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Plastic City and Other Stories

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A dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the
degree of Masters in Creative Writing

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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.

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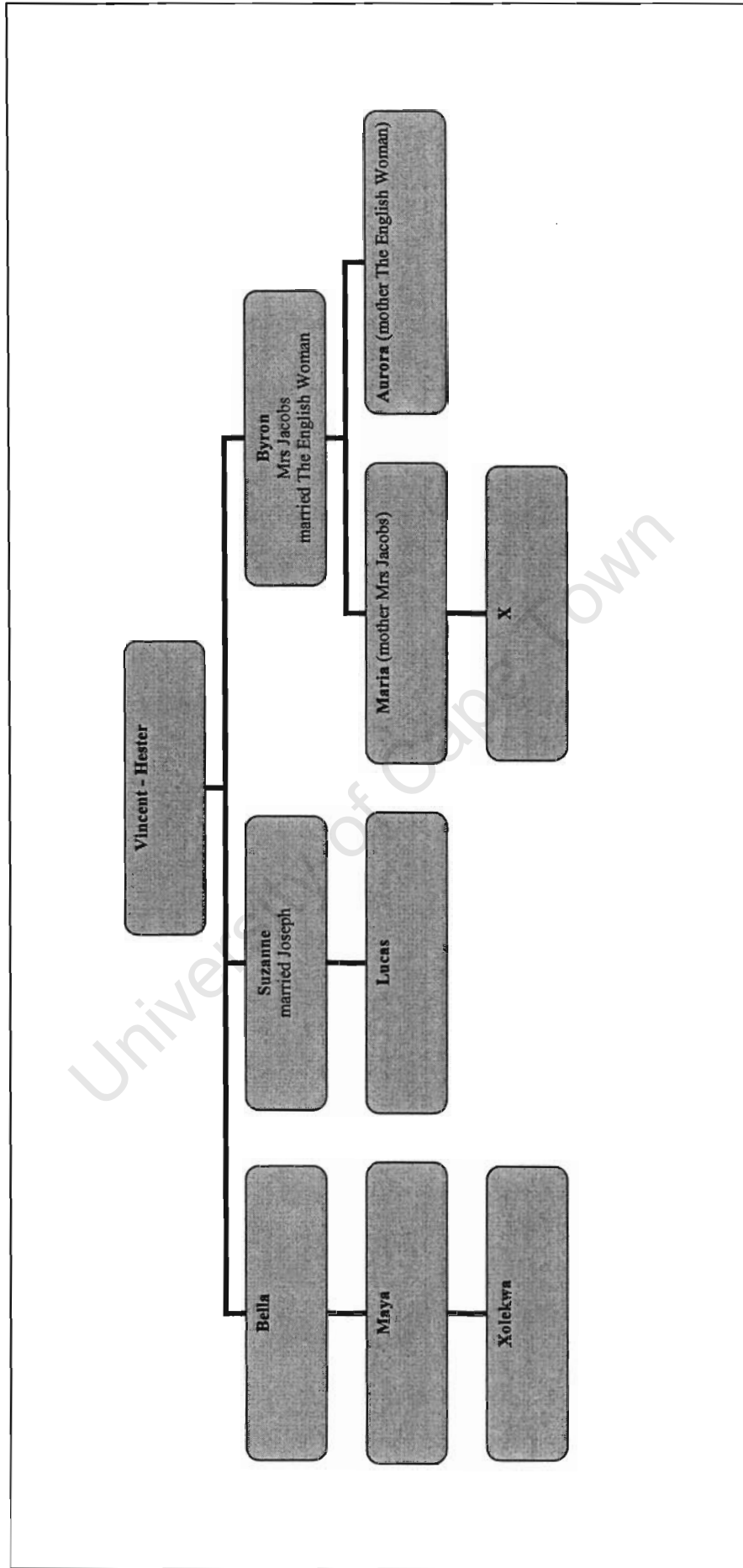
Plastic City and Other Stories

Abstract

Plastic City and Other Stories is a set of inter-connected short stories that capture moments in the lives of members of one family. The stories traverse more than five decades of the family's years lived in Cape Town, South Africa. While the stories are essentially about the individual, greater matters - outwardly beyond the character's experience - affect and influence the decisions, choices and, ultimately, the lives of each character.

The collection is underpinned by several themes - the most pertinent being the familial bond which serves as a link between stories and enables the reader to become acquainted with the characters through several perspectives as they recur through-out the collection. There are also other, more subtle themes that form a connection between events happening decades apart.

A, not entirely unobtrusive, narrator links these independent allegories together via inter-leading pieces, adding another dimension to the collection by virtue of her role as, not only narrator, but also as family member. Nine stories with nine inter-leading chapters make up the collection of *Plastic City and Other Stories*.



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There is no time to prepare the senses for the warm months.

One morning, the heat is suddenly here. Hot and petulant, the ochre sun is up early, daring us to come outside. As if it never left us to the bitter wind, the months of rain, or the cold long nights.

Everything is right again.

The air itself now is saturated with the fragrance of blossoms with long, playful names. Gladioli. Frangipani. Honeysuckle. The salty sea smell can drift for miles on days like these. Skins turn a dark shade; the city lights up from below so everything is exaggerated. A placid ocean, a flat mountain, a city's old soul beneath summer skin. Cape Town is seldom humble, especially not in February.

People change too. Everyone walks lighter. Girls vanish in the milieu of summer. Strangers speak a little easier, nodding greetings. Elderly men tilt their straw hats. White sun caps all the way from New York, shielding caramel and coffee faces, bop hellos back. Chafing between strangers on these streets, which could happen on another day, dries to dust in the hot air. Even the smoky exhausts from minibus taxis that careen down streets, metal bodies twisted to the side as alignments falter, cannot spoil the mood. Taxi guards stick their heads out of moving windows to shout where they are heading and become part of the charm, for now.

Traders on the side-walk will get good business this month. Zimbabwean bananas with brown spotted yellow skins, coquettish Durban mangoes turning sweeter still, sell by the bag. The city's drifters, who live for the change of season, will get

more food than at any other time, and maybe some money for booze or glue to keep their own senses switched off.

“Cities have souls you know,” he always said.

Now I believe him. My grandfather. Being back after the months of travel in Europe has made me hungry for something. Maybe it is a place called home, maybe more. The unhurried seduction of heat, sand and rawness. People live close to the ground here. Maybe it is the intensity of the sun or the closeness of sorrow, around every corner in some places, which makes life so precious. Anyway, it is good to be home. I feel sane for the first time in months.

The house is cool during the day at any time. It's a trick my grandmother mastered a long time ago. She keeps the curtains closed and the windows just slightly open. When we were children, it always gave the house an eerie sense of mystery. As if it were full of ghouls in its semi-darkness, with threadbare portraits of family members and its weeping Jesus, when everyone else was baking in their lounges and expiring with cups of Rooibos tea on their south facing stoeps.

Outside, the sun is starting to set. The crickets are out and calling for all the world to hear that it's time to mate. I turn the lights on. There it is, as if I had never left. I run my hand across the dark wood of that ancient table, trying to draw out its mysteries - secrets I know it must be in on. Scars where infants hit their heads, circles left behind from rowdy lunches. And here, where a daughter's stiletto heel clung to the ball foot as she lost her virginity, the flesh of her lip broken to mark a coming of age. This spot, where Grandpa fell, surprised expressions all round as the family crowded over him. We buried our grandfather and ate bitterness at our first meal without him.

I hear her soft, unsteady footsteps walking towards me. Down the passageway to see if I am still here. Hester, my heart-broken grandmother and the only one left who can bear witness to all of our lives.

“Maya, you still here my girl?”

“Yes, just getting ready to leave.”

“Don’t forget to switch off the light,” she says smiling gently.

“Yes,” I say. I reach across to flip the switch. In the darkness I am sure that I see him there: stooped over a chair, his finger tracking the gold thread burrowing through the red. I turn quickly away from the dark, afraid that if I look again, he will be gone.

University of Cape Town

1952

Vincent

He closed his eyes as he brushed the red and gold brocade with his fingers. It had the texture and smell of wealth. Like the rich cloth, framed in oak and stinkwood, that stood beside expensive-looking tables in homes where his mother had cooked when he was a boy. Vincent knew that this fabric belonged to places and ideals far beyond his quiet room. The way the skinny gold threads clung together, mapping the thick red fabric - first curving to the left, then spiralling sharply, diving beneath another, before ending in a dramatic arabesque. Its unashamed exhibitionism fascinated him.

He had no choice, he reminded himself again.

For two weeks Vincent rose with the distant sounds of the devout being called to prayer, cleaned and dressed and made his way to the workbench where he remained bent over the chairs until late each night. He removed the old covers and made sure that the seats were sturdy and in good condition, before covering each with the fabric that had been cut according to a pattern, marked with chalk onto brown paper. With his spectacles pushed up onto his forehead - one eye off duty, the other on heightened alert - Vincent threaded Egyptian red cotton through the half-moon upholstery needle, then negotiated it through the chair's button loop. Before replacing the seats, he stripped the wooden legs and backrest, repaired the damages and lacquered the frame in a mahogany varnish. When he finished the sixth and last of the chairs, he sat down and for the first time in three weeks, rubbed his eyes.

It was the same way he remembered rubbing his eyes after a long day at the bookshop where he had worked for twenty years. *Cohen Brothers Books*. Setting out with his ten years of schooling and new brown trilby hat, angled left and worn with a peacock-green feather, Vincent went in search of a job. More than a job, an occupation. Was it too much to hope for a life-long passion? After all, he was master of his destiny. Even so, it must have been providence that guided him to the newly established bookstore. Vincent took a wrong turn in a town that he knew like a lover. He grew agitated as political turmoil threatened to explode onto the streets, and at night, he too was at peace and slept to the perpetual rhythm of the ocean and wind. Yet, he had taken a wrong turn and ended up before the still wet front door of *Cohen Brothers Books*.

Mr Cohen threw his eyes over Vincent, let out a tortured wheeze as he reached for his pipe and scurried off. He didn't wait to hear about Vincent's weekends and school vacations spent reading in the public library when other boys of his age were fascinated with wireless broadcasts and learning the art of romance. He didn't notice the care with which Vincent had dressed, nor the shortly clipped nails, polished shoes, or the deliberate expression that gave him an air of self-respect.

"We need packers," Mr Cohen hurriedly said as he made his way to the warehouse.

Vincent arrived at work the following Monday. The milkmen were making their first rounds and a thin line of light was appearing on the horizon. He looked around the bathroom at the back of the warehouse, removed his hat and left it on top of a cupboard - all the while trying not to notice the broken sink and filthy, stained walls. A job was a job, he thought, and at least he was working with books. The warm smell of ink stained onto paper and the possibilities of imagination contained between the pages of a book always carried him away.

Vincent strained beneath the boxes. He worked until his body was exhausted and his mind too tired to wonder. Without favour or distraction he applied himself to even the most menial work. Eventually Mr Cohen conceded that he had rarely seen a man work as hard and he was curious to test Vincent's skills in other areas.

"You're a good man Vincent, you'll go far ... far," he repeated absentmindedly as he became distracted and rushed off in another direction.

Vincent was moved upstairs to the clerical section of the store. His desk was small and he folded his body uncomfortably into the straight-backed wooden chair. It didn't matter though, because he could set his hat on the corner of his desk and from the window see the sprawl of city buildings and some of the homes in the district. He looked onto the world and knew that he was a part of it. The fish market was to his left and on warm days he would hear the bugle calls when fresh snoek was delivered, while conversations of the flower sellers drifted up from the street. In the cramped space he could touch the books, breathe them in.

The new job was less tiring because Vincent placed orders, reconciled stock, filed papers and made the occasional cup of tea for Mr Cohen. Some days he helped out in the store when Miss Wilson, the sickly English lady, was off with an illness that she said was brought on by the Cape's summer heat. And Vincent read more than he had even in youth when he threw away long, hot summers for the pleasure of a read. He liked in particular the works of the two Russian authors, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Maxim Gorky. When he began internal debates about the novels he read, he started jotting down thoughts. Thoughts became questions that became answers, which developed into streams of writing. And a time came when he no longer wrote to debate, but because he did not know how to stop. He wrote in every spare moment, early in the morning and late at night. Even when he met his beloved Hester, he continued, sometimes forgetting

appointments with her, and was very nearly late in asking her parents for her hand in marriage. It was a calling that awoke him in the middle of the night and forced him to grab paper and pen. Words formed in his head like breath filled his lungs. The moments of intense emotion fed his imagination, like the birth of his first daughter Bella. And when his mother, who raised him on the earnings of a cook and the singular belief that passion could achieve anything, died, his tears formed the start of a novel.

The novel grew a few more pages each day until the manuscript was eighteen chapters thick and too precious to be left anywhere, so Vincent carried it with him in his brown leather satchel. He interrogated his memory for stories that he had heard growing up, ones that weren't passed down to busy children any longer. Like the account of the English priest who had married a freed slave and, together with her, left the city to found a village in the middle of the parched Karoo. Their new home stood beneath an open sky, welcoming. And they came - other freed slaves, free blacks and children who had descended from the merging of worlds - from slaves from the East, their European masters and the indigenous Khoi. Every generation that followed had a story to tell.

For ten years Vincent wrote, collecting bits of information from libraries and museums. Records had been kept in pristine condition and documented a history of people, who really had once seemed invisible: dates of arrivals, sales, marriages, births, deaths, crimes and punishments. Vincent was careful not to appear as anything more than a clerk who was collecting information when perspiring guards hesitated and blocked his path at the door.

“What you want with this stuff boy? Is dangerous stuff, can get you into troubles.”

“Just some research for work. My boss is a curious man - historian you see,” Vincent said. He held his hat in both hands and made little eye contact.

And Vincent sacrificed Saturday afternoons to doting couples who repeated themselves, fell asleep in mid-conversation and grew dewy-eyed over browning photos of family members, stored in biscuit tins.

Vincent dreamed that one day he would find the courage to send his novel to a publishing house, but whenever he dreamed, his imagination invented an exhausted editor located in some bustling part of London with mountains of scripts before him and intolerance for anything that was not an English tale. Besides, Vincent often felt as if he were at war with the words that he wrote. The Afrikaans that he would forbid his children from speaking fell easily from his own mouth while he waged a silent battle with his adopted English tongue. So he buried the dream of becoming an author, for the while.

On an ordinary Friday, as usual, Vincent took his lunch hour to buy the few groceries that Hester had asked him for. He returned to find Mr Cohen and the English lady at his desk, hidden in quiet conversation.

“Mr Cohen, Miss Wilson.” Vincent tipped his hat.

“Yes, Vincent. For some time now Miss Wilson has suspected you of, shall we call it ... yes, activities not becoming of a man of your status. Vincent really man, I cannot have you writing this on my premises.” He lifted the manuscript.

Miss Wilson looked up nervously, turned, then aimed her stare at Vincent.

“That was in my satchel,” Vincent said quietly.

“That is not the point Vincent. The point is that you have been very busy with this for quite some time. Quite some time,” he repeated. “We’ve watched you become forgetful, scribbling notes on everything like a mad man. Miss Wilson,” he nodded in

her direction, “was good enough to discover the source of your flailing attention. Good heavens have you lost your mind man? You shall have to leave by day end. We won’t report this to the authorities who would lock you up and ask questions later. Yes, they’d ask questions much later, Vincent. Besides, it seems improper to even employ a person ... a coloured person, in this occupation.” Before Mr Cohen turned to leave, Miss Wilson well out of earshot, he said, “Vincent, you’ve left me no choice. My family, we are new in your country and our memories still fresh. I’m sorry ... I can’t,” he said and walked away slowly.

At the end of his last Friday with the Cohen Brothers, Vincent felt the ground disappear from beneath his feet after each step. Without warning, he had nowhere to go and little to take with him. So focussed on writing, he’d neglected thinking about savings and each spare cent had been used for his needs - paper, a specific black ink from the *Paper and Pen Store* and so many books that the musty smell of second hand reads climbed into the fabric of his clothing. Books occupied every vacant space of his and Hester’s barely adequate home. What would he do? Hester was expecting their second child in less than five months. She brought in no income besides the pittance from the breads and cakes that she baked for neighbours.

Vincent walked a stranger’s path home. He did not notice the pink and orange dusting the land. He took no inspiration from the ocean, spitting into the air, as the wind blew. When he passed by, he didn’t contemplate the story he could tell about the houses along narrow streets with doors permanently open, and children playing outside under the watchful eyes of maternal grannies. He thought instead about what he would say to Hester. He wanted to reassure her that he would start searching for another job without delay. He would not let his family down.

But work in 1952 was not easy to find. He stood in every queue and even knocked on the doors that had been shut because of the recently passed Job Reservation Act that kept the good jobs for white people. The only work that he could find paid too poorly to feed his family. For two weeks he sought desperately, measuring his own anguish by the look on Hester's tired and drawn face. Their second child would be born soon and it had not been an easy pregnancy. Vincent saw how Hester endured her worries about money, the baby and their family's future and he felt overwrought with guilt. All those silent days with him bent over his typewriter had led his wife and child to understand that his was a distant caring.

He closed his eyes and prayed for the first time in his adult life. As a child, he'd been mesmerised by how his uncle had resurrected old tattered pieces of furniture into remarkable chairs and settees that families bought and made their homes with. Before he discovered books, he and his mother would walk to his uncle's home on Friday evenings. After dinner, Vincent would sit with his legs up against his chest on the wooden bench and hand his uncle nails and rivets and was once even allowed to varnish the legs of a mahogany table. The table was broad and beautiful with so many places that he could not count enough people in his own family to seat at it. After a while, Vincent was entrusted with covering a chair, but his uncle kept his good eye on his nephew while the other one shifted purposelessly in its socket.

Vincent imagined that this was something he could do as a man. An honest job. But his mother got angry when he told her that Sunday.

"No," she said, tripping over the English that she only practised with her son. "You have a future in front of you. A proper future and a real job. You just need a little passion and hard work. Your destiny is in your own hands."

They visited his uncle less and less and by the time he'd read *Great Expectations* for the first time, he preferred to stay home and read. Vincent missed the stories his uncle told, about fights in beer halls where he was defending either honour or justice, depending on the day. He longed for the fried fish and chips that his aunty always made. Unlike his mother who let him eat anything, she was convinced that he would go straight to hell if he ate meat on Fridays.

Vincent bowed his head and offered God a pledge. He asked God to help him remember the way his uncle had worked, with not a stitch nor pattern out of place. That God would make his hands useful again. The chairs of the oak dining room set that had been left to his mother by her employer would sell for a fortune if he upholstered the fabric, like his uncle had.

If God would give him that gift, he would never write again. He would trade his love of writing for the simple ability to feed his family and give his children a good education. He would learn to stop dreaming.

Vincent told Hester nothing of his conversation with God. And she never asked when she saw him work day and night fixing those old chairs that had been handed down to him, and were a reminder of his mother's love. She said nothing when she saw him use the last of their money to buy the red and gold fabric. And when she saw him take a chair with him one morning, still she remained silent.

Vincent found an antique shop in Church Street that wanted all six of the oak chairs. Mr Smith, the short and balding owner with the soft brown eyes, said it was not the finest sewing he had seen, but it would do. The fabric could forgive almost anything, he said.

Vincent sold the chairs for enough money to keep the family in food for a month, to purchase more material and some well maintained second-hand chairs. As his skill increased and as his workmanship became exquisite, he worked more regularly for Mr Smith. He transformed beautiful pieces for homes that he never saw the inside of. Vincent still read. Read as often as his family and work would allow, but never wrote another story.

University of Cape Town

The smell of holy water as it swished in porcelain bowls, dark light filtering through stained glass windows and the sound of choirs singing. This is how I think of Hester. My grandfather I associate with more earthly things. Books, their stale smell as their pages burn slowly, hammers and sickles on the covers of A5 magazines.

I suppose I became the custodian of their lost moments because these threads of memory seemed too flimsy, like strands of gossamer holding together a lifetime of knowing them. I wanted more. Something that painted them beyond Sunday Lunch's portrait. Who they were when they were not mother, father, grandparent, sister. I was jealous of their pasts, of the lives they lead when I was not around. What their private angst was. What they had chosen to forget. What they would always remember.

I took time off from the publishing company I had started years earlier. Instead of spending days and nights bent over manuscripts, reading until my eyes were wired with red veins, I now began to haunt libraries, listened in on the conversations of strangers, relatives and friends. Then, one by one I went in search of my family.

I'd spend days waiting patiently for each to speak. Sipping cups of tea on Saturday afternoons, just like my grandfather once had. They would tell many stories - selected from memories stored far away - and I would rummage through these, asking for more and more still, until I heard what I had come for. I was surprised at what they were willing to tell. As if all they were waiting for, was someone to ask.

I wouldn't always like what I heard. Often I'd regret that I ever started, but, having come too far already, had to continue.

That's how it is. And that's how I came to be keeper of lost stories.

University of Cape Town

1959

Hester's Sense of Things

Hester had a delicate sense of smell. It was her nose that traced the plump orange roses left on her windowsill, light with the scent of budding romance and fresh tea, back to the garden from where they had been picked. Back to the hands that had picked them and into the arms of her first and only love, Vincent. So it made no sense that she didn't detect the evening's tomato bredie being reduced to emaciated pips and blackened, broken onion rings. Somewhere between over cooked rice and burnt food, Hester's mind had wondered. She would go to the dance.

She knew his face as she knew her own. Every angle, every crease: the map to his heart. And what it meant when his jaw tightened, lips conjoining into a thin straight line.

Eventually he would say in his quiet but certain manner, "Go if you must. We'll be here when you come home."

Anyway, she should be grateful, other husbands would not let their wives go at all, she supposed. And Vincent was a serious man. She knew that when they got married, more so since he left his job at the bookstore. Now he spent every spare moment reading at the back of the house and made few demands on her, except for the occasional cup of tea. The only time he went out, besides for the morning paper or weekly trip to the library, was when he disappeared with Dr Adams or the chap from the union and came back hours later smelling of whisky, and more aloof than when he had left. Anyway, she would go and why not. She wouldn't be alone after all. She would

have Betty Daniels with her. Something else that bothered Vincent. He never had taken to Betty, ever since their wedding day when Betty disappeared to the back of the hall with the Isaacs twins. Hester reasoned that the truth was altogether better left unsaid. Though how the green smell, fresh and intoxicating, did not drift in and reach up into everyone's nostrils was a miracle to Hester. Still now, Betty kept a special variety of what she called her asthma cure, hidden in a biscuit tin at the back of the food cupboard.

"Tch!" Hester flicked her tongue off the back of her palate in the way that she did when she was angry, irritated, or just making a point. Betty was her companion. Strange as she sometimes was, she had been a reliable friend ever since they'd met at the blouse factory all those years ago. Betty had accompanied every birth, every birthday and every funeral since.

The sky was turning a dark violet beyond the rectangular kitchen window. It was time for Bella, Suzi and Byron to come inside and eat the pilchards, smooored with onion and tomatoes that she'd made in place of the burnt stew, with a dessert of rice pudding salvaged from the evening's meal. She would boil water for their baths while they ate, enough to fill the galvanised tub a quarter way, wash and settle them to bed. A story was read to them every evening and Bella was old enough to do it and did it better than her, anyway. It would give her time enough to clean and change, before Betty arrived in less than two hours.

"Rice pudding, what did we do to deserve this special treat?" Vincent was pleased.

"Yes, gits, thought it would be nice for a change. Had some rice left over from yesterday." Hester crossed her fingers beneath the table. "I thought I would go down to the Drill Hall with Betty this evening. They're having the dance tonight. Betty will

fetch me and we'll walk together. Anyway, just spend a few hours there. The children are washed and Bella will read to Suzi and Byron. Is that alright?"

"That's up to you. We will be here," Vincent said, before he disappeared somewhere into the darkness at the back of the house.

Hester had been saving the pair of black stockings that she'd bought at the Elson's Christmas sale for a special occasion. She tugged at the draw, lifting and pulling at the spot where it hesitated. Everything was packed neatly - pairs of stockings, yellowing half-slips, petticoats and other bits of underwear. She gathered the stocking into luxurious black folds resting between her thumbs and slid the flawless skin onto her feet, shimmying it up to her thighs.

She would wear the strapless velvet dress and matching three-point shawl, which she also kept for special occasions. The oak door of the wardrobe moaned as the scent of dried-up petals and rose oil escaped from a crowded interior where dresses, some too small, coats, hand knitted jerseys and skirts from years ago, hung patiently.

With dabs of lavender water on the nape of her neck and the inside of her wrists, she examined herself for the first time in a long while. She was a handsome woman, some people said. Even beautiful, she had been told not so long ago. Her shoulders were strong, breasts firm and her hips swayed generously above strong calves when she moved. A gentle reminder of three children showed in the curve of her belly beneath the dress. She would be thirty-two soon and the years were starting to show at her temples, where lines of silver marked her black hair.

It was a cool mid-October evening. The windy season. Groups of boys stood at the corner where Babu, half-asleep behind the counter, was still selling loose cigarettes and cool-drinks.

“Evenings ladies,” some of the boys greeted and tipped their hats as Hester and Betty passed by. The street could barely fit two cars and ran downhill in the direction of the sea. Doors were left open so houses stuffy with the smell of boiled vegetables and braised meat could catch a breath of sea air after the evening meal. Some families sat on their stoeps - fathers smoking, mothers listening to radio dramas - while watching the dusk graduate to night. The cobbles down Sterling Street were punishing on her good black court shoes. As they walked she placed the silk purple flower that she had rescued from an old hat, behind her left ear and pushed her thick black hair to the back.

Betty, who had once been the prettiest girl around, had grown puggish in her loneliness and had started to resemble her late mother to a tee. Down to the thick waist and buttocks that swaggered behind her, taut against the full length brown dress, which hid opaque cream pantyhose that in turn hid reliable, determined legs.

Eddie and the Envelopes, Eddie Layne’s 6-piece band, was playing a foxtrot when they arrived at the packed hall. Pie Gevriet stood at the door in his immaculate Shulman Brother’s suit. Pie was called such because his face was round and flat and had peepholes that looked as if they had been etched out with a pastry knife. And a terrifying but comforting sight he was.

“Hester, grab us a table.” Betty pushed her friend into the cherry tobacco air. Tables had been placed around the outskirts of the room and only a vacant spot of polished pine wood was left in the middle for dancing. Everyone was there, even the neighbours from two doors away who were said to have been the products of decades of inter marriage. Henry Wilson and his family all looked alike. At less than five foot, they wore identical, hospital-issue, black-rimmed spectacles that made them seem intense and intelligent, though they were not. Fatiema Alie, The Beautiful, hair down to her perfect knees, was there too. And the girls from the flats, who by some twist of fate

had been born boys, were groomed in the latest fashions and bouffant hairdos. Without them, no party could start.

He was there. Cas. Hester could smell him from clear across the room. The curry powder that climbed beneath his skin, staining his hands orange-red as he scooped cup after cup into the brown paper bags, hung around him and everyone that worked in the sweet, pungent smelling shop. She remembers that she hadn't noticed him that first time. Not immediately; not until she fumbled in her purse for change to pay for the few strips of cinnamon that she needed for the sago pudding. He didn't take his eyes from her as she searched in her bag, her pockets, as she unwrapped little pieces of paper and rechecked her bag, cheeks flushed.

"You can bring me the balance tomorrow. It would give me another chance to see you," he said, and turned quickly so she would not see his goateed face going boyish with admiration.

That evening for the first in many more to come, Hester burnt the sago pudding as her thoughts returned to the shy young man behind the counter. His black eyes following her wherever she went in the shop crowded with open bags of basmati rice, powders and pastes. She was running out of excuses to see him and had more gifts from the store than she would ever use. A range of spices, saffron worth more than its weight in gold, chillies dried and fresh, so that even her kitchen was taking on the smell of the little spice shop.

Cas had arrived at the dance forty minutes earlier, his younger brother hidden in his shadow. Their deeply religious parents thought that if he took his sibling with, it would encourage a sense of responsibility and, more importantly, sobriety. And while Cas was sworn to many of the lessons their parents taught him, Abdul, desperate to escape the

darkness of being the second child, was not. Cas circled and cut through the crowd four times, while Abdul stayed with their friends who stood outside and talked cars. All but one in the group were slick and handsome with thick, wet, kiss-me-quick curls that fell onto the middle of their foreheads, pointed brogues and white socks. They drew the district's finest girls because their Mothers wore gold and silk and their fathers owned businesses, cars, their own homes.

Hester clutched her handbag close to her chest and looked at the table as Cas and his friends made their way towards her and Betty (who was waving and calling).

“Yoo-hoo ...”

“Betty stop it! You're making a fool of yourself. He doesn't even know you.”

“What? Nonsense, everyone knows everyone else here, yoo-hoo ...”

“Good evening ladies. I thought I saw the room start to sway as you walked in,” said the leader of the pack who had been kicked out of university after a week, had a wife with generous curves chosen for him and would inherit the string of discount stores that his father had built up from nothing.

“Ag shame, sweet of you.” Betty smiled ungraciously as she swiped her hat to the side and tried to catch her breath.

As they glided to another table, Cas remained, staring down at Hester.

“Hello Cas. How are you?”

“Fine. Just fine, Hester. I see you made it. I'm glad. I was hoping ... maybe we can speak later, when the dance is done. I have a car out front. Maybe I can give you a lift. And of course, you too Betty ... a lift home,” he shouted over the sounds the accordion was emitting.

“Ja, sjoe that's lovely of you Cas. See you later.” Betty was over the moon that was not conjured for her.

The banjo called the accordion, drums, double bass, violin and saxophone to pick up pace and volume, until the room tapped to a fiery beat. The smokers killed cigarettes in empty plates and chipped glass ashtrays, drinks were rushed down throats and conversations ended mid-way without promises of later as everyone hit the floor for the square dance. Groups of eight were formed as shoulders rolled, feet slid and twisted, partners were swapped and taken back again.

Hester sat between the six, suddenly vacated chairs. She was married. But he, young and promising, had every pretty girl looking his way. Fool, she almost said out loud. He was being polite. Must be. He probably never had watched her as she walked around the store, stomach pulled in, careful steps. Cas filled her bag with spices, while his father was off in deep conversation with customers, out of pity. He didn't hear the pause in her speech filled with memories of wild love in darkened rooms. Cas was simply being polite. Anyway, she was thinking foolish thoughts. She was married and happily at that. Unlike other women, Hester didn't have to lure her husband home - like the ladies who learnt to bake so well that their husbands drifted away from card games early on Saturday evenings, led back by the smell of their wives' lemon meringue pies and other possibilities.

The dancing was at full tilt. The girls from the flats were teaching Mr Wilson the Quadrille, though he was using up their infinite generosity as he'd take a step, tie a shoe lace, sip a glass of cola or push his spectacles back onto the bridge of his nose with his middle finger, before going in the wrong direction.

A scuffle was about to take place between Pie and an unknown man that had a scar (as thick as a finger and soft beige like new skin) running from his eye to his lip. The story would be told for years to come. Dressed in pleated pants and white shirt buttoned from beneath the collar, he had moved without touching anyone through the

packed, half-lit room directly to Fatiema Alie, The Beautiful. He must have asked her to dance (it was later said) and when she refused (as she was bound to, having been secretly sworn to Pie since her twelfth birthday) he wrapped her hair around his fist and demanded that she apologise. Pie must have crossed the room with a few steps.

“Let her go ... or ... or I’ll have to hit you.”

“Naai, my ou, don be like that. Jis wanted the girlie to dance wit me. I can see she’s spoken for so I’m on my way. No wurries.”

He turned his back as if to go and in a rapid movement that everyone would later swear was quicker than the eye, he pulled out a knife and sliced through Fatiema’s lush hair, so it would no longer brush against her perfect knees but sway at her shoulders. Pie set in motion behind him as the man leapt through the air and dodged men whose fiercest tempers had been provoked. Finally (there was no consent on this) it was Betty who stood resolute as the fellow came towards her, lifted her handbag and swung with all her strength into the face marked with the scar (like a baddie from a Spaghetti Western, it was said). He twirled for a moment, finally hesitated and hit the ground.

“God Antie, wat’s in your beg? Heavy makeup?” was all he said (it was said) as he was led off by Pie for a beating that he would not forget in a hurry.

Betty shook off all congratulations,

“Shame, what a pity, nice looking chap ... did you see how he came running ...”

The evening had passed quickly and Cas was signalling for Hester to meet him outside. Betty was busy holding court, so Hester managed to move quietly and unseen through the hall’s front doors.

“Can I still drop you off? I really would like to, if that’s all right.”

“Yes, thank you. That’s sweet of you.”

“No, not really sweet at all, Hester.”

His words fluttered through her. And she could not, did not, dream of saying no. After dropping off Betty who had told and retold the story five times in the short drive, Hester and Cas sat thankful for the darkness and the loud engine beneath them. Cas drove with Hester's silent consent to the top of the hill that overlooked the entire city. Still they said nothing. He turned off the car, reached over to her and lifted her chin. Cas moved so close to Hester's face that she could feel his breath against her skin. His lips moved between hers as his tongue sought her out. Slowly and softly Cas tugged at the wet flesh, before he kissed Hester with more passion than she had ever felt, or would again. They only spent a few minutes there that, in truth, felt like a lifetime. Eventually, Hester pulled away from Cas. "Please take me home," she said in a clear soft voice.

The drive down the mountainside back to the city was dark and still, while outside, hopes for a long summer prevailed. Couples walked hand in hand as they returned home from Friday evening parties and the homeless came out from the shadows and lay on the pavement so they could watch the city lights signal the way for the ocean.

Cas stopped the car at the bottom of the road. Without turning to say goodbye, Hester swung her body heavily out of the car, shut the door and began the arduous walk up the incline to where her husband waited half-asleep in the dark.

Standing naked in the galvanised bathtub in the centre of the kitchen, she poured cold water over her arms, face and mouth. Rubbing the soap frantically between her hands she lathered her arms, face and breasts. But the smell would not leave. Not even the antiseptic, that she poured too much of into the water, could release her from the same odour that lurked on his skin and hung around the shop.

Hester woke the next morning when it was still dark, exhausted but desperate to escape the repeating dreams and the stench that still lingered on her skin. Vincent said little over their Saturday morning breakfast. He'd woken early as usual, took a walk to Babu's for the morning paper and now sat reading as he finished his tea and toast. Hester first took down the picture of Jesus (beside a recently hung, hand-drawn sketch of Marx, to keep balance, said Vincent) made the sign of the cross and promised it would go back up. But for now she couldn't bare his weeping eyes, watching wherever she went (Marx, she didn't mind). Then she cleaned the entire morning, rubbing the cupboards down on the inside and out with soapy warm water, throwing away every last grain of spice and leaving parcels of lavender tied in muslin in every corner. But the odour lingered for days, months and eventually years.

In a final and permanent act, Hester refused to eat or ever make curry again. Her children and later her grandchildren mocked her, thinking her silly and a little strange. And they moaned loudly and repeatedly about her foibles. Hester ignored them and continued peeling potatoes but hastened from the kitchen, handkerchief over nose, at the smell of curry powder.

Vincent would ask her many years later why she so steadfastly refused to eat or cook the aromatic dishes, when once she had even built up a stock of spices.

"Gits, spouse I just went off curry. Not the thing for me," was all she said.

There were certain things that one had to know about Sunday Lunch, for instance that it was a standing arrangement. These sacred trysts were not to be interfered with.

We also knew that we would eat like the wealthy on Sundays. Knobbly bread crusts, which on any other day had to be eaten so as not to be wasteful, were lopped off so we tasted only morsels of white bread that were buttered, jammed, sliced into prisms and eaten alongside tea with milk and sugar, or lemon and honey. For that matter, no shortcuts whatsoever were to be taken on a Sunday. In our home as in the homes of everyone we knew, no expense was spared on this one day.

In the preparing hours, a melody rose from every kitchen as spoons swivelled in cast iron pots, knives drummed against wooden chopping boards and glasses chimed as they were placed beside hand-me-down crockery that read 'Made in England', in cursive.

Sorted and packed, we would sit around the oak dining table on the red and gold chairs that themselves held more secrets than we ever knew. Grandpa Vincent at the head of the table, Ma Hester at the other end, their offspring with their spouses, guests and friends next to them, while the children were seated on a makeshift contraption of an unused wooden door, propped up on four even-sized chairs. Feet filled the length of that underworld - black brogues high on Nugget tapped the parquet floor, while side-buckled patent leather shoes dangled from crossed ankles. Fuchsia-pink courts sat perfectly still beside takkies that tried to kick girls' knees at the opposite end of the table. Flat slip-in's fussed all around us.

And as the family swelled and deflated like a tempestuous melody, we learned to know ourselves. The little things - like about my mother Bella, who cut her food into even sized bites before setting down her knife and masticating at least twenty times per mouthful (how she insisted on referring to it, oblivious to our giggles). Or how Grandpa Vincent gradually became more untidy in his eating habits, at first spilling here and there until he stopped eating in front of us entirely, too ashamed that his body could not obey his will. This prepared us for what was to come.

There were some basic rules, many that had come about because someone had first broken them. These were handed down, the ignorance of which would lead to more rules, so we were careful to observe the most important ones:

1. Along with Sunday Lunch came The Sunday Look: appliquéd, frilly clothes and curled hair. Even though this felt surreal under a hot sun, no matter how much we cheated, lied and tried to escape, still our hair was moulded into cones and our cheeks pinched as our mothers tried to capture the look of strawberries and cream that girls on English chocolate boxes, in their frilly dresses and beatific faces, achieved easily. Still, no child dare show up without it.
2. We were not church going people though religion, as we knew it - through red and white ceramic moulds of the Lady Madonna in the darkest corners of our grandparents' home - was present. So Sunday Lunch began with a prayer.
3. If dinner was at your house, enough chairs and tables had to be arranged for, even if this meant borrowing chairs from neighbours who came still attached to at least half of them.
4. Greet everyone and always enquire about the health of the host, even if it means a verbal tour of your auntie's haemorrhoids.

5. No elbows, bottoms or shoes on the table. This lesson was learnt the hard way for us children - through denial of our reason for being: Sunday pudding.
6. Eat with your mouth closed, unless you're asking for more food.
7. Most importantly, there had to be enough food left over for sandwich fillings for Monday school lunches.
8. Always ask for seconds, unless everything has been dished up (a fact clearly communicated with an uncovered bowl carried back to the kitchen immediately).
9. All talk is permissible besides for matters related to the toilet, bowel or genitals. No Afrikaans and slang.
10. A pie and a quiche are not the same things (this last rule was a late addition, added when Ma Hester promised pie and instead delivered quiche).
11. A single, discreet hoot (not to be confused with two or three long honks of the horn after a wedding or party) was to be sounded on leaving as a show of a nice afternoon.

1968

Sweet August's Bitter Aftertaste

Saturdays had something about them. And on this particular Saturday, the air had an even sweeter smell, subdued by a twist of anticipation that settled in Bella's stomach. She couldn't figure it out. It wasn't Christmas, not New Year's Eve and no one was celebrating a birthday. But it was undeniable; there was something in the air.

Bella was at the age where she knew what it meant to be a woman in most of the usual ways, besides the obvious. Or so said the aunties who like vampires arrived in the dark or when death was imminent, expecting graciousness and cups of tea. She'd never been with a man, not because they didn't try. Bella's impenetrable innocence drove men insane - men who usually had no trouble in checking out, sizing up and smoothing down the hottest little mamas. But Bella, she rebuked them at every turn because she honestly had no interest in any of the pavement Romeos who threw pebbles against her window, disrupting the sanctity of sleep.

Her mother, Hester, said her time would come, as she passed down family secrets to Bella and baby sister Suzanne (who was prettier and more easily ensconced in the usual ways of man and woman). So on her sixteenth birthday, Bella not only received her mother's recipe book but also heard how the women in their family had battled fiercely to protect their brood and would sacrifice almost anything for that cause. Like her own great Ouma who walked across the Karoo in a summer of fire, thirst and desperation with a child on each arm and a third on her back. No one in her line was ever beaten or cheated on, Hester warned as memory circumvented history.

Saturday usually started the same way. Bella would hear the solid oak front door of their home in the district slam shut as her father, Vincent, made his way from Babu's with the weekend papers. She waited in the doorway of her bedroom, expecting it. It never came. Unusual, all she could hear was a voice that began in the lounge and shrunk until it was nothing but a susurrantion filtering through the long, dark passageway. Bella tracked the sound like an animal following the scent of blood.

There she was. Her skin like dark rum, blue shadowed lids, ruby lips and asymmetric face that made her look severe and disproportionate, like a Picasso painting. Still, she sat on the red and gold dining chair like a goddess and commanded the men's attention. They listened when she spoke, torsos heaving in unison as they shared the air between themselves, so they could live off her every word.

Bella jumped back into the passageway and leaned her head against the wall. Bella had never seen this woman before, but here she was sitting on chairs that were usually reserved for Sunday Lunch and other special occasions. They were family heirlooms after all, chairs that had a history since her father had lovingly restored them, sold them and bought them back three months later from Mr Smith's antique shop.

Vincent, Mr Gomas the next door neighbour, Comrade Mhlaba from the union and Dr Adams the family practitioner, priest, postman and saint to all political prisoners, sat in a guilty semi-circle around her. Hester quietly left a tray of tea and freshly syruped donuts on the side table. She no longer offered the old, broken cup to Comrade Mhlaba since Vincent had grabbed it angrily that one time and drank out of it himself.

"There is much going on back home. We can feel the time is getting closer and closer. This meeting that I've been telling you about will only be revealed to a handful of comrades hours before it is due to take place. We can take no chances. That's why I

am here for a little while to rely on your protection, silence and vigilance. Too much has already happened and it seems that the walls have ears and also tongues.”

They breathed out.

She spoke. “I will ensure that our comrades in Jo’burg know of your obvious dedication.” She expelled words from her full lips like gunfire, commanding men who obeyed her. No one said her name. Not that it could encapsulate a woman who it seemed was too much for the confines of flesh.

The men left one by one. Mr Gomas, Comrade Mhlaba and Dr Adams passed through the front door shaking Vincent’s hand and, as they did, sealing some bond between men. The woman remained behind and would stay as a guest in their home, Vincent told his family.

“Please give our visitor the utmost privacy. Suzanne will sleep in Byron’s room and Bella I know you won’t ask her foolish questions. She is tired and here for a few days of business. It would be better for all concerned if you do not tell anyone that we have a guest.”

Bella lay in bed with her feet against the wall when the woman returned later that day, carrying the evening breeze as if she were some sort of earth element. Shutting the door, she sat on the bed at the opposite end of the room and took her shoes off so quietly that Bella strained to hear her: first left, then right. Bella didn’t stir. If this stranger could cast a spell that transformed respected men into schoolboys with revolutionary dreams, and her name went unspoken as if it could leave a trail of sorcery in the air, then Bella would not face her.

“My mother used to scold me when I put my feet up against the wall like that. She said I would dirty the surface, but I don’t think she knew why it bothered her. Maybe she thought it was unlady-like or a sign of laziness, maybe too much pride. I

never understood how anyone could have too much pride ... never stopped me anyway, just did it when she wasn't around. I never saw her with her feet up, mind you ..."

The invitation did not go unnoticed. They became accomplices in a strange union where Bella didn't ask the other's name but knew things about her, some instinctively. They'd pass one another in the passageway without making eye contact, but to the observant, of whom there was one, they were like disobedient children. Bella was no longer resistant to the charms the night could bring and she stayed up just to hear the woman tell those stories or sing the latest hits so quietly, it left chilled flesh along Bella's bare arms.

She spoke in pictures - of a golden mechanical city, which was incongruously raw and jagged - and only surrendered to sleep when the sun pulled the morning sky into position. Bella had never been outside of her own city and only ever heard of these other places when an act of political violence created such a stir, that news ground like gravel in everyone's mouths, even children's. Bella began to dream of a place that only remained in memories. About days when trumpets were played as if lives depended on it. Girls in shebeens mingled with smoke while outside heartbreak and poverty clung to each other - misery loves company, the woman said.

"Yes it does. Sophiatown, but we called it Kofifi. People were poor and afraid of the tsotsis, who dressed to kill and knew every trick - card, knife, it didn't matter to them. But we all knew how to live. And when we loved, the men didn't stand a chance. Politics - we scratched at it like it was a disease eating our skin and when we were sad ... oh we'd wake up in the morning and have to check - did we cry that much or had it been raining the whole night long?"

Her words scarred Bella's dream world so when she became old, Bella would still, while asleep, remember the clubs and shebeens of Sophiatown as if she had been

present. Never having laid her eyes on a *Drum Magazine*, there Bella was in precisely the same stance as the young Dolly Rathebe, poised on a mine dump.

And they laughed like two girls at the men who sat in stupefaction, hiding their arousal. In that strange woman the men saw themselves as great revolutionaries, cadres who had been subdued to live suburban lives for the sake of the cause while beneath their breath they sang freedom songs not only for their people, but for themselves.

The woman would stand naked as truth as she moisturised her body after her evening bath. Proud that her skin was as stained as the mahogany chairs, her nipples the colour of blueberries and that her buttocks were full and protruded way beyond her calabash figure. The woman's beauty was never called lovely in those parts, her brown skin and thickly fleshed limbs, the way she wore her red lipstick with blue eye shadow that made her face look like a beautiful caricature. Bella found her exquisite and had to avert her eyes because she was afraid that, for a moment, she had looked at the woman just like the men had.

She had.

Oblivious to the fact that Hester roamed the house like a restless spirit, Bella couldn't eat, jumped at the sound of opening doors and developed half-moons beneath her eyes as rest betrayed her, even when the woman fell into a languid sleep.

Mostly, Bella loved the times between conversations when she understood that this stranger was no more than a woman who'd grown from a girl. Just a woman who had woken up with her hair disordered and a plain face, but who had the gift of metamorphosis so she filled everyone with the idea that to be in her company was a wonder.

Decades later, when details of the woman's disappearance after leaving their home in the District became known, everyone would recall that she had left behind an

inexplicable feeling of sadness. Even Mrs Daniels agreed, forgetting how she'd banged on the front door until Hester opened up to quieten her.

“Hester, my goodness gracious what is that? As dark as sin ...”

“Betty, shsss. She's a friend ... friend, from up country.”

The disturbance was enough to cause hot flushes of panic and Bella was told to go and help their guest pack, she would be leaving immediately. Nothing was said as she packed her things into the two brown leather suitcases that she had arrived with. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, precisely one week after she'd arrived. For Bella it had been seven days that traversed the possibilities of a lifetime and nothing was the same. The woman didn't say goodbye, just twisted on her heels so quickly that she marked a semi-circle on the pine floors and walked away without stopping, not even to say thank you.

Unable to eat and plagued by unknown places when she slept, Bella stayed locked in bitterness until her seventeenth birthday. Only Hester, her mother, did not chide her when she refused to go on family outings or when she excused herself early from the Sunday Lunch table. Only Hester placed her arms around her and said it would all be ok. Only Hester seemed to know things beyond what walls and silences concealed.

It would remain with Bella, so when her turn came to choose as her mother had predicted so many years before, she chose to remain alone. Only the child that she would have, the father seldom spoken of and never seen, would receive all her love. But Bella never forgot the surrender of being in love.

I have a collection of ancient things.

The wedding photograph belongs to no one I know. Solemn men on either side, fading black suits, white shirts and pitch black new ties. Hair, now hardened and slick from fingers spread out early that morning with Brill Cream. Not one out of place. The women are friendlier. A-line skirts, white court shoes, posies of what looks like St Joseph Lilies and smiling faces. One young, the other old enough you can see faint commas around the mouth. But the same face. Sisters.

Other than old photos that I hoard like a stamp-collector seeking a rare find to be pasted in thick dusty books, there are also newspaper clippings, pages torn from magazines, a handmade badge with the word *Freedom* printed in red against a khaki background. I like the *Drum Magazine* article in particular. Its bold print, full colour pages and hazy pictures of beautiful girls in bikinis and handsome men in boxing poses. The woman in the picture seems more than carefree. Free. Ironic, the column beside the photo says that the two (Jurgen the photographer and Dolly the performer, like a knife throwing duo) were arrested for contravening the Immorality Act. The photographer had taken the young Dolly Rathebe to a mine dump to take pictures for a cover portrait. But the neighbours called the cops and they were arrested right there.

I find also an old poster in my aunt's garage, among stacks of old documents and her son, Lucas's, school reports. It reads, *The Gathering of the Artists*. The poster must have been popular in its time, with its thick curvaceous lettering and shades of pastel - blues, pinks and yellow. Not like the usual montage of struggle pictures with

their townships fading in the light and Caspirs framed in smoke. Red, white and black.

The hard facts.

My Aunt Suzi had forgotten all about it. Hadn't thought about it for years.

“Yes. Yes, my word, I forgot about this entirely.” She pats the top of her head, locates the reading spectacles and places them on her face to take a closer look. Her hair is pulled tightly into a pony tail and she's wearing tracksuit pants that show how she has gained one kilogram (the meter still ticking) for every year since she gave birth to Lucas (a fact she always reminds him of whenever he complains about something).

“Strange how things change one, isn't it,” she says as she walks back to the kitchen. I follow her, wanting to know more. The joke-teller, the amiable sister, unlike my own mother, Bella, who has been known to be a battle axe. Aunt Suzi always soothes tense moments. Leaving the big decisions to others. What else is there? I want to know.

She smiles and says, “I was quite a beauty you know ...”

1977

The Gathering

One by one they were captured. Joseph had only time enough to shout out as he was dragged into the police van, pages of sentences, words and letters screaming a thousand silent protests as it floated back down to earth.

“Tell her I love her and to continue ...” he shouted, knowing that his landlady, Mrs Bader, would pass the message to Suzi, his love.

Who could know that a change in hairstyle would lead to all of that?

Suzi was not one for the discussions that kept her father Vincent talking late into the night with men who spoke passionately as they drank half glasses of whisky. Her sister, Bella, had been the studious one paying attention to matters political; head always hidden between pages like a human bookmark. Suzi, on the other hand, found joy in the simple things in life, like searing through the latest romance stories on Saturday afternoons, painting her toenails (red for winter and pink for summer) and spending hours perfecting her walk. When boys came in vain to call on Bella, Suzi would strut through the lounge, hips swaying from side to side, backside-lilt at a ten-degree angle for maximum effect.

As it turned out, more things were due for a shake up.

Things altered in one moment when Suzi threw off the cut-off pantyhose that, wound tightly around her head, was used to tame and hold hair in place. It was first swirled to the left for ten minutes, then in the opposite direction for the night, if one

could bare it. The next morning she'd remove the pantyhose from her hair that now lay straight and flat, a telltale crease residing on her forehead until the early afternoon.

Before then she had tried many other ways to straighten her hair. She had placed her hair on the kitchen cupboard, covered it with brown paper and begged Bella to 'iron out the kinks' so she could wear it long and sleek like Twiggy. Or short and sleek like Purdy. She had rolled it, twisted it, braided it and very nearly baked it. But nothing worked, not even the torturous swirl. So when her fringe shot out like antennas in the middle of the day as she sat at her desk (for HB attorneys) perfecting eighty words in one minute, she grew more vicious than she had ever imagined. That evening she went home, threw away the pantyhose and chopped her hair into a short, perfectly round afro. Like Michael Jackson of the Jackson Five.

The response was unexpected. Groups who Suzi had seen before sitting in dark corners of cafés, now invited her to sit with them and debate. Neruda, Nietzsche and Biko tripped off their tongues as they drank cheap red wine and argued until the early hours of the morning. Suzi, realising their mistake, thought initially of correcting it. But the more she saw them, the more they saw her as a radical, black-eyed, natural-hair beauty, and the more she sat silently in the corner and nodded when she heard a name that she recognised.

Joseph, a stooped poet with shoulder-length, brown hair and quick hands that were always smoothing down his moustache, had long had both his eyes on the beauty and finally asked Suzi if she would go out with him.

"Tonight I can write the saddest lines ... aaah Neruda, the real thing. That's the problem with our artists, we're not avant garde enough." He flattened and smoothed his a's around his tongue, licked the side of his cigar and begged Suzi to go back with him to his single room in the Old District.

“No, never, I’m not really like that at all. It’s just the hair that is a bit wild ...”

Suzi kept him at bay but, hopelessly attached like a spider to a web, Joseph dangled beneath Suzi. Joseph fell for the new girl, and the more he did, the more he struggled to write even one line of poetry. Page after blank page, he stared at the pens that marked his hands black and blue, but emitted nothing the instant he placed its tip to paper.

“But what’s wrong? Don’t I make you happy?” Suzi tried to coax Joseph out of his petulance.

“Oh you make me happy. And this may be it ... perhaps too happy. You see, to write I need the divine agony of heartbreak, the bittersweet of misery to fuel my passion.”

Suzi eyed Joseph blankly. “Maybe you need something to work for, instead of just talking about poetry and politics. Gather all your artist friends and do something. Make it, sell it, burn it, but do something.”

Joseph mulled over Suzi’s words for a long while until he realised that, of course, Suzi was perfectly correct. He should, without delay, begin planning *The Gathering of the Artists*. It was an inspired idea.

“Urm, yes. *The Gathering of the Artists*,” Suzi repeated softly and agreed that she had come up with just the right scheme.

“We write poetry yes, but we are without audience. Therefore my brothers and sisters - what are we really? Artists or armchair politicians?” Joseph stroked his moustache as he waited for the idea to resonate. The group rubbed chins, swigged from the dregs of their wine glasses and one by one nodded their agreement.

“A revolutionary idea ... something to give us work ... voice, I mean,” Tommy Fingers said, and tried his best to resurrect himself from the petty thief that he had been right up until a month earlier.

It was decided then. And Joseph fell still deeper into Suzi’s big black hairdo.

Linda, the tall actress with the soft green eyes, and Iris, the androgynous painter with stout fingers, took charge of the advertising with posters and flyers, while Joseph, Tommy and Hammad tracked down every poet, painter and philosopher and put *The Gathering of the Artists* into motion to take place one month later. Joseph wrote with a renewed spirit. Pops Chaulkie, a popular people’s poet (as he called himself) who was known to write only within the loving gaze of his hashish pipe, had agreed to read at *The Gathering* and Joseph would have to put his finest works to the test. Instead of meeting up each evening, the group dispersed to their haunts and created as if they had only weeks left to freedom. And so it turned out that they did.

As Linda got ready to portray her greatest challenge yet - Lady Macbeth from an excerpt of the play - security police (tip-off still burning their ears) broke down her bedroom door and removed the subversive scripts that spoke of overthrow and insurrection. Hours later, Iris was arrested leaving art school; her easel, paints and works confiscated because her portrait of a young Joseph was without a doubt, to the tall men in blue, the image of Che Guevara. They went for Joseph last, read his pages of poems and, from what they could tell, deemed it dangerous stuff. They piled Joseph into the back of the van, his poetry collecting in the mud before quiet hands collected them and walked away unseen.

Mrs Bader waited for Suzi on the corner that night in the bitter drizzle to tell her what had happened and passed on Joseph’s message that she should carry on.

“Oh no - I encouraged him Mrs Bader - he got the got the idea from me ...” Suzi whispered distraught and a little guilty that the idea which she hadn’t had at all in fact, had led to so much trouble. What was to come she wondered?

But she continued, the only one left besides Tommy Fingers who had not been detained. Suzi picked up where the group had left off organising *The Gathering of the Artists*, not because she wanted it, or because she thought it of any significance, but because the man who had become her true love had asked it of her. Besides, it was all she could do to quash her guilt. She took advice from her father Vincent, who was only too pleased to help his daughter in these matters, and disseminated details of the new venue and programme via anonymous notes left in letter boxes. The word seared through communities like hot gossip and again burned the ears of the security police, who reasoned that nothing much could come of it now that the main culprits were safely put away.

Even though Suzi was more focussed than she had ever been, her mind still wondered relentlessly to Joseph and whether he would be alright. So news from Dr Adams, the family doctor, blew over her like a cooling breeze.

I have a message for you. Come and see me as soon as you can, he scribbled on a green notepad in a doctor’s scrawl.

“Joseph is alright ... well, as alright as can be expected. A few cuts and bruises that is nothing for you to be too concerned about. They won’t keep any of them for too much longer, they aren’t a great threat. Nonetheless, they will not be released until after the event. Joseph did say that I should ask you to read something for him. He said you would understand ...” said Dr Adams.

“Read something for him? Did he give you anything to give me? A poem maybe? They destroyed all his stuff ... the police.” Suzi’s tears dried instantly at the news of Joseph’s request.

“No, just the message,” Dr Adams said as he pulled closer an open file as an indication that their meeting was over.

“Did he say whose poem I should read? Did he tell you where I should find it?” Suzi’s voice vibrated with new panic.

“Suzi, I think he meant for you to write it yourself.”

Suzi was perplexed and a little angry at Joseph’s lack of sensitivity. “Must be the torture that’s made his mind pulp,” she concluded as she left Dr Adam’s offices and hurried to the bus stop. She would have to think of something. But what? She could not, in all good conscience, ignore an incarcerated man’s request. Still, if Joseph had only seen her for what she was - a real girl who was more comfortable with copying recipes than writing poems - they would not have been in this mess.

But she sat down on the red and gold dining room chair that evening and tried to pen her first poem. How did all poems start? The only ones that she knew were the poems that had been memorised at school to the rhythm of a wooden stick.

How do I love thee ...

She scratched out the first line.

Let me not to the marriage of true minds ...

She wrote and scratched out so many times, until the wasted page in front of her was only a tribute, she thought, to her lack of ability.

Three days were left to *The Gathering of the Artists* and still inspiration evaded Suzi, but only her. Everyone else, including Pops Chalkie, worked harder following the news that their peers had been arrested.

“Let’s do it for our friends, our fellow poets,” Tommy Fingers said, while he sat holding his head in his hands, buying rounds of red wine for everyone at the table.

“It’s important that everyone arrive on time.” Suzi issued instructions to the artists who were at the final meeting before the event. “We don’t know how many people will come, but there’s lots of talk around,” she continued. “The programme for poets will happen in the main hall before lunch, with exhibitions in the foyer and on both sides of the hall. After lunch, performances by theatre groups and in the late afternoon, music by The Screamers.”

“Wow Suzanne, if I may call you that?” Pops Chalkie stared with a new intensity at the beauty.

“Of course you can call me that. It’s my name. Now pay attention.” The newly in control Suzi had no time for distractions. “No matter what happens in the following days, we must go ahead. Its important to Joseph ... and of course all of you. And, as a precaution, perhaps you shouldn’t sleep at home, just in case.”

“Slow down Suzi girl, I’m sure we’re all friends here,” Pops bit back as he tilted his beret and sulked into his beer.

Suzi didn’t go home that evening, but to Joseph’s empty room. She searched through his things - not a single poem had been left behind. She could not let Joseph down; she would have to write that poem. So she waited for inspiration. None came. She thought about Joseph incarcerated, her new friends, all relying on her. Still none came. Hours passed before Suzi admitted to herself that Joseph loved something that she, quite frankly, couldn’t and didn’t want to be. She would have to settle matters when he was released and if he still loved her then, he would love who she really was, she reckoned. Suzi fell asleep late that night, her fist clenched around a pen, and dreamt that she was writing her final high school exams.

Suzi rose the following morning thinking clearer than she ever had. She would ask Bella, beg if necessary, to write the poem for her. As she made her way from Joseph's flat, a sad shape, curled so only flailing arms could be seen and reeking of stale alcohol, sat outside Joseph's front door.

"Tommy Fingers what do you want here? And drunk as well." Suzi stared into the mess of hair and tears before ushering Tommy inside as neighbours stuck entire torsos out of their windows to see what the trouble was.

"It was me ..." Tommy dragged sounds from his throat.

"What you talking about?" Suzi prodded him impatiently.

"It was me ... I'm so sorry," he whispered this time.

"What was you Tommy ..." Suzi's voice crawled to a stop as she realised what Tommy was talking about. She saw the bundle hidden beneath Tommy's jacket, Joseph's poems caked with bits of mud.

"I tipped them off for some money. Not very much even." He started to cry again. "It didn't even cover my rental, but it kept me out of jail when they caught me stealing at the station."

"Pick-pocketing? You sold out Joseph and all those artists because you were too much of a coward to face a month's time in jail?" Suzi sat down, got up and in a motion so fast that she even did not see it coming, slapped Tommy Fingers so hard, he fell backwards from his haunches and lay on the ground, crying soundlessly. They stayed that way for a long while. Suzi afraid of the person that hid inside of her, but unremorseful.

Eventually she rose, collected Joseph's poems from Tommy Finger's limp grasp, opened the door and said in a quiet voice, "Tommy Fingers, if I ever see you again, I will tell everyone about what you did."

He left as quietly as he had arrived noisily.

Suzi took a bus home as quickly as she could, having planned to ask Bella to write the poem. But home was filled with the clutter of strangers and an unexpected darkness.

“Bella, what’s wrong? And why are those people in the lounge?”

“I’m devastated. Everyone is. Steve Biko was murdered today. They’re planning a vigil and maybe a protest. In police custody. They say he fell, slipped on a bar of soap, but we all know what happened.”

Suzi couldn’t bare the sadness that had spread across great distances that day. She walked slowly as the sun set behind her to Joseph’s room. *The Gathering of the Artists* was less than a day away and suddenly and very dauntingly the whole world felt as if it rested on Suzi’s shoulders. She didn’t like the responsibility that Tommy’s betrayal had left her with, but she would tell no one because she wanted no hand in his fate. Suzi felt a terror that she had never known before; a fear for everyone she knew, even Tommy Fingers. As she sat down that evening, a strange notion caught hold of her. She picked up a pen and wrote a poem for the first though not the last time.

It was still dark outside when Suzi awoke the following morning, her thoughts still fresh with sepia dreams with gun toting poets and serenading freedom fighters. Suzi dressed quickly. The day had arrived and she had much to do.

The queue to buy tickets to *The Gathering of the Artists* wound, like a leviathan of hope, around the building. Pops Chalkie was spectacular. Dressed in flared jeans and patchwork leather waistcoat and peak-cap, his words worked a strange kind of magic on the crowd who knew little about poetry, but still sat dead quiet and ate up his every word, calling him back for more. Suzi stood at the side of stage, hands wet with dread. She loved Joseph, she was sure of that, but wasn’t sure if she loved anyone

enough to stand in front of the crowd of over a hundred people. As Pops Chalkie came flying into the wings, the gloat of victorious battle spreading across his face, Suzi felt more than just stage fright. Her feet that, left to their own would have run in the opposite direction, obeyed her and followed each other until Suzi stood in the middle of the stage. Like the middle of the world. She cleared her throat one last time and began.

Tonight, I too, can write the saddest lines.

This is not a love poem and

I am not a poet.

Not a politician.

Not a philosopher.

But, these words found me, where I thought I could not be found.

Yesterday I held a man's life in my hands, as another's was taken from him.

Today, I cry for those who are free and those who are not,

And know that our destinies will always be one.

Her voice rose with the audience's as they grew bored and started speaking to one another, until her poem was lost in a myriad of conversation. Still she carried on and only stopped when she was done. She had read something for Joseph like he had wanted. But more importantly, she had written something for herself.

Suzi crossed the stage, a smile slowly and certainly settling on her face as her hips swung like a metronome from side to side, her backside pert and confident as she did the walk that she had rehearsed so many times before, in a tribute to her own accomplishment.

On the way home, she stopped to buy the newest romance novel, remained engrossed for the rest of the evening and didn't hide the book from anyone this time.

And when Joseph came out of prison later that month, she read the poem to him, her head resting against his naked chest. He wept at the beauty that he saw in it and did not explain how he had wanted her to read something from one of his favourite poets, Serote perhaps. At first he was surprised at this all new Suzi who spoke her mind on matters that she did and did not know anything about, and who read romance novels like others scoured the daily papers. But he had seen beyond the obvious to her unfailing pure heart. They would stay together for years to come, Joseph forever more consumed with love for a beauty that had morphed from a creature of his making into one of her own.

University of Cape Town

Rumours arrived for years with aunties who spat out the news as they sipped second cups of tea. These morsels of hearsay spread all over the house - settling on furniture, dissolving in unfinished cups of tea, sitting on books and glass covered pictures. They said that other people said that he had left in the middle of the night. His hands washed in blood. Or that someone's second cousin's husband had spotted him just days ago at the bus stop, begging for change.

I met my uncle, Byron, his wife and my cousin Aurora one afternoon over tea in a café in London. We met inside the spacious, modern interior - only the third time I had seen either cousin or aunt as they had only been home once before. They both hugged me like the long lost relative I was, while Byron stood looking, before shaking my hand politely. Us women spoke at first - family, weather, politics, the usual things. Then I told them about my plan for the book. Byron made eye contact for the first time, his green eyes scanning me as he simultaneously reached for a cigarette in his right hand shirt pocket. Hands clean and smooth like those of a pianist. It seemed incongruous with the teeth that seemed to have been thrown into his mouth to find their own place. His hair brushed to the back at a slight angle.

I guessed he was trying to see what resemblance I bore to my mother, Bella, or was figuring out how it was that she became pregnant with me when no one had ever seen my mother with a man. I wondered why I had imagined a crook from a seventies flick, rather than a dodgy-looking uncle.

“That’s an interesting occupation. Writing stories about other people’s lives. I thought a writer was meant to use his or in this case, her, imagination.” Byron lit the cigarette with his one hand, never taking his eyes from me.

“Yes. I suppose in some instances that would be the case. I am more publisher than writer actually. I took some time off. I wanted to learn more about the family, perhaps keep the memories alive. I suppose it’s rather a personal account.” I looked from person to person, imploring a little and shifting in my seat.

“Yes. Though sometimes we mustn’t forget that not all of us choose to have our private lives made public.” Byron mouthed each word slowly and a little pedantically - so I would get his point.

“The book may not get published. I thought it would be something for us, a legacy of sorts.”

“Mm huh,” he said, flicking the ash with his thumb into the steel dish.

“So,” I said, still moving around as if the yellow and white striped chair was burning beneath me, “Would you do it? Would you speak to me?”

“No,” Byron said simply.

They didn’t seem uncomfortable - mother or daughter - as they chattered on and asked me for info on the family at home.

“You must come for supper and Aurora can take you around” said his wife between mouthfuls of cheese cake.

“I’ll take you around,” said Aurora.

“Yes.” I smiled, thinking, you shouldn’t be eating that. The wife’s thigh which had once caused such a stir in my grandparents’ home now lazily poured over the chair.

When I got back I started to find out what I could about Byron. I found letters, exhibits one and two - a letter received by my grandparents’ evicting them from their

home and another letter from a woman known then only as Mrs Jacobs, sent to my grandparents' address and held for years in a drawer awaiting Byron's return. I found a newspaper article in the archives of Newspaper House about the two friends who had been found murdered in their workshop in the old area. And exhibit number four was another photo to add to my collection, of three boys. They're sitting on a metallic blue Datsun 1200 (so says Uncle Joseph when I show him the photo) - it's a sunny day, all three face the camera, arms locked around each other's necks, posing super cool like young men used to do. One of them is Byron.

I have a few other things which help me. But it's not much to go on and I feel as if I am connecting dots like a child with a colouring book. I didn't think I'd get far with this at the time; it remained unfinished for almost a year. Until I met Aurora again, months later. I've finished it now, but understand that it took months to come this far. And may well have never been complete.

1983

The Unfavourable Son

Who could know, years later, what had made him go that way.

It came from deep inside him and spread to everything he did, leaving behind a trail like a limping animal. It was the kind of spite that could take him nowhere - too little to make him evil, too much to make him good. The dead end part of the low road. While some boys joined gangs, stole things or were mean because it was how they would survive, he did because he wanted to. Of course he tried hard to convince himself that it was his destiny. As far as Byron could recall, it had all started at his birth and was helped along by fate's twisted hand.

Byron was the third child of Vincent and Hester and the only one amongst three generations to be born on a day with an uneven number. Everyone in his family before him came into the world on a day divisible by two. Perhaps it shouldn't have mattered as much as it did. Maybe it didn't. Though the aunties, with their moles and rancid smells of spinsterhood still fresh in his memory, had bent over his cot and inspected him week after week until he was big and fast enough to run away, averting their thick wet kisses. They spoke in hushed tones as soon as Hester left the room,

“He don't even look like the rest of them. Green eyes. Sure sign of mean spiritness. I know the whole family, no one has green eyes ... makes you wonder.”

“Well you know what they say about the child born on an odd day ... odd man out if you ask me. Pure bad luck and they know it. Sshhh Betty, here she comes ...”

The whispers added to Byron's belief that he was born out of synch with the natural order, marked even, by some menacing fate. The superstition would follow him his whole life. And looking back years later, he recalled the day in 1968 when he was fifteen and found an envelope lying face down on the wood floors a metre from the letter slot. The note was free of postmarks and was odourless; anyone could see that it was trouble. Every person in the district opened the same letter that morning. Hearts went cold as they read that their homes, stretching from the verge of grass that marked the mountain's brow to the bald spot in front of the harbour, were to be evacuated. The recently passed slum-clearing act was being enforced and homes would be demolished within the month. His father, Vincent, stood with the letter in his hand, the envelope floating off on a gust of hot wind as he shook with rage and shame. Byron saw but felt nothing. His father remained that way for hours. Late into the night Vincent wrote letter after letter to friend, counsellor, enemy, collaborator, and disappeared with the falling sun to attend a meeting that had been hastily called. It was months later that Vincent eventually accepted the destiny that Byron had handed them, the latter impervious to his father and everyone else's malaise.

The new place was at least two bus rides away from the city. White squares like a huge sponge cake coated in icing and cut up evenly for children at a party - each was the same as the one next door, and to the one next to that, which was the same as the house that stood beside that one until a row of precise cubes stood across from one another. Rows crossed, crossed and criss-crossed the flat planes of land until all the eye could see was uniformity. The rooms measured no more than four by four metres and were square, low and bare besides for the metal frame in the thin wall. Less love presided there. When the winter rain fell it did so with malevolence that washed away plants and

sank slanting roads in soft mud. In summer the sun moved right in, sat down on the couch and left the family cracked up in the shade of the backyard. And when the wind stirred, it raised more than just dust.

Byron's state of putrefaction grew in the new place. As a child it had been the harmless things that had entertained him. Smiling politely until his parents turned away, unable to see the little boy's pointer ascend into his nose until his knuckle disappeared into the warm cavern; the enjoyment on his face more shocking to the guests than the act itself. But he became progressively worse, pulling the wings off butterflies, rubbing jam into his sister's panties and even throwing pebbles at the swollen ankles of elderly women. He made sure that someone else, usually the timid child, was caught holding the water bomb long after he had splintered into the school crevices.

But these were just the hors d'oeuvres. The real trouble started when he met the two brothers who lived a few roads away and went to the same school as Byron. Before then, Byron would stroll on Saturdays to the café, located between Hope Primary and Blueshine Bottle Store for a loose cigarette and a Double "O" soda. With the cigarette lodged behind his left ear, Byron would drink from the glass bottle before smoking in the shade of the pomegranate tree. From there he could see the Saturday afternoon chaos of buses loading and unloading fat women with scarred faces, screaming children and exhausted carrier bags. It was also the perfect spot from which to lob rubbish missiles, unseen.

The brothers had the same meaty faces as their mother and fists like huge, misshapen rubber balls. Byron found them at his spot beneath the pomegranate tree one clear afternoon.

Since the brothers' births two minutes apart, they were inseparable but fought one another like enemies leaving swollen eyes, broken arms and once a fractured ankle. Mrs Mohammed, their neighbour who knew the Koran and Bible off by heart, had named them Kane and Less Able, after breaking up a fight that had left Less with a limp that stayed for years (initially because it really was there and, after it had healed, because he liked to mete his revenge out slowly).

It didn't take much for the three to become inseparable. The triad understood one another, shared the same Stuyvesant smokes and spoke about important matters of the day. On Saturday afternoons they now gravitated to the local bioscope that was one of the first places to show *The Godfather*, only a year after the world had seen it. For months they spoke only about the Corleone family, the wonder of the Cosa Nostra and the honour of brotherhood. And when the talk excited everyone else, they saw that it was time for them to move on and discovered, just in time, Johnny Boy played by De Niro in *Mean Streets*.

But it was their activities during the week that brought Duimpie into their lives. Cold winter afternoons after school were spent in the garage, attached to the twin's house, where equipment was perfectly cared for in a fully fitted workshop that the twin's father had left behind before he departed one, otherwise uneventful, Wednesday. Painting the Datsun every other week became their chief source of entertainment. When the car was brushed with a hot pink that made the three the laughing stock of almost everyone at school, Duimpie - bread winner, serial desk engraver and occasional cause of concussions - crossed over the backfield to where the car was parked.

"Naw who sprays a kar pink?"

“The cherries like it ...” Kane started in a voice that didn’t disguise the fact that the closest he had been to a girl was in standard nine when he shared a desk with Miranda Jones. Duimpie rubbed his chin while he decided that this was a good answer.

“Maybe you want to make a bitta extra money or so on da side. I check you always spraying dis ting dif’reent colours, maybe you can help out with some of my connek’s kars.”

Duimpie arrived when only the feared or fearless were still out on the streets. He was short and thick and had the dark eyes of a desperate man. His neck-less head moved in arcs while his yellow tinged eyes shot around the place on constant alert. The first car was a flawless and rare creature: a 1965 black Valiant Barracuda with red interior, V8 Engine with fastback and bucket seats. No numberplates but a line of blood crossed the back bumper. They worked through the night - quietly so they didn’t wake the twins’ mother, Bonita Adams, a hard working and dedicated hairdresser who stood for no nonsense under her roof, mostly when it was too late to be prevented. The cars came fast and regularly after that, mostly impeccable models of the newest vehicles on the road. Duimpie always paid on time with a roll of cash that the three placed in a tin and hid in the recesses of a bedroom cupboard. Duimpie kept them busy on days when the three were meant to be in school, or when the riots got so bad that school remained closed for the week. The twins, after long and heated arguments with their mother, dropped out with months to go to their final exams. Byron would have done the same, but relented when Hester took to her bed ill with worry. And when Byron excused himself to study for his final exams, having barely scraped through the year, Duimpie held a serrated-edged knife so close to his throat that beads of Byron’s own blood fell onto his shoes below. Still, in a stroke of luck, Byron passed. At the Sunday Lunch

celebration, the family bustled around the table as they schemed about Byron's new course in life.

"You can work in the bookstore part time until you get onto your own feet," his sister Bella suggested with all the dedication of a future head librarian. "Before I leave for night school in the evenings, you can come by and I'll train you how to work things. It'll be a good start."

"That's ok, I've got big dreams," Byron said as he dug into the meat pie.

Sitting on the red and gold chairs, Vincent watched his son closely while Hester wondered silently where they had gone wrong.

With the money that Byron and the twins had saved from three years of work for Duimpie, the three rented an unused shop that stood on an empty piece of land, marked by a canal on one side and a field on the other. They could spray any car in record time and their workmanship was guaranteed (by reliable sources) to be the best. And so also said the thick cursive letters sprayed in orange onto the purple, white and pink striped wall, beneath a sign that read *The Little Shop of Colours*. The better they got, the more they saw themselves as artists crafting their skill onto the sides of cars - midnight blue bodies writhing in a starry mass of black, red stars for nipples while rolling orange and yellow fire tinged the sides of Eddie Baker's black van. They even got a consignment of buses and were commissioned to paint them in gold cursive, *Mustapher and Sons Inc. - Moving People*.

Looking back, Byron thought that things had changed and maybe for a little while they had. But Duimpie remained their most regular, and soon only, client. One ordinary day, Fuzzie Doberman entered their workshop. Flanked by two guards, he wore a large ruby encased in yellow gold on his right hand, to match a set of perfect gold teeth with star shaped jewel in each incisor. He carried a sense of calm as if he

were a holy man. The gangster ran the city's stolen car trade, and had a reputation for having murdered and sliced his first wife into bite sized chunks. It was his name that was whispered to quieten crying children. Duimpie, more authoritative than before, walked two steps behind Doberman and made his announcement,

“Ouens check here, everyting’s chainzed. Mr Doberman over here he’s got work for yous three. Big opporchunity guys, don’t let me ... ur, Mr Doberman down.” Doberman said nothing, just raised his hand mid-air as if he were performing a blessing.

They moved to bigger premises with security around the clock. A precaution, Doberman said. Cars were brought in at night and, twenty-four hours later through another exit, sent out with new number plates and wet paint work. Doberman’s business ran with the aplomb of high commerce. Beneath him were his two deputies who were the only ones who knew precisely what areas would be targeted next and knew the ever changing routes to get the cars out of the city. Beneath them were the leaders of units or gangs who commissioned and executed work with a clean and thorough methodology. It would be too much to say that the three became friends with Doberman’s boys. Nonetheless, they kept their company mostly to share a white pipe - marijuana and mandrax mixed and smoked in a glass funnel that had been transposed from a bottle scored with a flame and then broken off at the neck. It took one or two hits to feel the ground ripped from beneath their feet as normality fractured into blackness, then tranquillity. Many years passed this way.

The twins, now slowly balding, grew more similar in appearance until Byron could tell them apart only from Less’s limp. Byron sat every afternoon watching the traffic. His stomach grew slowly over his pants. Cars came into the workshop and left through the other side while the triad smoked, fell asleep and barely supervised the staff of five that

scuffed the cars that they had just painted, allocated the wrong number plates and left behind the smell of smoke inside the freshly painted cars. The troika's world had assembled with such natural synchronicity that by the time they realised how far they had come, they were also able to see that it was not so far at all.

Byron could explain all that had happened until then as immaturity, lack of conscience, but the one act that would haunt his days and nights until he became an old man, was meeting the girl.

Byron walked to Mrs Adam's newly opened hair salon one Friday to drop off the money that her sons sent and to buy the week's curry special from the café. *Chez Bonita* (Mrs Adam had chosen this name in favour of her sons' not uncommon suggestions of *Hair Today Gone Tomorrow* or the more popular *Hair Raising*) had been bought by the twins so their mother would no longer have to work twelve hour days.

"Mrs Adams, where do I leave this?" Byron called out and pointed to the package in his right hand. The one thing that eased all three's minds was the money they gave their parents, who still believed they had grown rich from a corner business.

"Sit over there for a minute. Just finishing a wash-and-blow. Big wedding tomorrow! Speak now now," Mrs Adams sang as was her habit, over the murmur of hairdryers.

Byron climbed over legs stretching from pink domes that let off a hot glow as beauty left the eye-of-the-beholder and fell into the hands-of-the-beautician. The service was a sit and wait policy as the sign read up over the door, *Please be seated. Someone will attend to you shortly.*

Of course it usually took an hour for a newcomer to be noticed (only teachers and professionals were served first here, but no one complained owing to Mrs Adam's skill with a hand held dryer).

That was when he first saw her, awkward and plump as she was, but with such a force of sensuality that her soft, round belly moved like perfumed water beneath the thin fabric of her school shirt.

“Hello,” she said shyly as she moved passed Byron to collect her bag, her freshly washed hair smelling of apple shampoo. Byron asked her there and then if he could take her out. He bought her a flower on their first date before taking her back to the empty workshop. Years later he wouldn’t remember the details but he would always feel the shame of that night. Her body, first moulding to the curve of a Volkswagen Beetle, then pushed up against its door. He whispered into her ear as he seduced her with open lies.

“You can’t fall pregnant standing up ...”

And she believed him. What did she know, all of fifteen and so innocent that she only connected the sequence of events when her usually soft stomach turned hard and round?

Byron would recount that Tuesday evening for years to come. The three had been hanging around the garage as they always did - not idle, not doing much. The girl’s mother knocked at the door. Byron had seen her before. They watched her from the workshop window. She was nervous, the way she waited before knocking louder. She knocked louder still, until the ignoring became too much for her and a kind of madness gripped her. She started shouting that she knew he was there and he would have to answer for what he had done. Soon she was making so much noise that the neighbours were sticking their heads out of their windows, shouting for her to shut up before they called the cops. The three would have to open.

“Byron. Who is Byron? My daughter is pregnant and you are the father,” she blurted out so quickly that they knew it was more a desperate question than an accusation. Byron knew how to deal with her. He knew her sort.

“Who is your daughter?”

“No I don’t think I know her, you’ve come to the wrong place,” he said once he had heard her out. Byron watched her carefully, the way she dressed in a clean housecoat, kneading her hands, and the way her mouth twisted when she spoke as if she were sucking on something bitter all the time. She insisted that he go home with her - to see the child and repeat to their faces what he had just said. Byron only went because he feared she would cause a bigger scene still and because he knew the girl’s father was probably away or gone. Otherwise the father would be there and less talking would be happening.

“Oh, yes I do know your daughter. But I’m not the father. I’m sorry” he said this time gently, so the mother’s face turned to ash as if she were falling apart right there.

“But what are we going to do?” the woman asked quietly as the girl looked at her shoes and made herself an everlasting promise that no man would ever touch her again. Her mother prostrated herself on the kitchen floor in a howl of shame as Byron made his way through the dark streets to the workshop, the taste of disgrace not yet settling on his tongue.

Byron found the twins, as he had many times before. Only, they didn’t stir when he shouted at them from the workshop door, “That was a close call!”

But they didn’t move. Their faces, Byron noticed as if for the first time, were angelic. Eyes still open and one indistinguishable from the other, as Able and Less lay

a metre apart, spilled blood meeting and flowing into a red ocean in the middle of the room. A note had been left behind by one of Doberman's boys and read in a filthy, bloodstained scrawl: *Nobody likes sloppy work. Your friends are fired, but you had luck on your side this time.*

Byron closed their eyes, said a silent prayer and went out back to sit and watch the cars pass by. The bodies were to be given a Christian burial by their doubly heart-broken mother who was devastated by the random, tragic break-in, as Byron (and the police who were busy with protesting students) confirmed. Hours before the funeral, Byron posted an envelope thickened with money to the girl who would have his child. He wrote a letter to his parents saying goodbye and asking them to forgive him. He didn't turn around, not even for one last look, as he placed the one-way ticket in his pocket.

We waited for the Sundays when guests had been invited to lunch. It meant that we could put out the best of who we were, along with our finest dinner service. Everyone was expected to look, behave and cook as if it were the last Sunday Lunch we would ever have.

Somewhere along the way, though, something always went wrong - one of the corpulent curls hanging from either side of my face would refuse to stay in formation, or a button would go missing on my cousin Lucas's best shirt (sending Aunty Suzi, his mother, into a spasm of panic) a dish would inevitably get burned or Uncle Joseph would drink too much and let all the family secrets out of their hiding places. We would laugh (or lament) about those days for months - telling so-and-so not to do an Uncle Joseph on us.

But, it was the rare visits that we would remember, years later. Like when Alex, a visiting librarian from the USA, was invited for lunch and changed the way we saw ourselves.

"That's fine cooking Ma'am," Alex said with her braided hair and smooth skin over a plate of butternut soup.

We were fascinated by the heart of her language - with its drawn out words and deep resonating tones. She smoked tobacco, hand rolled in paper that she kept in a little square tin, and wore a kaftan that gave off wafts of patchouli as she walked by. We all wanted to impress her. Uncle Joseph started speaking about Louis Armstrong, calling him Satchmo as if he were the next door neighbour, while my mother went on about

Toni Morrison. Alex (short for Alexandra) seemed amused by the talk. Anyway, by the time the curries, roasted meats and plates of sweet yellow rice and raisins arrived, we all started to feel like she was one of us.

“So tell me about y’all’s history,” Alex posed what seemed like a perfectly normal question.

“Well our family has always lived in Cape Town,” my mother began.

“That I know. No I mean - y’all got a slave history too, don’t ya?” Alex clarified.

Yes, what is our history by the way? Is this true? Lucas and I seemed to be asking unanimously. But everyone else was frozen. You see, Lucas and I had asked about our history at some time. My mother Bella became busy, Grandpa Vincent mumbled that though he had once been interested, it was now all over and Grandma Hester mystified us with ever changing stories about long journeys and rude Afrikaners.

I realised much later on that for them, like most other people around me, forgetting had become a way of keeping the past in check. Like a wall that had been built in their heads to stop yesterday’s ghosts from climbing over into the present and disturbing their well laid plans.

But now, someone had broken down their wall - and here were those ghosts, like poor relations, sitting around the table and reminding them of what they would rather not recall.

“Well ...” started Aunty Suzi, “we don’t really know that much. We can’t be sure,” she said politely in her that’s-that-then voice. But by then Lucas, Alex and I were waiting to hear more - and were looking at them with questioning eyes.

“Well, much of the history has been lost ... unfortunately. Of course there was slavery and mixing ... well whose path in history hasn’t crossed? Maybe it seemed to

make sense to forget, but then ...” She stopped, allowing us to finish her sentence silently.

“That’s alright. No need to worry. Just in my experience, I’ve found when you know the past - no matter how sad and hurtful it is, the future looks a whole lot better,” Alex said and changed the subject.

Lucas and I smiled. Jointly our hands passed her the beetroot. Though months later, Lucas and I found a manuscript buried beneath books in our grandparents’ bedroom. Written in our grandfather’s handwriting, it told these histories and more. We began to ask questions, always in front of guests so we could not be shushed quiet or ignored with a change of subject. Little by little we asked more until the past was allowed to come slowly back to life. Vincent started telling us about what he had learned when he was interested in the same things. We never felt their shame or their hurt, Lucas and I. We were just driven by our child curiosity.

1994

Passage

Metal howled and gravel was spat into the air as the train stopped for the second time in the hour, waking Lucas again. Outside his window, the valley of a thousand hills lay beneath a lilac sky - the only comfort that a two day train journey back home had to offer. They were nowhere near a station, but static, somewhere between Durban and Pietermaritzburg, looking out at hills that stretched beyond the imagination. Like eternal possibilities.

It was late May, but heat still clung to Lucas's wiry limbs. The seat across from him had been empty when they left Durban station that evening. Six-thirty p.m. and he'd been grateful so he could put his sun stained feet up onto it. Sleep had been rare since his mother Suzi phoned a day earlier asking that he come home as soon as possible. His grandfather had, a few days earlier, stood bolt upright after Sunday Lunch like he'd seen a long awaited sign, clutched the table as he fell to his knees and was carried to bed where he remained semi-coherent and waiting. But Lucas could not get a flight until days later. The country's first democratic election had recently taken place and everyone had somewhere to go in an awful hurry. Like missed centuries of freedom could be squeezed into this one election, to make up for all past longings. The only option remaining open to Lucas was the overnight train away from his holiday of sun and surf with school friends. Until Lucas reached home he would remain in a state of unknowing - as if he were holding his breath all the way to Cape Town.

The seat across from his was no longer empty. Now an elderly man sat across from him. Even in the heat he wore a black suit, with silver buttons on his waistcoat done all the way up while his hat was left to perform trapeze acts on his knee. He didn't turn to look at Lucas, just stared out of the window. Good, thought Lucas, that way he would not have to make polite conversation. He was not in the mood. Lucas fluffed the pillow that his jacket had become, dozed off again and only awoke this time when the train pulled into Pietermaritzburg station.

"It will be a short stop, no need to worry, you'll be on your way again in no time," the man said without turning his head from the window.

"Yes, thanks." Lucas didn't want to encourage him, so it was best to be curt.

"This was the station where Mr Gandhi was thrown off, you know. Of all the things a place could be remembered for, ejecting Mahatma Gandhi," he said more to himself as he lifted his hands in a questioning arc. They were working hands, thickened with labour and sun.

"I didn't know that," Lucas answered quietly, hoping that the man would go back to staring outside.

"You seem to need your rest. That is good. Very good. When you reach my age you sleep with one eye open. You never know when you may get called up, and you don't want to miss that!" he said, pointing with a blackened, ridged fingernail upward. The pupils of his eyes, now that Lucas could see them, hid behind thick milky clouds. His face was also weathered and his flesh gathered over pronounced bones like insipid curtains letting in light as he smiled.

"I am Sirius," he said. "I have been hoping for a chance to talk with you." Lucas shifted uncomfortably in his seat. It would have been better if he had said nothing.

“Look, I’m sorry, but I don’t know you,” Lucas said less politely this time and opened the novel that had been closed on his lap.

“Yes, yes of course. But perhaps, nonetheless, you would spare a few moments. I was just hoping,” he continued before Lucas could object, “that you would do me a favour. I see that you have a book on your lap. My eyes have given up on me when I need them most ... I can hardly make out the words. All my books gone to waste,” he said more to himself, then, “cataracts,” he said finally as if this would explain it all. “And here,” he reached into his pocket and removed a sheet of blue paper as thin as onion skin, the ink seeping through so the impression of the letters was a visible purple on the other side, “I received this yesterday. I do not know what it says, besides that it is in English, it is from Cape Town and that it is from my granddaughter. I was hoping that you could read it to me. We have not seen her for many years and heard nothing from her until this letter arrived yesterday. My wife was never taught how to read and the only other people who can in my village are young. But they have all gone to find work elsewhere.” He waited for Lucas to register what he had said - raise his eyebrows, soften his stare perhaps - but the young man’s face revealed nothing. “So before I could find someone to read it I bought a train ticket. Now here I am on my way to the address on this letter.”

Lucas didn’t know what to make of the old man, hand outstretched in a limp offering and an open face that pleaded. It made Lucas feel pity and loathing all at the same time. He supposed it couldn’t hurt. Lucas took the letter cautiously. It was still warm from being held so close to the man’s chest. In a tiny, neat handwriting that seemed to be that of a child’s, Lucas read.

Dear Grandfather

I hope you are well. Please forgive me for not being able to write in our language. I have been learning only English. And now this is all I can write.

I hope this will not make you angry.

The girl wrote that her mother had only agreed to give her their address on account of their new plans.

Lucas read on,

As you have not called or written since my father has left us, I write this note out of duty to let you know that I will be moving with my mother and her new husband to a new country. We will be leaving in three weeks already to Mozambique, where my mother's husband has a big job as a factory manager. Maybe you will write to me when I am in the new country. It would be nice to have family again.

Sirus kept a hand gripped on each leg, the hat displaced to the seat this time, his eyes squeezing more tightly shut as the words made some new point blindingly clear to him. He waited until Lucas stopped, waited a moment longer in case there was some revelation he had neglected to mention, before he grew older - like a mythical apparition - right before Lucas's eyes.

"It is what I have feared. She thinks we didn't want to see her. But tell me one more thing, when was the letter written?" he asked, really not wanting to know the answer. Lucas, aware of the fact that he held more than just a letter in his hands, but hope itself, turned it over and inspected the handwriting for a date.

"Just under three weeks ago," Lucas said as plainly as he could.

"Then perhaps I am too late," Sirus said, before he removed his body from the edge of the seat, placed the hat back on his knee and stared, once again, out of the

window. Lucas was relieved that the man had gone back to ignoring him. He had too much to think about himself. Until a couple of days ago, he had thought about nothing but Sandra Lee in her yellow bikini, black hair blowing in the wind as she lay on her stomach, fine grains of sand clinging to her feet like jewelled sandals. She had dominated every space in his mind - her flat stomach pressed into the sand, the curve of her backside and what rested beneath it. Now he wondered if he could ever forgive himself for not seeing his grandfather one last time. All he could do was hope.

They stayed in silence that way for many hours as the train seemed to shift like a lethargic centipede in the dark. They both grew more nervous with every passing minute. It was the following morning, just before they were about to reach Bloemfontein, as the two ate their breakfast of runny eggs, toast and coffee, that Lucas this time spoke.

“I wonder if you would do me a favour?”

“Please ask. I have been so overcome with my own sadness, I have not even bothered to ask the reason for the worry on your own face.”

“My grandfather is really ill. It seems sudden, but I guess I knew that he was this ill. I feel guilty. And this is what I need your help for.”

“How is it that I can help you?”

“I can write - it's as easy as breathing to me. But what to say, that's the problem. I think ... I can tell that you would know what to say better than me. See, my grandfather has always been there. There's never a time that he wasn't and now that I should be with him ... well here I am. Sitting here with nothing to do makes me nervous. So maybe you can help me write this letter to him? I mean the words. I can do the writing.”

Sirus smiled. "That would be good. I too need something to take my mind off my own problems." Sirus was born in KwaZulu, in a place where sugar cane grew till it towered over houses and where mangoes, round as women's bottoms and bananas as slim as their fingers, grew so easily that to sell them to people there would have been foolish. It was a place, he said, that felt very much like paradise for a child who didn't know what the world was really about. His hands were rough again, as they had been then, because of the tending of his garden - to keep himself out of mischief, he said. As a man he left to work in a post office in Johannesburg, a future at least beyond the labour of the cane fields. Sirus spent days weighing parcels, checking addresses and sometimes sorting the letters onto huge tables.

"Letters always seemed a bit magical to me. What did they say? Who were they uniting, or maybe dividing? They were always fascinating, so all of this seems ... serendipitous." He etched the word into the air.

He and his wife returned home when their four children were grown. The youngest of them was the girl's father. "He abandoned mother and child not long after the girl, who was so young at the time, gave birth. So who could really blame her for wanting nothing to do with us, his family," Sirus said.

As the train maintained its monotonous heaving, people got on and off at stations. Some popped their heads in to greet the elderly man in the customary manner and ask about his health. Some looked curiously at the odd couple, engrossed in the happenings of the sheet of paper that rested on the young man's lap. And neither boy nor man thought about what was happening beyond their world. How people who had waited day-in, day-out for entire lives, had laid out clothing days earlier. Not just any clothes. Outfits that were usually reserved for weddings, funerals or church on Sundays, so they could look their best when they woke early to walk to the voting

station days earlier, and had queued for however long it took. Freedom should never be taken for granted, they'd said. Lucas and Sirius heard or saw nothing of the axes or words that had come down after that to quiet dissent - of the bloody new birth that had taken place. They had their own burdens to carry.

Outside, the land turned slowly to semi-desert. Sand and dust hung in the air, painting people the same shades of beige and brown as the earth. Everything was burning and thirsty. The Karoo: thirst land. It was the only name that this bit of earth could know. Sirius and Lucas watched, quiet and apart as they had been, but connected in a profound new way that neither had thought possible before. The land turned slowly back to green and the mountain came into view, both men holding letters close to their hearts.

Lucas's parents were waiting as the train pulled into the station. Suzi, who usually didn't allow quiet to inhabit a space and who filled up rooms with laughter when any sort of discomfort arose, could think of nothing to say.

"We need to get to your grandfather. He seemed to have been waiting for two things. Now that elections have happened, he is only waiting for you," Joseph said quietly. Lucas and Sirius said hasty goodbyes, both wishing the other well with lingering handshakes. Suzi didn't ask Lucas how he was. Today she was Vincent's daughter.

The house was darker than usual as Hester sat alone on the red and gold dining chair, her fingers mindlessly circling the knobs of a rosary. She got up to walk with Lucas, her hand reaching up to his shoulder where it remained. It was comforting, as if it said everything was alright. His grandfather would understand.

Vincent lay in the musty bedroom, shafts of light sliding in between the blinds as two of his three children stood around him like ushers who could go no further and so stood on the outskirts and watched. Byron, Vincent and Hester's only son, had been notified days earlier but had still not managed to get a flight. The aroma of soup simmering on the stove and drifting through to the bedroom at lunch time had been replaced by the piercing odour of medicine and disinfectant, a smell that Lucas would forever more identify with death. The books, which were normally piled high in every corner, had been cleared away and packed into boxes. Novels, fables, biographies and historical texts that Vincent had collected his entire life and recalled a time when Lucas had sat, hands holding up face, as his grandfather read - a different voice and face for each character. In place of the books were chairs that seated cousins and aunties. No one spoke or acknowledged Lucas as he entered the room. Vincent breathed slowly and steadily.

"I wrote you a letter," Lucas spoke softly in Vincent's ear as he placed the letter on the pillow, "but someone helped me with it. Not because I didn't know what to say but because this person, an old man who has never known his grandchild and may now have lost her, needed the comfort of the letter more than me. I did it because you would have, and I want to be the same kind of man as you."

Vincent smiled and held Lucas's hand. It would not be long now.

Sirus had never been in this city. It was only because of the young man on the train that he knew where to go. He thought also that it was because of Lucas that he felt some hope. It had been a long time since he'd spoken to a young person, he had forgotten what they spoke and thought about. Most importantly, it was good to be reminded that all people were just the same beneath the surface, irrespective of age. It

would be a long journey before he reached the house. Sirius was not used to these city taxis any longer and found himself seated awkwardly between two women who took up the entire back row, a space normally reserved for four people. They clutched parcels and shopping bags tightly on their laps. Even though Sirius felt like a stick between the forest of women, swallowed up by their huge hips and thighs and the smell of food on their lips, they were helpful and gave advice easily. It was his weakness, speaking with such an open heart to strangers.

“Don’t worry Tata, God will lead you to her. Now we are free, every day is a good day and we can dream ...” One of the women spoke as she made her way through a packet of striped, mint toffees.

“Never mind God Ma, I will take the old man to where he needs to be,” the guard at the door interjected as the ladies got into a serious debate about family values and the importance of respect.

“Ai! This is not a good mother. To keep her child away from her grandfather. These young people forget our values nowadays,” the woman sitting beside the driver, who had seemed absorbed in the passing scenery until now, added her piece as she shook her head.

“Yes but what about the father who left them ... she probably thought like father, like son ... sorry to say.” Another toffee vanished as a crinkled up bit of plastic drifted to the floor.

The conversation continued - Sirius relieved to have these strangers share his burden so easily. It helped him forget about the possibility of not finding her. The journey was over much too quickly and the guard opened the door,

“Ok Oupa, here’s your stop. Walk all the way down this road, turn left and then your first right. Good luck, everything will work out - you’ll see.”

Sirus walked as fast as he could. He knew that every minute counted. But the closer he got the more he was filled with a dread. It was not that he might never see the girl. It was that she might never know how much she was loved and missed. How he and his wife had sat outside their house on many days, surrounded by the fruit trees that they had planted and speculated about their grandchild - how old she must be, whose nose she had and whose eyes, even playing foolish games imagining what she would say when she finally came home.

“What a beautiful home you’ve made for us.” Sirus thought she would say, while his wife was more pragmatic. “You’ve grown fat, you must be wealthy.”

This is what filled his head as he came to a stop before a green and white house. He’d only needed to ask directions once. Unlike the other houses in the street the door was closed. But the windows were open. That gave him hope. Sirus knocked on the door. All he could hear were the strained sounds of a radio playing American music in the background - he thought the songs spoke about matters that were not meant for everyone’s ears, all that talk of improper things - but what did his opinion matter? The young people were mad for it. He knocked again. Light footsteps walked towards the door. A young girl with skin as fresh as a winter morning, braids that hung to her shoulders and eyes bright like the mid-day sun stood before him. Sirus looked at the girl for a full minute.

“Can I help you Tata?” she asked again.

Sirus turned away and walked back to the road. He didn’t have to ask who she was, he could tell. A grandfather knows certain things. But he could not face her with womanly tears streaming down his face. So he waited until the tears were gone, and she was still standing there, knowing. A grandchild knows certain things too.

There are things that I don't understand or know how to begin. So I procrastinate - finding information, articles on similar incidents elsewhere, distractions along the way - anything to put-off the inevitable. But I cannot hesitate any longer. The story about Maria, who I have come to know like a sister, needs to be told, perhaps more than any other.

The articles I find are a strange, fragmented mixture of things. I place them into a file. One piece is on repressed memory theory - about a young American woman who remembers after twenty years that she had, as a child, witnessed her father rape and murder a young friend. I don't know what to make of it.

There is more, still. Stuff that I don't want to read but know I cannot look away from. These are the facts and I must face them. Statistics on abuse. Rape. Old women. Baby girls. As if we have become monsters who consume our young and aged. More women and children - some months old - are raped here than anywhere else. Every few seconds, the page says in black against white as they do in commercials that warn about the risks of smoking. This, too, is a possibility.

At the bottom of the file is an even more curious collection of stories on miracles. Sightings of God, Jesus and the Virgin Mary. And not as spectres seen in the dead of night or shadows in church. No, divine handwriting in ordinary things. The trace of Arabic on the pale yellow of an egg that reads, 'God is Great', a bearded face as waves retrace their journey to the sea and leave a holy imprint in the sand. One woman claimed to see the face of Christ in a burrito. Her home became a virtual shrine with

eight thousand people passing through within days to view the piece of bread. The image of Jesus has also been sited in amorphous shapes in the clouds, in shadows playing on garage doors, in the barks of trees, on frosted window panes. Tears from statues, stigmata ... there seems to be no shortage of people who believe they have witnessed a miracle.

I don't know what to make of all this information.

But I cannot stall any longer. There is no way to tell this other than the way in which it was told to me. I must leave this up to you now. You must decide.

University of Cape Town

1999

Heavenly Children

In a simple world Maria Jacobs of number 12 Blooms Court, Lavender Park, may have been a simple person. But the world is multi-faceted and Maria being a part of the world, has its shape. It was six-year-old Maria that saved her grandmother from an irascible flame that had attached itself to Oumie's skirt after she knocked over the gas stove. Maria stared and the flame cowered in submission and blew itself out. Oumie fell to her knees and thanked the Lord with five Hail Mary's and an Our Father but never quite looked at her grandchild in the same way. And it was Maria who knew that Mr Davids was for certain going to die in a car accident right before winning the lotto. At school she could recite chapters of the Bible with eyes closed, yet not remember that Jan Van Riebeeck arrived at the Cape in 1652. So when on her sixteenth birthday she woke up knowing that she was pregnant, she also knew that God had sent his child express and unequivocally to her. Maria knew this was so because she had been conversing with God as far back as she could remember and it was during one of their early morning or late night talks when she learnt that the finger of divinity was pointing unwaveringly at her.

“Maria - you could be the next Mother of Jesus. You are a good, kind, if not simple person. And besides, we need to shake the world up a bit, so perhaps this time my son ... err ... our son will be born to you, here, in Lavender Park to people that need some healing. And besides with all that's happening in Bethlehem, I couldn't possibly send my child to a war zone.”

And that was that.

The second reason that she knew this was a heavenly child was because she never in her life so much as side-glanced a boy with desire, never mind thought of sex. She rarely came in contact with any man, being that her mother had neither husband, nor boyfriend, nor companion. In fact the lubricious tongues of Lavender Park often debated beneath their swirled hair how her mother's one and only encounter with a man, had been on the night that Maria was conceived, against the passenger door of a 1976 VW beetle.

Being that Maria didn't always think things through, she went straight to her mother with the joyous news of the addition to their family. Her mother, after washing her daughter's mouth out with soap and water, made two trips. The first was to the priest to ask God to forgive her wicked child who really did not know what she was saying. The second trip, for which Maria was marched home for a change of underwear and to wash her private parts, was to the doctor.

Dr Naidoo was the sort of man who believed a good life was measured by laughter and he measured one's worth on the expanse of their guffaw. Maria remembered how he had made house-calls five years earlier to each of the five children who were found playing with syringes discovered in the park. She thought herself lucky because Dr Naidoo was so angry about the incident that he even called the newspapers, which led to them tracking down the driver who had been dumping the bits of flesh and needles, because it meant he could go home half-an-hour earlier. And Dr Naidoo made Maria's mother serve her jelly and custard everyday for a week.

Dr Naidoo whistled through the wide gaps in his teeth and tried to stop his stomach from shaking with the hilarity that had started there and was rising to his throat for escape.

“Urm. Yes. Yes. Aaaah. I see, this is Immaculate Conception. Well, being that I have met the Lord himself in my surgery many times, this should come as no surprise. Mmmm. Ok Maria - let the boy who has done this face up to it. If you protect him, it could harm you and your child.”

He let out a sigh as he said, “And if you really believe what you are saying, then Maria, be careful what you say and who you say it to. Life in Lavender Park can bring out the worst in most people.” With that he drew blood, sought permission from Maria and her mother for various tests and sent them home.

Mrs Jacobs walked two paces ahead of Maria. She stared in front of her but made eye contact with no one and, with one hand folded over the other, she signalled her deep anguish. Without removing her scarf or her good shoes that she kept in a box of tissue paper between visits to church and the doctor, she headed for the kitchen to make herself a good, strong cup of tea. Between sobs and slurps she wondered when the punishment would end. First God had given her a daughter to raise alone, all because of her idiotic trusting of that Byron fellow who swore that she wouldn't fall pregnant if they stood up and did it. And God knew how hard it had been raising Maria who was sometimes really quite strange and now he had given her another mouth to feed, another burden to bear.

Maria, barred in her room by the sound of heartbreak coming from the kitchen, sat on her bed and looked at her world. Not even the ghetto sun bothered her there. She wasn't sure any longer whether God had sent her a miracle or a curse. She hadn't reckoned on her mother's total disbelief or her saying that she would have to leave school with just one year to go. Would God provide when the little one arrived? She stayed at home the next day and the next, too tired to leave their home and too afraid of

what rumours the air around Lavender Park carried. Of course only hilarious news travels faster than news of death or a shotgun marriage; besides, a hole the size of an ear allegorised the privacy of the doctor's rooms.

Everyone's mouths clapped with speculation about who the father was and whether Maria had finally lost her head. They all thought she was a little strange, but not so strange that she couldn't figure out the rites of passage between man and woman, and then still to create an elaborate cover up.

Only Dr Naidoo's house visit broke the freeze holding number 12 Booms Court. But there was no trace of his easy manner.

"Maria, Mrs Jacobs. The other day I took a sample of blood for various tests. One of which, was an HIV test. You understand in this day and age and not knowing the boy that made you pregnant I thought I should. Also, there was that incident a few years ago when we found the children playing with syringes. Who of us even thought to have the children tested for HIV? Be that as it may, the tests arrived just fifteen minutes ago. Maria I'm not sure about this boy who you've been seeing, he must be tested too ... the thing is you had better prepare yourself ... you are HIV positive." Strange words twisted out of Dr Naidoo's mouth and by the time they reached Maria's ears they were a distorted and horrendous sound.

Mrs Jacobs stood taut as Dr Naidoo explained slowly and carefully what it all meant. He didn't know when she had contracted HIV, it could have been years earlier in the park. In great detail and with a voice so soft that he could mask his own distress, he explained. But as he spoke he couldn't stop his eyes from darting around the ordered room, assessing inane things which he didn't usually notice, like the walls which had been painted so long ago that the once aquamarine shade had turned a sickly pale green,

the old black and white television set with the broken aerial, and the bareness in the spot where a dining-table stood in other homes.

They barely survived on Mrs Jacob's wages as a receptionist for the local council and he knew that she could not afford the expensive anti-retroviral drugs that were Maria and the baby's only hope. Mrs Jacobs asked questions wildly, wanted to know what could be done, could she write to anyone, who could help? Not that she wanted charity. No, charity was the last thing she asked for. And what about the baby? Was this a death sentence for her entire family? Surely together they could do something.

But the questions were beyond the scope of an ordinary man, even a learned doctor. And in an act of forgivable desperation, Mrs Jacobs threw Dr Naidoo out of the house, closed the door and held her daughter and her grandchild close. Maria who sat silently in the corner of the brown and pink patterned couch heard very little. She shut out the whole world, closed her ears and eyes and tried to commune with God. He would know what to do and obviously had a reason for sending his son to her when her body was engaged in the fight for its life. But God may have been in a state of shock too, for he said nothing.

When Maria finally came too, her mother was cradling her for the first time in years. The way she once had, before the dust left behind by misunderstanding had clouded their relationship. Mrs Jacobs didn't want to feel shame any longer and didn't want to place blame. She just felt old. Centuries old. As if all of life's strife had seeped into her bones and had made her ancient. Even her skin fitted uncomfortably over her flesh and she wanted desperately to escape her bones and body and blood. But then she'd tried to escape her entire life. Turning cold when she wanted to cry, and remaining

silent when she wanted to shout, and accepting things graciously when she wanted to show contempt. And she couldn't escape any more. She had to stay and carry her child over this.

“Mummy. You're crying. Everything will be all right. Auntie Maurie's son has AIDS, everyone knows just no one says so, like it's a punishment or something. He is ok. And I know God would not send his child to die. I will pray.”

She did. Maria prayed every night and asked God why he had sent his only child to face such odds before he was even born. But God was silent and Maria understood the quiet to mean that this was God's will.

Dr Naidoo insisted that Maria return to school and when ready, her child would be born in the local hospital. She went to school but made her skin thick to avoid the remarks of the students and teachers. And when they had said so much that the air turned hot with fury, they felt the scorch of their own anger and, humiliated, they stopped.

Dr Naidoo was right though, there was not enough money to keep Maria on the expensive mix of pills and medicines. Mrs Jacobs worked overtime where she could, but still that was not enough. So they resorted to taking each day as the gift that it had always been. The residents of number 12 Blooms Court Lavender Park resumed the shape of normal life. Each morning Maria walked the five-minute walk to the taxi rank and waited in the front passenger seat for the taxi to fill up. She learned how not to be angry when people who she knew avoided sitting next to her and, worse still, looked out of the window when she turned her head in their direction. News had spread and now she was not only known as strange Maria; she could see in their eyes, that she was seen as Maria who must have committed one helluva sin.

Their evenings were filled with preparing for a baby. Maria sat in the low sun that entered their lounge and read books while Mrs Jacobs busied her hands by knitting clothes for their little one, who was still nameless. Together Maria and her mother tried to seal out the rest of the world and comforted one another with the love of the despairing. And Maria did not complain. Not when morning sickness embittered her day and not when her feet swelled up, nor when she struggled through sleepless night after night. She still believed that God was sending his son to perform a great deed for all of humankind. Moreover that this was a part of God's plan.

And on the evening that her son was born, the night was not silent. Cantankerous rain clouds obscured the full moon and the expanse of dark sky. No one saw the meteorite shower. Even the scientists, who had long anticipated the wonder the galaxy was throwing their way, saw nothing. Even the prophetic men and women who claimed that a miracle was due and would happen soon, saw and heard nothing. And as the meteorite burnt up in the earth's atmosphere, no one, not even God seemed to notice how the tail of light pointed to number 12 Blooms Court Lavender Park.

When she came into the world my mother, Bella, let off a piercing salute to life, stopped, opened her eyes and kicked the midwife in her face. Or that's how the story goes. A warrior since birth her mother, Hester, said. She was the sort who never bought a lottery ticket (for fear that she would win and then have nothing left to battle for) and never owned a microwave (butter will melt in its own time she said inexplicably, because we owned a stove).

On the day that she went into labour with me, my mother arrived single at St John's Women's Hospital (two bus rides away and perched on a hill) pregnant and with contractions minutes apart. The stunned head nurse asked where the father was. Another woman might make an excuse - even ill-conceived just to keep the peace. Hold with convention. But not my mother. She grabbed the sheet of paper being held out by the nurse and in the empty space that asked for details of the father, took a pen and crossed through the entire section.

"Only mother," she said, walking towards the ward.

Maybe it was this spirit of defiance and battle that seeped into my own genes, so I'd only miss having a father when I was angry with her or when other children arrived in zig zag patterns of three, four or five. The two of us were only a straight line.

As for my mother's own motives for having a child on her own, these only became clear when I was old enough to understand. Being a single mother was never a burden, but an opportunity for her to face down everything. To be mother and father. To deal with the network of stares or slightly too loud comments in supermarkets and

doctors' offices about what her thick pantyhose and square shoes meant. In return she'd boom out, "Don't stand there looking like an unfinished question, mind your own business." And they would.

She raised me in a small house where books were kissed if they came to harm, freedom was seen as sacred and love was given precedence above everything else. Only years later would I regret that I had never known my father - because I was conceived in an age old act, not a glass tube, no prods, shots and hospitals. But on a bed in a dark room with a travelling friend who could not be a father for long. A friend who grew thinner as the lump in his heart grew larger. She said he died of a broken heart.

I asked more questions then - why with him and why then.

"We gave each a gift that no one else could have. He lives on now and I have you."

I understood.

She never gave me the big speech about when my time would come to choose - because she reckoned she had raised me well enough to know my own heart and head.

2001

Plastic City

Nosipho became a compulsive, nocturnal visitor.

As the couple slept, Nosipho wiped away invisible grime, dusted mite-free corners and watched the washing machine's tumult with mute comprehension. When the sun rose, she went back to the flat at the back of the couple's house, kissed her child and counted cows till she fell asleep. It had been Nosipho's daily routine since the day her husband disappeared in the middle of the night from their home in Plastic City. It was not long after that that Nosipho vanished with the last of the March heat.

Maya and Thami could feel the sun on their faces hours after Nosipho had gone back to her room. Maya moved slowly, half asleep, towards Thami. He would lie rigid now. Not like before when he sensed the slightest of movements and reached out to touch her. Maya would get out of bed always tired, wash, dress, and leave for work without saying a word. Thami would dress hurriedly after Maya had left. As he walked through the passageway to the front door he looked away from the picture that recalled the day, three years earlier, that both of them had thought of as their happiest.

The wedding had been an anticipated event. They were, after all, the ideal new South African couple as *Nuevo Afrika* magazine had written one month earlier. The twenty-four-year old Maya had just signed a five-year book contract with the Education Department, accelerating her start up publishing company, MOYO Press, to the

opposite end of its five-year plan. And Thami, who demanded attention by stepping into a room and left cologne dancing in the air hours after he had been somewhere, had graduated in the top ten of his class at the London School of Economics. With a Masters in Economics, he made the journey back home because he said he missed his mother's cooking, but more importantly, because his scholarship had run its course.

Their wedding took place at one of the most expensive hotels in the middle of the city. The courtyard, where strings of fairy lights were woven around Roman pillars and Frangipani trees, was packed with guests who, as weddings go, were eating and drinking much more than they should have as they danced to a dark blue voice that sang old love songs that everyone knew from the radio.

From the bodice of the white organza dress, above layers of fabric that had been diligently woven by one thousand worms in China, to the bottom of the dress inscribed with the work of the *Bead-It Co-op* where ten women beaded day and night, everything had been thought of. Rice and pap, beer and Umqomboti, vegetarian, kosher, halaal, no beef for the Hindu guests, no genetically modified foods, no MSG, and absolutely no slaughtering of animals in front of the guests.

While the wedding had been largely a joyous feast, to those who knew and had remained sober, it was also a delicate affair. The families of the groom and bride sat at opposite ends of the courtyard. Thami's mother indignant that the whip of a girl had bounded over cultural norms, accepting and discarding ancient rites in some modern-fusion-fashion.

"Such embarrassment Papa. Coloured is maybe ok, lots of people is a bit mixed up after all, but says she is a feminist also. Bah!" Thami's mother, Ma Agatha, said as she sat at her husband's grave, hands pulling at threads from the handkerchief with the word Tuesday embroidered on it in white.

“We raised our boy well but sometimes, maybe too well. Got his own idea that boy. Hope he know his heart. And Zulu beads at the bottom of the dress. Bah!” she said, dabbing the handkerchief across the bridge of her nose and forehead.

Maya had refused to accept the lobola offer of cash and when she insisted that the slaughtering of animals occur out of sight of any of her guests, it shouldn't have been a surprise that Thami's family was gravely offended. Many of the older people, for whom tradition remained important, had only arrived at the celebration out of curiosity and a fading sense of duty.

Maya's family blessed the union one Sunday at lunch. The family sat around the huge table while platters of meat and vegetables were being passed around accompanied by a cacophony of discomfort. Hester who could bear no sort of quiet especially at the lunch table, did her best to make Thami feel more comfortable.

“You children have such opportunities open to you nowadays,” Hester said. “Gits. Live, do, eat what and where you like. You can even marry anyone. Not like when we was young. My word, even a black man,” Hester had said with an innocent smile.

The wedding ended in the early hours of the morning long after the newly married couple had crossed the equator en route to their Italian honeymoon. Maya's mother - Bella, and Ma Agatha, had by that hour forgotten to avoid one another and found themselves inspecting their outfits at precisely the same time in the two-by-two metre, gold gilded mirror.

“So,” began Ma Agatha ready to say her bit, “your daughter, she is a too modern girl. Doesn't cook says Thami and no labola which is very important in our Xhosa tradition, you understand.”

“Yes,” said Bella, “but your son doesn’t cook either. It’s a different world today. Some men make the best cooks you know. And Maya,” she said, softening her tone at the site of Ma Agatha’s frightening stare, “she didn’t want to offend you. But today, children don’t remember that weddings are about families and that tradition is important. Anyway she has always been headstrong.”

“And Thami too. Nooo. Tch. Never could reason with that boy,” Ma Agatha said, accepting a temporary cessation of hostilities. “Maybe they listen to each other.”

“I think they will. It’s not like when we were young, is it? There were so many restrictions then. You couldn’t just love for love’s sake, could you? Couldn’t follow your heart,” Bella said, so Ma Agatha knew just what she meant and the two mothers, grand in their wedding outfits, wiped away tears that were not just shed for new love, but also for old loves lost.

Maya and Thami knew no peace since the day Nosipho, the twice a week cleaning-woman had first arrived with two bags, a teapot and Xolekwa, her five-year-old daughter slumped over her shoulder - two cherry lips and black lashes curled back as the little girl breathed in and out, blissfully unaware of the drama unfolding around her.

“Hello Mrs, Mr. I got nowhere and nothing. That skelm Joachim ran off with all my stuff. Only left me this teapot - he never drank tea. Only coffee. And rum. Serves me right for taking a Mozambican. Heard they were better - don’t hit or force themselves, but who knew they steal everything in the middle of the night. Can I stay?”

So Nosipho stayed. At first for only a few days until she could figure out what to do. But the days got shorter as summer turned to autumn and after a few weeks, Nosipho seemed to forget her promise of a few days only. And the more Nosipho made herself at home, the more Thami receded to the edges of the house - skulked around

corners, observed things from doorframes and spent hours speaking on his mobile in the courtyard. He came home later from work each evening. And when Maya and Thami told Nosipho more than once that it was time to go, she always said the same thing.

“Tomorrow I go back to Plastic City. Ok it’s cold. Very dangerous and wet, but we make a nice bed for Xolekwa on the floor.” And that became that.

The little girl, despite her mother’s impossible nightly routine, climbed into Maya’s heart with her quiet stares and her lopsided walk (and could not be pried out, even by Thami’s increasing agitation). Xolekwa spoke slowly and softly and Maya saw that she had a gentle nature. The girl’s affections were easily won with attention and patience. Though Thami’s was running out.

“She isn’t our child. Give her back to her mother and let them go. Nosipho is bluffing. Thousands of people live happily in Plastic City, Maya. She’s blackmailing you because she can feel you walking around apologetically. God! Before you know it, she’ll be leaving the girl with us to bring her up. And we’re not ready to have children.”

“Yes, you’re right. And I do feel guilty. I know. But she is sweet. Let’s just leave it for a while more, ok?”

But when Maya finally did agree to give Nosipho the boot it was much too late. On the evening that Maya and Thami slept without being interrupted by the sound of the washing machine, they should have known something was wrong. The following morning it was Maya who first heard Xolekwa’s cries. Maya opened the door to Nosipho’s room. There Xolekwa was, a ponytail above each ear, sitting alone on the floral duvet. Maya looked at her. The girl looked back. They both smiled. The note taped to the door read: *Sorry. Still got nothing. Try to come back.*

While Maya and Thami waited for the routine papers to be filled out, stamped and processed, Xolekwa moved into the main house (it made sense that she stayed with them until a foster home was found, said Maya) and Thami moved into the shadows. Thami learned to give way during dinner time, sleep through a child's nightmares and by-pass storytelling without effort. He could become invisible while being right there. Xolekwa learned to love Maya's laugh, know her smell and avoid Thami's eyes. The girl and woman became attached, and not just in an emotional sense. Thami stopped imagining his wife without the little girl trailing her. He never saw them separately.

Thami drove east just as the early morning sun was setting alight Plastic City. Bits of corrugated iron and white synthetic sheeting gave off a glow that left a shimmer hanging over the township. It was another world here - one that never slept, just slowed down to catch its breath. Taxi's were already, or perhaps still, racing through four-way stops, the smell of braai'd meat off-cuts and frying onions had been thickening the air since four a.m. and business was being plied on the sidewalks: hair cut and braided, lottery tickets sold, phones charged and spirits healed. Only the yellow crane at the side of the road, bending over piles of bricks and wood like a giraffe over a waterhole at first light, seemed still.

Husbands weren't lost, just displaced, and Thami knew where to look. Joachim couldn't be too far off. With the right questions and the proper answers he would track him down and give his child back to him. Bribe him if he had to. Thami only worried that his brand new, silver-grey Beamer would be scratched or touched by envious hands. He should have borrowed Maya's car. But he knew these parts well. Always had. This was his playground and Joachim had to be somewhere in it.

The envelope arrived by speed courier. The girl stood in her cycling shorts, Destiny's Child blasting through her earphones while she hovered at the door, waiting for someone to notice that she'd not been tipped. Maya didn't even look up. The A4 letter felt like it was burning a hole right through her. She knew what it said because the social worker had called earlier that day,

“We found a nice family for Zoolekwa. Lovely people. You can set your mind at ease. I'll send over the papers and we can collect the girl tonight, okey-dokey?”

No, bloody not okey-dokey, Maya wanted to shout but instead stammered politely into the phone, “Yes ... so soon. Tonight already? I thought these things took months. It's only been four weeks.”

“And they say the public service is in crisis! We are on the ball here. On. The. Ball! Ok gotta go, s'long ...” And she rang off.

Xolekwa really wasn't ready yet. No, that wasn't quite right. Maya wasn't ready. And probably never would be. But Thami would not agree to keep the child. Who could blame him? He still wanted to travel before they settled down, he'd said. Maya had to be smart about this and quickly. She would cancel her appointments. Her three person team would have to manage without her. Perhaps if Xolekwa had a grandparent or someone, they could work out what to do together, rather than sacrificing the child to a black hole of foster homes and who knew what. She would think about the rest on the way to Plastic City.

Maya double checked the doors every few minutes and only stopped at traffic lights when she saw oncoming cars. There were no cops here. But plenty of hijackers. She hadn't been into a township without Thami before and had no idea what to expect. Maya pulled into the petrol station.

“Molo Boetie,” she said to the attendant.

“Yes Mam,” he answered, bored. If he had five bucks for every time he dived into conversation, only to realise mid-way that the blank stare meant the person spoke no Xhosa beyond greetings and thanks.

“Can you give me directions to this place please? NY 2119? I’m looking for Nosipho. Big woman, wears bright colours and never stops speaking.”

“That describes half the women here, Sisi. Drive straight, turn left. Ask at the restaurant before you get yourself lost. It’s called *Made in Africa* ...”

The roads on this side of the township were new and houses had been built all along them. The street lights hadn’t been completed and stood headless, like decapitated soldiers, way above the throng below. There wasn’t much of the plastic sheeting that had first given the place its name. Maya pulled up beside a bus that was off-loading tourists at the restaurant for lunch. Cameras flashed and children (out of school in the middle of the day she noted) ululated for some change. Maya made her way inside.

The restaurant was small but well designed with lit candles that hung in wire baskets. A framed tapestry hung at the entrance and richly embroidered cushions on wooden benches were scattered around the place while calabashes and colourful fabrics hung along the other walls. Kwaito played in the background, so the room vibrated hypnotically. And there in the middle of the room, drinking beer and chatting to men Maya had never seen, was her husband.

“I was not trying to sell the girl Maya, just asking questions! And I found him - Joachim, I found him right here in Plastic City. He hadn’t run away, just got caught up in something. And he says he does drink tea by the way,” Thami added, pleased with himself.

“He stole his wife’s things!”

“To pay for gambling debts. But he says he will go back to them.”

“But we don’t know where Nosipho is, do we? And does the father even want his daughter without accepting money in exchange? Look, I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but I’ve grown close to Xolekwa. I thought that after some time I’d be alright to see her go. But I can’t. I can’t just pass her off like a sack of potatoes to anyone.” Maya waited.

“Aah, here’s the point. You want to keep her? Well, you’ll have to do it without me,” Thami said, stopped, turned and went back inside.

Nosipho, meanwhile, had lost herself. She didn’t know where she was or where she would go next. The ache wouldn’t stop. It started in her heart and soon filled her entire body with excruciating pain. This was her punishment, hell on earth that she would endure. She couldn’t go back to Plastic City, people probably knew what she had done by now and would be mad with her. And she couldn’t go back to Maya and Thami. The girl would be better off, for now. New work would be too hard to find with her like this, so confused all the time, and it wouldn’t be easy from now on.

In the beginning it had been difficult to get used to the strange couple. She didn’t know what to make of Thami who spoke to her in English. And insisting that she call them on their first names. She thought if Maya just treated her like a maid then it would be easy for her to clean up after them. But they loved Xolekwa. Everyone did. It would take time but she would get back onto her feet.

“It will be like living in a waiting room,” Bella said. “A sense of something else to come. Will the mother come back and when she does - will she let you adopt

Xolekwa or want her back? As for your marriage, well, you must decide,” her mother said sadly.

It happened the only way that it could then. Thami and Maya went their separate ways and no-one said I told you so. Even Ma Agatha was desperately heart-broken. Though Maya wasn't her choice for her only son, who ever wants to see their worst predictions finding their way to truth? Bella blamed herself for not teaching Maya more patience. Neither Thami nor Maya blamed the other. Just the consequence of choice, they said to themselves. Maya would learn not to panic when the doorbell rang or when the phone beeped unexpectedly late at night. And Xolekwa, she learned to love toffee apples, loathe school and took each day just as it came.

University of Cape Town

We know the rain will arrive long before it does. The earth lets off a delicate odour, fresh and wanting. And when the rain does appear, it knows no limits. It pours for days and days, the wind joining in for a rambunctious orgy. The Cape of Storms it was called by the Portuguese sailors who traversed our coastline and claimed it as their discovery. Long after many generations had lived and died. Long after Chinese sailors had been. Long after all life had been declared sacred.

It's raining like that now. As we pack up the last of the house. The table will go with Bella. Each child will get a chair or two. We look like a group of gypsies, taking our chairs on our backs and heading for new places. The house has to be sold. Hester must say goodbye. These are our instructions. And she obeys. Hester will live between daughters, swinging back and forth for Christmas, Easter, weekends. She can no longer take care of herself, we say. Our duty.

All her life she has been looked after, Hester says. No peace.

We don't know how to say goodbye to the house, so we all just walk away. Perhaps there are no goodbyes.

I wait till the night arrives before I begin. I have always been drawn to the dark, the deep of night when everyone else has retreated from life. I feel safe, comforted here. Everything is gentler - angles are softer, life resides in lesser things - dogs barking, cars screeching, even memories of the day give way to elsewhere as we shut our eyes to submit to another world. My own eyes, though, are wide open - wider than they have

ever been. I sit at my desk and start to type as I have done every day for more than a year. The stories I have written have given some shape to lives that I only knew vaguely. Yes, it's true. Only knew vaguely.

Yet, there seems to be more pieces now than when I first started. The more you know, the more you will need to know, my grandfather's voice says through a character in his novel. It's true - I know less than I ever did and I've come to realise that I will learn less still. Life's mystery. Endless questions.

The sun is rising already, I didn't realise the time. There is so much that has to be done. Xolekwa will wake in a few hours time.

A gaunt silence accompanies first light. Even dogs have stopped their lamenting. I hear the ocean, uninterrupted by the city noises. Smell the perfume of wet grass. The clouds give way to a mightier power.

A new day has begun and I welcome it.

University of Cape Town

2004

Home Coming

Aurora strained her neck so she could see the landscape over Mrs Pearson's open mouth that emitted occasional, soft snores. The elderly woman was exactly who she'd hoped not to get caught with on a twelve-hour international flight. The retired bank teller was on her way to visit the home that she had known all her life until a few years back (when she and hubby Allan thought things were going bad). She insisted on giving Aurora a guided tour of her fragmented memory.

"I've always loved Africa. Kenya. White mischief they called it, you know. I had an Aunt there when I was just a little thing. Poor dear, she had a lovely farm - acres of land that stretched as far as the eye could see, until the locals started their uprising. Chased her back to England ...," she continued, pausing only to sip from her gin as she blinked at the map that showed up intermittently on the screen in front of their seats. "Oh and what a tragedy Uganda was. My neighbour at home is an Indian woman. Nice sort. Says her family was chucked out of Uganda by Idi Ah-min like last week's curry." Congealed talcum powder fell from between her ageing breasts as she shook with gentle waves of mirth.

Aurora stuck her head into her book to discourage her, but Mrs Pearson breathed heavily into her face as she tugged gently on her arm and offered her a ginger snap.

"Rhodesia. What a pity," she said, pausing for a moment of silence.

"Goodness, is there a word for someone like me - who loves Africa, I mean? Must be an Afrophile" she said, taking a long sip of gin.

That would be colonialist, Aurora thought, but said nothing.

Now that Mrs Pearson had finally passed out with half-an-hour to landing, Aurora tried to piece together her own memory as the plane flew over blue waters and the peak-less mountain. It was only the second time in her life that she had been back to her father's home. Ten years earlier they had been ushered into a taxi in the middle of the night and driven silently to her Grandmother, Hester's, home. The next day was stuck in her memory, a page that her mind kept blowing back to. People had come from all across town and insisted on walking behind the casket in which her grandfather, Vincent, lay. Everyone in her new family had let their tears fall freely as they walked silently, dead weeds and wild daisies trailing them as their sadness spread to everything.

They tried to make Aurora and her mother - the English Woman, a name that would stick no matter what she did or didn't do - feel welcome at that Sunday Lunch. But between their looks of surprise which indicated that they had not been expecting the little girl and the length of the English Woman's skirt, everyone felt strained and out of place. Aurora's mother had fallen pregnant with her months after Byron first arrived in London; married him to give him citizenship and bought herself freedom from a life doomed to standing behind the counter of the local butcher. Byron had more money than any man she'd known and when he opened the florist, gave the couple a full time occupation and a neat house with two bathrooms.

Aurora's father had been home a few times after that, but still the strain between him and his sisters could be felt all the way to their home in Barnet on the outskirts of London. So when he suggested that Aurora take a month long break before her final year of study, she jumped at the opportunity to come out from under the haze that seemed to cover her father. Besides, she knew that this was where everything would start to make sense. For a long time she had known that her father was in

correspondence with someone. On the first Saturday of every month - irrespective of snow or heat wave - he disappeared, an envelope concealed beneath his jacket, more surly than usual. He never said who he was writing to and didn't try to appease Aurora with promises of sweets later, like he did when he went on business trips and always brought back a doll. But it was the note that had arrived five years earlier that changed something deep inside of him - arrested his sense of fun, so whenever he burst out laughing after that, he would stop suddenly, as if he had some affliction which left him with only half a laugh.

The light blue envelope with the anaemic handwriting had arrived early one June morning. From South Africa. No-one really wrote any longer so it had to be important. Aurora inspected it, smelled it, held it to the light and considered steaming the seal open, but thought better of it. She handed it to her father with a curtsy, but he didn't smile. He took the letter with him to the bedroom and remained hidden for the rest of the evening.

Whispers floated between the walls of their house for the rest of the night. She wasn't sure, but behind the soporific sounds of trees rustling in the wind, she thought she heard her father sobbing as she fell asleep. The next morning he was gone. Her mother, silent and sullen, would only say that he would be back in a few weeks time and Aurora would understand one day.

Byron returned two weeks later, drawn, thinner than Aurora had ever seen him, and forever altered. As if life had somehow rearranged itself behind his eyes and now he saw everything differently. Starkly.

Aurora had written down the return address that Saturday afternoon weeks earlier for reasons she could not explain, and had held on to it. She never did throw it away.

“Are we there yet dear?” Mrs Pearson made a spectacular recovery as she fluffed her hair into place and applied another coat of crimson lipstick.

It was a windy day with the sun fighting to reach through thick grey clouds. The family had arrived to welcome Aurora.

“Gits, look how you’ve grown.” Her grandmother walked up to meet her with a familiar smile that Aurora didn’t yet recognize as being that of her own. They inspected Aurora for minutes, apportioning her body parts and complimenting her beauty between each other as if they were responsible for it.

“Her mother’s long legs. But our forehead and what lovely skin,” said Hester.

“Also our good bones,” Suzi said.

“Fine looking girl, takes after her grandfather,” Bella added before ushering the family out of the building.

“You’ll be staying with me. I have a big house, one daughter and a cat,” her cousin Maya said, taking her bags.

Maya lived in a quiet home that only came to life when Xolekwa, Maya’s daughter, arrived with the babysitter ten minutes later. The child blew in with a tornado of questions, answers and kisses as she spoke non-stop until she fell asleep exhausted in Maya’s arms. Maya and Aurora sat in the small courtyard at the back of the house and watched the sky turn pink over the dozen hills that followed each other like children playing leap frog. The ritual of question and answer helped to fill in the outlines of their lives. Maya updated Aurora about all the family gossip before she disappeared to collect something from the bedroom.

“I thought you might want to see this, given that your major is literature,” Maya said as she carried with great gentleness a thick, yellowing manuscript. “Belonged to

our grandfather. Lucas and I discovered it years ago, but pretended like we had never seen it when Ma gave it to us when she moved. Thought you might like to see it.”

The pages were thick and crisp between Aurora’s fingers and smelled of history. The top of the first page was written in a tight, cursive writing in fading brown ink, *The Prayer*. A tinier scrawl, untidy and less formal than the rest of the front page had been scribbled beneath. *Vincent*.

Aurora remained on the couch for the rest of the evening reading the text gratefully as she learned more about Vincent and this unknown place that she wanted to call home. More than anything, it made her anxious to understand her own father and why his past remained such a mystery.

Xolekwa sat on the low stool in the kitchen and watched the ritual unfold. The family - or rather the women - gathered in the kitchen around a big table while finishing touches were put to Sunday Lunch. Hester at the head of the table tossing salad into a bowl, Aurora given pride of place beside her and Suzi moving between the oven and fridge at break-neck speed as she tried to accomplish five tasks at once. The aroma of spices, herbs, lemon and caramelised sugar infused the air as Bella gave instructions to Maya. Joseph and Lucas popped in occasionally only to be told they were taking up space. When they sat down to eat an hour later, Aurora felt as if she had always been a part of them. Unlike the quiet which shaped the family meals that Aurora knew, a noisy industriousness took hold there as dishes were passed, matters commented on, and food eaten in sublime synchronicity.

“Betty Daniels is having her eightieth birthday soon. You’re all invited. Big do, hall, colour scheme, everything,” said Hester.

“Betty’s been Ma’s friend for about two hundred years ... she never had a wedding so she has a ‘big do’ every year,” Lucas explained as he passed Aurora the carrots.

“Will she be wearing a hat that’s afraid of her again this year?” Maya asked.

“Rumour has it that her hat died of fright looking down at her last time,” Lucas answered Aurora’s unasked question.

“What would you like to do while you’re here? Take you around perhaps? It’s a lovely city,” Suzi said, changing the subject as Hester stared down her grandchildren.

“Yes I know. What I’ve seen is remarkable. By the way - where is this place Lavender Park Aunty? My father mentioned it once, does he know people there?”

“Lavender Park - good grief. Perhaps in the old days he had friends there. It’s very rough there now. Wouldn’t suggest you go there,” Bella answered.

“Oh, just curious,” Aurora said as chairs were shuffled and feet busied in preparation for dessert.

The taxi driver opened the door for Aurora. She had exactly two hours before she would be missed.

“Where to lady?”

“Lavender Park? This address here.”

“Ok. Bit of a rough neighbourhood nowadays. You know someone there?”

“Yes. Family, I think. I’m sure, thank you,” Aurora said as his eyes narrowed in the reflection from the rear view mirror. As they passed through the city, the taxi weaved between other cars and through busy side-streets. So this was her second home, Aurora thought. She’d always thought of London as the only home she would ever have. Still did. But this place felt familiar. She couldn’t be sure why.

The taxi slowed down as it approached a small house that had not been painted, nor the grass cut for what looked like years.

“Righto. This is the place, mus I wait for you?”

“Yes ... wait please. I won't be long.” The metal gate was shut despite the few threads of rusting wire that held it together. An old *Beware of the Dog* sign hung from one bolt and shuddered as she shut the gate behind her. She walked up the narrow pathway. An eye watched her advance from the slit in the curtains.

Aurora raised her hand to knock. Two soft raps, not to seem too forceful. She'd leave any time now if no one answered. But the door slid open quietly and a girl peeked out over a chain barring Aurora's entrance.

“Yes?”

“I'm sorry to disturb you. But I was looking for someone here who might ... this sounds a bit silly now ... but know my father, Byron? He knows someone who lives at this address and well ... he wanted me to give the person a message while I'm visiting.” Aurora's heart leapt as she realised the foolishness of what she was doing.

“Byron? I don't know anyone by that name. I can ask my mother but she's at work. Do you want to leave a number so she can call you when she gets home?” The girl was not quite child, not quite woman. Thin, tall and pale, she wore a lemon dress that reached below her bony knees.

The door opened to a lounge that was dark and empty, apart from a few chairs and aged toys that lay strewn on the ground. The carpet was worn in places and the walls were painted a green that reminded Aurora of a public hospital.

“I don't want you to go to any bother,” Aurora said.

“No worries. Maybe he is an old friend. Maybe she will call you,” the girl answered.

Aurora walked back down the pathway. Her face heated with the embarrassment of what had become an obsession. Naturally, the woman wouldn't call. This had gone too far. Still Aurora stayed beside the phone that evening, knowing the woman wouldn't call, all the same hoping that she would. The phone rang three times. Aurora jumped like a school girl awaiting her first date and smiled shyly before handing the receiver to Maya. She never called.

In the weeks that followed, Aurora got to know every member of her family. Their silences and conversation: what they meant to say when they said nothing and what they didn't say when they continued speaking. Her family seemed like they had never been that far away, after all.

Aurora got to know the city too - by what everyone told her before she could decide for herself - and when she did, wasn't sure. To her it was a world between other worlds. Now a city at the ocean, placid and beautiful, then a city in Africa, patterned and busy. One moment breathtaking, as sparkling beaches unwrap themselves beneath hill-creeping mansions, at another moment bleak as workers recede with the approaching night from the city to their homes somewhere at the edge of madness. Maya said Aurora expected too much. Africa doesn't have one expression on its face.

Exhausted and still trying to recover from the schedule of dinners, lunches and tours, Aurora barely paid attention to the ringing phone.

"Hello ... please can I speak to ... Aurora?"

"Yes that's me."

Silence.

"Mrs Jacobs? I didn't think you'd call. I'm so pleased to hear from you ..."

"My daughter said you have a message for me?"

“Well, Mrs Jacobs, I hope you don’t mind. I wanted to ask if you know my father, Byron?”

Silence.

“Mrs Jacobs?”

“Did your father ask you to contact me?”

“So you do know him?”

“Look, I don’t know why you came here or what you want, but ...”

“Mrs Jacobs, wait please. I just had a strong feeling when I was there. This all sounds a bit foolish but when you sent that letter five years ago ... I kept the address because I couldn’t forget it and the way it made my father behave for months after that, I just wanted ... needed to know more.”

Silence.

“Mrs Jacobs. Is there something that I need to know about you, or your family?”

“You must ask your father that. Just be careful of the doors that you open. I’m sorry but I don’t have anything to tell you.”

Click.

Aurora held the receiver in her hand. The woman had said all that Aurora needed to know. She dialled the number slowly.

“Dad? Yeah, everything’s fine. Dad, I need to know something ...”

The news spreads through the family like a mild stroke, immobilizing a hand here, leaving a temporary limp there, with everything more or less still functional but forever more altered. Damaged. Everyone got to know in an unprecedented, record time. Each called the next in a matrix of ‘did you knows’ and ‘I can’t believe it’ until they all had

the same story. The family grapevine. The news was too much for Hester to bear, who walked around quietly shaking her head and checking inside cupboards. Aurora had a pained expression pinned to her face. Bella was resolute,

“Nothing to be done, but the right thing,” she said.

They were all sad about so many things, and because of what Byron’s deception meant - about him and about all of them as well.

“Look on the bright side,” said Lucas. “We’re like a new family. Three new members. A new beginning.”

“But so much has passed by already; lost time,” said Aurora.

No one knew what to think of Byron. Everyone felt cheated by him, as if he had lived a secret life. He had.

Maria, Aurora’s new sister (how can one have a new sister, she kept thinking) was still on medication. For the rest of her life. Her short life. She was twenty-one-years old and carried her burdens like a lost child; frantic and bewildered most of the time, Aurora had said. Maria’s son - Aurora’s nephew and Hester’s great grandson - would be five soon and had a clean bill of health.

“A boy, thank God, enough girls already,” Bella said joking, but no one responded.

“Thanks to modern medicine,” Joseph added.

“At least Byron sent money every month since Mrs Jacobs called him five years ago,” Lucas said after while.

“He flew down to see Mrs Jacobs but never met his eldest daughter,” Aurora replied.

Holes started developing in the middle of their conversations after that - during lunch, at midpoint of drawn-out telephone conversations, with strangers in supermarkets

- leaving behind charred outlines in place of the snapshots the family had of who they were, until then.

Eventually Hester said in a voice that none of them had heard for years, "I will phone Mrs Jacobs. I have a lot to say to her. Call her on behalf of Vincent and me."

Sunday arrives quickly. The whole day has been spent cooking. Everyone is nervous, tentative, as if our entire future is dangling above our heads. When the doorbell rings, everyone freezes. Who will open? Did you put out enough chairs? What about plates? Only Hester seems calmer than anyone can remember her. She walks slowly to the front door. All her life she has looked after us, she mutters to herself until we hear her saying,

"Come in. We've been waiting for you for a long time."

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