morning when we start this type of hike, there is never anyone around. I guess I'm afraid that Mr. Strydom has sensed the enormity of my guilty conscience and is coming for us.

We finally get to the small stream where Professor Lindsay wants to plant the trap. I rest while he scouts around for the ideal location. It's a well travelled stream with a fairly distinct path along it. There is one place where it narrows from the encroachment of a large bush. It is here that he decides to set it.

We move the trap into place. The ends of the cage slide up and down. When it is set, pressure in the center of the trap will cause the ends to fall shut like guillotines, trapping whatever is inside. We pull both ends all the way up so it looks like a tunnel through the foliage. We do our best to disguise it. Professor Lindsay breaks branches to cover the top and sides. He also blocks other possible exits and entrances to the space. I cover the cage floor in mud and twigs. It's creepy to be working inside the cage. Even though the mechanism isn't set, I keep imagining it closing on me and never being able to get out.

It takes us all day to carry the cage to the stream and set it up properly. When we are done, we hike back to the vehicle and set up camp. Professor Lindsay explained the necessity of camping to me when we planned this outing. The trap needs to be checked twice daily so that if an animal gets trapped, it isn't for too long. It could get dehydrated or hurt itself trying to get out. It's suspicious for us to go to and from the site that often since we usually only come up here once a week. So we camp here and hope that no one will notice when we don't come down.

Professor Lindsay uses a gas stove to make a simple pasta meal for us. I set up the tents - my one-man tent and Professor Lindsay's enormous palace of heavy green canvas. We sit in plastic chairs and eat our meals in silence. The darkness gathers around us and a chilly wind sets me shivering. I feel better after I add a few layers of clothing. Professor Lindsay is still in his button up field shirt and broad, khaki shorts.

“Do you think we’ll catch them?” I ask.

“Oh, probably not. We’ll might catch something, but not the leopards. They are very smart animals. And the potential for a porcupine or a genet to get there first is quite high. I’ll give us three days. Then we’ll have to take it down. Far too suspicious to have my vehicle missing from camp.”

The cold becomes too much for me to bear and I move to my tent. I snuggle into my sleeping bag and watch Professor Lindsay from the open tent flap. He is sitting with his hands folded across his stomach. I can barely make out his profile against the sky. The heavy clouds have blocked out the moon and the stars and there is no light pollution reflecting off their bellies. He is looking off into the distance, approximately where the trap has been set. He is humming a familiar tune. I can’t quite put the words to it. Then he starts to sing.

*Oh my darlin’, Oh my darlin’, Oh my darlin’ Clementine,
I have loved you since forever, oh my clever Clementine.*

We check the trap in the morning. We can see from a distance that the doors have fallen shut, enclosing whatever animal might have wandered past in the night. We approach the cage quietly, not wanting to scare it. There is nothing there.

“Erica, don’t look so distraught,” says Professor Lindsay. “We were bound to miss them.”

“Can’t we leave bait or something?” I ask. “What’s the point of a trap without bait?”

“Have you learned nothing about how bad it is to feed animals? We’re more likely to catch a baboon using bait. You wouldn’t want that would you?”

We reset the trap and head back to our tents. Professor Lindsay is acting like he is on vacation. He has a canvas folding chair and footrest that he sits in all day. He reads or naps, getting up occasionally to check the trap. I imagine him with a pipe and a newspaper instead of his bird and mammal guide.

I spend the day moping. I don’t want to leave without seeing a leopard. But I also don’t think it counts to see a leopard in a cage. A wild leopard sighting would be so much more amazing. I go for walks, hoping to run into Clementine and her cubs on the trails. I come back every two hours to check the trap with Professor Lindsay.

I am on a trail walking back to camp when the cloud reaches us. I’ve been watching it pour in from the south east covering the mountains with crests of white. I stop to watch as it fills the valley. It is early

evening, and the sun takes its time getting through the cloud. It leaves an eerie arch of white light on the path in front of me.

There is a noise behind me. I turn just as a honey badger comes to a standstill on the trail. I can't make out its coloring or markings, only the distinct, dark silhouette. And before I am really aware that it is there, it is gone again, into the cloud.

I have a dream sometimes where I hear my sister screaming for help. It shakes me awake, and I immediately start crying.

"Erica, it's okay," says Professor Lindsay. "It's just an animal in the trap. It isn't hurt."

I'm in my tent. The screaming isn't a dream, nor is Professor Lindsay's comment. I climb out of my tent and into the early morning darkness to find him excitedly assembling his rifle by lamp light.

"We are very lucky," he says. "I might have been dreaming, but that sounded exactly like a leopard."

I'm nervous on our walk to the trap. Even I know that trapped animals can be very dangerous.

It is quiet as we approach the stream. We turn off our flashlights. The sky is just light enough to make out shapes and details, but not bright enough for colors.

"Erica," Professor Lindsay whispers, "you go around to that side. Tell me what you see. If it is a leopard, tell me if it is facing you or not. If it isn't facing you, come around to the other side. Do whatever you can to make sure it continues facing you. I want a clear shot of the hind quarters."

I take an arching path away from the cage, so I can see in without getting too close. I'm tempted to hide behind the trees and barely peek out, but that won't really do me any good. I have to remind myself that a leopard will be more afraid of me than I am of it.

I step out onto the clear, muddy bank of the stream. There, in the cage, are two curious faces, rounded ears perked to my approach. They are both crouched low against the bottom of the cage. Their sweet intelligent eyes find me and stare me down. I find myself sweating.

"Aren't you just the sweetest things," I whisper. Then I remember my instructions and call out to Professor Lindsay. "It's the two cubs, Professor. They are facing me. I can't see Clementine."

As if in response, a low growl raises the hairs on the back of my neck. I remember a story about how leopards often pounce on top of their prey and break the neck. Although a Cape leopard wouldn't do this to a human, I cautiously clamp my hand over my neck and turn around slowly. There is nothing there. I scan the brush, looking for the rosette-patterned fur. I realize as I look how perfect that pattern is

at camouflage. The way the early dawn light plays in the shadows, it's impossible to pick out.

A second growl allows me to pick up a better idea of where she is. There is a rocky escarpment just beyond the stream. I search the rocks and scattered vegetation until I see a small movement. She's there, just out of sight.

"I can see where Clementine is hiding," I say loudly, looking up at her. My articulation is met with a chorus of growls this time. I turn back to the cage. The cubs no longer look so cute. Their ears are flat against their heads. Their lips twitch back, showing the tips of sharp teeth. One stands up and moves closer to the front of the cage. It snarls. It's not so much the length of the teeth or the size of the mouth that is frightening. It's the animal rage and aggression that is expressed in every muscle of its body.

The other one jumps up with a yelping cry. It starts to turn around.

"Hey!" I yell. "It's just a dart, chill out!" All three respond with growls and barking snarls. I look up at Clementine. She's still out of sight. I still have my hand covering my neck.

Professor Lindsay is a smart man. He waits a long time to fire the second dart, letting the animals become acclimated to my presence. As the light gets brighter, I can pick out that the standing one is Brutus and the other one is Amelia. Brutus slowly calms down but watches me intently, face alive with anger. Every once in a while I can hear Clementine in the brush across the stream.

Brutus lets out a snarl of surprise. He looks at me as if I was the one to somehow sting his rump. He slams his paws against the front gate and roars at me. He starts ramming the cage with his face, shoulders and paws. The muscle behind each attack is powerful enough to shake the whole cage.

"Stop," I whisper. "You're hurting yourself."

A thin stream of blood trickles from his nose. It cakes onto his whiskers and the bars of the cage.

"Erica, back away slowly," says Professor Lindsay. "Go stand by the gun." He's left the gun on the ground a good distance from the cage. I back off and stand next to it, watching. He walks quietly and slowly up to the cage. Clementine makes more and more noise the closer he gets her babies. Brutus stops ramming the cage and Amelia is pacing and crying.

Professor Lindsay raises the door of the gate. Immediately, there is a blur of yellow, black, and grey as Amelia bolts for the stream. She leaps across and crashes into the bushes. Brutus is still in the cage. He is crouched on the floor, roaring up at Professor Lindsay. Professor Lindsay backs away from the cage and comes to stand next to me. Eventually Brutus crawls out, moving cautiously away, eyeing us suspiciously. Then he disappears.

Temptation's Way

That evening we sit on the couch and watch the leopards ping back and forth across the computerized landscape. Every minute or so, the GPS location refreshes itself, and the dot moves. Professor Lindsay and I watch for a full hour.

“Oh, oh, look at what they did there,” I say, pointing at the screen. The dots have been moving along the stream from somewhere deep in the mountains where Professor Lindsay and I could never get to. They’ve come to the approximate spot where the trap was laid, and they’ve gone around it. The dots cross the stream, climb onto the rocks, and then go back to the stream a suitable distance from the trap site.

“Fascinating,” says Professor Lindsay. He has a notebook on his lap and is taking notes of the many minute discoveries we’ve made just this evening.

“Just imagine, Erica,” he says. “We will have so much information about the movements of these cubs. We could prove exactly where they go and when. It will shed so much light on daily movements within the habitat.”

The dots follow the streambed down the mountain. If they continue, they will eventually come to the road and cross over into the farmlands.

“That’s great Professor, but who will you ever be able to share your findings with? Writing a paper or using this information for conservation purposes will mean admitting the existence of the cubs and the existence of that crazy gun.”

“We can’t do that, can we,” he says. “Not right now. They are too young and vulnerable.”

The leopards reach the road at a point that borders Ruan’s farm. They turn and follow the road toward the pine forest and Mr. Strydom’s farm. I’m breathless. It’s like watching a horror movie or a thriller. At any moment I expect the dots to dip onto Mr. Strydom’s property and stop there long enough to kill a few of his precious animals. But they stay on their course, the two dots following their invisible mother along the road. They turn up into the mountains on the same road we follow to get to the hiking trail. They still aren’t in the clear. Mr. Strydom has about 50 sheep *kraaled* on that high up piece of land across from the main body of the farm. We saw them today as we drove down the mountain, idly trotting about their large enclosure. It would be so easy for these leopards to get in there and take one out.

There is a minute where the dots are frozen, waiting to refresh. In that time, my hands are squeezed together, knuckles white, in an odd prayer to some thread of faith that the leopards know not to cross into the *kraal* and take helpless sheep. The minute passes. The dots have moved on, well up the trail, out of temptation's way.

Professor Lindsay lets out a long breath and I unclench my hands.

“Close call,” he says. He closes the laptop and puts it back in the case.

They move across the landscape in a pattern. They spend the early evenings deep in the mountains, mostly in the *kloofs* and streams. They move sporadically – practicing to hunt, playing, and investigating the extent of their territory. At night, they move more strategically. They are occasionally still, watching their mother hunt or resting after exertion. Then, in the smallest hours of the morning, they make their long trek home. They move down the stream bed, pausing here and there to sniff out some animal, pounce on a hiding meal. They go all the way to the road. Occasionally, they stray from the road to hide from a car, a stray dog, or maybe a drunken farm hand staggering back from a party. Sometimes Brutus gets distracted and will chase an animal into the forest. He never stays there for long.

They take the turn off and pass Mr. Strydom's *kraal*. The sheep stir uneasily in their sleep, sensing their proximity to a wild danger. They huddle closer for protection. The leopards pass without a sound, with hardly a glance at the lambs and ewes. They are satisfied from their day of hunting and are on their way home.

Home is the cave on the ledge that I fear. They spend hours there, resting relaxing, probably playing cards or backgammon. Clementine makes them tea and tells them stories about the strange man who watches them and the small female that follows him around. She tells them stories of the even stranger men in the valley below. These are scary stories about big men with guns, dogs, and traps. The cubs shudder in fear and exhilaration, asking for those stories of death and gore again and again. They also ask for stories of their father. Clementine tells them they might meet him someday, though it is not very likely. He travels a lot, often far into the mountains for long periods of time. She tells her children that they, too, will someday travel far away and make their own territories and have their own children.

In the early evenings, they move again and go deep into the mountains. At around that time, the strange man who watches them and the small female who follows him sit at a couch in the center of their territory. They download the day's data and watch it in fast forward. In just over an hour, they have seen the patterns of the mother and her cubs, following their daily commute across the mountains.

To Secrets

We have settled into our evening ritual of following the leopards, and we jump at the sound of the approaching vehicle. We both have the same reaction - reach for the laptop and hide it. Professor Lindsay gets there first and shoves it into its case. He leaves the room and walks quickly up to his house. He should be well-hidden by the darkness, but I worry that whoever it is will see him and ask questions about the case.

I fill the electric kettle and start it, trying to look natural. There is a soft tap on the front door, and Cyril sticks his head in.

"Hello," he says. He steps in and takes off his coat. There are small flecks of water sticking to it.

"Is it raining?" I ask.

"*Ja*, just barely. There is a nice front coming that should bring heavy rain over the next few days. It will be very good for the plants and the farmers. The winter has been strangely dry."

"Good thing we'll have rain then."

"Yeah," he says. "Is Professor Lindsay around?"

"Yes, he's in his house," I say.

"Oh."

We sit listening to the slow rumble of the kettle. It clicks off and I set out three cups and pour the tea. We sit in silence, sipping at the hot contents of our cups and staring off into our own distances.

Professor Lindsay eventually comes in from the house.

"Cyril, what can we do you for?" he says.

"*Ja*, Professor, just seeing if you need help drafting that proposal to collar the leopards."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary, Cyril. We've been tracking Clementine on foot, and she seems to be staying local. I'm not worried she'll disappear."

Professor Lindsay takes one of the cups and sits down with it at the bar. He takes a flask from his pocket and liberally pours the contents into the cup. I can smell that it is whiskey.

"Aren't you losing valuable data?" asks Cyril.

"Not really, we know her approximate range and are focusing on video collection. She's very easy to track, you know."

“We must not be talking about the same Clementine,” says Cyril.

“You must not know her very well,” Professor Lindsay snaps.

Cyril pours himself another cup of tea. I watch him from the other side of the bar. He stares into his cup, searching for the right thing to say.

“Professor, let me tell you what I do know. I know you have a trap. I also know you have Erica as a faithful assistant. You could trap a leopard and collar it if you wanted to, which is very dangerous for the animal. A lot could go wrong between anaesthetics and injury from the trap. I want to protect the leopards just as much as you do. I can’t do this when I do not know what is going on. However, if you tell me, I will use the information for what I think is right. Your secret may not be safe with me, but you will have the support of Cape Parks in the matter. If you do not tell me, I will not be able to help you if something bad happens. Please consider this and choose appropriately to the given situation. It would be very bad for a leopard to die on your hands.”

Cyril wishes us goodnight and leaves. Professor Lindsay and I are left drinking our tea under the scrutiny of the kitchen light. I think about what Cyril said. Without all the facts, it sounds like we intend to dart and collar Clementine. That would be more dangerous than what we did, but not by much. Brutus threw a pretty nasty tantrum in that cage. He could have knocked himself unconscious, broken a rib, or hurt Amelia. Professor Lindsay may be able to use a gun and set a trap, but I don’t think he’d be able to monitor the vital signs of an unconscious leopard. I shudder to think that we could have found a dead cub in the bottom of the cage.

What’s done is done. We were successful and now have GPS trackers in two Cape leopard cubs, and no one is the wiser. Is there any danger in what we have already accomplished? They will continue to be a secret. When they are old enough to fend for themselves, Professor Lindsay can make a ruse of the new technology and show it off for the first time. No one will question it or realize that the cubs were the first targets. And even if they do, I’ll be long gone and so will the cubs. Professor Lindsay will be the one in trouble, and he’s always in trouble with someone.

“What are you going to do?” I ask. He takes a long drink of his tea before replying.

“Mum's the word. I’d appreciate if you did the same.”

“Of course,” I say. I hold up my cup. “To secrets.”

“To secrets.”

We toast and down our drinks. Professor Lindsay gets the case from his room, and we watch the next episode of leopard movement.

Sleeping

I have a nightmare that I am being chased by dogs. They look like the dogs I know here, but they have the mean, angry faces of the terrified leopard cubs. I run on my four legs, but keep running into the wall of a cage. I try to climb, but I have an animal's legs, not hands. The dogs attack. They kill me repeatedly. I die a dozen times before I wake up, exhausted.

The sun is masked by a solid dripping of rain. The dim light makes me want to roll over and keep sleeping. I force myself out of bed. We're installing camera traps in Clementine's territory today. Now that we have a better idea of where the cubs are, we can more easily capture their movements. I hope I can see them on video one last time before I leave. The week countdown to my departure is almost here, and I ache for a glimpse of those beautiful animals before I am permanently separated from this place.

Professor Lindsay and I load up the *bakkie* with all the cameras we can spare. We bundle into the cab with our rain coats and extra layers of clothes. Professor Lindsay starts the engine.

"Attention, attention."

Professor Lindsay and I look at each other, amazed. He cuts the engine.

"Attention, attention."

The radio above our heads is crackling. Professor Lindsay lifts it down and holds it between us.

"There is a livestock loss on the farm of Kobus Strydom. We request representatives of the farmer's union, Cape Parks and CFPC make themselves available immediately."

We sit in stupefied silence. The rain taps gently on the car windows, reminding us that time is passing.

Cyril's voice cracks the silence.

"Be there now, Mr. Strydom. I'm sorry for your loss."

Professor Lindsay unclips the radio.

"Vincent Lindsay here, leaving presently."

He fastens the radio back in place and starts the *bakkie*. He rolls down the drive and pulls onto the main road.

“Maybe it’s a jackal,” I say. “Or a caracal.”

“Don’t be *dof*, Erica,” Professor Lindsay says. He looks in his rear-view mirror. I glance out the side to see what he’s looking at. Lights flash in greeting. A Cape Parks *bakkie* is following us. Ahead of us, a *bakkie* pulls out from Ruan’s driveway. We travel in convoy to Mr. Strydom’s farm.

Thin droplets of rain hang from the grass in the pasture. I walk through, feeling the cuffs of my pants get heavy with moisture. Ahead of me are Mr. Strydom, Ruan and Pascal. Behind me are Professor Lindsay and Cyril. Our black raincoats and sombre expressions remind me of a funeral march. I suppose that’s what this is.

There are seventeen sheep lying in the pasture. They look like they are asleep, like they could get up at any moment. Cyril comes forward and touches one of the sheep gently. He lifts the head by the fluffy wool between its ears. Then I see. At the neck there are two bloody teeth marks. Mr. Strydom heaves a dry sob and covers his mouth. Ruan stands close to him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Definitely a leopard,” says Cyril.

“How do you know?” The question comes from Pascal.

“Hush, Pascal,” says Ruan.

“Your boy should know how the animals have died,” says Mr. Strydom violently. He nods to Cyril, asking him to continue.

“The leopard has powerful shoulders,” says Cyril. “It will get low and spring up from underneath. Once they have the animal by the neck, they pull the head down to the ground. The animal breaks its own neck trying to free itself.”

Pascal’s eyes get wide. He grabs his father’s hand.

“Eighteen sheep,” says Mr. Strydom. He shakes his head.

“I’ve never seen this much damage from a single leopard,” says Ruan. He touches the one at his feet, also lifting up the head. It almost comes completely off, the neck is so broken.

“It probably wasn’t a single leopard,” says Cyril. “This amount of damage shows that it must have been, well, might have been, two animals working together. A single leopard takes only a few, for they can only carry one away. But with two, you now have a game. It is highly likely that a mother was teaching a cub to hunt. A group of fenced in sheep makes for a perfect place to practice.”

I glance at Professor Lindsay. He doesn’t look like he’s paying attention. His eyes are moving from sheep to sheep.

“Eighteen sheep,” says Mr. Strydom again.

“Professor,” says Cyril. “You wouldn’t happen to know about any cubs in the area, would you?”

“No,” he says, brushing off the question. “Mr. Strydom, I only count seventeen sheep.” Professor Lindsay’s nonchalance and insolence is astounding.

“You question my ability to count, Professor. One has been dragged away. I have followed it as far as I can. You can see where they stopped to rest, a flattened patch and bits of wool. But eventually the trail is gone. Where leopards hide things you will never find them. Deep, deep brush, the middle of thickets.” He looks out over the pasture. He has tears in his eyes. “Eighteen sheep.”

I look out over the massacre and nearly cry myself. I saw these sheep alive last week. Now they are only bodies. Could our cubs have done this?

“I have called you here to discuss my options,” says Mr. Strydom. He wipes his eyes with his rain-damp sleeve and clears his throat. “Ruan, as a farmer, you know my concerns, and you know what I should do, what any farmer should do, when faced with such a loss. To protect *my eiendom*, to protect *jou eiendom* and that of the other farmers, these pests must be killed.”

Professor Lindsay and Cyril both start speaking at the same time but Mr. Strydom continues to speak over them.

“But I am reasonable. I will hear other things. I want to know my options.”

Cyril jumps in right away.

“Mr. Strydom, I am very sorry for your loss. We will help you dispose of the bodies and give you access to the research that Cape Parks has conducted and manpower to implement better protection for your remaining animals. I will also remind you that if a leopard is killed, other leopards often come to the area to expand their territories. New comers cause far more damage than locals. Also, please take into consideration the rare distribution of this animal. Losing a single one will be devastating for the population.”

Mr. Strydom looks up into the mountains. I get a chill as I follow his eyes. I may be imagining it, but it looks like he is looking right at the cave where Clementine and her cubs must be sleeping.

“Devastating,” he says. “You are a communist but you try to tell me one leopard life is more valuable to eighteen sheep lives. A life is a life. A death is a death. I have eighteen dead. You think I am not devastated?”

“Professor Lindsay,” Mr. Strydom continues, turning to address him. “I need compensation for my loss. What can you offer for my promise not to kill your animals?”

Professor Lindsay surveys the damage, rocking onto his heels, then onto his toes.

“In normal circumstances,” he says, “I would offer you a fair price for each of the animals killed. But you continue to poorly manage your land. I’m not going to compensate you for laying out a veritable picnic for any predator that strolls by.”

“Picnic?” says Mr. Strydom. I can see the color rising in his face. “I’ll tell you picnic. Your job is picnic, easy money from the green city people and other fuzzy bunny huggers. Your petrol, your food, your house, it is all covered by the University. And me I must protect my things from the things you protect! If I do not, I am not able to live.”

“Mr. Strydom,” says Professor Lindsay, “your farm is worth millions. Buy some protection for your animals, and maybe you’d still have them.”

“You don’t understand business, Professor. I sell my farm, I have nothing. You would not say that thing if you knew the way this business is run. Your animals came onto *my eiendom* and killed my sheep. You pay the price or your animals pay the price.”

“Revenge is an ugly business, Mr. Strydom,” Professor Lindsay says. “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.”

“Yes, but a tooth for a tooth means at least my family won’t go hungry!”

Professor Lindsay doesn’t know how to respond to that. Cyril and I stand absolutely still, hoping to be left out of the argument. Ruan shifts his weight from one leg to the other. He tries to light a cigarette, but the rain makes it difficult. Pascal stares at the sheep.

“Listen,” says Professor Lindsay in his best imitation of a soothing tone of voice. “I’ll give you R10,000 for the lot if you don’t kill the leopards. It would not be fair to give you more. Otherwise, I would have to pay all farmers for their carelessly fenced sheep.”

Mr. Strydom purses his lips, considering the offer. I do the calculations with him. Eighteen sheep at R1,500 is R27,000. That’s more than half of what it costs to take his wife to a hospital for a single treatment for her illness. Professor Lindsay’s offer covers a tiny portion of that, and, if it were to happen again, it is clear Professor Lindsay would not be interested in paying.

“No,” says Mr. Strydom. He spits on the ground. “That is not a fair price. You are a bully. I choose revenge. Until you find respect, I always choose revenge.”

He walks away from us toward his *bakkie*. Ruan follows him, dragging Pascal away from the horrible scene. Cyril, Professor Lindsay and I stand in the rain watching the sleeping sheep.

“If there is anything I don’t know, Professor,” says Cyril, leaving the sentence unfinished. It could be read as a threat – *you’ll be in trouble* – a plea – *tell me and I can help* – or something in between.

“Thank you,” says Professor Lindsay. “I’ll let you know if we find anything.”

Dilemma

Professor Lindsay sits in the overstuffed chair in his house. He has a radio in his lap and a glass in his hand. The stuffed owl has become a side table, a bottle of whiskey on its head and a few cigarettes in its mouth. I've never seen Professor Lindsay smoke before. I was under the impression that he thought it was bad for the environment. Every few minutes, Professor Lindsay turns the knob of the radio. Music, voices, and static, but not what he's looking for.

I sit on the floor and lean against the bookshelf listening to the sounds from the radio and staring at the dead flowers hanging from the ceiling. They are colourless and dry. No amount of rain on the roof will ever revive them. Nothing will turn back the clock for those sheep either. Or for our cubs, however their fate is decided.

This is the strange thing. Our cubs didn't do it. Professor Lindsay and I watched the video of the night before in real time when we got home. They follow the same path up from the road and pass the *kraal*. Even though we only get movement updates every minute, there is no way that they could have strayed from the path, killed eighteen sheep, and moved to the next spot up the path in under a minute.

I tried to convince him to tell Cape Parks, but he would have none of it. That would mean he would be admitting to Cape Parks and the farmers that he knew there were cubs in the area and hadn't told anyone. It goes against everything he had agreed to when he started tracking leopards. It would also mean that he would have to tell them how he knew the exact minute by minute movements of the cubs. He'd have to show them the gun, tell them about the trap, and show them the laptop. Chances are, his new tools would be confiscated and he could get into a lot of trouble. I'm sure it's illegal for any individual to own a rifle like that.

I also tried to get him to give Mr. Strydom the right price for his sheep. He said it was impossible. He would have to pitch it to the donor (whose identity is still a mystery to me and probably should, given his strange ability to acquire specialty firearms). The donor requires a certain guarantee that the farmer is trying to protect his or her animals. Professor Lindsay refuses to make a case on Mr. Strydom's behalf. I think that's more about blind stubbornness than reason.

So we wait. Professor Lindsay pulls a cigarette from the owl's beak. He offers it to me. I shake my head. He lights it, exhaling a ring of smoke toward the ceiling.

"I haven't smoked in years, Erica," he says.

"Stress will make you do all kinds of things," I say.

"Cheers to that." He downs his drink and pours another. He's three quarters of the way through a new bottle of whiskey. The bottle wobbles as he puts it back on the owl's head.

"Tell me," he says. "What ever happened between you and Cyril?"

"Doesn't matter," I say. "Whatever might have happened didn't."

"Do you want me to kill him?"

I laugh, even though by now he's probably serious.

"No thanks," I say.

He spins the radio dial. Drums, talk show, classical music, voices in a normal conversation. He pauses there until he can hear that it's just a few ladies planning a party. Music, music, static, then silence.

"Whatever happened between you and Mariette?" I ask.

He shrugs, taking a drag of the cigarette.

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Bullshit," I say.

"You don't believe me? I guess you'll have to. I have nothing else to say."

I study the flowers on the ceiling. When they were alive, they probably looked like the flowers in my mother's garden, gorgeous dahlias of yellow, white and red. Not at this time of year though. It's early spring here, so it will be early fall there. There should be pumpkins and kale and apples on the tree. There might even be some blackberries left in the patch of brambles by the compost. I'll be there too soon.

Music, static, music, static, talk show, static, voices, voices, and then the absolutely undeniable voice of Mr. Strydom yelling at some poor soul about delivering the wrong materials. "We're building a trap, not a fence, you *doos*," he yells.

Professor Lindsay shuts off the radio and climbs the stairs to his bedroom. He shuffles around up there for quite a while. I stay seated on the floor looking up at the ceiling. I don't know what else to do.

He comes down and stands unsteadily on the floor. He is wearing long black pants, a black raincoat, black boots, and a black beanie. He looks like a cormorant with big grey eyebrows and bloodshot eyes. He's holding a fresh bottle of whiskey in one hand and his pellet gun in the other hand.

"I can't let this happen," he says. "Are you coming with me?"

"Um, no," I say. "I don't want to drive with you when you are drunk." I rise to my feet, but there is no way I'll be able to stop him from leaving.

“Suit yourself,” he says. He puts up the hood of his raincoat and enters into the rain.

“Professor, wait, shouldn’t you wait?”

“Wait for what? Wait for them to kill the leopards? I don’t think I’ll be able to do that. This is what I have to do, Erica. And if you try to stop me, I’ll run you over.”

I watch as he gets into the *bakkie* and rushes off down the driveway. I think of all the poor animals on the road tonight that he’ll run over just to save his precious leopards.

I go to the house, take the radio off the wall, and press the button next to Cyril’s name.

University of Cape Town

Rescue

Cyril is there in twenty minutes. He must have been close by or else he would have had to drive very fast to get here. I run down to the road to meet him when he honks the horn. The rain is coming down in sheets, and I'm glad when I get into the cab.

"He's drunk Cyril, I'm afraid he'll hurt himself. Or Mr. Strydom. He has his pellet gun with him."

"Calm yourself, Erica, he can't hurt anyone with a pellet gun."

"He can hurt all sorts of things with his drunk driving."

"It's fine, we'll find him. Any ideas where he's gone?"

"I don't know. Mr. Strydom said he was building a trap. He's probably gone to stop him."

We drive to the pasture where the sheep were killed. His vehicle is nowhere. We would have seen it if it had gone off the road, and he must have come in this direction. We drive to the trailhead to turn around. There is his *bakkie*. The front wheel is stuck fast in a muddy ditch. He's not in the cab, and the rain has washed away whatever tracks he's made.

"Professor!" I scream into the rain. I listen hard for a reply.

"Did you hear that?" says Cyril.

"Hear what?" All I can hear is the clatter of rain on leaves and rocks.

"Do it again."

I call out again. Somewhere in the darkness there is a dull pinging noise.

"It's his pellet gun."

We scramble up the trail. He has a good twenty minute head start and is walking fast as always. It takes almost an hour of hard, fast climbing to get him in sight. We hear him long before we see him.

"Oh my darlin', Oh my darlin', Oh my darlin' Clementine!"

"Professor!" I call out. He turns around and fires his pellet gun. It hits a stone at my feet.

"Jissis, he's a good shot for a drunk," says Cyril.

"Professor, it's me, Erica, and Cyril's here to."

"What," he says, "do you," long pause, "want."

"We want to help," says Cyril.

"Well, in that case, make some noise. Oy!" he yells. "Clementine! Run away! Hide away in the pits

and darkness of that gorgeous mountain of yours. They're coming for you, and this rain is perfect for washing away the trail!"

Cyril and I clap our hands, making enough noise to keep Professor Lindsay happy. If we are quiet for a second, he threatens us with the pellet gun.

"We have to get that gun away from him," I say to Cyril.

"We won't be able to get close. We'll have to wait until he gets tired. It has to happen sooner or later. He's had so much to drink."

We follow him up and up. The rain comes down and down. I can see the lights of the farm below and the dull outline of Cyril beside me. Cyril is carrying the emergency flashlight he had with him in the *bakkie*. We turn it on when it gets too dark to see the path. Professor Lindsay follows the trail in his memory. He never misses a step so ingrained in this path on his psyche.

I'm relieved when I realize we are approaching the cave. He's sure to stop now and maybe even be reasonable and come back with us. To my absolute horror, he veers off toward the ledge.

"Professor, no!" says Cyril.

He turns and shoots. This time he hits Cyril in the shin.

"Ow!" says Cyril.

"Back off," says Professor Lindsay. "I don't want you following me."

He totters along the narrow ledge toward the cave. I watch breathlessly from above, clenching and unclenching my hands. I am soaked and cold and terrified and glad, so glad, when he finally sits down outside the cave.

"Now you stay right there, Clementine old girl, Vincent will protect you from the evil poachers. And if you are not at home, then STAY AWAY!" He screams the last part into the night. It echoes across the *kloof*, bouncing back and forth against the steep walls.

Cyril and I sit down above the ledge and wait. My teeth are chattering with cold. I'm wearing several layers and a rain jacket, but my pants are soaked from walking and my face and the front part of my hair are wet.

"Erica, you are freezing," says Cyril. "Please sit closer to me. I don't want you to catch cold."

My eyes have become accustomed to the dark, and I can make out minimal details on his face. His concern looks and sounds sincere, and frankly, I'm too cold to care.

They held me like this when Amelia disappeared. My mother and father took turns. I was thirteen but became as helpless as a baby. But I didn't cry. I didn't even talk. I just sat in my mother or my father's lap for what seemed like days. A memory would come, and I would bury it. It became a task, almost a

game. Bury each memory as they come up. After I had buried enough of them, I stopped feeling helpless. I felt strong. I would go to places we knew together as children just to bring the memories through so I could bury them. My childhood became as empty and soulless as a graveyard.

Now I cry. The crazy man below me stands to lose so much. The man who holds me is so good but so lost. Mr. Strydom, his wife, Ruan, Pascal, Mariette, the sheep, the cubs, and Clementine – so much sadness and conflict, obscured and confused in this mountain of clouds.

Eventually the rain stops. Not completely, but enough to feel whole again. Cyril lifts my hood off my head and kisses my forehead.

“Feel better?”

“Yes,” I say. “It doesn’t mean you are allowed to kiss me though.”

“Sorry.”

Professor Lindsay stands up, swaying gently to and fro as he hums. He undoes his pants and urinates all around the ledge.

“What are you doing?” says Cyril.

“I’m marking my territory.”

It’s so absurd that I start to laugh. Cyril laughs too.

“Right,” says Cyril. “Come on, Professor, it’s time to go now.”

“Oh, alright, but only because I love you, Mariette.”

Cyril goes down to the ledge and helps the professor. They walk slowly back to the path together, Cyril carefully guiding him.

“Ah,” says Professor Lindsay when they meet me on the trail. “There you are. I was looking all over for you. No more of this nonsense, straight to bed, young lady.”

A gunshot fires from the valley below. It is sharp and harsh in the quiet of the rainless air. The silence after it is immense, almost louder than the shot itself.

“Clementine,” says Professor Lindsay. He twists himself out of Cyril’s grasp and starts to run. He only makes it a few steps before he slips and falls, hitting his head on the ground and losing consciousness.

The Vet

I lie in a cot in the veterinary clinic and page through a book about horses. Whatever details are provided about the different breeds are lost on me. I haven't often seen Afrikaans written down, and the words look garbled and strange. Either there are too many syllables or too few. Instead, I treat it as a picture book, making up stories about the various horses I see.

Professor Lindsay lies in the cot next to me, snoring away. His belly rises and falls, and he sometimes mutters and mumbles. I can feel myself get angry with him for causing so much trouble. I pull the covers up to my chin. I turn back to the book, absorbing myself in the pictures.

The clinic is a short building with a large pasture in the back and a barn. The vet, a man named Doctor Andrew Clarke, lives just next door to the clinic. He was already in bed when we arrived last night. I wanted to know why we didn't go to the medical clinic just out of town. Cyril said that's where the people from Spieëlfontein go, and it is usually very crowded with not enough doctors. He knew Professor Lindsay would rather go to the vet.

Professor Lindsay moans and opens his eyes. Then he closes them again and winces, holding his head.

"Morning," I say.

"Where am I?" he says.

"You're at the vet clinic."

"Oh, good," he says. "Where is Doctor Clarke?"

I ring the little bell on the bedside table. Doctor Clarke comes into the room.

"Good morning, Professor," he says cheerfully. "How are you feeling?"

"Like hell," he said. "What happened?"

"You fell and hit your head," says the doctor. He sits down on a chair next to the bed and puts a thermometer under Professor Lindsay's tongue. I've never seen Professor Lindsay this obedient.

"How did I get here?" Professor Lindsay asks when the thermometer has left his mouth.

"Cyril and Erica here carried you down from the mountain and drove you here."

"That was very stupid," Professor Lindsay says, turning to me. "You should have left me there and gone for help. Or you could have radioed the mountain rescue team."

“Professor, be kind,” says Doctor Clarke. “Under the circumstances, they got you here faster than anyone else could have.” It took us two hours in a steadily increasing downpour for me and Cyril to carry him down the mountain in his half-conscious state. It was nearly midnight by the time we got him into the clinic. Besides it being dangerous to order a mountain rescue in that kind of weather, we just didn’t think we should radio. Then they would know where we were. Cape Parks would have been mighty curious about why Professor Lindsay was halfway up that particular piece of mountain that late at night.

“They could have injured me if they moved me incorrectly,” Professor Lindsay says to the doctor. “A head injury could easily have been a neck injury, and I could have been paralysed.”

Doctor Clarke sighs and hands Professor Lindsay two pills and a glass of water.

“That is highly unlikely. It was a small fall. You might be slightly concussed, but I suspect most of the pain in your head is a hangover. I would like you to stay here for another night and drink plenty of water.”

Doctor Clarke puts fresh glasses of water on our bedside tables and leaves us to rest.

Professor Lindsay feels his forehead. There is a small goose egg that has formed just above his eyebrow. I’m not sure if that’s from the fall or from getting him in the car. Cyril might have knocked him into the car door when we were trying to get him in.

He looks at the ceiling as if he is trying to read something written on it.

“Erica?” he asks.

“Yes?”

“Did that all really happen?”

“Yes.”

We sit in silence. I turn the pages of my book, not really seeing the photographs.

“Did they get her?”

One gunshot was fired. Something must have died down there.

“I don’t know. Cyril is going this morning to find out.”

Professor Lindsay looks over at me. I’m in the bed and under the covers. He looks confused.

“Did you get hurt?” he says.

“Doctor Clarke asked me to stay. I needed to rest, and he didn’t want you to be alone.”

“Hrmph,” he says, but doesn’t argue. He seems to respect Doctor Clarke too much to argue with him. He sighs and drinks the glass of water next to his bed. Then he falls asleep.

* * * * *

It was a long, frightening hike down the slippery mountain trail. Cyril's flash light went out and we could barely see. Then it started to rain again. I was freezing cold and terrified. I was afraid Professor Lindsay was going to die. It would have been my fault for not stopping him, for not telling someone the truth.

Doctor Clarke tended to me first when we came in. I was in shock. He took me to the back room where there was a shower and turned on the hot water. He raised my arms above my head and took off my clothes. He pushed me into the shower and left the room. I stood in the hot stream of water shivering away. Eventually he came back with a towel and a dry set of clothes. He pulled me out of the water and turned it off. Then he dried my hair and my body roughly. I felt like a rag doll, or a small child.

"Ow," I whined.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. We have to get you dry and warm. I want you to put on these clothes and climb into bed."

He led me to the cot where I lie now and tucked me in. Professor Lindsay was already in bed making strange and terrible noises. I dreamt that I caught a rabbit and pinched its ear with a pair of pliers. I recorded the screams and played them back to the empty land. Leopards came one by one to investigate the sounds made by the injured animal. I shot them until the ground was soft with their bodies.

This Mountain

Cyril comes by during his lunch break, bringing us news that is both good and bad. Mr. Strydom built an elegant, lethal trap. Cyril saw it. It was a roofed and fenced pen. In the evening, they tied a sheep to a post in the middle. On the outside, they strung up two fences going out from either side of the pen. If a leopard hit the fence, the idea is that it would follow it to the pen. The only way into the pen was through a hole in the bottom. A leopard would have to scramble through to get in. Below that hole, Mr. Strydom set a trap - two rows of metal teeth that open wide, waiting for an animal to step in it. It snaps shut, closing over the animal's leg, often breaking its bones.

They heard a leopard screaming from the trap in the late evening. They shot it. Cyril was allowed to take photographs to ID the animal.

"Verreaux," says Professor Lindsay when he sees the photos. Verreaux is laid out on the ground, asleep like the sheep. There is a tear in his fur just above the shoulder where the bullet went through his body. I almost respect them for doing it that way. There is something particularly inhumane about being shot in the head. Not that a leopard is particularly concerned with an open casket funeral. It just makes these pictures easier to look at. He still holds some small remnant of his personality.

"Mr. Strydom has donated the body to Cape Parks. I'm not sure what he expects us to do with it. I'd like to have it stuffed and have the internal organs examined. We should get very interesting information from studying his insides."

"Be sure to measure him before you cut him up. I would like that data."

"Sure."

The idea of cutting up Verreaux makes me feel a bit sick. I would want to bury him, give him a place to remember him by. Maybe I would bury him at the base of the tree where he must have sharpened his claws. Or I would bury him in Ruan's graveyard, looking over the mountains he roamed all his life. That would be a nice place for a leopard to rest.

After Cyril leaves to go back to work, our second and third visitors arrive. Pascal comes running into the room and jumps on my bed.

"I made you a card!" he says. He's drawn an outline of a gecko with a green pen on a white piece of paper. Inside it says *Hang in there*.

"That's sweet, Pascal, thank you," I say. I look over at Professor Lindsay. He's pretending to be asleep.

"Are you feeling alright?" says Ruan. He is standing in the doorway. His kind face is filled with a gentle concern.

"I'm fine, Ruan, feeling much better."

"When I heard you and the professor had been trapped on the mountain in the rain yesterday, I was very worried. It is good that you rest here. How is the professor's ankle?"

I look over at Professor Lindsay. He's still pretending to sleep.

"I think it's fine," I say.

I don't know what they've been told, but they obviously don't know where we were or what we were up to. I'm glad.

"How are you Pascal?" I say.

"I'm okay. I'm sad about the sheep. And really sad about the leopard. They think it was living in the forest. I had my own leopard and didn't even know."

He picks up the card, opening and closing it.

"Also, I'm not talking to Pa anymore. He's the one who shot the leopard."

I look at Ruan, confused.

"Ruan," I say, "I thought you said you would never kill a leopard."

"Nee, Erica," he says. He looks embarrassed, scratching his head with his hand. "I said I wouldn't hunt a leopard. This leopard was trapped. Someone had to put it out of pain."

"Did you hear something, Erica?" says Pascal. "I thought I heard someone say something just now." Ruan shakes his head. He lights a cigarette for comfort. Doctor Clarke appears from somewhere and immediately asks him to put it out or take it outside. He looks torn between staying and going. He ends up taking his cigarette outside.

"You know how I don't eat animals that are hunted?" says Pascal. "Now I don't even eat animals that are raised to be food. I am a vegetarian."

"What about chicken?" I ask.

"I don't know. I don't get quite as sad when a chicken or a fish dies. Maybe those will be alright."

Pascal's logic, as always, is perfectly sound. It's just not conventional.

* * * * *

When Pascal leaves, Professor Lindsay wakes up from his pretend sleep.

"How's your ankle?" I tease. He rolls his eyes.

"It's fine," he says. "My head is killing me though."

I sit up and slide my legs to the floor. Doctor Clarke has washed and dried my clothes and they wait at the foot of my bed. I take them and go to the bathroom to change out of the large shirt and baggy shorts I've been lent. When I get back, Professor Lindsay is sitting up in bed. I get back into bed, tucking the sheets tight under my chin. I still feel cold from yesterday.

"So, it was Verreaux," I say.

"Yes," he says. "Shame. What a waste. Impressive work, though. Can you imagine the effort it would have taken him to kill eighteen sheep? It's nearly as amazing as catching that eagle-owl."

"And as heartless as killing a pregnant baboon," I add.

"What pregnant baboon?"

We look at each other from our beds.

"Oh come on, Prof.," I say. "How many times have you kept secrets from me? In any case, it doesn't matter anymore. He's gone."

Professor Lindsay puts his hands behind his head and stares up at the ceiling. I'm not sure if he's angry or not, but he doesn't seem to be.

"I saw him, you know," he says, "when we broke down and you went for your walk. He was following the road and came straight up to the car. He sniffed the bumper and looked at me through the window before moving on into the forest. I wish I had said goodbye."

I wonder how many people knew he was there, kept him as their own secret. He lived so close to all of us.

"I think he did it on purpose," I say. "Like he knew that by getting caught, he would distract the farmers from the existence of his children. He was sacrificing himself to keep them safe."

Professor Lindsay laughs.

"That is preposterous," he says. "What does an animal know about sacrifice? Even if it did cross Verreaux's mind to protect his children, getting himself killed was definitely not the best way to do it. With the dominant male in the area gone, there will be many contenders for his territory. When a new male comes, the first thing he'll do is kill the cubs of the previous territory holder. Those cubs will have to grow up fast if they're to survive."

I hope Clementine knows what Professor Lindsay knows. I hope she keeps her children far away

and tells them not to talk to strangers.

"It will be interesting to monitor the takeover of another male," says Professor Lindsay. "We can get camera traps up on the edges of Verreaux's former territory. I don't know how we should protect those cubs though. Maybe I could use my funding for a relocation."

"Good luck," I say. "Wish I were staying to help out."

"Oh right," he says. "You leave very soon. Well, I'll just get this master's student to help. If she's as keen as she sounds, it should be easy to convince her to switch projects. Then I could just use her funding as well."

"Knock, knock," says someone at the door.

It's Mariette. She reprimands Professor Lindsay for putting me in danger and clucks and coos over his ankle. She tells me how brave I am and how stupid I am for following Professor Lindsay hiking on a rainy day. Apparently, she's been told the same story that Pascal and Ruan know. Professor Lindsay and I learn from her that we went hiking and got caught in a storm. Professor Lindsay twisted his ankle and I used his radio to call Cyril for help. We carried him down and brought him here. Cyril and the vet must be in cahoots for the story to be flying so nicely.

She is exactly what we both need, a mothering souls to shower us with attention and care. And scones. She has a basket full of hot scones fresh from the oven. Professor Lindsay and I eat them quickly. Doctor Clarke has given us plenty of water, but not much food. Maybe he knew what Mariette was bringing.

"When will they be released, Doctor?" asks Mariette.

"Erica can leave this evening. We'll have to see about the professor though. He's still unstable."

Professor Lindsay glares at him. Doctor Clarke smiles pleasantly.

"Shame," says Mariette. "I'll have chicken soup ready when you get back, Erica. Now get some rest."

Mariette stands by Professor Lindsay's bedside looking down at him. He has his eyes closed now and looks like he's asleep. She leans over and kisses him tenderly on his forehead. He moves a little and shakes his arm out of the constraints of the sheets. He takes her hand in his and settles back into his pillow. She sits down on the bed. She stays there holding his hand for a long time. Eventually, he begins to snore. She lifts his hand up and kisses it, then lays it back on the bed. By the time she turns to leave, I have tactfully closed my eyes against their moment. I listen for her footsteps and the quietly closed door before I open my eyes.

Professor Lindsay sleeps soundly, a soft scowl on his face. He hides his secrets well, but every so often he slips, and I get to learn something. He tries very hard, but I don't think anyone can be a mountain.

Far More Important

It's a hard week, a week of goodbyes. Professor Lindsay is still feeling bad, so Rubbish takes me up to camp. I pack up my room and say goodbye to the stuffed owl, my computer, the kitchen and the lounge, the trails, and the rock pool. I capture mental image after mental image of the mountains, the view of the farms, the rough roads, and the animals. Then Rubbish drives me to Mariette's house where I stay for the rest of the week.

Cyril takes me out for coffee one last time. We talk about everything, except for the most important things. We sit there for a long time, through many cups of coffee and tea, knowing it's the last time we'll see each other.

He gives me a small box. It is wrapped in the most beautiful tissue paper. The paper is blue with patterns of clouds. The clouds look real, mobile, moody, like clouds I could never draw. He makes me promise not to open it until I am home in Portland. I promise, not really wondering what is inside. Nothing he can give me will make me feel any more or less strongly about the strange relationship we had. Besides, the box is beautiful as it is, contents obscured by the wrapping of cloud.

I decide to open it anyway. Inside is a flash drive. On the flash drive are all the videos Professor Lindsay and I recorded during my time in the Wolkeberg. Kudu, klipspringer, rabbits, and porcupines flood the screen. Also the leopards. George, Verreaux, Clementine and the cubs are all there. There are even a few clips I hadn't seen of the cubs, and one or two of George – just about as many as I had kept a secret from Professor Lindsay.

It makes me wonder. When had Cyril found these videos? How long had he known about the cubs and the other leopards? Why hadn't he said anything?

I return the camp keys to Professor Lindsay and say a final goodbye. He's being held hostage by Doctor Clarke in the veterinary clinic and is not very happy about it. The ladies have been gossiping that the pills Professor Lindsay is being given are actually for alcohol detox. No wonder he still feels sick.

Professor Lindsay is his usual self - he complains about the food, the pain, his head, and not being able to be at camp monitoring leopards. He complains that I'm leaving, but manages to avoid saying anything complimentary about the work I've done. I don't ask him about the videos on the flash drive. It doesn't matter anymore. Instead we argue about small things and discuss the future of the leopards and

conservation. When I leave, part of me wishes for a hug. Besides carrying him down the mountain, the only physical contact we've had was that first handshake. Instead, we exchange nods and a few short words. I know I'll miss him the most.

The air is cold on my face as I walk out of Germane, down the road toward the N2 and the distant gas station where my bus will be in a several hours. I have plenty of time. The sun is still up and the bus only comes at midnight.

They'd all be upset if they knew I was out here alone. I should have told them, but someone would have stopped me. Instead, I told Cyril I was getting a ride with Mr. Strydom, who knew I was getting a ride with Rubbish. I told Mariette and Rubbish I was getting a ride with Ruan. And I told Ruan I was getting a ride with Cyril. I didn't tell Professor Lindsay anything. He didn't ask. If he had, I would have told him the truth. He would have understood my need to be alone.

As I walk, I have the familiar feeling that something is following me. The feeling is too strong to ignore. I turn around and see it – the mountain. The sun is just going down and the clouds boil up over it. I stop to watch the colors change. I think about Clementine. She's somewhere up there with her family, oblivious to the trouble caused by her and her kind, but perhaps aware of the loss of Verreaux. Does she know that with loss comes change? Another male might fill the gap, kill the cubs, live in Verreaux's home. Perhaps he will be more destructive than Verreaux and take advantage of the easy food provided by Mr. Strydom and other farmers. Perhaps he will father more cubs. Like the mountain with its ever changing mood of clouds, this place is not static. Professor Lindsay, Cyril, and Cape Parks will keep pushing for conservation. Mr. Strydom and the farmers will keep listening in their own peculiar fashion. I've seen it just in this week since Verreaux was shot. Ruan and Mr. Strydom were ostracized. No one wanted anything to do with the men who so coldly trapped and shot a leopard. The newspapers picked at them until even their families felt raw. Ruan repented as much as he could. Mr. Strydom is too stubborn for that, but he's moved the sheep off that piece of land.

I turn back to the road. In front of me is a line of tracks. They were not here before. She is there, just beyond the bushes, walking through the fading light.

I consider following the tracks off the road, hunting for her, seeing what I had always wanted to see - a leopard free in her natural environment. But I move on, taking with me things that are far more important to me now – a handful of porcupine quills, a flash drive of videos, a hand-made card and box from Pascal, and a notebook of memories.