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UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

GRADUATE SCHOOL IN HUMANITIES

The Things We Left Unsaid

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BRRAMY001

A minor dissertation submitted in *partial fulfilment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of Masters in Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities
University of Cape Town
2008

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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IN THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES**

I, Amy Barr-Sanders

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do hereby declare that I empower the University of Cape Town to produce for the purpose of research either the whole or any portion of the contents of my dissertation entitled "The Things We Left Unsaid"

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The Things We Left Unsaid

Amy Barr-Sanders

ABSTRACT

At sixteen, Alice, a gifted and highly sensitive teenager in her final year of school, has it all: perfect parents, loyal friends and big plans to attend university. She would never have imagined that in a week everything could vanish.

After a party where things go horribly wrong, Alice has a dark secret, one she longs to tell her mother. Penelope, with whom she shares a close bond. But when Penelope is killed in a head-on collision on route to an unknown destination, Alice is bereft of both confidante and guardian.

In the chaotic days following her mother's death, Alice discovers she was having an on-line affair. She fears that her mother's deception renders their whole life together a lie. As she delves into this mystery, she becomes obsessed with the secret life of Penelope and is torn between her pursuit of the lover's identity and an instinct to abandon the search. She is simultaneously embroiled in a series of scandals at school.

Disillusioned, Alice risks everything to uncover a truth which she believes will miraculously solve her crisis. Her best friend, Theresa, is the constant voice of reason which Alice wilfully ignores. When she finally tracks her mother's lover to his home, her neat judgements disintegrate as they encounter a complex reality. The idea of Penelope as a sexual and emotional being, not simply a one-sided symbol of maternal care that sacrifices herself to the needs of her family, is, for Alice, deeply disturbing but ultimately redemptive.

In this coming-of-age story, as Alice begins to relinquish her judgement of others, she is able to forgive herself for her own failings and accept ambiguity as part of life. It is her decision to move beyond prescribed roles as well as to identify and fulfil her own needs that constitutes her essential development into maturity.

It is a story for young adults that acknowledges that childhood is the springboard from which we launch ourselves into the world, that the things we learn in adolescence and the ways in which we cope with adversity during that time determine to a large extent the adults we will become and that those youthful choices reverberate throughout our lives.

*When I was a child, I spake as a child, I
understood as a child, I thought as a child:
but when I became a man, I put away
childish things.*

1 Corinthians 13:11

“Oh, Alice come look! It’s raining!”

Her mother was standing at the large picture window that overlooked the pool and garden with a look of rapture on her face as though it had never rained in the history of creation.

Alice reluctantly went to join her.

Penelope wrapped an arm around her and squeezed her in unrestrained delight.

“Isn’t it beautiful?”

Penelope’s love of the rain was only partially explicable by her being an avid gardener and so revelling in the idea of her thirsty plants, even those frequently overlooked dears in the very back of the beds close to the boundary walls, being drenched with water.

“Heavenly water,” she’d smile. “Holy water.”

She loved contemplating how each drop was finding a secret dry inch of ground and quietly reviving its inhabitants. The garden did always look revived and fresh after the rain, all the dust washed from the leaves, so that they gleamed in renewed shades of luscious green. Penelope often spoke excitedly about the Emerald Isle’s hundred shades of green and how the Irish did not appreciate how lucky they were. Alice knew that secretly her mother longed to reproduce a similar success in her dusty hot corner of the world.

“Let’s go and stand in it!” Penelope squealed, thrilled at the prospect.

Alice’s father came stomping in, face like the storm that had brought the rain, dashing the droplets from his face and arms and banging and stamping his boots on the coir mat at

the side entrance.

“Bloody rain! Weather for ducks!”

He was the embodiment of doom.

“Duck weather!” Penelope enthused and then, looking at Dennis, she narrowed an eye, mimicking the close inspection all avian creatures give a changing and possibly dangerous situation. With a sudden twinkle in her fowl-like eyes, her mother made a low duck sound. Then she quacked loudly and flapped her arms. Alice’s father froze on the mat and watched the scene as though his wife had, at last, gone mad. Penelope looked at Dennis and there followed a series of quacks:

“Quack?” (What’s wrong with you?)

“Quack.” (Oh, no you don’t. I’m not letting you ruin my fun.)

“Quack, quack, *quack!*” (I’m going to play in the rain, so there!)

And she charged off in a flurry of flapping limbs. Alice, weak with laughter but by now also quacking, ran out into the wet garden with its deep earthy scent. The land seemed to breathe in the rain and exhale itself in a deep sigh. Penelope did a mock waddle and quacked at Alice. Alice giggled and flapped her arms high above her head and quacked back. Wet pigeons dozing on the telephone lines un-tucked their heads to watch and listen to these strange new birds. A crow answered their hoarse cries. This only encouraged her mother and she went into a frenzy of quacking. Her father flung open a window and said in a whispered shout, “Penelope! Come inside! You look ridiculous. You’re both going to catch your death in that rain. Don’t come crying to me if you get pneumonia. And what will the neighbours make of all this?”

Penelope stopped and turned to see her husband’s angry red head, which seemed to float, separate from his body like a red balloon. The man has too much face, she thought uncharitably. With such a big head, he really ought to grow a beard again.

She stared at him in mock seriousness and said, “Just tell them we’ve gone quackers.”

Dennis slammed the window shut. Alice rolled on the wet grass, clutching her sides. Penelope spun like the girl in the old Timotei shampoo advert, her spun-gold hair in a veil around her, head tilted back to let the rain kiss her beautiful face, tongue out to taste it, because she didn’t care if it made her look silly. But nothing could. She was a water nymph; she was a garden faerie, a storm angel. Alice sat up and watched her mother

twirling and dancing as the flowers on her dress eagerly sucked up their fair share of the rain, excited at not being left indoors in the poor weather. "How could anyone call this 'poor' weather?" she shouted to the sky. "It's the richest weather of all!"

Then she ran back inside, calling to Alice to come with her. She ran her daughter a hot bath with geranium and lavender oils and Alice stripped off and hopped in. She lay in the warm water and listened to the rain outside. It made a sound like an electric kettle does when it first begins to heat up: a strange rattling, shushing sound as the falling drops struck the house forcefully and ran down to the relieved vegetation.

Meanwhile Penelope was heating two fluffy bath sheets in the warmer drawer. When Alice called that she was done, Penelope popped her head round the door and smiled. She bore aloft, in the attitude of a servant presenting a priceless gift to a sovereign, the crisp, hot towel. Alice jumped out of the bath and with an imperious glance down her nose, said haughtily, "Yes, that will do". She took the towel and pressed the comforting heat to her rapidly cooling flesh. Penelope swept up the heap of sodden clothes and bore them away to the laundry room.

Alice dried off and scampered to her room to change into her warmest clothes. Next she made some tea in the kitchen, listening to her mother splashing and humming to herself in the bathroom next door, until she heard "Finished!" At this point Alice whipped the second hot towel from the warmer drawer, flicked the oven switch off and, neatly folding the towel into a large square, she prepared to present it to her queen.

...

A series of hearts covered the page.

Alice Nichol wrote her name and his side by side. Next she experimented with taking his surname, Worthington, and adding it to hers: Mrs. Alice Worthington. It had a pleasing sound. A well balanced name, she thought. Alice smiled wistfully and ballooned a large heart around their first names: Derek and Alice. Suddenly the note was snatched from her desk and held aloft. Ms. Powell glared down at her, her large head blotting out the

fluorescent light; her normally pallid complexion flushed deep garnet. Her chin wobbled as her voice boomed through the hushed silence of twenty-five girls barely breathing.

“Well, Ms Nichol! I’m very glad that you feel so sure of your future that you have already selected a husband!”

Alice cringed.

“However, your taste leaves something to be desired. I would have thought you, of all people, would be smarter than to fall for a rugby player with an infamous reputation!”

“Tell us, miss!” the class broke out in repeated calls. Girls craned to catch a glimpse of the scrap of paper.

“Well, Ms. Nichol? Am I to post this on the board?” She walked briskly to the front of the class and pulled a red magnet free of the metal surface.

Alice turned puce and mumbled, “Please don’t, miss.”

“Or...” Ms. Powell dragged the single syllable out. “I *could* give it back to you and you could put it away and promise to focus on my lesson. Really, Alice, the whole point of an all-girls’ school is to afford you young ladies the privilege of a superior education without the distraction of boys.”

She said the last word as though it were something distasteful. Her mouth puckered. Alice nodded furiously.

“Well? Which is it to be?” Triumphant, she held the note aloft, rustling it like a fan and her heels clicked together. All that was missing were the castanets.

“I’ll put it away and focus, Miss Powell,” Alice answered meekly.

“How many times must I tell you girls, it is Mizz Powell or simply Ma’am?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Alice rushed to supply the desired correction.

Ms. Powell marched down the narrow aisle between the desks and placed the offending slip of paper face down on the scored wooden surface. Alice clapped her palm over it, as though playing a game of ‘Snap!’ and slid it off the desktop, into her fist. She crumpled it into a ball and zipped it into her pencil case, which she then dropped into the cavern of her satchel. She hastily pulled on the ties, cinching the leather straps in tightly as the redoubtable Ma’am Powell gained the front of the classroom and resumed the lesson. Ms. Powell asked Alice another question a few minutes later. Alice, sufficiently humiliated, had been listening keenly and answered with ease. Her teacher nodded in curt satisfaction and

the lesson continued until the blessed bell announced break-time. Once in the corridor, Theresa and Alice could relax enough to laugh about it.

“Bloody ridiculous woman!” Alice snorted.

“You are to call me simply Mizz Powell or Ma’am.” Theresa displayed a real skill for mimicry and the two fell about laughing. Alice loved the way she made the Z sound so precisely.

“And what exactly is the damn difference between Miss and Ms.? Still means the same bloody thing: unmarried bitch.”

“Well, Miss Nightingale is a Miss,” Theresa pointed out.

“Yes, but she’s young and beautiful and will certainly end up with a hunky husband. Besides, she doesn’t ask to be called Mizz. Maybe that’s the crucial difference. Mizzes are guaranteed to be Mizzerable! They fear they will never be married and so they figure they might as well make it seem like a choice!”

“Alice! You’re terrible! Mizzerable Mizz. Powell!”

And they descended into hysteria for a few more minutes.

“Shoot! I forgot my lunchbox in homeroom, Theresa. I’ll meet you and the others in our usual spot, yeah?”

...

Alice found Melinda crying in the empty classroom. It was break time on a glorious winter’s day when everyone was outside sharing their sandwiches and soaking up the tepid sunlight. She was sifting through her school bag, trying to rescue as much of the contents as possible from the goo and slime of a burst choc-chip yoghurt still somewhere in the bottom of her suitcase. Alice knew she should offer to help her wipe down her books, should tell her it was no big deal and that they could sort it out together in no time. But she didn’t. Melinda had looked up startled when Alice came in. She now pulled out her yellow plastic lunch box and offered Alice a soggy cucumber and cottage cheese sandwich (her mother always put strange things on her bread). Alice knew she should stay and share the sandwich with her, it would only take a few minutes, but she didn’t. Instead, she backed

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out of the door, mumbling, "I can't. Sorry. The girls are waiting." and left her there. She had run, riddled with guilt, to her five closest friends, lounging in a group on the grass at the edge of the quad: Theresa, Susan-Rose, Caitlyn, Madeleine and Amanda. Melinda must be the saddest girl in school, Alice thought. She was a social outcast, chronically unpopular, with a skin condition that left scabs all over her body. She was more loathsome, perhaps, because she didn't even seem to like herself. As usual the most popular girls lounged in the courtyard centre, claiming it as their rightful place. To be the centre of attention was their due. Their long, lovely legs clad in sheer pantyhose that was, itself, a statement. They were more revealing than the thick opaque tights most girls wore. Sheer pantyhose were sexy, grown up. It also laddered at the slightest provocation and so had to be frequently replaced. It was a statement about money and the luxury they were used to; about parents who endlessly indulged them. No clear nail polish carefully applied to an existing ladder to limit the damage so that they could be worn just a little longer! These girls, instead, had been known to rip an accidental ladder wider and higher deliberately - to ruin them in an indulgent frenzy and then laughingly pull a fresh pair, still in the wrapper, from a pristine leather bag. It was this elite group whom every girl secretly envied and wished she could join. They always hogged the centre of the courtyard, talking and laughing loudly. It was this group whose eagle-eyes spotted Melinda as she scurried past, heading for the bathroom with yoghurt down her navy gymslip. "Eeeuw!" cried Vivian, the coolest girl in school. "Look! Look at Melinda's uniform! It's covered in cum! Messy Melinda! Messy Melinda!" The rest took up the chant. Melinda picked up speed, charging like a blind animal as the taunt followed her. She careened into a clutch of girls, who hissed, "Watch where you're going, Melinda! Don't touch us! We don't want to get that icky skin-thing!" Alice saw the Gorgons' noses wrinkle in disgust and wanted to cry. She wanted so badly to defend Melinda, to help her but she knew school social politics. She wasn't popular enough to pull it off. She didn't have the social clout to pardon Melinda. If she spoke in her defence, she risked being ostracized and associated with the poor girl, which would make her as wretched as she was. She closed her eyes and lay back on the grass, pretending to doze, but her fists were clenched tightly and she was breathing so heavily that her best friend in all the world, Theresa, asked if she was all right. Alice sat bolt upright, like one waking from a nightmare, as another volley of cruel taunts fired at Melinda reached her

outraged ears. She made a move to rise but Susan-Rose, wise to the ways of the world, gripped her arm fiercely and hissed, “Don’t! You don’t want to make an enemy of that lot, especially not Vivian. It’s social suicide.”

“Well, *you’re* friends with that bitch,” Alice countered.

“We’ve known each other since pre-school. She wasn’t always like this. Are you going to be OK?”

“Alice, there’s nothing any of us can do.” Caitlyn’s soft, clearly enunciated speech was unmistakable. Alice turned to her and saw her earnest look. Amanda’s lips were pursed and she was nodding sagely. Madeleine shrugged and went back to picking dirt from under her nails. Theresa said nothing. Alice eased back unwillingly. She closed her eyes and draped an arm across her face to appear unfazed but she actually needed privacy. Alice was not sure she could hold the neutrality of her expression. She was twisted up inside with feelings, feelings she worried would twist her face, too. Under the fabric of her blazer she gritted her teeth and felt tears ooze from the corners of her eyes. It was wrong; and all of them, sitting quietly, saying nothing, eating their sandwiches, changing the subject, were all guilty. She heard Theresa ask again if she was all right. “I’m fine. I just can’t wait until we all finish school for good! Thank God it’s Friday!”

...

16 March 1999

I have to get on with my work! How am I going to get my head right? He is such a distraction? All I do is think about ways to see him. Maybe I just want him too much. Unrequited love is the pits! Although, can I call it love if it's not returned? Isn't it then just lust or obsession? Isn't love a synthesis? Doesn't there need to be reciprocity? Two people sharing the feeling and engaging with one another?

As though from very far away, Alice heard her name. A sweet voice was calling to her. It was Miss Nightingale. She was standing beside Alice’s desk and staring down at her and the open diary. Alice felt an instant of raw panic that tightened the base of her belly as though she’d clinched her gymslip’s belt in by three notches but Miss Nightingale’s voice held only a gentle reproach. “Daydreaming, again, are we Alice? Alice in Wonderland.”

Then she smiled her thousand-watt smile and added, “C`mon. You`re up next. You have your poem ready, I`m sure.”

Alice, bathed in relief, dug out a sheet of paper and stood nervously. She recited in her clear resonant voice, (the voice of a natural public speaker her mother had always said):

*You will never stretch yourself for me.
And me?
Stretched taut like a drum for you
Stretched like children`s hands to the sky for you
Stretched like yarn on a rack for you
Stretched tight to breaking point for you
Ping. Pong. A game we play. A sound you could pluck me to produce.
A string sound. A string-strung sound
A string-strung-over-a-hollow sound.
A hollow me. An empty sound.*

When Alice sat down, the only sound was the creaking of her hinged seat as it fell into place. Miss Nightingale stood quietly nodding. “It`s very good, Alice. Sounds like a situation you should try to get out of, though.” There was concern in her voice.

“Yes, Miss.” Alice acknowledged her favourite teacher.

The bell sounded and they picked up their gym bags and filed out, heading in an orderly line to the changing room closest to the gym hall. Alice loved sports but she hated Phys Ed class. The physical education teacher, Miss Ball, was a woman who Alice was sure had balls. She should have been a Mr. Ball. She was unnaturally muscular, wore size 9 tennis shoes and navy running shorts that gave pronounced meaning to why they were called “shorts”. They barely skimmed her upper thighs. A gleaming white golf shirt beneath which a sturdy sports bra with racer back was visible rounded out the intimidating attire of Miss. B. Not to be mistaken for an endearment, the ‘B’ was short for ‘Bollocks’, ‘Boy’ and ‘Bastard’ in Alice and Theresa`s word game. They felt a thrill of power when they called her Miss B, and she smiled, not knowing she was the butt of a private joke. The other teachers did not approve of Miss Ball`s appearance but she was so trim and her muscles so perfect that she seemed almost asexual in a pair of shorts which would have been outrageously provocative on a more feminine form. Her divergence from the norm was tolerated because, and no one would ever admit this, she was viewed as an honorary male.

They snuck illicit glances and then reproached themselves.

She was a loud woman who liked to bark orders and make the girls run in pointless circles. Alice had once enraged her by refusing to do a headstand on the grounds that it was dangerous for the neck to be used to hold the weight of the whole body. Miss Ball had cruelly responded that some people's 'whole bodies' were a little too 'whole' and that perhaps, were they lighter, the exercise would not be so difficult. Some girls had tittered. Alice had blushed but replied firmly: "I never said I couldn't do it. I said I won't. It's not difficult, just dangerous." She'd been sent to the principal's office for insubordination, but when the headmistress had called her mother, Penelope had responded that, as a practising Yogi, she would not have her daughter performing such a ridiculous manoeuvre and that if that bullying dyke in any way made life difficult she would have Alice permanently excused from Phys Ed class. She went on to say that Alice was a real sportswoman who played hockey and swam and that she would not have her belittled by a She-Man who specialized in the pointless activity of running drills and enforcing antiquated exercises. She did not want to hear another word about it and any future phone calls made to her home had better be in connection with legitimate transgressions and not her daughter's good sense. She added that she hoped she had made herself clear. Alice, sitting quietly opposite the desk of her headmistress, had found no difficulty in piecing the overheard conversation together. The principal had sent her to change and instructed her to wait for the home-time bell before leaving the school building. While Alice was changing Theresa came in to drink some water and fetch her asthma pump. She looked ashen and out of breath. The sight annoyed Alice. Asthmatics were supposed to start exercising slowly and steadily increase their pace. Miss Ball insisted on intense running to commence the session when they were all still cold, their muscles taut. Every time Alice had to watch with pity as her friend struggled valiantly against the monstrous stupidity of her teacher and was subjected to her jeering to hurry up and suggestions that if she were fitter, she wouldn't puff and pant so much. Alice, herself asthmatic, felt keenly her best friend's discomfort.

Now, hunched over, hands on knees, gulping for air, Theresa still managed to ask how things had gone with the principal. Alice smiled. Theresa knew exactly how Penelope felt about head stands and any 'unsecured or un-braced positions'. "Take your neck to the four points of the compass, by all means, but do not make it rotate rapidly like the earth",

she was known to instruct sternly to anyone she caught doing vigorous neck rolls as a warm up. No one ever argued with Penelope when she took on that tone. Theresa was smiling as she shook the inhaler and pressed it into her mouth. Alice held her breath as Theresa inhaled the gas with its bitter residue. Before Alice had been prescribed her own pump, she had tried Theresa's, eager to experience everything. Besides Alice's innate curiosity, it was the nature of their relationship to do everything together. They had started menstruating in the same month and now their periods arrived on the same day. Often they knew what the other was thinking and many times when they would call one another, one would lift the receiver to dial only to find the other was already on the line, having come through without yet ringing. Such synchronicity at first surprised and shocked them but both eventually accepted their closeness as the gift it was. They had even devised a way to cope with Vivian, the bitchiest girl in school, who had taken an instant dislike to Alice and would always make a point of saying something nasty to her. At such times Alice and Theresa would play their mind game. It helped to offset the poison. They would ascribe to Vivian an adjective beginning with 'V'. Many times they would not have to say the word, only look at one another to know which description was being made. Later, when they were alone, they would compare notes to see if they had, in fact, been thinking of precisely the same word. On the few occasions it wasn't a match, each word was discovered to be apt for the situation that had arisen. Once, Vivian had fallen out with her good friend Annabelle and had been horrified when some of her group had sided with the other girl, believing Vivian had gone too far. At that time she had come in search of Susan-Rose for support and sympathy. She had found Alice's group lounging on the grass in the main quadrangle and had related her version of events. She had terminated her tale of woe by shrieking, "It's not my fault!" Vociferous Vivian, Alice thought, flashing Theresa a look and knowing they had the same word in mind by the expression Theresa threw back. Sure of her innocence and determined to convince her audience, Vivian continued, "I mean, really, I'm the one who should be upset. They're all taking her side and I did nothing wrong!" Her breath caught audibly in a reined-in sob of self righteous indignation. Victimised Vivian, Theresa proposed silently with both hands clasped defensively to her chest. Alice indicated her agreement by thickening her bottom lip and allowing it to tremble ever so slightly as though she was about to cry.

Their list of words grew over the years. Such was the frequency of Vivian's nastiness that they soon had to consult a dictionary in search of new and applicable 'V' descriptors. Now, as Theresa's breathing normalized and colour returned to her wan face, she caught Alice regarding her body in the large mirrors that lined the changing room and said:

"No, you're not fat!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"God, I hate these changing rooms! What kind of sadist installs bloody wall to wall mirrors in a room where teenage girls routinely undress!"

Theresa, slender all her life, laughed sympathetically, although she could not really understand.

"My thighs are disgusting! In spite of all the sport I do, they're still...still...SQUIDGY! Alice wailed."

"Your thighs are not squidgy."

"Yes, they are! I play hockey, netball, do team swimming and after-school aerobics and I've still got wibbly-wobbly whopping columns for legs! It's not fair! They're like Doric pillars!"

"Nah, they're more delicate than Doric. Maybe more like Ionic?"

"Bitch! You don't do a whiff of sport and look at your legs! All golden and smooth and perfectly petite! I'd hate you if we weren't friends!"

"Oh, Alice. You're so funny."

"I'm serious. Besides, look closely. Can't you see the cellulite?"

"No."

"Not even a hint of orange-peel?"

"There's a dimple there."

"Where?"

"Where your thumb is squeezing the daylights out of your thigh. I mean really, Alice, everyone has those bumps if they push that hard."

"You're just being sweet. I do appreciate that, really I do. Alice gave a deep extended sigh and then said in a truly dramatic tone of resignation, "Oh, well. Best be off to the gym to fight the good fight. You run along to your afternoon on the couch with a book and

doughnuts.”

“Drama queen. Besides, today it’s banana bread.”

She dodged a shoulder slap from Alice and darted out the changing room and down the corridor, circling to face her pillar-thighed best friend while still moving backwards, sliding her shoes across the stone surface as though skating, calling, “See ya tomorrow, babe! Don’t forget your Afrikaans homework!”

Alice finished changing and went to wait at the statue of the little girl which stood beneath a plumbago in the garden area next to the library. She regarded the little stone face, the cherubic hands clutching a plate which often filled with water to form a bird bath. The statue made her sad. It had a forlorn aspect, a hidden tragic element as if it had once been a real little girl but had become the victim of a powerful enchantment: turned to stone by an evil witch. Lord knows, there were plenty of them within these walls, Alice thought, and gave a wry smile. Here, next to the sad statuette was where she had arranged to meet Caitlyn after school. She was sleeping over at her house that evening and they had plans to watch movies all night and eat junk food until they felt sick. Alice thought, “Stuff Miss. Ball!” Tonight she was going to add a whole lot more to the whole of her body.

Someone clapped their hands over her eyes. “Guess who?” came the unmistakably classy voice of her rich little friend with the gorgeous brother. Alice played along and guessed a few wrong names. She knew it was childish but Caitlyn genuinely enjoyed the game. “Is it Mizz Powell?” she asked. It was this suggestion that made Caitlyn squeal out her own name and dance around Alice in sheer exuberance, chanting, “It’s Fri-day! It’s Fri-day!” Caitlyn lived a few blocks from the school. They began their lazy amble homewards; stopping to chat to girls they knew who stood at gateways waiting for parents or buses. They waved to others as they moved away from the school building and left it behind. Strolling along wide grassy verges, kicking pine cones between them like soccer balls as they went, Caitlyn asked Alice about her poem. She wanted to know who the inspiration was. There was a twinkle in her hazel eyes. She already knew it was her brother, Derek. She wished that it wasn’t but Alice was so obviously smitten. Alice confessed casually as they passed beneath a gigantic blue gum and paused to watch the grey squirrels, almost the colour of the bark, charge up and down the length of the trunk.

“Eeeuw, gross! He’s such an asshole. Ally! You seriously need to get over it. I know

everyone thinks he's good-looking but there are lots of nice-looking guys who won't break your heart."

"I don't like him just coz he's hot."

"Ok, so, what makes him so special?"

"I dunno. I just can't stop thinking about him. I want to spend all my time with him. I want to talk to him and have him hold my hand and know his dreams and his fears."

"Jesus."

"I just know that somewhere under all that bravado and bullshit is a special person. He's not as shallow as he seems. He's not as cold."

"Are you sure?"

"He's your brother, so you're never going to see the best in him!"

"Wouldn't I know if he had a better side? A secret at-home side that was all warm and fluffy?"

"Stop ripping me off."

"Ok. But I think you should leave it alone. He's my brother, so I have to love him, right? But I don't like him. You don't know how many girls have called the house crying? Trust me, girl. He's no Dr. Jekyll but many girls have met Mr. Hyde!"

"Ok, I get it. You don't like that I like your brother. I can't help it! I just adore him. I get the fuzzy jelly feeling and everything."

Caitlyn's nose wrinkled in disgust.

"But you have to promise not to tell, Catie!"

"I don't have to tell him! He already knows. It's all over your face every time you come over to my house. You get all goofy the moment he walks in. You blush, you grin and you do that high-pitched giggle at anything he says, even if it's not funny."

"Oh, God! Do I make it that obvious?"

"Ye-think?"

At the sight of Alice's paroxysms of embarrassment, Caitlyn relented.

"Maybe he hasn't noticed; he's not the brightest crayon in the box. Just tone it down in future. Now let's get out of here, and I don't want to talk about my bloody brother any more today, OK?"

"What movie do you want to get?"

“That’s better. Spore?”

“Spore? No! I hate gruesome, oozy alien movies. It’s so done.”

Alice hummed the theme tune from *Nightmare on Elm Street* and rolled her eyes.

“Ok, Alice, but your suggestion is probably some romantic comedy with a dreamy green-eyed boy in it, right?”

“Wrong! I thought we’d get *The Dreamcatcher*. It’s a thriller about this particular dream catcher that works in reverse and so it lets all the bad dreams through and stops the good ones! But it doesn’t just let them through! They become real and the consequences of the dream are real, too. So, if you have a car accident in the dream, you wake up all battered and if you die in the dream, you don’t wake up! Sounds cool, huh?”

“Wait. So extraterrestrial life come to exterminate mankind is crap but dreams come to life is good? I’m just teasing! It sounds scary. Let’s get it!”

...

Alice lay awake and watched Derek sleeping. She knew this was a stolen moment. A lucky accident. A few hours before Caitlyn had set up mattresses on the floor in front of the impressive flat screen television that dominated the room, a gigantic dark eye that flickered to life and floodlit the whole area, preventing escape. Alice and Caitlyn had decided to watch movies all night, or at least until they fell asleep. It felt strange to see mattresses and bedding out of the bedroom. It was exhilarating, this unusual sleeping arrangement, which held the latent thrill of camping. They were all alone in the vast, stately home. Caitlyn’s parents were, as usual, away. In Greece, apparently, although Caitlyn hadn’t heard from them in over a week. “They could be on the moon by now, for all I know,” she had muttered darkly and Alice had thought it best not to ask any more questions. So they had the place to themselves and Alice felt very grown-up and free. She had taken a long bath in the round Jacuzzi tub en suite to the master bedroom and Caitlyn had brought her champagne to sip as she soaked. “Bubbly while under the bubbles!” Alice had crowed, delighted. It felt decadent. Alice was concerned that Caitlyn’s parents might miss the bottle of *Veuve Cliquot* but her friend had snorted. “Can’t miss something if you’re not there to see it is missing, can you?” They had ordered pizza and raided the

pantry for the planned midnight feast. By one in the morning they were very tired but as soon as they had turned off the lights and started to drift off in the happy heaviness of full stomachs, something crashed through the front door. Alice screamed. Caitlyn flicked on a light and Rex, Caitlyn's oversized Alsatian, went demented. He came charging in from the kitchen and then began to wag his heavy tail as he trotted to the prone figure on the entrance hall tiles and licked his ears. "God dammit, Derek! You're supposed to be in Hermanus for the weekend! What are you doing here?" Caitlyn demanded. Derek lifted his head and made a concerted effort to rise. Rex bumped into him joyfully and was rewarded with a vicious shove.

"Piss off! Bloody mutt! You keep knocking me over."

"Well, it's hardly his fault you're paralytic! A feather could knock you over, you're so drunk!" Caitlyn called Rex to her and stroked his head consolingly. Derek decided that getting upstairs was going to take too much effort and promptly gate-crashed the girly evening. He staggered in, nodded at Alice, and collapsed onto the middle of the mattress, refusing to budge. Caitlyn's requests and threats went unheeded and he was soon asleep, leaving his younger sister no choice but to sleep on the far right, Alice on the left and a hulking brute in the middle. Alice was secretly thrilled. Caitlyn sulked and smacked off the light switch, plunging the room into darkness. Slowly, as Alice's eyes became accustomed to the gloom, she could make out the sleeping form of the boy she adored. She wondered where he had been all night. Not content with the initial flinch and nausea that the thought evoked she tortured herself by imagining who he had been with and whether she was prettier. She was undoubtedly prettier. Jealousy made her feel small and even less attractive. She could not help it. She wanted to spend all of her time with this boy. She peered into the darkness, brooding.

The night was finite but her feelings were not. She wanted the night to last forever. She grew desperate with each passing hour. She knew this encounter was by chance; hardly able to believe that he was only arm's length away. She could touch him as he slept, if she dared. This was an opportunity to torture herself in new and painful ways. A whole night near Derek. A whole night with him. To watch how he slept, hear the noises he would make, what positions he'd assume and smell the sleeping smell of him. Alice lay, alert and awake, listening to the wind howl around the old high-ceilinged house, rattling the sash

windows like ghosts wanting to get in out of the cold. She listened intently for the soft whisper of his breath, pale echo of the wind, in and out of the house that was his body. Alice had to get closer. She needed to crawl near and feel the heat of him. To get close enough to smell him. By 2:45am she had summoned enough courage and inched closer. She now was scarcely a hand's breadth from him. Derek seemed to sense her and shifted even closer. They moved in a shadowy penumbral dance. Alice held her breath as he briefly held her. But then he rolled away abruptly, presenting her with the fortified wall of his back. Eventually she heard the birds calling and knew that her time with him in this intimate capsule was evaporating. She wanted time to stop and willed the night to stay. She hated the birds then and prayed they'd fall dead from their perches but they took to the wing, calling in derisory unison, "He's not yours! You can't keep him!" Then the light began to fill the room in shade by shade gradations and Alice could see the surroundings more clearly. In that moment she prayed for blindness. But slowly, Derek too, came into glorious view. Alice was transfixed. She lay watching the nape of his neck, the curve of his back. She noted how his left shoulder blade was pushed outwards – displaced – by the weight of his right side bearing down on his unsuspecting left. A sharp vertical scar, luminously white, showed through the dark, bristling hair. A childhood accident. Alice lay with her right hand hovering near his spine. She yearned to lay her hand firmly, palm down, on him. Instead, she held it millimetres away until the air between became so heated with her frustrated love, she felt sure he'd sense her. He rolled onto his back. Alice whipped her hand away just in time. Derek sighed and snored softly like a small happy bear. Now in the growing light of dawn, Alice could observe his profile at length. Even while he slept she was frightened to gaze too long or directly, in case the intensity of her desire should wake him. It might cause him to make one of his characteristically sudden movements.

She feared his head would whip sideways, his aquamarine eyes instantly alert, and catch her in the act. Her face was hot with shame and longing. She felt utterly undone. Confused beyond explanation. She traced the line of his profile with a patient eye: the high forehead, the prominent brow mounds on which sprouted neat rows of dark hair. The deep dip to the nose, a sudden ditch, then up and sweeping down to a rather hooked end. His mouth pushed up, a deep cleft in the chin. His face more relaxed and less taut in sleep, allowed a slight flesh lump to form beneath the jaw. Alice found this tiny softness, this slight sag,

endearing. She felt a pang of maternal feeling. It disturbed her. Yet she hated the dawn and the noise from the waking world that made Derek stir and wake.

In the kitchen a few hours later Derek had completely ignored Alice and instead sat, head down, chewing his way morosely, methodically, through an enormous bowl of cornflakes. The rhythmic crunching sounds grated against Alice's fragile psyche and she felt absolutely miserable. She sipped her tea, sneaking covert glances from hooded eyes, but he never even looked at her. It was as if she was invisible. Alice cleared her throat and made a cheerful comment about the weather. Derek barely registered that she'd spoken. He grunted and redoubled his efforts to finish his cereal. He couldn't wait to get out of the kitchen and away from her, it seemed. Alice wanted to claim a small shred of dignity and leave before him but she couldn't.

It was only when she offered to help him with any English homework he might have due for Monday that he looked up. Then he had smiled at her and said, "OK. Thanks." Alice knew, from the last two times, that he'd return and dump the books down and after giving her the necessary information, would not even stay with her to do the work together. It had not been so much helping him do it as doing it for him.

He knew Alice was school-smart and boy-dumb. Alice hated her pitiful attempts to ingratiate herself. His indifference filled her with self-loathing; yet she seemed powerless to leave. She could not stay away. Every second in his company was like another breath of air, another sip of something sweet. She was addicted to him. Deep down she knew he was poisonous, but he was a drug she just could not stop taking.

...

"Ma, surely it's always just the good stuff?"

It was late June and Alice and her mother, Penelope, were curled up on a heavy, globular sofa. It was brown velour, ugly and solid, like most things from the seventies, but a more comfortable seat Alice, throughout her long life, was never able to find.

"Mom, I think people only ever remember the good stuff when someone dies. It's like they make them up or something? I wonder if the dead person would even recognize the vessel of virtue described. Gees, re-written into a stranger. Talk about selective memory!"

Mom, if I die, promise me you won't lie about me. Promise me you'll keep it real."

"Keep it real?"

"Yeah, you know. Tell it like it is. So that my friends would know you really knew me."

"Alice, your truth is stranger than fiction! If I tell it like it is people will think it's entirely invented! A concoction of my fanciful imagination! And they'll just go right on believing their sedate, domesticated version, anyway. Though, it is true that I do really know you. And I love what I know."

"I know. And it's really cool. Most kids don't have that, ma. Most of my friends don't tell their mothers anything! Their parents don't know them. Amanda still can't believe you bring me one of your ciggies with the tea when I take a study break!"

"Please, Alice! That's not something I want you to advertise. Daddy doesn't even know about that!"

"Sure he does. He just pretends not to coz otherwise he'd have to do something about it. You know, growl like a bear. Be the big disciplinarian!"

She had laughed. So had her mom. Till the tears rolled. "It's true! I love him to bits, but it's true!" She'd gasped in between sobs of laughter.

"So, promise me you'll keep me 'me', if I die?"

"You're not going to die. At least not any time soon. Not before me, my dear. That is the natural order of things. Parents grow old and get to irritate their children by needing care and bossing them around and criticizing their parenting skills and spoiling their grandchildren and generally making a nuisance of themselves until their children wish they'd hurry up and die already."

"Mom! That's a horrible thing to say!"

"What? The bit about irritating you in my golden years or the bit where you end up wishing I'd shuffle off this mortal coil at less of a shuffle and more of a trot?"

"Both! You really can't say those kinds of things."

"Why on earth not? They're true."

"It's bad luck."

"Oh, goodness! I chose not to raise you catholic deliberately to avoid you becoming all superstitious and strange and now it looks as though that's happened anyway! I may as

well have agreed with your farther and enrolled you at St Bernadette's to learn the many ways of becoming backward."

"Now you're adding blasphemy!"

"No. Blasphemy is not the same as being against organized religion and its indoctrinatory bent. Fetch my 'Book of Meaning and Non-sense' and I'll show you."

Reluctantly Alice had fetched the dictionary. Her mother was right. One had to use religious names and terms in a 'profane' manner to be guilty of blasphemy. Simple criticism was not sufficient.

"Besides," she continued, "I've always personally regarded the sin of blasphemy to be that of railing against God, not the man-made, human, and therefore fallible, church. I never rail against God. God exists but I don't believe that he lives in a building or that you can not talk with the Great Spirit directly. Don't forget, Alice, if the Holy Spirit is content to live in man then surely man must be willing to be in the Holy Spirit. We are of the same stuff. 'So God created man, in his own image'. The church only wants to tell us how unworthy we are, how we should grovel and plead and apologize. Marianne Williamson wrote, 'Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure'."

"Whoa, ma! If you'd been in Spain in the 1600s or Salem, they'd have burnt you alive! You're such a hippie!" Alice could not conceal the admiration in her voice.

"Probably. I may very well have been burnt in another life," she said, an earnest expression suggesting she was not joking. "Sometimes I can smell singed hair and the smell seems to emanate from my own head."

"You're really weird sometimes, mom. But we got way off the topic. If I did die before you, will you tell everyone what I was really like?"

"You mean a naughty, spoilt brat with a sharp tongue who likes loud music, pilfering her mother's makeup and cigarettes and coming home after curfew?"

"Ma!"

Her mother began to laugh so hard Alice was sure she was going to pull a muscle.

"Well, who unlocks the back door, so I can sneak in late, huh, huh, huh?" shouted Alice and punctuated each 'huh' with a playful jab at her mother's insanely ticklish ribs. Her mother squealed and almost fell off the bed. "Ok! I promise to tell all of your truth. How

you are my kind, smart, irritable, impatient, wild, undisciplined, charming child and how I love you more than anything! Good enough?" There were tears in her eyes. Remnants from the giggles but coupled with her suddenly serious face, the effect was one of deep sincerity. "I love you, mom." Alice said and hugged her hard. Her mother clung back with equal ferocity.

They did not part for a long time and then only when her father walked in unexpectedly and said, "And now? What's all this then? What's the matter?" He looked both concerned and annoyed. He did not like intense displays of emotion. He thought they constituted unnecessary dramatics. He loathed the theatrical. The fact that Alice and her mother shared an affection that was both intense and completely unaffected only made him more suspicious. He wished people could just be content. Emotional extremes made him uncomfortable. Alice learned fast that her father could only handle the uncomplicated wailing of an infant that needed a nappy change, food, sleep or a patting. Tears that had complicated causes were repugnant to him.

Alice sometimes really believed that her father secretly wished that he could have kissed her goodnight, aged eight, and next kissed her good morning, aged twenty, all the hard years miraculously over and the two of them as close as they had been when she was a little girl. A time before periods and moods and Alice's realization that she was too smart to be happy. Sometimes she longed to be a cheer-leader type of girl with long bronzed legs, vacuous friends, trips to the beach and daddy's holiday house and boyfriends who French-kissed you at the school discos and put their hands up your (short) skirts when you went to the movies. Sometimes Alice even hoped that her father's wish could come true, so she could skip high school altogether and wake up twenty and beautiful. What can one say? Alice daydreamed a lot. She wished on every stray eyelash, green clover, dandelion, but nothing changed. She remained pale and overweight with smart, 'deep' friends whose parents were hippies or prudes. Her friends were edgy types who plotted how they could all catch a bus to a commune in the Knysna forest and leave their worries behind. What exactly they'd do there (in a place none of them had ever been to or knew anything about) and how they'd live and on what money, were additional steps never discussed. They would all just sit and listen, riveted, as Alice would describe their midnight flight from their respective homes, how they'd meet at the bus depot, buy their tickets cash and be deep in

the forest by the time their parents were bellowing that they'd be late for school! Having one another and an escape plan made them never feel so trapped that they actually resorted to something drastic. Unlike Melinda Matthews, a mousy girl with no friends and a skin complaint that had her nicknamed "The Leper". She whined that it was just eczema and not contagious but no one would sit next to her or walk as her partner when the scholars went to assembly like animals into Noah's ark – two by two.

...

Alice practically flew home. She was so excited by all her news that she couldn't wait to share it. She burst, breathless, through the door, calling, "Mom! Mom!"

Her mother poked her head around the kitchen door. "What's the matter?" she asked, a worried frown creasing her perfect face.

"Nothing, ma! I just had the *best* day at school today!" Alice slung her heavy satchel onto the wooden kitchen bench with a thud and hugged her mother hard. "Ouch, Alice! You're hurting me! Not so hard! You and your bear hugs," she chided as Alice eased the vice-like grip into a less passionate embrace.

"Oh, mom, it's wonderful!"

"What is?"

"I think he likes me and we're going on a class trip and I got invited to the coolest party of the year! And we're doing my favourite Shakespeare as our set text for finals! We found out today! All in *one* day! Can you believe it?"

"Slow down, Alice. One thing at a time. Firstly, who likes you?"

"He does. I can't believe it!? He's *so* gorgeous and hot and all the girls would kill to be with him and he likes little old Alice! Me!"

Her voice was triumphant and she squealed and wagged her head, eyes bulging.

"Do you mean, Derek? The boy you've been smitten with all year? He's finally shown an interest? Amazing. I wonder what took him so long."

The tiniest note of concern and doubt inflected Penelope's words.

"I don't care how long it's taken!" Alice flashed back defensively. "Caitlyn told me that he specifically asked about me and whether I would be coming to her party! So there!"

“Aah. So, Caitlyn’s party is the coolest party of the year?”

“You can’t say cool, mom. It sounds weird when you say it.”

“I can be hip.”

“No! Please, mom. No self-respecting parent should try and use our lingo. That’s totally uncool.”

“Ok.” Her mother nodded gravely. “I wouldn’t want to be uncool. That’s your father’s job.”

“Well, now I’ll have to get an outfit. I can’t wear any of my boring old stuff to this party. It’ll have to be a ‘wow’ outfit. You know? One that’ll make everyone think, ‘Wow!’”

“Of course. We’ll go to the shops tomorrow. When’s the party?”

“This Friday.”

“All right. Don’t worry, we’ll have you sorted by then. Now, what’s this about a class trip?”

“Yes! We’re going to see Macbeth at the theatre during school hours!! It’s a matinée performance but I’ll get to miss the last period of the day, which is Maths! Isn’t that great?”

“Hmmm. You can hardly afford to be missing Maths, missy!”

“Alliteration!”

“Yes, your English is just fine, but your sums need some improvement.”

“Yes, ma, I know.” Alice placated her with a kiss. “So, I’ll need R45 for the ticket, R20 for the bus and something extra for eats and drinks at interval. Also, they’re going to give us a permission slip and it *has* to be signed or we can’t get on the bus.”

“Ok. I’d better write that all down in my diary. You *have* had a busy day, huh? What do you want for lunch?”

Her mother continued without waiting for a response.

“How about apricot yoghurt, egg and salad sarmies and a banana? And there’s orange juice in the fridge.”

“Sounds great.”

“OK, go and change and I’ll call you when it’s ready.”

I have the best mom in the world, Alice thought as she dragged her school bag to her

room, unpacked her books into neat piles on the oversized oak desk, scarred with years of use and marked with pens, gouged with pencils and scratched with the compass points of bored students through the ages. Her mother had bought it second-hand from a man who'd watched his five children grow up and leave the house. It seemed every single one of them had used the desk at some point. He himself, studying a night course as a young man with his first baby in the house, had initially bought the desk for himself. He had longed to get his qualification and improve his earning potential. He had studied hard but had given it up as an unobtainable goal after three years. Alice remembered standing quietly beside her mother five years earlier when they were looking for a more 'adult-size' desk for Alice, who was in her first year of high school and already a serious student with her eye on being Valedictorian in her final year. She had felt sorry for the man. His story seemed tragic: to put three years of effort into a project and to come so close to getting that slip of paper and then to feel it was futile, to have the pressures of a large family crowd out all space for yourself. To become submerged and subsumed – swallowed – by one's family was an upsetting thought.

Did becoming a parent end one's own private life? Alice remembered gazing up at her mother's beautiful face and wondering if she had ever regretted having her. If, perhaps, she sometimes wished she were single and free. Penelope had listened to the man ramble on about his life patiently, talking about the memories in the desk, but she had still got her price. Penelope was not afraid to bargain and haggling was second nature to her. Alice wondered if she had lived in India or Asia in a previous life where haggling was simply part of the transaction process and those who did not haggle were perceived as foolish.

"Lunch is ready!" The call came from downstairs. Alice quickly straightened her books into two neat piles, yanked off her uniform, pulled on her jeans and a clean t-shirt and slipped her feet into her favourite green velvet pumps. "I'm coming!" She called in reply to the increasingly irritated calls of her mother. "Sorry, I was daydreaming."

"You're always daydreaming, Alice. Just like your namesake." As if on cue, Dinah, her cat named for Carroll's literary feline, brushed up against her legs under the table and pushed a damp nose into her lowered hand. "You only pitch up when there's food to be had, hey, Dinah?" Alice said accusingly. Dinah meowed.

"We'd better get stuck into Macbeth after lunch, Alice."

“Yes, ma. Can’t wait! Can I read Lady Macbeth?”

“If you like, but I think you’d be better as Macbeth himself. He’s brave and outspoken – at least in the beginning – like you are.”

“But mom, that would make you manipulative and deceptive like Lady Macbeth is! And that doesn’t sound like you at all! You don’t suit her any more than I do! Mom? What’s wrong?”

Penelope’s face had clouded and her eyes had darted away. She was fiddling with a dishcloth, wringing it in her hands.

“Nothing, darling. I’m just thinking about the darkness that hides in us all. That’s what makes Shakespeare’s plays still seem so contemporary. They are often stories of people behaving badly, in ways they still do today. We haven’t changed much, my dear. Civilization is but a thin veneer covering our barbarous innards!”

She laughed a strange hollow laugh with her head thrown back. It was a stage laugh, Alice thought. It was not her own. It was stretched and derisive and ironic. It was a weird sound and seemed a little incongruous when dropped into the harmless afternoon chat about school work that they had been having. Alice shot her mother a quizzical look, but her mother pretended not to notice.

“Ok! You go and get the text, I’ll see if I can rustle up another copy and we’ll meet in the lounge – there’s more space to manoeuvre there.”

“Manoeuvre?”

“Quickly, Alice. We haven’t got all day.” She sounded exasperated.

When her father came home, looking weary and in need of some quiet and a cold beer, he stumbled in on yet another crazy scene. Alice often wondered about the unfortunate timing of so many of his arrivals. On that occasion she was wearing a towel as a cape and held a kitchen knife in trembling hands. Penelope, wearing her translucent white nightgown, her hair loose and wild down her back, had whirled around to face Alice and glided towards her hissing, “Why did you bring these daggers from the place? They must lie there: go carry them, and smear the sleepy grooms with blood.” Alice cowered, the knife held before her in limp hands as she shook violently as if she had witnessed a horror yet to be absorbed. She had spotted Dennis immediately out of the corner of her eye. He was trying not to move, not wanting to disturb them and Alice could sense he felt as though he were intruding. He

had the look of one who fears that they have stumbled in on a private moment and ruined the fun. A perception Alice's mother confirmed when she saw him moments later and exclaimed, "Dennis, you have displac'd the mirth and broke the good meeting." Not wanting him to feel excluded, Alice greeted him excitedly, "Daddy!" and dashed towards him, the carving knife thoughtlessly in hand.

Alice was always glad to see her father come home at the end of the day. Even as a child, he told her, she had always been the first to greet him. First as a babe in Penelope's soft, white arms, later as a toddler who raced to the front door, squealing "Dada", when she heard the key in the lock. It was always a welcome of the intensity of the prodigal son or Odysseus back from the sea. It was as if he had been away for an eternity, as if his safe return had not been guaranteed. Always the excitement and warm embrace. Always the genuine joy. Alice knew this puzzled her father but that it gave him great pleasure. He would smile bashfully and flush when she kissed both his cheeks. Alice knew her father thought her careless and wildly oblivious to danger. He was always so mindful of disaster. He was a worrier and Alice knew that his gruff anger was actually his love in disguise. Alice and her mother formed a happy unit that often sneered at his approach as being tyrannical and excessively pessimistic, but Alice knew how much he loved them both. How he sought only to protect his family from a world he believed to be dangerous and dark.

As she ran towards him, he said in an alarmed voice, "Alice! Be careful of that knife! You never run with sharp objects in your hands! Remember?" But she never did. Alice, nine years old, running with the scissors to greet him when he had arrived unexpectedly early during a craft session she and her mother were having. Alice, running, always running, to the brink of disaster – unscathed. She had once overheard him sharing this concern with her mother, who had merely laughed and said, "Don't worry so much, Dennis! Alice has angels, I swear it! Remember the time she went off with that stranger at the fair? We saw them in the distance and he was handing her over to a policeman. By the time we got there she was already chatting away to the officer and asking if she could sit on his lap and wear his badge! Cheeky thing! Remember?" Alice, peeping from behind the door, could not remember that day at all and although she saw her father acknowledge the memory with a nod, he had not seemed in the least bit comforted.

Alice, at sixteen, remembered to drop the knife onto the sofa as she rushed past it,

gathering momentum, and then collided with her father like a guided missile, hugging him fiercely. "Not so hard, Alice," he pleaded, holding her as tightly. "How was your day, daddy? Mom and I are doing Shakespeare."

"That's nice," he replied limply, and Alice saw his eyes meet Penelope's, which held a look of irritation. Her mother hated to be disturbed in the middle of her 'creative process' as she called it. It was a throw-back to her acting days in the theatre company. Even now, if he came to kiss her mother in the kitchen, sidling up behind her at the stove, to cuddle her, she would tolerate it for only a moment before saying, 'Not now Dennis. I'm right in the middle of cooking.' Suitably chastened he would seize a quart-sized bottle of beer from the fridge and head to the backyard and his workshop. It was quiet and dusty there. Safe. Alice always felt sorry for him at such times. Her mother would usually break into her thoughts, saying, "Alice, take your father a glass for his beer and this sandwich. It'll keep him out of my hair till dinner's ready."

Alice would oblige and once there, they'd sit on old barrels and say nothing and he'd let her take small sips of his beer. Alice knew that Dennis cherished these stolen moments with her and was grateful for the opportunity to be her sole companion and hence the centre of her attention. At intervals she'd ask him questions about something he was fixing or building in the workshop or what he was doing at work and whether he wanted to take the dogs to their favourite beach on the weekend. It was quite a way further than their small, local beach, but there the dogs could run for kilometres and there was a man in the parking lot who sold ice-cream and hot, spicy sausages. Dennis would always agree to take her.

Alice got into the car and fastened her seatbelt. She waited for her mother to pull away but Penelope was scanning the surroundings, examining the children that spilled from the gateways. She frowned. She did not like what she saw. Alice followed her gaze as it lighted on the younger kids waiting for their lifts to arrive. She was singling out for attention those fresh from the primary school. Her mother's eyes narrowed as she spotted a young girl, round as a barrel, her midriff almost completely circular. She was laughing and stuffing Niknaks into her face with short, stubby fingers, their nails bitten to the quick.

"Look at that child! Perpetually ravenous. When she runs out of fodder with which to stuff her face, she eats herself!"

"What do you mean, mom?" Alice asked, puzzled, a moment before her eyes spotted the chewed nails.

"Her nails!" Penelope shrieked.

On the drive home, Penelope began to mutter to herself but slowly the volume rose and her voice took on the tone of pronouncement.

"Those younger kids are a generation of degenerates, all stumpy and thick around the middle, they are examples of a species way past its prime. Gone are the days of long, lean, flat-chested children running on hardened soles through the dust outside! I remember children whose bodies were bronzed by a sun not yet grown too hot, too cancerous and who swam in water alive with microbes, not carcinogens. We live in a plasticized world,

Alice. All our eyes glued to a screen of some sort: a TV, a PC, a mobile phone. So indoors is where the children loll, zombie-like and pallid, incapable of a hundred meter dash to anywhere!” Penelope’s whole face was creased in disgust. Alice felt hurt. She was not flat-breasted. She was not bronzed. She was plump and pale with her father’s tendency to ruddiness. Alice longed for golden skin or even olive-toned, blue-based coolness. Hers seemed so florid, so easily excited to blotchy red-ness and irritation. Her mother read her thoughts.

“Oh Alice, not your generation, darling. Yours is the last of the good ones. But look at even a few years below you in school and see the rot that has set in.”

“But I’m not long and lean and flat-chested, Mom.”

“I know, my dear, but you fight against sloth and ungainliness. You have always been active. You do not have a bag of potato crisps permanently in one hand.”

Alice’s mother always said ‘crisps’ in order to distinguish them from whole potatoes cooked in oil, which were ‘chips’. “Language should always be as specific as possible. Discussion should always be pithy, not an endless babble of words that dribbles out dully like water from a leaking tap,” she had said more than once. Alice persisted:

“But I’m still fat, mom.” Alice felt tears rising, hot and unbidden.

“You are not fat, Alice. You are plump. It is puppy fat and I have every confidence you will grow out of it. Besides, what is more important is the fight. You fight against your genetic predisposition to weight. All of your father’s side of the family are big people, especially the women, who were quite colossal.” At this her mouth dipped in disgust at the edges. “But you, my petal, swim like a fish and race up and down the hockey field and jump for the hoop in netball. You ride horses and do aerobics...”

“Yes! And I’m still not slim!” Alice interrupted her mother, as the tears welled up and over the rims of her eyes.

“Now, now, Alice. Don’t be so sensitive. I know. I know it’s not fair. You deserve to be a slim child but it’s important to accept that life is not fair. The important thing is having the courage to fight against degradation. That is the difference between you and those slothful children whose parents indulge their sedentary lifestyle and endless eating. You eat right and exercise. You do all the right things and you struggle. It is noble to struggle, Alice. Never forget that life is a battle.”

Alice looked at her mother and wondered if the world was really always as Penelope said it was. Alice had not noticed any ‘rot’ in the younger girls at her school. She could see no difference at all, in fact. She opened her mouth to say as much but then thought better of it.

“So, what are we getting for Caitlyn?”

“Caitlyn?”

“As a gift.”

In a flash Alice remembered the small lie.

“Oh, yes, of course. Caitlyn’s very girly. She loves bath products and soaps and stuff, same as you do.” It was another lie, but one she knew would endear Caitlyn to her and avert the suspicion Alice could see forming in her mother’s mind. Penelope was quick, but today Alice was quicker.

“Great! I know just where we can go!”

Her mother’s enthusiasm was ignited, stifling her maternal suspicion.

An hour later they were home, with a carefully selected collection of bath and beauty products already wrapped in shiny paper. No one at the stores ever dared to tell Penelope that they did not offer a wrapping service. Quietly a roll of suitable paper would be found and a cashier, trying not to appear inept, would attempt to wrap the gift in a professional manner. Completely unaccustomed, she would be making a hack job of it right under Penelope’s steady gaze, until her mother relented and tut-tut ting at the inefficiency, would take over the task, showing the awestruck cashier how to neatly tuck the corners in and secure firmly with a tiny piece of tape initially until the whole parcel was perfect, in case one needed to redo a corner. Then, and only then, would she secure the seals with longer strips of adhesive tape, lovingly applied in split-level lines, all bubbles eased out with a finger. She’d stand back to examine the result with genuine satisfaction and pronounce that it was easy if you knew how and practised. “Now, you do the other one,” she always offered generously and the employee would painstakingly follow the steps she had observed.

Penelope never gushed but she would often proclaim the attempt to be most adequate. The poor young woman, feeling both suitably chastised but also glad of the new skill, would grin sheepishly. Then it was on to the next store with Alice having to trot to keep

up with her mother's brisk little steps. Penelope's mother had an innate dislike of shopping malls. She always went to them with a plan and a specific list. She was economical with her movements and always parked as close as possible to the entrance nearest the stores she intended to visit. That way she did not need to traipse through the entire centre. Penelope never strolled anywhere. She was not one for window shopping or for aimlessly meandering through the mall, appreciating the pretty lights and centre displays or stopping at a coffee shop to enjoy a cup of tea and a cream bun. "Cream buns give you big, creamy buns! And besides you can never get a decent cup of tea in any of these places!" And that would be that. Alice knew better than to whine or plead. Penelope was immune to teenage tactics and would only become more irritated.

As they had initially agreed, Susan-Rose came round to Alice's house to get dressed for the party. Caitlyn and Suzie had had a nasty fight the day before and Caitlyn had since uninvited her. Alice had tried to intervene on Suzie's behalf but Caitlyn was adamant. She would not even discuss the nature of the fight or what had transpired. Alice was touched that Susan-Rose had still agreed to come over to help her get ready, in spite of no longer being able to go herself. Penelope had rolled her eyes and called Alice naïve.

Alice had never understood why her mother disliked Suzie and had often said, "Be careful, Alice. That girl always lands on her feet. One of these days, you may be under them." She had once likened her to a creeper. When Alice had sought an explanation, her mother had said, grimly, "Opportunistic. Smothers the tree it uses to climb closer to the sun." Penelope: always so cryptic. Alice knew that her mother believed Susan-Rose must have an ulterior motive for coming over but Alice could not think that of her friend.

When Susan-Rose arrived they went straight to Alice's bedroom. Alice pulled out all of her old favourites. She showed her the new black leather boots with the thin heel and the blue top with the diamanté detail her mother had bought her. Susan-Rose shrugged.

"They're OK, I guess." Alice knew that Susan-Rose never received new things, only tatty hand-me-downs from her older sister, Lindsey, who she maintained was the favourite. Catching sight of her own glowing face in the mirror, Alice hoped she did not look smug to her friend. Suzie's face was a mask but Alice feared she was thinking, 'Spoilt only child!' Still, she could not contain her excitement and replied, "I think they're lovely. I especially like the boots. They make me taller."

“Yes, you are rather short, aren’t you?”

Alice felt the jealous barb and busied herself pulling jeans and skirts out of the cupboard. As she did this she mumbled, “I’m so sorry you can’t come with. I think it’s just silly for you and her to be fighting.”

“Well, being sorry doesn’t change anything, does it?” Susan-Rose said spitefully.

“I *did* ask her to forget about the fight and re-invite you, but she wouldn’t... I hope I’m going to be warm enough in this top.”

“Your chest’s going to get cold – half of it’s hanging out! You should wear a polar-neck.”

“I *hate* polar-necks! Wearing a woollen one is like being strangled by a sheep.”

Alice was pulling on her favourite blue jeans. They were low slung and had embroidered hearts on the rear pockets, one on each buttock.

“Oh, not those pants again, Alice.”

“Why not? What’s wrong with them?”

“Nothing. It’s just...”

“What?”

“Well they’re not very flattering.”

“Oh.”

“Try the black ones. They’re more slimming.”

“Oh, OK.”

Alice flushed and yanked off her favourite jeans. She must look fat in these, she thought. God! Why hadn’t Theresa told her? Good thing Suzie was here. All this time wearing them to parties and never thinking she looked dumpy! Alice cringed at the memories of those evenings and how many photos she’d appeared in, in those very jeans! Immortalized in hard copy in fat pants!

Saying goodbye to Suzie had been awkward. Alice had hugged her and told her not to feel bad, that Caitlyn and her would soon be friends again, she felt certain. Susan-Rose had responded glumly that with friends like that who needed enemies and had set out on her fifteen minute walk home, shoulders hunched, without a backward glance and without the usual wave from a distance. Alice called to her, but she just kept walking, as though she hadn’t heard. Outfit selected and overnight bag packed, Plan B commenced. Caitlyn’s

parents were, as usual, abroad somewhere and Alice's parents, as usual, did not know this. However, this time, as there was talk of a party, Penelope was more diligent than usual. She insisted that Caitlyn's mother call her and confirm that it was all right if Alice stayed over. When Alice whined as to whether it was really necessary, Penelope had responded tersely that perhaps, after a night of noisy teenagers, Caitlyn's mother, Dawn, might like her house to herself. Alice promised Dawn would call, fearful that further resistance might seem unreasonable and arouse suspicion.

Once at Caitlyn's house, Penelope had terrified her daughter by suggesting that maybe she should simply come in for a moment and speak to Dawn herself. Alice had quickly said that Caitlyn's mom was at the tennis club and would only be back by seven. Penelope, glancing at her watch, admitted defeat. She did not want to wait another forty-five minutes for a two minute conversation. "Have her call me, Alice, I mean it," were her last words as Alice bounded away, slamming the car door and calling out "Thanks for the lift, ma! Pick me up before lunch time, OK?"

After that it was plain sailing, as Alice's dad would say. Caitlyn, a girl with many unknown talents, could mimic her mother's adult tones impeccably. She simply practised her lines a few times and then calmly picked up the phone and chatted to Penelope as an equal. When Alice had marvelled at this ability, Caitlyn had said, "When you're left without parents most of your life, you learn to parent yourself. You grow up fast. You don't have a choice. So sounding like a grown up is piss easy. It's acting like one that's hard. Just ask my parents. When you next see them, that is. Doomsday, maybe?"

Alice never knew what to make of these kinds of statements from Caitlyn. They gave her a sick feeling deep in her stomach. She felt pity for her friend at such times but was also too uncomfortable to probe the issue further. She never wanted to prolong such conversations and always found a way to change the subject.

"You're so funny" or "You're such a joker" were lines that did little to alleviate the seriousness of Caitlyn's situation. Caitlyn would gallantly play along, replacing her earnest expression with a clown's face, sticking out her tongue or rolling her eyes to look at her nose. It was these attempts at levity that always hurt Alice's heart a little. But soon, the mood would shift and Alice would try hard to forget that she had never met Caitlyn's parents. That Dawn and Peter were off in Never land somewhere and were strangers to

Alice, as they were, in truth, to Caitlyn. She knew them only from pictures; large glossy photographs that festooned the house as though enough images of them could compensate for their absence.

“So, what did my mom say?”

“Not much. She seemed distracted. I just told her that Peter didn’t want to be stuck ferrying children home late and that Alice was always most welcome and it would be absolutely no trouble having her.”

Alice gave her friend a look of admiration and they ran upstairs to get ready.

...

Alice stayed up stairs for as long as possible. She fidgeted with her hair and pulled at the chunky belt with its oversized buckle slung low over her hips. The black jeans and heeled boots made her legs appear slimmer and longer. Alice examined her bottom carefully in the mirror, searching for signs of lumpiness but the surface appeared smooth – all was calm on the body front. She need not go to war with herself tonight. She looked good. It surprised her and she felt a flutter of pride. She applied a second coat of mascara and retraced the line around her eyes with a brown eye pencil, softening the effect with the expert smudging of her ring finger. It was known that this particular finger had fewer muscles in it than the others and was still dexterous. This made it the ultimate make-up tool as the fewer muscles meant that the finger could not be over-zealously tugged or pressed onto the skin, a practice which beauticians said was a leading cause of premature wrinkles. Alice loved to read the glamour sections of her mother’s glossy magazines. She had a photographic memory for details and rarely forgot anything. She shortened her bra straps and adjusted each breast carefully by leaning forward and allowing them to drop into the cups. Now they stood high and round in the black balconette bra that seemed to spill the soft milky flesh ever so slightly over the top of a sheer off-the-shoulder number that Caitlyn had insisted she borrow instead of the more conservative top her mother had picked out. One of the black bra straps stood out in sharp contrast to a pale round shoulder. The magenta top felt soft and sexy against her skin. Alice tousled her hair and the resultant ‘bed-head’ was, for once, just as it appeared on catwalks in fashion capitals around the world that season. Carefully sculpted to look accidental, the ruffled sensuality

of a woman newly tumbled from her boudoir, was de rigueur. Alice could scarcely believe that her hair, for once, looked exactly as she wished it to and she could barely recognize the young woman with the vermilion pout staring back at her in the long oval mirror in Dawn's dressing-room. She blew this strange siren a kiss and laughed. Yet still the nerves bubbled up as she heard the house fill with noise and voices and more and more guests began to arrive. The house filled with a sense of excitement and energy. Caitlyn burst in, calling, "Come on! What are you still doing up here? The party's *downstairs*, dummy!"

"I know. It sounds busy! Who all is here?"

"God! The world and his dog, that's who! My brother has pitched up with a whole bunch of his no-good friends! I don't know why they want to come to a high-school kid's party. Most of them are a bit older than my useless brother and have matriculated already. They must be losers not to have anything better to do on a Friday night. If you and I had a car and a licence to drive, we'd be out on the town, for sure!"

Caitlyn laughed, and then grew serious again, scowling.

"Damn him. He knew he wasn't invited! He said he would go out. He promised me. But when last did anyone in my family keep their word, I guess, hey?" She grimaced.

"Oh, and Suzie's here! I never invited her. Did you?" Caitlyn rolled her eyes.

"No, I didn't. She told me you guys had had a fight or something."

"We did. And I didn't invite her and now she has the nerve to just rock up, all smiles and in a typically skanky outfit. The skirt's so short she must have borrowed it from her slut of a sister. Lord knows Lindsey's the village bike!"

"Oh, Caitlyn, don't be so mean, it doesn't suit you. She probably just really wants you two to be friends again. Be the bigger person. Go make up."

"Trouble is I'm not the bigger person, I mean have you seen her thighs? If I were her, I wouldn't be wearing a mini skirt!"

"Caitlyn. Go." Alice's voice held a warning. She hated gossip. Cattiness made her uncomfortable and, if prolonged, incited her righteous anger and her need to defend the underdog.

"Ok, but only if you stop preening in the mirror and come with me! You look great! And I'm sure you're thrilled that Derek has gate-crashed my party, even if I'm not."

She winked and dragged a nervous, exhilarated Alice downstairs to meet destiny.

...

Alice spotted the popular girls immediately. They stood idly giggling, chatting and striking what Alice termed ‘privately perfected poses’. Vivian presided over the scene, standing slightly apart from the rest, leg arched, hand on hip. She switched legs with a high backward kick that made the sole of her pretty leather pump connect briefly with the ruffle of a white summer mini where it terminated mid-hamstring. It was a move Alice was sure she must have practised over and over in a full-length mirror until it achieved a determined nonchalance. Practised, idealized, school-boy-wet-dream. Gorgeous. Vivian had no need of heels. She was naturally tall and elegant. And all the while each girl was smiling, smiling, smiling. Not at their undeserving girlfriends but past them. Through them. Beaming at the boys. Smiles like steel traps. Meant for others. Male Others. Boys who were lounging against walls, pretending to play pool, carefully chalking the ends of the cues, keeping a steady eye on a girl while doing so. Some phallic implication at play. Some of the boys pushed one another. Harmless roughhousing aimed at showing off muscles. Their physical strength and agility on display as they did flick-flacks and seemed to bounce off walls, dodging one another by jumping clear over the furniture. The girls took it all in.

“What are *they* doing here?” Alice hissed; her heart instantly in her shoes.

“I couldn’t exactly not invite them. What kind of a party would it be without the coolest girls in school to tell everyone what a blast it was, huh?”

“Oh, so you’re hoping to elevate your social standing, maybe even become friends with those cows?”

Caitlyn flushed. “Try to have some fun, Ally. It doesn’t always have to be so serious.” Then she was being summoned by Vivian and scuttled over to do her bidding. Alice pulled a face and made a strategic retreat into a shadowy corner of the room, from where she could view the scene with little chance of being spotted. She watched the silly girls twirl and titter until, from the corner of her eye, she spotted him. Into this busy scene, Derek moved as one oblivious. He paused and scanned the room indifferently then continued on his way. He was so utterly handsome that it hurt to look at him but it was impossible to look away. A beautiful man transfixes. He was a legend at his school. Boys wanted to *be* him and girls wanted to be *with* him. His exploits were the stuff of myth, repeated over and over to rapt

audiences of envious, admiring schoolboys down the years. He was the proverbial crowing cockerel on a dung heap, king of all he surveyed.

A blonde, skinny girl with a forgettable face from within the deadly clutch beckoned to him. His glazed, indifferent gaze and stonily handsome face was irresistible to a girl accustomed to flattery and attention. She would not be ignored. She called out to him, smiling, her head cocked to her less attractive side – the left – the right side high and proud, tilted towards him. He recognized her from somewhere and when she reached out to embrace him, he obliged. Alice, in deep shadow, wanted so badly to be that girl. Then he seemed to invite her and her friends, by their proximity, to join him outside. Vivian flashed a devastating smile that obliterated all competition. Derek released the arm of the blonde and gravitated as if under strong magnetic forces to Vivian's side. *Voracious Vixen! Vivian the Vamp!* She was like a teenage Elizabeth Taylor, all carmine-lipped and luscious. Derek was bewitched in an instant and followed her outside as though it had been her idea.

It wasn't long before they boys had carried the pool table onto the veranda, so that they could smoke and play at the same time. There was strictly no smoking allowed in the house. Someone had brought beers and a bucket filled with bottles of what Alice's father always called 'hard tack'. Soon they were all drinking and the music throbbing from inside put everyone in a good mood. The heavy bass drummed out a primitive call, like blood rushing in the brain. Within the hour, the dancing had begun. Loud music. Hard liquor. The evening promised decadent excess. Alice watched from the doorway as the popular girls sipped beers and puffed on cigarettes, pretending to smoke, not inhaling. They rolled the smoke round in their pretty red mouths and blew it out in plumes that looked almost authentic. But they were too dense, too white and fluffy, not the fine, grey spray of smoke that has first been dissipated on the surfaces of lungs.

Soon, they were pairing up and canoodling on benches and in corners. Alice couldn't bear to watch. She went inside and devastated the buffet table. She downed Fanta and gobbled sausage rolls. She pretended to enjoy herself and chatted with Susan-Rose. They danced with the others in the centre of the room, cleared of furniture for the purpose, and looked up to watch the mirror ball spin and cast disco lights around the lounge. A set of lights which resembled a robot was perched on a bookshelf – The red, green and yellow orbs flashed at intervals, as though in time to the music. And all the while Alice kept eating,

hoping to feel better. Whenever she spotted Caitlyn charging from one guest to the next and their eyes met, Alice would grin and wave and wiggle to the music as though she were enjoying herself so that Caitlyn would not worry about her.

This pretence went on for hours, but in what seemed like a flash, the crowd thinned dramatically as curfews came into effect. The popular girls, from well-off families, were among the first to be collected. Rubbing their mouths with toothpaste and spraying copious amounts of sweet deodorant to mask the smell of booze and cigarettes, they prepared to leave. Heels went into large handbags and miraculously some entire second outfits appeared and were swapped. Earrings came out of a few ears and scarlet lipstick was wiped off and replaced with frosty pink lip-gloss – the colour of innocence. Alice watched as Vivian slipped with feline grace into a car named for a cat (a fierce black cat: her totem) and was whisked away. Her electric window slid down to reveal a seductively smiling face. The cat that got the cream, Alice thought bitterly, as she saw her wave slyly to Derek, standing in the shadows on the grass outside, lest her parents see him.

It was later that evening, as the crowd thinned further, that Alice went outside to see what Derek and his friends were doing. They were still playing pool. Still smoking. Now drunk from all the drinking. Derek spotted her standing in the doorway and proffered a beer.

“You want one?”

Alice, flattered to be noticed and offered anything, smiled and walked forward. She took the cold beer and sipped it. The fresh, dry taste was one Alice knew from her stolen sips of her dad’s lager. Derek had made a fire for fire’s sake, since it was not to be used to cook anything. They stood around, enjoying the heat. It was freezing in the garden. Mid-winter. Alice wondered then how Vivian had managed, dressed in her summer mini. Stupid girl, Alice thought. Who left almost all their legs bare in the middle of winter? Someone with great legs who didn’t want them to go unnoticed, Alice answered her own question. Soon she had finished the beer. She held her hands around the empty bottle, trying to conceal its emptiness. Scared that if it was finished so was her time out here with Derek. If she had no more beer to drink then she had no reason to be out here. As though reading her mind, Derek appeared at her shoulder with a bright red liquid in a shot glass.

“Shooter?”

Alice smiled and took the glass but was unsure of what to do next. Beer she knew, but her dad didn't drink this kind of liquor. Derek flicked his neck back and seemed to throw the liquid down in one clean go. One shot. Hence shooter, dummy, she belittled herself silently. But when Alice tried to imitate him, she succeeded, somehow, in snorting some of it up her nose. The group erupted into booming male laughter. Alice ran to the bathroom, her nose on fire. Splashing water on her face, rinsing her mouth and bathing her nostrils, Alice, coughing and blowing her nose in between, succeeded in clearing out the misdirected spirits. There was a soft knock on the door. Alice froze and looked at her face in the mirror. Her mascara had run in ugly black streaks down her face, which was now blotchy, red in patches and overly pale in others. Oh, for golden, even-toned skin, she wished fervently.

"Who is it?"

"Derek."

Oh God, she thought, furiously dragging a tissue across her face, all concern for causing pre-mature wrinkles gone, trying to remove the dark streaks and smooth her now damp and wildly frizzing hair.

"Are you OK?"

"Yes, I'll be fine. Don't worry; go back to your friends."

"That's OK, I'll wait."

When Alice opened the door, he was standing silhouetted by the passage light. It was like a scene from one of those ridiculous romances she couldn't help but read. His eyes glinted and as he stepped towards her. Alice thought she'd faint. God, swooning was supposed to be a Mills & Boon joke! She rallied and said, "See, all better." He was right in front of her now. His hand reached up to her cheek and picked off a piece of tissue that had stuck there. She was embarrassed. Please go away, she repeated in her head over and over. Then his hand came up again and this time he stroked her hair.

"You're supposed to drink it, not inhale it." He smiled and hugged her. Alice felt the intense heat of his body and smelt his scent just beneath the surface of his aftershave. She inhaled him and felt a tightening, a dual tug, low down where she imagined, from careful study of her Biology diagrams in past months, her ovaries must be. He seemed to hold her for much longer than was necessary or appropriate for a comforting hug. The energy of it was somehow off, too. It felt sexual. It felt like attraction, not solace. Amazingly it was

Alice who pulled away and stepped back. He looked down at her and said quietly, "Please come back outside."

"Maybe later. I will, really."

Alice didn't want to face his tittering cronies. If he had been alone outside, Alice would have gone immediately. So she spent the rest of the evening in the safety of her peer group. Derek would bring her coke from time to time and smile. Theresa, sitting beside Alice, noted this and thought it strange but said nothing. As the evening wore on, Alice began to feel increasingly strange. Theresa noted that she began to slur her words and seemed to slump more deeply into her chair. It was only when Alice had dragged herself from the couch, whooping about this being her favourite song, twirling in lopsided circles and shaking her body in a most uncharacteristic fashion that Theresa, grabbing her arm to steady her friend, asked, "Alice, are you drunk?"

"Don't be silly! I had a beer and one shooter. I'm drinking coke, see? She held up the plastic tumbler with the dark bubbly liquid. So, how could I be drunk, Resa?"

"Well, you've never been drunk before. So, how would you know if you are or aren't?"

"I'm sure I'd know. Now, stop being a party-pooper and dance with me!"

"Ok. If you're sure you're all right?"

"Po-si-tive!"

Soon it was time for Theresa to go. Her mother had rung her cell and told her to be ready earlier than they had previously agreed because she had a terrible headache and wished to go to bed. Alice waited with her best friend outside the front door in the cold and watched as Mary's battered Mazda rattled up the driveway. The face behind the wheel was dour and miserable. She was waiting, Alice thought grimly, to deliver the guilt speech she'd been working on all evening; the one about how she was all alone and how her only child was out having a good time while her poor single mother ate her TV dinner in solitude, watching reruns of *Dynasty*. Alice wanted, not for the first time, to slap her sour face. She felt unusually emotional this evening. Theresa looked worried. "Ah, forget about it! Let her moan at you. It doesn't matter, right? You had a good time tonight." Alice's said comfortingly.

"It's you I'm worried about. I think Derek's acting weird." Alice had fobbed off her warning, aware that Theresa had never warmed to Caitlyn's brother and that she thought

Alice had a blind-spot where he was concerned. They hugged each other and Theresa told her to be careful. Alice smiled and waved goodbye.

...

“Alice? Alice! Are you in there?”

Slowly the room swam into view as Alice lifted her head from the edge of the toilet seat. She was surprised to find herself on the floor, her arm slung around the rim of the bowl, her legs, folded uselessly under her. She tried to move them but found she could not. It was like that time her legs had gone to sleep during assembly when she was in primary school and when it had come time to sing the school anthem, everyone had risen, except her. The teachers were seated at the back of the hall, along the wall, with only the principal and deputy seated on the stage. An odd set-up, Alice thought now, as in the high school all the teachers took their places on the stage. However, this primary school system worked well for allowing the teachers to spot any untoward behaviour. Alice had been sitting helplessly, her legs like fizzy jelly, when she had been poked in the back by an enraged teacher. “Why aren’t you standing?” a voice had hissed in her ear. Alice had thought the stares from the school mates to her left and right were bad enough but now she had been singled out for a grown-up’s admonishment. “I can’t.” she had whispered back plaintively as the high, young voices commenced the second verse. “My legs are dead! They won’t move.” The teacher retreated and Alice hoped she felt stupid for asking a stupid question. Alice felt wrongly accused. She wasn’t a trouble-maker. She was a good student, always eager to please her teachers. Why couldn’t they have given her the benefit of the doubt and presumed that she must have a good reason for not rising? Alice knew that if she had fidgeted more often she would have allowed sufficient blood to circulate. But the teacher’s hated fidgeting, which they judged harshly from the comfort of their chairs, while girls cross-legged on the floor felt their bottoms go numb and their legs develop pins and needles, especially in winter. It was Alice’s stalwart attempts to sit still and not arouse the wrath of her Argus-eyed teachers that had brought even worse attention on herself. The injustice of it had burnt Alice. Now, as this old memory flooded through her groggy brain, Alice tried to work out why she was on the floor and why she could not get up. Something

smelt bad. Alice peered into the bowl and seeing what was in it almost made her do a repeat performance. She reached up with what seemed to take superhuman strength and pulled the lever. The toilet flushed and cleared but unrecognizable bits clung stubbornly to the sides of the bowl. She wiped her face with her sleeve. There was vomit in her hair. She reached up and unlatched the door. Caitlyn fell in.

“Good God! Look at you! What did you drink?”

“I don’t know,” Alice mumbled. “Just one beer, one shooter and coke, that’s all.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Alice nodded vigorously.

“Ok. Let’s get you out of here.”

Alice shook her head.

“I think I’m going to be...”

And she was.

The door slammed and Caitlyn was gone.

...

“Shame, Catie! Is your little friend OK?” A lanky youth with bad skin and an earring through the top cartilage of his left ear whined in false concern. The group tittered. Derek bit back a smile. “All right, you wankers, who did it? Huh?”

“Did what?” said Derek’s best mate Rodger, widening his large blue eyes and blinking furiously in an exaggerated expression of innocence.

“Spiked her drinks. One of you losers has been putting booze in her coke.”

“Prove it.” Came the cool statement out of the gloom.

Caitlyn stared hard at the outline of her brother’s face but the pronounced brow bones hid his eyes and cast shadows, making his expression unreadable. She wondered, not for the first time, how they could be related. He felt like a stranger. Her blood did not know him. “I know one of you did it. She’s busy vomiting her guts out right now and she doesn’t deserve to be sick because she didn’t choose to be drinking!”

Caitlyn’s fury mounted with her sense of helplessness. She couldn’t do anything to these brutes. She couldn’t even make Alice feel better. It was going to be a long night of

nursing her with water and keeping her warm with a bucket close to hand and a damp cloth to wipe her face after each renewed vomiting incident.

“Bastards!” She cried and kicked over the bucket holding the ice and remaining beers. The bottles slithered out, some rolling harmlessly onto the bricks but one smashed and another rolled off the edge into the swimming pool and sank in see-saw fashion to the bottom.

Immediately Derek had her by the wrist. He was twisting her arm and she yelped in pain.

“Bitch. You broke one of my beers and one’s in the bloody pool.” His voice was soft and dangerous. His friends, who had been hooting the mock sound of fear at her outburst, fell silent, their faces instantly sombre as they watched Derek wind his little sister’s arm behind her back and march her to the edge of the pool.

“Go and fetch it.” He said into her hair, his lips brushing her neck and the edge of her ear. He took her gold hooped earring in his teeth and tucked gently till her lobe lifted. “There’s a good girl”; the words darker than the evening itself. Then he released her arm and gave her a light shove. She toppled forwards into the icy water.

Shaun stepped forward to protest, “C’mon Derek. It’s the middle of winter. It’s just a bloody beer.”

“And when my parents get back and see that beer? Who do you think is going to be in trouble then, huh? Huh?”

“I can fish it out with the pool net.” Shaun volunteered meekly.

Derek stepped to him.

“You got a thing for my sister, Shauny-boy?”

“Nah. It’s just...”

“What?”

“She’s a girl, man.”

“So?”

Caitlyn had appeared, spluttering above the surface, gasping at the cold, her breath like mist on the water.

“Get on with it.” Derek snarled.

Caitlyn dived. Everyone waited. Shaun fidgeted as the seconds ticked by, worried. But

he didn't move.

The surface wobbled and then exploded as the pale girl burst through. She wiped the water from her face with a hand, sucking air.

"I – can't – findit." She said between gasps. The last two words became one.

"Well, keep looking then. If at first you don't succeed..." he taunted.

"It's too dark in the pool." Shaun reasoned.

Caitlyn had disappeared again. And again she came up empty-handed; although this time she made no comment. She kept her back turned to them as she gathered her strength and steadied her breathing in the frigid water. Her teeth were beginning to chatter and her fingertips were purple. She would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her difficulty and fear. On her third attempt, Caitlyn's hand locked around the smooth coolness of an Amstel. She gripped it tightly and kicked to the surface. She swam one-handed to the steps, not trusting Derek enough to place it on the pool's edge.

She rose, like Venus from the waters, beautiful and straight-backed, and walked sedately with her chin jutting out and up in defiance, jaw muscles bulging at the effort of keeping the quiver from her mouth. She did not look at any of them. They were beneath her. Bestial. She took no more notice of them than a deity would of a herd of cattle in the corner of a field. She placed the bottle quietly on the table with out stopping or looking down – in a single movement as she passed, shoes squelching, drops of water dripping from every edge of her – nose, chin, and brows. She went around the side of the house, heading for the kitchen, so as not to wet the lounge carpets.

"And whose gonna sweep up this mess? There's glass everywhere!" Derek yelled after her. "I will." Shaun's voice was firm.

...

Caitlyn collected Alice from the downstairs bathroom. Slowly, she helped her stagger upstairs where she stripped her and shoved her into a shower. "Wash!" She instructed firmly and while Alice fumbled through this order, she went to find her overnight bag. She helped her to dry, dress and brush her teeth but she would not answer Alice's baffled questions as to why, if it was Alice who had taken the shower, Caitlyn, too, had wet hair?

Once in bed, bucket at her side, wet cloth on her forehead and a large tumbler of water on the bedside table, Alice began to cry. She knew how stupid she must seem to Derek and his friends and now she'd had no option but to allow her orderly little friend to wipe vomit from her face, see her naked and help her dress as if she was an invalid. She felt deeply confused and ashamed.

"I feel so stuuu-pid!" She wept.

"I know how you feel."

"No you don't! I feel humiliated."

"I know. It's been a rough night."

"He must think I'm an idiot."

"*He*'s the idiot. Not you. Do you hear me? *He*'s the idiot!"

"No, it's not his fault. I have vomit in my hair!" she wailed.

"It *is* his fault. He and his little friends were spiking your drinks all night."

"What?"

"Yes. I *told* you he's a jerk."

"It wasn't him. It couldn't have been Derek. His friends did it without him knowing."

"Who kept topping up your coke, Alice?"

"Derek."

"Yes. Derek. Get real, Alice. My brother got you drunk without you knowing and without your consent. For his own amusement. He's sick."

"You think he'd really do that?" Alice's tone was that of someone desperate to believe otherwise. The tone of one hoping for another possibility.

"I'm tired Alice. You look tired, too. Let's just go to bed and, knowing you like I do, we can agonize over this in the morning. At length. Hours and hours of talking about Derek. Yay! I'm so looking forward to it." Sarcasm dripped from her voice.

"Are you mad at me?" Alice bleated, fresh tears brimming.

"No, of course not. Don't go getting all melancholy on me now! I'm in no mood for *dronk-verdriet*. OK?"

"Ok. So we're good?"

"We're good. We're fine. Now let's get your drunk ass to bed. You better drink *a lot* of water, or else you're going to feel really bad tomorrow morning."

...

Alice awoke to a house so quiet it was as if some giant hand had draped a huge wet towel over the whole building. Outside she could hear the sound of the wind coming through, as though from very far away, dumbed down by the wetness. Removed. And in this great grey stillness, when she could feel the house sleeping, her first thoughts were of Penelope. She tried to tug at the edges of a dream she had been having before she snapped awake. She felt on edge and disconcerted by the inkling of a warning in the dream that she could not now remember. The silence was unnerving – for some reason it caused a constriction around her heart – a fear of something for which she had, as yet, no name.

Her head hurt and her brain was foggy. Her eyes felt swollen as though the globes were two big for the sockets. She rubbed at them but it was like trying to put a bayonet light bulb into a screw-type fitting: the eyes stayed at odds with the skull. Her tongue was enormous and filled her mouth, choking her. She had to gape to get the air in as her nose was still stuffy from the tears of earlier. She remembered Caitlyn's warning about how she would feel in the morning if she did not drink copious amounts of water. She reached for the glass on the bedside table, thoughtfully provided by her sober, clear-thinking friend. She drained the last drop and decided she would need more in the night. She would have to go and re-fill the glass, but she needed the loo anyway, so the journey was mandatory. She slipped from the bed and crept quietly out, careful not to disturb Caitlyn. She padded down the long corridor and fumbled for the switch. The room burst into blinding light. Alice recoiled, shielding her face. She slowly peered through her fingers, giving her eyes time to adjust and went in. When she came out she heard the click of the door almost opposite the bathroom. Derek's room. The door swung open in a manner usually seen only in horror movies. She froze instinctively. She could see no one in the doorway.

“Hey.”

Alice made no sound.

“Alice?”

She nodded.

Adonis stepped from the shadows, stripped to the waist; the refracted glow from the

bathroom highlighted the muscles that protruded in knobbls from a washboard stomach. The shadow of a rib, the bulge of the pronounced Latissimus dorsi – or ‘lat’, as jocks called them. A nipple puckered in the cold. A pectoral flinched unbidden. Tousled dark hair and a face of angular, chiselled beauty. Alice inhaled sharply.

“Listen, I just wanted to apologize about tonight. I didn’t know. The guys were messing around. They know I like you but that I wouldn’t do anything about it, so they thought they’d give me some Dutch courage and make you more receptive to my charms, as it were.”

He smiled, embarrassed.

“I didn’t know and I’m sorry. That’s all I wanted to say.”

Alice was acutely aware that he was regarding her as intently as she had been him. His eyes dropped from her face in a lazy swoop to her chest. A pause. Then on, stalled again, then down her legs to her toes. The gaze ran down her like hot honey. She became intensely aware of the bathroom light behind her that was illuminating her white nightgown. It felt transparent. No, it felt invisible. She felt she was, in fact, naked in the doorway. She exhaled slowly through bowed lips. Ok. Let’s get it together, she thought as she looked up. Directly into his eyes. All hope faded.

What am I supposed to say? She had thought only to think it, but she realized she had spoken when he replied.

“I don’t know. I just thought maybe we should talk.”

Alice was mute.

“Hey, no pressure. I just wanted you to know how I feel about you, while I’m still drunk enough to tell you. Man, am I going to feel stupid in the morning!”

He ruffled his hair, looking at the ground, head cocked to the side. A sheepish expression, just visible in the light from the bathroom, completed the look. He was adorable. He was vulnerable. He grinned and cast a sideways look in her direction, his long lashes, like the sweet Disney dwarf Bashful. Alice melted. How could she have thought he would be mean? Or deceptive enough to be plying her with alcohol with nefarious intent. He had no ulterior motives. He was not trying to use her for his own purposes. He was her friend. And he liked her. He *liked* her, liked her – it that specific, non-platonic way! Alice returned his smile.

He gave an exaggerated shiver.

“Sjoe! It’s cold out here.” And he blew air over his lips till they vibrated. She gave a little laugh. Encouraged, he went on.

“Well, I’m going to head off back to my warm bed. I’d like to keep talking to you but it’s just too cold out here. You’re free to come and join me, though? Bed’s warm! Here’s freezing.”

He lifted an alternate hand, palm up, as he said each sentence, as though weighing up the two options on invisible scales. He smiled disarmingly.

“I don’t bite, you know? Unless you want me to?” And he laughed.

He made it seem so harmless, so silly to be nervous or reluctant. They were just going to talk. She could leave at any time. She didn’t have to do anything more than she wanted to. She didn’t have to go all the way. Alice’s mind reasoned furiously, yet her feet stayed rooted to the spot. Her body swayed as though positioned between two very strong magnets, with opposite poles, and they were fighting over possession. The net result was that she made no clear movement in either direction. Derek, feigning indifference to mask his annoyance at her unexpected resistance, shrugged and sucking his cheeks, said,

“It’s your call. You come when you’re ready.”

And he was gone, swallowed by the gloom. Alice clicked off the bathroom light and stood trying to collect her thoughts.

Her mind was racing. She hesitated at the threshold. She peered into the darkness beyond the half-open door. The dark seemed to pulsate like millions of spiders, teeming in a confined space – black on black – death in a jar. Alice’s heart was pounding. She knew she should say no and go straight back to Caitlyn’s room. She knew that going to his room at this time of night ‘to talk’ seemed unlikely and a very bad idea if she didn’t want something to happen between them but she really craved for something to happen between them. Alice felt compelled to follow him, to step through the door left so temptingly ajar. Yet still she hesitated, her bare feet beginning to feel the cold of the wooden floors. Alice had always maintained that most of life was pretty hum-drum but that there were moments that stood out. Defining moments, when an event or a decision changed the course of everything and altered one forever. The moments that one recalled as an old person, seated

decrepit in a chair, forgotten by the world but not forgetting. These events would constitute the reel of film played to the inner eye. Strung together like beads, they would be the rosary of a life. Over and over again these memories would run, till they wore out in the re-remembering, unravelled: like a jersey worn too many times, like a film whose black tape snaps. This was such a moment. Alice could feel destiny pushing up against her, an insistent, insidious nuzzling. The night itself nudged her towards him. She stood frozen, aware that any step, in any direction, would be momentous. A single footfall would constitute a decision. Her mind was a jumble of ideas and thoughts, but there was no sense to them. They were too muddled. Into her addled brain, her body beat out an unrelenting imperative. She could feel her blood pulsing 'down there'. She flushed with shame at the sensation that she had dual heartbeats and one had relocated to her nether regions! In the end it was the cold that decided her. As her body chilled, so the heat deep in the very base of her became more pronounced, its call more undeniable. Like a siren song it pleaded with her to just come a little closer. To anchor her bark in the safe warm harbour of the island. To allow herself to be drawn to its bosom and wrapped in its warm embrace. Alice knew even as she took the fatal step, that disaster loomed. She saw the bleached bones on the shore. But she could not turn back.

...

Alice's eyes flicked open. The room was filled with a dull lilac light that meant dawn was not far off. Her throat was dry. She must have passed out. The last thing she remembered was the weight of him on her like a boulder, his hand clapped over her mouth to silence her. Had it been the alcohol or lack of air or sheer terror that had caused her to lose consciousness? She did not know. She lay completely still and listened to his breathing. He was deep in sleep. The sonorous sound and languid pace gave this much away. She needed to escape but she was scared to move. Her heart began to beat faster as the reality of what had happened surfaced. Her skin grew icy cold and she tingled all over. She felt lame and when she commanded her limbs to move, they did not budge. Her legs were as useless as they had once been in an assembly hall many years before. They would not move and she knew that they would not support her weight. She was trapped. That filled her with fresh fear- cold, like water from a deep well. She tried not to panic. She told herself to take a few

deep breaths and try again. Slowly, her terrified limbs, once petrified to stone, warmed and felt more responsive. She lifted the duvet, careful not to let cold air in to disturb her naked bedfellow, and slipped off the bed onto her bottom. She froze as he shifted in his sleep. Once he had settled she groped around on the floor for her nightgown. Her hand clasped a slug. No. It was damp and squishy but not alive. It did not twist in resistance. Horror filled her as she recognized it in the dark. She knew what she held. It was the used condom, its vile contents knotted in with a careful slip tie. She flung it from her as one might a cockroach or a spider that found its way onto a hand. She thought she had screamed and froze again. There was no movement. The scream had been internal, deep in her brain; a primordial scream of horror. Fighting disgust and self-loathing she located the nightie and darted from the room on her toes, silent as a ghost. In the hallway she paused to pull on her nightdress and then ran downstairs to use the toilet as far from Derek's room as possible. Still fearful, her heart a hot orb, threatening to jump into her mouth, she tiptoed back upstairs and into the sanctuary of Caitlyn's room. Her friend was blessedly asleep. Alice slipped into the other side of the bed. Her body ached all over. Her muscles, her head. But there was a very specific pain inside her that she tried to ignore. Seated gingerly on the toilet, her urine had burned like fire as it passed over her damaged body. Why had he not listened when she'd said 'no'? She shut her eyes and prayed. She prayed to be forgiven. She prayed to understand why and to be all right. Alice fell asleep still praying.

In the morning she had a fever. She was sweating profusely and was pale and shaky. Caitlyn was observing her when she opened her eyes. The pillow beneath her head was damp with perspiration. It smelled dank and musty and Alice could taste salt on her lips.

"You don't look so good."

"Water, please." Alice croaked.

Caitlyn brought her some and put a cold cloth on her head.

"You must have drunk a lot of alcohol to still be so ill this morning. Did you drink lots of water in the night, like I told you to?"

Caitlyn's innocent question made Alice feel like she would throw up again. Instead she nodded.

"Well, it's already 10AM and you can't go home looking like that! You'd better call your mom and ask her if you can stay another night."

Alice was filled with dread. She did not want to stay here. She wanted to go home. But she was scared of her mother's questions and ashamed. She didn't want anyone to know. She had no choice. She phoned her mother and forced a bright happy sound into her voice. She lied about how much she had enjoyed herself and said that the top her mother had chosen had received many compliments. Caitlyn had, in due course, come on the line as Dawn and re-iterated that Alice was always welcome. The deal was sealed. In mere moments Alice's prison sentence was extended by another twenty-four hours. Alice took a long hot bath and dribbled baby oil into the water to ease her discomfort. She lay in the water until it went cold. Then she ran in more hot water and lay there until it became so tepid she was forced to let it out. Caitlyn joked that she had taken so long in the bath that she had thought Alice had drowned in there. They were eating sandwiches in the kitchen and Alice, still dehydrated, was gulping down glasses of orange juice when Derek sauntered in, wearing only his jeans. Alice averted her eyes. Derek grunted a general greeting and grabbed a leftover chicken leg from the fridge. He sat down directly opposite Alice and began to gnaw away at the meat. His eyes were on her and after a protracted silence he asked casually, "So, how are you feeling this morning, Alice?"

Caitlyn jumped in. "How do you think she's feeling, dickhead? Hung-over, that's how, OK? Hung-over. Sick. Thanks to you."

"Sick, is she? And it's my fault?"

"Yes." Caitlyn said gravely.

"Is that so?" He cocked his head and shot Alice a warning look. She became engrossed by the crusts on her bread, carefully shredding them off the sandwich and lining them up in neat rows like the marks scoured in prison walls to mark time.

Alice could not speak. "You OK?" he pressed. Alice nodded. Derek scraped back his chair. The sound made Alice jump. "We *are* sensitive this morning," he remarked with a smirk and left the room. Soon after, they heard his car, a battered old Ford bakkie, roar to life and he was gone in a screech of tyres. Alice exhaled loudly. Caitlyn shot her a quizzical look.

"Are you sure you're OK? You seem a bit weird today."

"I'm fine, just not in the mood to talk. I need sleep."

And so Caitlyn put her to bed.

Alice slept all day. She woke periodically, noting each time how the light in Caitlyn's white and burgundy room had changed, how the sun had moved round. Later on it seemed to have slipped to the far corner. Eventually she woke in a dark room. Disorientated, she lay in the dark, allowing her eyes to adjust. She wondered what time it was. It seemed late but Alice felt sure it was only just past dinner time. Maybe eight? She reached for her water glass, kept full by an attentive Caitlyn, who must have been checking on her and replacing her water throughout the day. She felt a bit better. Less feverish, at least. She decided she would go downstairs and find Caitlyn. In a little while. She needed just a few more minutes in the dark to think. A little while longer to clear her head. Just a little while longer.

...

Alice found Caitlyn downstairs. It was earlier than she had thought, only 6:30PM by the clock on the kitchen wall. Caitlyn was seated at the kitchen table, a bottle of what looked like brandy in front of her. She had her head down on her arms. Alice called softly to her. Caitlyn looked up, startled. Alice could see she had been crying. Her face was puffy and her eyes were red. Her mouth was set in a downward line. Alice was terrified. Could Caitlyn know already? Did she hate her? Alice wanted to shout out that she hadn't wanted to, that he'd made her, and that he had been too heavy to move. Instead she asked apprehensively, "What's the matter, Caitlyn?" And when Caitlyn gave her a cagey look but said nothing, she tried a new tack, "Where's Derek?"

Caitlyn, misinterpreting the tone of the question, said, "Oh, Alice, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but your lover-boy is away with friends at the beach house."

"My lover-boy?" Alice felt as though her nerves would snap.

"Ok. the boy you wish would notice you, so that you could become his girlfriend and live happily ever after! Only it's not going to happen because he laughs about you behind your back and that time you called him on his cell, he was with his friends and when he saw it was you calling, he didn't answer on purpose. He just laughed and said to his buddies, 'You see how she stalks me? Crazy Alice! Can't a man get any peace?' I was there. Alice. I just didn't tell you, because I didn't want to hurt your feelings and you're so stupid when it comes to my brother that you would probably not have believed me

anyway.”

“Why are you being so mean? Why are you crying? Why are you drinking?”

“Why, why, why? It’s Alice’s favourite question. You do so love to know why, don’t you Alice? Always got to have a good reason for everything as if the world isn’t a pile of shit? As if it isn’t all chaos and confusion.”

She laughed mirthlessly; her head flung back. The dry cackle like a witch made Alice shudder.

“You’re drunk.”

“My turn!” Caitlyn bellowed. “You were pissed last night and now I get my chance.

Why am I being so mean? Because I feel like it and because it’s the truth and you always say you want to know the truth. Well, the truth is that Derek will never love you. He’ll never love anyone except himself. Why am I crying? My parents called earlier. They’re going to extend their stay in Milan – that’s where they apparently are now, no longer Greece. They didn’t think I’d mind, seen as how I’m such a big girl now. That second one also answers your last question. I’m an orphan, that’s why I’m drinking. Because there’s no one to tell me not to, no one to care.”

She was spitting her words. Alice was alarmed. She went over and hugged her friend.

“I care, Caitlyn. You have lots of friends who care and who want you to be happy.”

Caitlyn shrugged her off.

“Join me. Have a drink.”

Suddenly Alice felt flat. Defeated. Too tired even to think about what the right thing was to do, let alone execute it. She pulled a glass from the shelf and flopped into a chair. Caitlyn gave her a generous three finger portion.

“Drink up!” Caitlyn ordered, her glass held high. “Cheers!”

Alice mimicked the gesture and downed the tawny liquid. The burn in her throat made her think her neck would explode and her cheeks puffed out like balloons. Flushing.

“Whoof!” She panted. “Strong stuff.”

Caitlyn topped her up.

“Should we be drinking this, K?”

“Why not? She shrugged with feigned indifference.

“Well, it’s pretty expensive. Wont your dad get mad?”

“Why should he? Why would he even notice? He’ll just buy some more. That’s what he does when he finds something missing. He just picks up the phone and has it delivered. If he came home and I wasn’t there, he’d probably just phone “Daughters R Us” and pick out another one from the glossy catalogue. Maybe he’d decide that he’d never really wanted a girl and get a boy replacement, instead.”

“Don’t say that, Catie. Your dad loves you.”

“How do you know? You just can’t imagine parents who don’t really give a shit, can you?” The tone was accusing. “Always been loved, haven’t you? You don’t know what you’re talking about. What you really mean is, ‘Catie, your dad *ought* to love you. He really *should* love you.’ Well, news flash Allie: we don’t all have your parents. Some of us have strangers who don’t love us but have to fit the bill, coz they had us to look good. They just had a family because it’s what people do. We’re no different, Derek and I, from the house, the cars, the holiday apartment. We’re accoutrements. We’re proof that they have it all. That they’re successful. Is it any wonder Derek turned out to be such a shit and me such a mess? Can you imagine being a thing to your dad? A possession.”

“That can’t be true.”

“Why, Ally? Coz it doesn’t fit your neat conception of what a real family is? I don’t even know where my parents are! Last time they called, they were in Greece. That was two weeks ago. It’s true, Alice. Even if it’s not your truth. Even if you don’t like it or want it to be that way. That’s just how it is. And wishing it any other way is a waste of time. It’s not worth putting all that effort into being miserable forever, willing it to be different.”

Alice poured out a hefty measure of Rémy Martin, swallowed it in a single gulp and sat silent a long time. She knew that Caitlyn was right. Turns out when the truth arrives it doesn’t look like you thought it would.

They drank for two solid hours and spent the rest of the afternoon trying on Caitlyn’s extensive wardrobe. Alice gazed around at the sea of shoes, bags and garments and remarked, “You have more stuff than I’ve ever seen! Don’t you ever feel bad, swiping their credit cards so often? I mean, you have at least 30 pairs of shoes!” “57.” The reply shot back. “I shop whenever I feel down. Or whenever they’ve let me down. Again. Why not let them at least pick up the tab? It’s all they’re good for!” Alice, sensing danger, changed the subject. Later they tore off their clothes and went swimming in the frigid pool, marble

statues all around. Then they ran around the house in their underwear, giggling in drunken euphoria, oblivious to the cold and collapsed onto leather sofas to see what was on satellite. A massive flat screen like an enormous ill-formed eye, regarded them. Hunger set in and Caitlyn dialled for pizza. They ate till they were sick and fell asleep, still half naked, wrapped in blankets on the overstuffed furniture.

Alice's eyes flicked open. She was instantly wide awake, as though spooked by something. She listened intently, but the vast house was still. In the distance a light motor vehicle whooshed by in the darkness, travelling at speed, destination unknown. It tore a hole through the night, tunnelling its way through the thick black stillness with a sound like wind through a steel pipe. Alice lay in the dark and wished fervently she was in that car, hurtling along the main road, heading out of town, away from the events of the last few days. Soon another car could be heard, coming closer. It entered the road and splashed through puddles, the water crackling as it ran off the tyres. It came to a slow, soft halt. The wheels scrunched on the grit-covered asphalt. A faint squeak – the axles realigning as a heavy form was lifted from the front seat. The door slammed authoritatively. It made the sound with feeling – A heavy duty vehicle. It was undoubtedly the Ford.

Derek was back.

Footsteps. And then a key in the door. She began to shake violently. She couldn't stop. It was an uncontrollable shuddering. Her teeth clattered together and she gritted them, for fear he would hear them. From beneath her blanket she peered at the grey blankness of the TV screen. The hall light went on. A heavy form strode past the doorway, then halted and turned back. The dark shadow came to stand in the doorway, scanning the room. Like a wolf he had caught the scent of something: fear. Suppressed, shivering, hiding fear. Alice could see him in outline; the light behind him making him look like a harmless paper cut-out but Alice knew the truth. She saw him clearly reflected in the TV's colossal screen. It seemed to amplify the size of him. Alice, still naked from earlier, shifted down on the couch, grateful to be hidden by the back of the sofa. The leather creaked. It was enough.

Soundlessly he was beside her, kneeling down, lifting the blanket to see if she really slept. Alice was shaking so hard, as she tried to hold on to her covering. He laughed quietly, "Hello there, Alice. Can't you sleep?" Alice's eyes were shut tightly. "Leave me alone. I'm

sleeping.”

“No you’re not. You shouldn’t lie, Alice. It doesn’t suit you.”

Alice opened her eyes and his face in the moonlight was wolfish and terrifying. She went completely weak and he tugged the blanket from her with ease. His eyes roved over her body and he whispered, “It’s like you knew I was coming back early. You’re dressed for me. Come, let’s go upstairs. It’s cold down here.” Alice shook her head vehemently and covered her front with her arms, her hands clutching her face. His hands were on her. He felt her heartbeat racing and sensed her fright. It seemed to arouse him. He began to plant kisses on her. She rolled onto her stomach and he pushed himself onto her and slipped his hands under her armpits, gripping her breasts hard. She yelped in pain and he released her immediately. That was when she rolled to face him and sat up, “Go away or I’ll scream,” she threatened with renewed confidence. Derek laughed softly, but he pulled back, “And what’s Catie gonna do, huh? Save you?” As though on cue, Caitlyn stirred and, in an instant, Derek vanished.

Alice heard him go back out the front door. The car started up and Alice stayed sitting bolt upright on the edge of the couch until the car had droned into the distance. Then she began to sob loudly. She could not help it. She was crying noisily and it woke Caitlyn. She was at her side holding her, their naked torsos touching, neither of them in the least self-conscious. Alice felt closer to Caitlyn than ever before and in this moment of intimacy, still partially inebriated, she told Caitlyn the whole sordid story, what had happened the night before and that Derek had just been in the room. Caitlyn could not conceal her shock. She stiffened and pulled away. She got up and wrapped her blanket around herself, then switched on the light.

“What do you mean, he was just here?” Caitlyn went to the window, looking for his car.

“He’s gone. He left again.”

Caitlyn shot her a disbelieving glance.

“He was here! Really. I promise, Caitlyn. Why would I lie to you?”

“Ok. So, let’s say I believe you.”

Caitlyn was pacing the room. Her manner was cagey and strange. Unexpectedly she wheeled around to face Alice and said sternly, “You mustn’t go getting any ideas. It was sex. Just sex. Besides, you’re not a kid anymore. It was probably time you lost your

virginity.”

“But I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to sleep with him. Not really. I told him not to.”

“Oh, Alice, *everyone* knows you were mad about my brother! Of course you wanted to! You’re just feeling guilty now, coz you’re not like the rest of us anymore. And you probably figured you’d be the last of us to go all the way.”

“No, that’s not it!” Alice protested. “Maybe...”

“Maybe nothing. To be honest, I’m surprised, too. I also thought you’d be a late developer. Also, I didn’t know my *boet* fancied you so much.” She smiled coolly. “It’s actually very flattering. Derek could have any girl he wants,” she continued.

“Yes, but you told me he sleeps with lots of girls and he can’t possibly care about all of them.”

“You’re different. He knows you. I’m sure he wants to be with you. It’s not just a one-off thing.”

“Well, he did wake me when he found us here and asked me to go upstairs with him.”

“So? Why didn’t you?”

“I don’t want to have sex again.”

“You mustn’t be scared. The hard time is over now. It gets better. So I’ve heard.”

“No, Caitlyn. I didn’t want to sleep with him. He just did it and I’m not gonna let him touch me again.”

“Fine, suit yourself. You have a right to change your mind. Just don’t go shooting your mouth off making wild accusations. You had sex and now you don’t want to anymore. That’s not rape, Alice. Just in case you were thinking it.”

And with that she rolled over and went to sleep.

Alice called to her, but there was no reply. A wall stood between them, their newly-established closeness destroyed by an ugly truth.

...

Alice and Caitlyn barely spoke the following morning. Alice went home glum and desperate to feel loved and accepted but she could not bring herself to tell her mother the truth. She took yet another bath and slept all day. On Monday, Caitlyn avoided her. When Alice finally cornered her alone after Biology class on Friday, a full five days of weirdness

between them, and asked her why she was avoiding her, Caitlyn's hooded eyes were cool and non-committal.

"I'm not avoiding you. I'm just busy. Besides, I think you and I have been spending a little too much time together recently and maybe we should take a break."

Alice felt as though she had been slapped. She reeled from the rejection. Before she could formulate a reply, Caitlyn was gone, disappearing down the corridor with long, elegant strides. Alice, stunned, wandered to her final class of the day: Art. Relieved to be among the strong-smelling solvents and damp smell of paint, Alice lost herself in her work. She deliberately chose a position away from the others on the far side of the still-life. The girls were arranged in a circular pattern around the collection of childhood toys that were the subject matter but few were near Alice, as she had chosen a difficult section of the still-life and no one else wanted to tackle the strange back angles of things it offered. Alice felt at home with this strangely distorted view. This, she decided, was how life really was: odd angles, strange views and a picture that didn't make sense and was not easy on the eye. A picture hard to understand and render accurately. She was thoroughly bewildered by how her life had become so complicated in what seemed like a single moment, a flash of time. Alice had always believed that it was important moments which made up the structure of a life, which constituted the skeleton of memory, around which the flesh of lesser events was gathered. But these last few days felt like jagged bones – too sharp to form a known creature. These were bones belonging to the life of some alien thing. Tonight! She would tell her mother everything. Penelope would know what to do, Alice was certain.

She was filling in shadows with blue paint when the intercom sounded loudly, unexpectedly, into the first half of an hour-long class. She was nonplussed to hear her name being called and to understand that she was being summoned to the office and must bring her things with her immediately. She rose and glanced at the clock above the board. Twenty-nine minutes past one. She packed up her things and washed her brushes methodically before placing them into the kitchen towel cardboard roll her industrious mother had converted into a paintbrush holder. Penelope had done this by reinforcing the tube and waterproofing it with three coats of fire-engine red lacquer paint. She had made a bottom for it with heavy-duty card, cut into a circle and taped on before the painting process and the lid was from an old milk bottle. This ingenious container meant that Alice's

paintbrushes could be transported to and from school without the bristles becoming bent and damaged. Now, as she clicked the lid on, she wondered what had made this memory come to mind. She wondered why she felt a sudden chill run through her as her mother's face rose in her mind. She saw her classmates' pitying looks. They guessed she was in trouble and had to go and see the principal. She smiled bravely at her second favourite teacher. Mrs. Prince, a jolly, round divorcée with a warm, maternal face. She flashed Alice a sympathetic look and said, "I'm sure it's nothing. See you on Monday." But Alice was not to see Mrs. Prince on Monday.

Scampering down the stairs and hurrying for no reason she could fathom, she kicked herself for thinking earlier that, after Caitlyn's rejection, the day could not possibly get any worse. Alice generally knew better than to tempt fate. Waiting at the office entrance was her father. He was standing to attention, hands clasped before him as though at a funeral and Alice felt a rush of relief at seeing him and then a deep sense of foreboding that made her guts feel watery and gave her an urgent need to pee. Wordlessly he indicated she should follow him. He nodded curtly at the school secretary, who, from behind her glass partition, shot Alice an "I'm so sorry" look. Alice stared back blankly and gave her a perplexed smile. Then they were out in the sunshine, the car in sight, parked directly in front of the main gate. It was something that was strictly forbidden, save that one incident four years before when the Head Prefect had fallen – some said she was pushed – from the top of the Queen's stairs.

They drove in silence. Alice sat fidgeting in the front passenger seat. She wondered why her dad looked so strange. Wild, pale and unfamiliar. He wore an enigmatic expression. It was one she had never seen before. A strange tautness around the mouth, a greenish-white tinge to the edges of the nose and the muscles in his face pulled at odd angles, making his wrinkles run in new and disconcerting directions. Could he know? Had he found out? Alice's stomach lurched. When she eventually spoke, her voice sounded weak and small.

"Dad? What's going on?"

He remained silent, his mouth working furiously as though trying to chew up and swallow undesirable words that crowded his mouth and pushed at his lips from the inside, demanding an exit.

"We're going straight to the hospital."

"Hospital?"

Alice's mind raced. Oh, God! Not for one of those horrid examinations where they stuck things up you looking for clues. She wanted to tell him to turn the car around. She wanted to scream, I've showered a thousand times since then! There's no trace of him, I swear it! And I'd been drinking, so, I guess, I was a little out of it. Maybe he didn't hear me saying no? But she said nothing.

"Mom's been in an accident. It's very serious."

Alice waited for him to explain. She thought she had misheard him.

“Accident?”

She was beginning to resemble the unfortunate goddess, Echo, who was only capable of repeating the last fragment of another’s speech.

He nodded.

“Yes, baby. Mommy’s car was hit by a truck. It wasn’t her fault. It came through the lane divider from the other side. It would have come out of the bushes, as though from nowhere. Mom wouldn’t have seen it coming.”

He was fighting tears, blinking furiously and all of sudden Alice knew that this was no joke. It was no bad dream from which she would wake. This was real. It was happening right now and she was powerless to stop it. Alice felt that another key moment had just happened. Another bead for the Rosary of her life. She began to cry and all she could say was “No”. A keening, doubting, wishful sound, a single syllable of denial. No. But even as she crooned and keened her refusal, she knew the answer. Yes. Yes her mother had been crushed by a monstrous steel beast. Yes. Yes, her mother lay in a hospital. Yes. Yes, it was very serious. Yes. Was she going to die? Yes. Was she going to be OK? No. No. No.

“Stop it Alice! It’s OK. Just breathe.”

Her father had pulled over and was staring hard at her, rubbing her shoulders. Alice’s single word had turned into a wheeze as she battled to breathe, cry and refuse simultaneously.

“Where’s your pump?”

Silence.

“Alice. Your pump?”

Alice reached into her blazer pocket, as if in a dream, and withdrew the grey-blue canister. She struggled with the lid and then let her hands lie open and limp on her lap. Dennis took the pump, uncapped it, shook it more vigorously than Alice would ever be able to, and placed it in her mouth. As though woken by the contact of the plastic nozzle with her lips, Alice took hold of the pump and depressed the cool metal canister. FffffffT EeeeeeehhHHHH...

AAAAAAaaaaaaaH.

“Feel better?”

Alice nodded.

“Ok. We’ll get some water on the way.”

He stopped at an Engen garage and strode into the Quick shop. He came back with water, a sausage roll and a coke.

“Here. Eat this. And drink that.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You need the sugar for the shock. At least drink some of the coke.”

Alice obliged and felt less shaky when she’d had a few large gulps.

Her dad patted her shoulder, well aware that a hug would reduce them both to blubbering. He knew asking if she was all right would have a similar effect.

“Onwards,” he said briskly, as though where they were going and what they were about to confront was nothing serious. ‘No biggie’, he used to say when Alice was nervous before an exam, a swimming race at the gala or a speech competition. “No biggie. Knock ‘em dead, kiddo!”

No biggie.

Yes, big didn’t begin to cover it. Massive, Humungous, giant, huge, colossal. None of them sufficed. This was more than a ‘biggie’. It seemed insurmountable. It was not simply any old mountain. It was Everest.

They didn’t speak again the whole drive across town to St. Ignatius Hospital. Alice sat sipping her coke and Dennis drove more cautiously than usual.

“Alice? We’re here.”

The voice came through layers of cotton wool. Alice swam up through the dense white and burst into the noisy world. The loud whine in her ears vanished and she heard car horns and a siren, African Ibises calling across the hospital grounds to one another. Death birds, Alice’s black nanny had called them, chasing them from the roof of the house, if they ever dared to perch. She made ‘birds’ sound almost like ‘beds’. Death Birds. Death beds.

“Witches’ birds.” She’d mutter darkly and go out clanging the pots and waving a broom.

The building squatted against the hillside, heavy and ugly, a preponderance of

prefabricated concrete slabs. Grey and leaden, it was a suitably sombre housing for the dead and dying. Dennis hated hospitals. He had never regarded them as places of potential healing but rather as a waiting room for the morgue. There was plenty of parking. Most of the inmates were bedridden and car-less and visitors were few. Alice noted her father's grunt as he said, "Optimistic size, this parking lot." Whenever Dennis saw such a building, he always hissed, "1950's Apartheid architecture: Institutional and ugly but built to last a thousand years!" He always punctuated this indictment with a Gestapo-like salute, while placing his left forefinger under his nose to mimic a moustache. "Bloody Dutchmen! They ruined this country. Hitler sympathizers. Hating everything that wasn't white. Calling me an *uitlander* in my own bloody country." He would always look so tired and sad when he saw the glowering remnants of an old and ugly regime. But her father had never been a raving liberal. He simply knew with the morbid resignation of the deeply cynical that the new regime would move in quietly and inhabit, with no sense of irony, the buildings of the old. He had been right. Massive oil paintings of glowering pink-skinned ministers had soon made way for equally large beaming brown-skinned countenances. The old monsters of Apartheid had simply been taken down and stored in some forgotten basement of the houses of Parliament. Alice had heard this rant many times before, but now the sight of the grey hospital seemed not to excite him. Instead, he gripped her by the hand, as he had done when she was six, looked left and right and silently guided her across the road.

Inside, a lone flower arrangement stood bravely on the endless white counter that was the reception desk. Pigeon holes lined the back wall and a telephone was shrieking to be picked up like a wounded child. No one obliged. The reception area seemed deserted. Her father scanned the lobby for personnel, looking a little deflated. At that moment a breathless young woman in white and navy blue attire burst through the back door of the reception room and came to stand behind the counter. The phone had given up and died. She smiled vacantly, "Yes? Can I help you?"

Across the counter came the pungent stench of cigarette smoke. Alice remembered suddenly how her mother had always smiled when encouraged to quit by saying, "My darling, the day that the man telling me to kick the habit is not himself a dyed-in-the-wool smoker, I'll consider it! Almost everyone in the medical profession smokes! And they are surely the ones with all the information on the dangers of smoking. If they aren't

sufficiently worried to quit, why should I be?"

Her father was pulling her down a series of halls, each identical to the other. It was like a maze and she wondered how he was able to navigate its inner complexities. The nurse must have given him specific instructions. Her father was good at following specific instructions – a throwback to his years in the military. Soon he had stopped in front of a heavy fire-proof door. He examined the number '2B'. "This is it", he said quietly. Then he hunched down to look Alice in the eye. "Now remember, Alice, mom is gonna look pretty banged up. Her face is all bruised and puffy. You need to know that she won't look good."

Alice nodded, the lump pressed firmly against all sides of the back of her throat.

"Ok?"

Nod.

"Ok. Here we go," he said grimly. Suddenly Alice is on the edge, staring down at the deep water. She is six years old. Those were the words he had always used before they jumped into the deep end of the pool, his hand holding hers tightly. The instant of fear, an airborne moment, the explosion of dual impact. Split-second silence. Then the rush and bubble of dark water. His hand the only link to a return to life at the surface.

Here we go.

He pushed open the heavy painted door with the glass window in it and Alice felt as though she had jumped through the looking glass and didn't know what to expect next.

She approached the bed slowly. Something was asleep under the painfully white sheets. It didn't move. A breeze from the window lifted a wisp of hair from a mound of raw meat that must once have been a forehead. Alice shivered involuntarily and stopped.

Her father was behind her, his hand on her shoulder. "Go on, Alice. Go and sit in that chair by the bed. I'm here." He stepped back a few paces and pressed his back into the wall. He half shut his eyes and she saw his Adam's apple jump and slide, up and down like an elevator taking something from his neck to his oesophagus and back. He was breathing deeply, like yogis did to gain greater control over the body. Alice glanced back at the bed. She didn't want to go nearer but she felt compelled. She inched forward and slipped soundlessly into the chair, then stared fixedly at her own lap. She tried to raise her eyes but they seemed to roll back down at the attempt. She closed them and prayed for God to help

her, for God to let her mom be all right. She promised to do whatever was asked of her in future and vowed to tell her mom the whole ugly truth about Derek. She vowed that if He would only spare her mom, she would go to church and look for His signs all her life, on what was expected of her. All this she prayed in the small white square, like a sterile womb with both her antecedents present. Her mother's head like a red orb, the only splash of vibrant colour. Her sire and her dam there as witness.

Alice imagined all the hundreds of little white rooms with their precious cargo, and all the prayers rising up from them through the ceiling and out into the blue sky above the grey building. She imagined that all these prayers, all these needs silently expressed might form a wispy cloud above the hospital, might linger there like a halo of belief and need and need for belief until the impassive southeaster came to blow it all away. Did any of the prayers break free from this desperate cloud and get to the ear of God, way out there in the universe, his great head beneath a coronet of stars? Alice doubted it, but she needed to believe she was special and that her prayer would be answered where others had not.

She gazed down at her mother's hand on the sheet. It almost blended but for Penelope's bluish tinge. The nails looked strange, as if they belonged on someone else's hand. And cold. The purple half-moons of the nails like some strange new manicure fashion. Alice was appalled by her non-recognition of the one she loved. She fought it off by seizing her mother's hand and squeezing and rubbing the cool dry skin to warm it.

"You have to wake up. I have things I have to tell you," Alice was whispering in her mother's ear. She was close enough now, but she couldn't smell her mother's smell. She could smell blood and iodine and something sour. All her life Alice was to associate those scents with death. But now she was still stubbornly hopeful. She whispered, "Don't die. Wake up. I need to talk to you. Please, don't go."

A large matron with bulging muddy eyes and a sallow complexion ill-suited to her plump cherubic cheeks waded into the room, undulating from side to side like a heavy liner swaying in its berth at the dock. She said matter-of-factly, "Visiting hours is over. You'll have to come back tomorrow at three." Alice's father rose from the chair in the corner to protest but she gave him a look that told him to conserve his energy. Death, disease and

irrevocable damage were as mundane here as bills and meetings and project deadlines were in offices. There would be no special treatment.

The nurses could not discard their procedures; they were their sandbags for the storm. Too much grief flowed through these rooms and they would be swept away in the deluge if they did not cling on to the stone tablets of Hospital Policy. Nurses had to be immune. They had to vaccinate themselves daily against the contagion of grief and humanity. For sorrow would make them unable to do their work and then they would be of no use to their patients who needed them the most and who had to be their sole consideration.

Dennis placed his hands on Alice's shoulders and tugged her to him. He guided her away from the bed and out of the room. Alice allowed herself to be led.

Alice's father woke her in the middle of the night. It was completely dark outside and the room was cold. The moment his hand touched hers, Alice's eyes flicked open and she knew.

"I'm sorry Allie. I'm so sorry. Mommy's gone."

Penelope had never regained consciousness. The doctor who had examined her upon her arrival at noon the day before had known she would never wake. Her head injuries had been too severe. They had admitted her because she had arrived alive in the ambulance and hung on stubbornly, refusing to die, long enough for her husband to arrive, demanding to see her. They had patched her up as best they could and cleaned her face. Still, she must have been unrecognizable to him, her eyes swollen shut, her face purple and covered in red weals and abrasions. Dr. Ishmael had seen the shock on his face. He knew that it would not be long. This was a brief opportunity to say goodbye. He had raced to the bedside of a corpse. Yet still, she breathed and while she breathed he would hope. The aging physician tried to be kind while still telling the awful truth, but he knew that relatives so often ignore the careful euphemisms for death.

"Mr. Nichol, in all likelihood, your wife will not wake up. I'm terribly sorry. We did everything we could; let me assure you, but the head injuries were too severe."

"How long?"

“It’s hard to say. Could be hours. Possibly days.”

Dennis nodded, acknowledging that he’d heard, unable to speak.

“Do you have any children?” the doctor prodded gently.

He nodded.

“Daughter.” – It came out in a whisper.

“You might want to bring her to see her mother. Or not. The choice is yours, only, there’s not much time. You would have to make a decision very soon.”

“Yes.” He said. “I’ll let you know.”

“Of course.” The doctor stood for a moment, to avoid the appearance of callous haste. “Again, I’m very sorry.” He concluded their meeting.

He placed his large warm hand briefly on the shoulder of the distraught man and moved off swiftly down the corridor, the edges of his spotless white coat flapping in the back-draft his rapid movement created.

Dennis had needed time to think after seeing his wife in that hospital room, quiet as a crypt. He had stared at her in silence for a long time. Then he had asked her what had happened and why she had been on that road in the first place? But he thought he knew. He asked her what he was supposed to do now and what about Alice? But Penelope was far away now, further from him that she had ever been, floating like an embryo in a fluid-filled world at the edge of the universe. Penelope was gone. Dennis stared at her unrecognizable face, shrouded in gauze. Dressed for death already. In recent years, there had been a layer between them, a veil his wife wore over her eyes when she spoke through him. Conversation had become forced and strange. It had stalled like a carriage on a heavily rutted farm road. It had juddered to a stuttering silence. The halt had been almost imperceptible. They spoke through Alice, about Alice and with Alice but she was the keystone of their failed marital arch. Without her, it would crumble. All this Dennis now finally admitted, in his mind, as he spoke to her. Where have you gone, Penny? But the hardest truth was that she had been gone long before the accident. Suffocated by the silence and the one-way traffic of his internal monologue, Dennis had left abruptly, running from the building like a man possessed. Unwilling to collect Alice from school and tell her what had happened; he had crept, instead, to the scene of the accident.

The vehicles were still there. A few red scraps were all that remained of her little city

run-around. The truck looked like a mighty beast brought to ground by a double bore shotgun with immense cartridges. It was slumped, the top of the horse warped upwards like a heavy shoulder, its wheels and undercarriage buckled under it like collapsed limbs. Dennis pulled over and got out. He crossed the highway and found a gap in the oleander bush that divided the two-way traffic. Best to start at the beginning, he thought. Ever-logical, poor Dennis.

He walked more than 400 metres up the road before he found the point of origin. The deadly culprit still lay on the tarmac. Stupid cops. They couldn't secure a scene if their own lives depended on it and not only the citizens they claimed to serve. A large piece of twisted, ragged metal lay half crushed into the tarmac. It might once have been an exhaust box. Dennis, looking just beyond it, saw the beginnings of fate. The steel had ripped through the tyre. It had started to fray out rapidly and the truck was suddenly in big trouble. Speeding undoubtedly, the beast, now lame, careened from the right into the left lane, rear ending another delivery van which had been moving rapidly in the same direction and so sustained only a stoved-in back. It was being loaded onto a tow truck, its back axle buckled. Dennis paced the side of the road, grimly taking in the length of the break marks the truck had made, the rubber markings stretching sideways and blurred as it jack-knifed. Over-correcting was the driver's next error; the truck became in an instant a monstrous serpent. It snaked uncontrollably from side to side, covering the full width of the road and exited at the right, plunged like an enraged bull through the protesting bush and found its red flag; its small, fluttering victim. A head-on collision with a fire-engine red VW, which it had rolled into a ball, bent back double on itself and made to go in reverse. Steam-rolled. Dennis found himself at the end of the scratches and paint residue tracks laid by the two vehicles, staring blankly at the compacted mess before him. All twisted metal.

He couldn't bring himself to imagine her horror when her entire windscreen view would have been filled in a split second with rushing death. It would have happened so fast. She'd have had only moments to react. He knew she would have panicked and instinctively braked hard, locking up the wheels. How she'd have stiffened, straightened her arms, blindly, desperately steering the un-steerable car, its wheels locked in a fatal direction. An amateur's mistake. The force of impact running straight up her arms and cracking her spine. Death should have been instant. Thankfully at least unconsciousness would have been,

moments before the monstrous horse and its three-tonne load completed its trajectory straight through her petite car. The endless screech of metal, the slow groan as the wreckage, no longer distinguishable as two vehicles, ground to a halt, twisted into new forms. Steam and noxious fumes spilling and a last sparking burst the death-locked metal dancers into flames. It was the truck driver who had managed to extinguish the fire before it became a blaze. He was injured, but mobile. They'd needed the Jaws of Life to get her out. Derek regarded a section of the steel lane divider that lay rolled up neatly like a bale of hay and another section further on which was completely flattened. Its supporting poles bent horizontally to the ground, it now faced the sky, like a white paint marking on the road side.

A memory: Dennis and Penelope laughing in a car. Dennis is saying, "No, dear, release the clutch slowly." Penelope is revving and stalling and giggling. Dennis recalled then that he had got annoyed. Angry over such a silly thing. Eventually he had paid for her to have lessons, for their marriage's sake. She was a late learner in her early thirties but Dennis remembered how she had squealed like a small child, her face gleeful, when a week after she had passed her licence she had come home to find a shiny little second-hand VW wrapped in a massive white bow. It was cute as a button and red for high visibility (and as a warning to other drivers). She used to wave at people as she drove, singing loudly as she took corners in third gear, exclaiming, "Whoopsy Daisy!" Dennis had always had the suspicion that she had bewitched the traffic official who examined her and bribed him with her beauty and the charm with which she offered him Sparkles – fruit-flavoured, hard boiled sweets in transparent wrappings, which she kept always in the glove compartment. She loved the virulent green lime ones. Perhaps he passed her first time, because he knew that if on her next attempt she got his colleague, the staunch Afrikaner with tree-trunk ankles, Elise van Tonder, Penelope would never have passed. Dennis remembered how he would always worry when she was late. "Left, left and home", the path of least resistance, was her habit. Ever-cautious, respectful of the steel machine she drove – death traps she called them. She had never been a confident driver and yet she'd been ferrying their daughter and herself around safely for ten years. And now this. And the accident had not even been her fault. Bitter tears streamed down when a police officer told him to move along and said he could not be there. Dennis, mutely biting his left fist, pointed with his right hand to the red streak

beneath the dead truck.

“Your wife, sir?” The thickset officer with a sun-burnt neck shook his head and said, “*Jammer, Meneer*. Sorry. It’s a terrible thing.”

Dennis walked back to his Ford. His wristwatch read one-fifteen.

He knew where he had to go now.

...

Alice had stayed in her room all weekend. The silence in the house was punctuated by the phone’s shrill sound. Alice could hear it ringing but made no move to answer. Her father’s footsteps in the hall. Murmured conversations. The receiver being clicked back in the wall-mounted cradle. The creak of the banister beneath his hand as he gripped the end post and stared up the steps, contemplating whether to come up and knock. Deciding against it, the steps receded. Alice felt relieved that she would be left alone a while longer. She felt numb. She cried, but not a lot, and then her tears seemed to have evaporated. She lay staring at the paint on her wall, tracing the cracks, noticing stains and finger-marks. Monday came. Alice begged to be allowed to stay in bed. Dennis relented but told her it was to be only this one time. Tuesday came. Alice hid under the covers. This time her father insisted that things must remain as normal as possible. School was too important to miss. His clinching argument had been that Penelope would want her to go. Alice had dragged on her clothes, not bothering to wash but had given her teeth a furious assault, scrubbing till the gums bled. Tuesday passed without major incident. She refused to talk to anyone, though she had sensed a strange atmosphere. Girls who had been talking hushed as she passed. She felt eyes on her and heard laughter. It made no sense. No one knew her mother was dead. Not even Theresa. But the strangest moment of the day had been when Alice had been sitting alone, pretending to read a book, and Vivian had appeared, her eyes bright and had said with ill-concealed glee, “Alice! Where have you been? You’ve missed all the excitement!”

“What excitement?” Alice had mumbled, avoiding the penetrating stare of Vivian’s flashing turquoise eyes. She felt queasy. Could Venomous Vivian know about what had happened with Derek? Could she already know about her mother? “Well, you’re famous, darling! You really ought to check it out.” And with an unintelligible smile, Virulent Vivian

slipped away.

...

Alice felt her father's hands shaking her shoulders. She became aware of her small room, the pink curtains of childhood drawn tightly against the winter chill leaking through the window panes. His face was close to hers. His breath stale and sleepy on her face.

"Alice! It's all right now. It's OK. You're awake. It was a dream. Just a bad dream."

"How do you know it was a *bad* dream?"

"You were screaming."

"I'm sorry I woke you."

"Oh, Alice, baby. I'm sorry you're not sleeping well. I'll stay with you a while. You lie back now and try and get some rest."

As Alice drifted off, she knew that it was not just a bad dream. It was the reality. Her mother was dead in her dreams, but when she woke up, the nightmare continued.

...

"Like, what's up with you today?" drawled Suzie, chewing gum at what Alice's mom would call 'a rate of knots'. Nautical idioms were popular in Alice's home. What with dad being an ex-navy man. "Nothing." Susan-Rose stared accusingly at her friend's glum face and said, knowing it wasn't true, "Fine, Ally. If you wanna be miserable all bloody day, I don't care. But walking around with a face like a smacked arse isn't gonna change a thing, you know?" Sensitivity wasn't Susan-Rose's strong point. Well, that's not strictly true. She was, herself, very sensitive about matters concerning her own life. She had been known to rail for hours about the insensitivity of people, especially of her slightly older sister who took great joy in torturing her. But somehow she could not extend that to her approach to troubles in the lives of others. Not even her friends. Consequently, she was dumbfounded when Alice hissed back, "You can be such a bitch, sometimes!" and stalked off. Susan-Rose gasped, "Well!" and stood watching Alice's figure dwindle, blur around the edges, her frame highlighted with a golden aura, her head haloed by the early morning sun, which then

appeared to swallow her whole. She vanished into the blinding light.

Susan-Rose stomped her feet to try and get the circulation back in her toes, sitting cramped and damp in their heavy knee-length winter socks. She'd had no choice but to wear them because her sister Lindsey had laid claim to her last pair of stockings after she had laddered hers while rolling in the bush with Rodger the Dodger, so-called because of his evasion skills in most sports although Susan-Rose called Lindsey's boyfriend "Rodgy the Dodgy" due to his equal skill at avoiding uncomfortable questions. Questions often thrown at him by Lindsey and relating to rumours he was also sleeping with a girl from Union High. Susan-Rose secretly wished he was fucking someone else. Maybe his two-timing would have some desirable effects on her sister. She might have her over-inflated ego reduced and also finally ditch Dodgy Rodgy and stop behaving like a slut. Suzie doubted this second event would arise as Lindsey, if the graffiti scrawled on the backs of toilet doors in the bathrooms was to be believed, enjoyed sex far too much. Being such a nympho meant that even should she ditch Rodger she'd be sure to find an even bigger loser to shag and then her infamy would grow to new and more embarrassing proportions. Lindsey had what Alice's mother would have called a 'penchant' for arseholes. Nice guys need not apply. Stupid Lindsey, she thought. So what if Lindsey had gotten the svelte long legs? At least Susan-Rose kept hers together and had something between her ears. Lindsey usually only had someone between her legs, she thought bitterly. The cold wind now blew up her skirt and attacked her naked thighs, causing them to dampen and chafe together at the point they met, lower down than was ideal. They were disproportionate to the rest of her body, which was slim. She was known to mutter darkly, "Somewhere out in the world, there's a fat girl walking around with my thighs!" All the girls found this very humorous. Susan-Rose was often entertaining without meaning to be and her dark cynicism brightened many a boring break-time.

Susan-Rose blew out a plume of water vapour and pretended she was smoking, holding a pencil in lieu of a fag as she strolled across the quiet hockey field in the direction Alice had gone. She'd be late for assembly, but she didn't care. She was too cross at what Alice had called her. "Some friend!" she remarked wryly to the dew-covered winter grass. "If she's gonna be like that, I don't need her," she complained to the empty grandstand, slowly rusting itself out of a job. The grass and the grandstand said nothing, not wanting to get in

the middle of it. In the distance the final bell was jangling. Shit! Guess I'll hide in homeroom and hope no one misses me, she decided and skirted around the right side of the main building, ducking as she went passed the library's low windows and darting through the side door, left open on in the mornings by the janitor while he cleaned the nearby Art Room. She could hear him whistling softly and talking to himself in the store room as she slid, unseen, past the doorway and took the flight of stairs, two at a time, on her toes so as to be silent, swinging her arms exaggeratedly to maintain her balance. She peeped cautiously through the porthole on the door of her homeroom and was just about to enter when a voice behind her said, low and clear, "Yes, Ms. Susan-Rose Fletcher, and where do you think you're going?" When she unfroze and turned slowly, she found herself nose to nose with the formidable Ms Harper.

- *Oh, gees, Mzzzz. Harpy!* Her mind flashed an image of a ferocious winged hag, talons already latching onto her. This is going to go badly, she thought and acknowledged her mind's take on the situation with an unconscious nod.

"Well? Don't just stand there nodding like a mute. Answer me! Why are you not in assembly?"

A flash of brilliance. She lowered her eyes bashfully, purposefully bringing on a blush by remembering where she'd let Bryan Morris touch her at the last joint school disco, and said demurely,

"Uh, you see Ms. Harper, I've gotten my period today, unexpectedly, and I thought I'd left a spare tampon in my pencil case in my desk. I was just going to check and then go straight down to assembly."

Ms. Harper softened, fooled by Susan-Rose's rosy cheeks.

"Oh, well. Be quick about it then. You should have just gone to ask the secretary, she keeps such things, rather than sneaking around up here. Besides," her ire rose again, "don't you think a girl your age should be using sanitary towels, instead?"

"Yes, Miss." said Susan-Rose, feigning a respectful, thoughtful tone. "I'll ask my mother next time."

At this point it is worth noting that Susan-Rose's fine abilities to mimic exactly complex expressions and tones was to result in a very successful acting career six years later.

“Off you go, Susan-Rose. You’re late enough as it is.”

Jumping down the steps, two at a time, heels flat to maximize the sound, Susan-Rose sang, “Silly Cow! Silly Cow!” all the way to the hall. Once there, she slipped in through a side door and found an empty seat right at the row’s end next to Amy Carter. Susan-Rose beamed at her and whispered, “Can’t wait to get the hell out of here and on with my life!” “Shhhh”, came the prim command of Mary Cunningham, as she leant forward from her seat directly behind them to spray them with a fine mist of saliva. Amy made a clown’s face of disgust, her mouth slightly open and turned down sharply at both ends, chin taut, lower lip rolled onto it slightly. Susan-Rose pointed her right index finger to her open mouth in the universal sign for retching. They giggled: their casual friendship immediately firm. Susan-Rose was the kind of girl who always landed on her feet.

...

Theresa had been aware of a strange shift in things since Monday. It had been an odd week. First Alice had been absent. Alice was almost never sick and even when she was, unless it was dire, her mother bundled her up and sent her to school. This absence was more unsettling as it followed the intercom announcement which had summoned her to the office the previous Friday. Theresa had called three times over the weekend but on two occasions there had been no answer and when she did get through to Alice’s dad, he had sounded strange and said that Alice was sleeping and he would let her know Theresa had called. She had seen Alice slip into the hall just before assembly started, like a zombie, her eyes glazed. She had slumped in her chair and Theresa had been about to move closer when the music sounded and the teachers filed on to the stage. Alice seemed not to notice the strange sideways glances and sniggering of the girls around her. From a distance, it was noticeable. Theresa was confused. What were they laughing about, she wondered. Why were the girls directly next to her shifting away, raising their shoulders to form a wall, rolling their eyes in her direction and cupping their hands over their mouths to whisper in one another’s ears? It seemed to ripple like a strange current. Theresa watched the message pass down the line like a treacherous game of Broken Telephone. And it must be treacherous. Theresa could sense it. Alice seemed not to register their unfriendly behaviour

at all. She was picking at her nails and sniffing. Theresa experienced a growing sense of doom.

After the anthem had been sung, the bible reading concluded and notices read, Ms. Stone cleared her throat and said solemnly, "As your principal, it grieves me to announce some very sad news today. It has come to my attention that one of our own has experienced a grave loss over the weekend. Our prayers and heartfelt condolences go out to the Nichol family at this time. I was informed that Penelope Nichol passed away in the early hours of Saturday morning. She was the victim of a tragic car accident. Our thoughts and prayers are with her husband, Dennis Nichol, and, of course, our Alice. We ask that, as a school body, we pull together and offer our support and friendship to Alice at this trying time, that she might feel the sisterhood and fellowship of the Girls of the College. I ask you all to rise now and sing the hymn on page 96 of your hymnals: Abide with me."

Theresa shot Alice a panicked look. Alice was slumped in her chair, her eyes fixed on a distant point in the void she must have seen gaping before her. Theresa saw the shock wave ripple like the earlier rumour across the room. And, for the second time, Alice was the cause. Theresa saw a few of the nicer girls, who had been chilly, turn towards Alice, looks of pity and confusion on their faces. After assembly, some of the girls mumbled condolences but most could not look at her. Theresa found this disturbing. It was an odd reaction. She noted, also, that those less friendly to Alice as a rule threw her strange glances, their faces twisted with what looked to Alice's best friend like guilt and a kind of eager horror one sees on witnesses of mass destruction and death. Leaving the hall, Theresa overheard the whispers of a small group, huddled in the doorway.

"Someone should tell her."

"Are you crazy? Who'd want to tell her now? Her mother's dead, for Pete's sake!"

"God, it's awful. So glad I'm not her!"

It was then that Theresa knew her friend was in for what they called a "Double Whammy". Trouble was, Theresa did not know what to expect, and so how was she to help her friend cope?

It was later that day that things became devastatingly clear. Theresa had been sitting on the toilet, staring blankly at the wooden door scored with graffiti (most of it about Susan-Rose's sister) - a wad of unused toilet paper in hand. The flow of urine had waned to a

trickle when she heard the hinged double doors of the bathroom thump open. Two girls came in, their shoes scraping the concrete floor. Then one of them spoke in an urgent whisper.

“Quick, check that no one’s here.”

Theresa, sitting quietly in the cubicle, had been just about to finish up and rise. She paused, mid-wipe and, on instinct, lifted her feet well clear of the floor as a pair of shiny black lace-ups whipped past, their owner checking under the doors.

“It’s all clear!” the voice belonging to the mirror-like shoes hissed and the other girl let out a snort of laughter.

“Quick! Come look at this!”

“Oh my god!”

“Shocking, hey?”

“Who would have thought, Alice Nichol, brain of the school, a complete slut?”

“Well, they always say the goody-two-shoes have a secret life.”

“I know, but she just never seemed the type.”

“What *I* want to know is what possessed Derek to choose her!”

“You’re right. He could have any girl he wanted. Bizarre!”

More peals of malevolent laughter.

“Look at this one! Her thighs look massive! The voice squealed.”

More shrieks of laughter.

Theresa rose silently. Soundlessly she pulled up her panties and pantyhose in one movement. She smoothed her clothes. All the while her face grew hotter, until she was sure it would be scalding to the touch. Her hands were numb. Spots formed behind her vision, as the anger overwhelmed her. So, this was the dirty little secret! Derek had seduced sweet smitten Alice and then made her the laughing stock of the whole school by photographing her naked with his cell phone! His school, too, no doubt. She had a vision of locker rooms where boys, sweaty from gym class, fought over one another’s phones and swopped the pictures like baseball cards, trying to collect a full set. Yet, still she hesitated, frozen in the cubicle, her hands in tight fists by her sides.

“Have you seen the video?” The throaty voice inquired, hoarse with emotion.

“Video? There’s a video! Oooh, yes, please, I’d love to.”

At that, Theresa burst from the cubicle like a rodeo bull from the gate and stormed at the girls blindly, her nostrils flared, spittle on her lips, gibbering incoherently. They scattered, eyes wide with fear.

She took a deep breath and said coldly, "Give me the phone."

It was a voice of such menace that the girl meekly held out the Nokia.

"What are you doing?" hissed the larger girl and yanked her friend's arm back. "You can't have it. It's my phone," she continued, her voice uncharacteristically high and thin, unrecognizable from the full, husky voice of earlier.

"Give it to me, or else."

"Or else, what?" She croaked the last word.

Theresa took a step forward. She said nothing. Her eyes held those of the owner of the phone, who chose, in an instant of self preservation to slide the phone onto the sink counter and step away. Her friend joined her in a retreat to a safe distance while she called out with fake bravado,

"Fine! Look for yourself! But if you break it, you'll be in big trouble. My dad got me that phone!"

Theresa did not make any sign she had heard. She turned her back on the two and quietly examined the evidence. It was ugly. Then she put the phone down slowly and asked,

"Is there anything else I need to know about?"

The thin girl spoke quietly; her voice held hues of shame.

"There's a blog. He has a blog and she's in it."

Theresa released the phone and stalked past them. No one spoke. They stiffened as she drew level. She was away and down the passage when she heard their argument break.

"Why'd you tell her that?" The bigger girl was shouting; her voice now quite restored.

“**W**hat happened, Allie? You can tell me. You can tell me anything. Nothing you could ever say would make me not be your friend. Best buddies for life, remember?”

Theresa and Alice sat on the narrow single bed with the heavy imbuia headboard that had belonged to Theresa’s paternal grandmother. Alice cast her eyes around the tiny room. She took in the battered dresser, smothered in a heavy layer of white lacquer paint that obliterated any charm it might have had in its original state. Alice guessed from its shape that it was early Victorian and that under the now yellowed paint lay a heavy dark wood, possibly teak. At her feet was a moth-eaten Persian carpet, the colours dulled with dust and years of traffic, its once velvet texture scuffed to raggedness. The mesh burglar-proofing always reminded Alice of a chicken coop. It gave the room a small, caged atmosphere. Whenever she sat in this room she understood the meaning of feeling ‘cooped up’. Alice sat on the thin mattress, the springs pushing through to cause discomfort, the original coir underneath giving off the odour of a musty bird’s nest. She stared out at the patch of grey sky visible through the small window. It was a dusty, suffocating space. No wonder Theresa’s asthma was worse than hers, she concluded. Theresa tried so hard to keep it clean and neat but the collective age and exhaustion of all of her inherited belongings made the attempt in vain. The pale pink curtains hung limply like dead roseate birds: flamingos, Alice thought. The idea made her feel queasy. She imagined long bone-like beaks hidden in the tattered pink folds. Death in the plumage.

Every time she visited, Alice was always terrified Theresa’s mother, Mary, would come

home. She did not seem to like guests and was permanently exhausted. Apologizing incessantly and flapping around her mother, fussing, Theresa would become so sickeningly servile that Alice would want to scream. She found her behaviour degrading and at such times she would feel keenly her friend's discomfort and knew that she must guess her inner thoughts. Suddenly there would be distance between them and Alice would know that her friend wished for her to go. Alice's keen gaze made all the holes show up, like those in the kitchen curtains. Alice's deep grey eyes watching lit up the room under white light and showed up all the cracks. It was mutually unbearable. Alice could not stop seeing. Theresa could not stop knowing that she saw. Alice would give her friend a look of regret and apology but Theresa at these times would not look her in the eye but would let her out of the faded apartment without a word. Alice would look back to wave, as was their custom. But the door, on these occasions, would already be shut.

Alice came back from her reverie to find Theresa's concerned face centimetres from her own.

"Alice! You have to tell me what happened. I know something did. Alice, there is ugly gossip all over the school."

Alice rummaged in her satchel and pulled out her diary. She opened it and ripped a page from the dog-eared volume. Theresa took the proffered sheet.

Your lips on my skin – your wet lips on my pale skin. I don't know if I want this but it feels good, so good to have hands in my hair and eyes on my body and a pressing persistent finger in my navel. My navel which tingles all around while the rotations of your middle finger whip my innards to a whirlpool called desire. All of my nerve endings re-fire. Fire again. Why can you do this? Where is my disgust? Where is my restraint? My shame? Your golden skin with its strange signs and marks, etched in ink of a darker hue, is barely visible in the gloom. You are a boy I should not want. I twist and twirl your hair, loop-d-loop, into a short coiled snake – ready to strike – a round-about, a rollercoaster to a place where I will lose it all. You and me, heated and hot. You and I got to stop. And then you lied. Your soft lips on my back, your tongue in rolled pleasure on my buttocks, making circles with your head, making circles with your tongue, in the crease where bum meets thigh. I've never had anyone kiss me there! What a strange sensation! This is the most aroused I've ever been. And yet you lied. You said you'd

stop. Anytime I wanted. You aren't different. Why can't I have something beautiful? Why this poor excuse for love: lust. I am broken. I was rendered in that moment a sceptic. A victim. Your hands – large, supple, inquisitive – are the hands of a lover. Adoring, stroking, patiently impatient. Bent on service, intent on reward. I didn't want that. And you held me, you who were all hot and flustered and breathing in flurries like a frightened breeze, but you were the storm. You were the storm.

Theresa read slowly, her eyes never leaving the page, her face clouded and flushed. She finished and folded the sheet up carefully like one would a piece of paper destined for an envelope. Then she raised her dark eyes to look at Alice. Deep chestnut, they shimmered with unshed tears. The brown lashes were dampened to a darker intensity.

“It’s beautifully written. Does it say what I think it does?”

Alice was biting her lips in a vain attempt to stop the quivering and retain her composure.

“It wasn’t like he raped me. I was in his room, willingly. I was in his bed and we were making out and it got very hectic and I was enjoying him touching me but...I didn’t want to do that. It all happened so fast. He said we could stop at anytime but then, when I asked, he said it was too late, that he was too far gone, too worked up, you know? And he said it was almost over, anyway, just a bit more.”

Theresa was nodding gravely. She wanted Alice to feel heard but she did not know what to say to make her feel any better about the fact she had been penetrated without her consent. An act which, according to everything they had learned in guidance class, *was* rape.

“Who else have you told?”

“Caitlyn. It just came out.”

“What did she say?”

“She told me I was crazy for Derek and that it wasn’t rape.”

“I see.” Theresa’s jaw muscles bulged, distorting her delicate appearance.

“You didn’t tell your mom?”

“No. And now she’s dead, so I can’t. Ever.”

“Ok. Do you want to report it?”

“No! It’s my word against his and it would just be so awful! So humiliating and then

my dad would have to know and he'd be so ashamed."

"Ashamed of you? Of course he wouldn't!"

"You don't know my dad. He would think I was asking for it by being drunk and acting 'forward'. He'd be ashamed that I'd let Derek touch me at all like that. He'll think I'm dirty."

"He's your father. He loves you. He would get over his disappointment and be angry at Derek for what he did."

"Then everyone would know that I've been raped and then I'd just be pitied and I don't want to be seen as...as..."

"What?"

"Damaged goods."

"Derek deserves to answer for his behaviour!"

"It'll ruin his life. He'll hate me."

"Why do you care? Why do you care what his friends will think of him or that he will be shamed? He should feel ashamed! He should be publicly humiliated! Why should you be the only one to feel bad, when it wasn't even your fault?"

"No, you don't get it! I'll be the lying slut and he'll be the victim of some love-struck girl's over-active imagination. Besides, everyone knows that I'm mad about Derek. That I was his 'stalker', his love-sick puppy. They'll just say that he rejected me and that I'm doing this to get revenge!"

"Hell hath no fury..." Theresa's face fell. "I see what you mean. It doesn't make it right. He shouldn't get away with it!"

"But he's going to. Because 'shaming' him in public, Theresa, will shame me, too, and every humiliation he is made to go through, I will have to go through too. Probably even worse than he will!"

"There has to be something we can do."

"There isn't. Just like there isn't anything to be done about my mom being dead. Things without remedy should be without regard, right? Isn't that the advice of the Bard?"

Alice cocked her head and gave a brave smile. "So please can we talk about something else now?"

"I really wish we could, Allie."

A long pause.

“I’ve got some bad news.”

“You mean *more* bad news, surely Resa?”

“Yeah. Guess so.”

Alice saw Theresa’s lips moving but the words made no sense. She listened in shocked silence as her friend told her all that she had learnt that day from two strangers. She allowed herself to be led to the kitchen where an ancient PC sat on an ugly table with steel legs that left pock-marks on the floor. Together they found Derek’s blog and viewed the damage. *It never rains, but it pours!* – Penelope had an idiom for any occasion. At one point Alice became hysterical and paced the kitchen from end to end, biting her thumbs. Theresa had brought her back to her seat. “And the hits just keep on coming!” Alice said bitterly, completely re-defining the meaning of a popular radio jingle from the local station. Theresa, saying nothing, kept methodically saving all pertinent sections of the blog.

“You have to know what has been said. You need a record of this in case you decide to...” Theresa’s voice trailed off.

Alice looked back at her blankly.

“He shouldn’t get away with this, Alice. This has to be illegal. You can’t do this to someone. It’s slander. You could make a case for, um, you know, what’s that term for when someone says things about you that are damaging to your reputation?”

“Defamation of character.”

“That’s it.”

“Trouble is, I did sleep with him, so how has he defamed my character?”

“Derek had no right to take pictures without your consent and post them on the internet for a global audience of millions! Alice! You have to make him take them off.”

“What’s the point? They’ve been downloaded and saved and distributed over and over by now. And all of the people I know, not the unknown cyber-freaks somewhere out there” - Alice jerked her arm to indicate a world far from them – “but the people who know my name, my face, who knew me before...they have seen this already. The damage is done.”

“I can’t believe you’re just going to roll over and let him flaunt you like a conquest! This is not the girl I know.”

“Would the girl you know have gone to a guy’s room and got naked on the very first night? Maybe you don’t know me as well as you think you do.”

“I know you. I know that when it comes to Derek your usually great instincts and judgment are useless! It’s like he has you under a spell. Nothing you do around him says anything about who you really are. This behaviour was...”

“An anomaly?” Alice proffered.

“If that means out of the ordinary, then yes.”

Theresa burnt the offending material onto a CD and handed it to Alice with the firm instruction to keep it and to think about whether she should tell. Alice was horrified at Theresa’s suggestion that she see the principal and explain what had happened. Theresa was confident that Derek, as a member of the brother school, could get into big trouble and would be made to delete all the pictures or face expulsion. Alice thought that even if this were true she would be utterly humiliated to know she was being discussed in staff rooms in whispered, outraged tones. And the idea that her father would then have to know was unthinkable. Especially now. Especially when there was no Penelope to do the tricky parenting this situation would demand. The thought of his intense discomfort and horror froze her inside. He would be ashamed of her, Alice knew. And she feared that somewhere, deep in his brain, he would be thinking, “This is what happens when you behave like a loose woman.” The hint of ‘I told you so’, the whiff of reprobation, would be too much for Alice to handle. She took the disk and slipped it into her bag.

At that moment, the front door slammed. Alice’s and Theresa’s eyes met and flashed in unison to the clock – it was only 4PM. Theresa’s mothers, laden with shopping, tottered into the red and white kitchen. She shot them an exasperated look and deposited the bags onto the counter with unnecessary force, even as Theresa rushed to assist. She swatted her away with an impatient hand, “It’s done already, now, isn’t it? I could have used your help at the door. Or getting up the stairs”, she said meaningfully, as though Theresa should have been able to sense her mother had left work early and was in the street below, weighed down with shopping. Alice felt her indignation rise and Theresa’s rapid apology, head lowered, made Alice want to rush to her defence.

Instead she shut down the computer while Theresa meekly helped her mother unpack the groceries. “Leave it alone, Theresa. You have a guest to entertain. I’ll manage.” Mary’s

words made Alice cringe. It was time to go. Theresa's mom grumbled, "Damn lift's on the blink again. I had to climb all those stairs. *And* my head is killing me. I had to leave work early because the pain was so awful."

She collapsed into a chair to punctuate the point. While Theresa fussed and brought her sprawled mother her pain medication, Alice could not help but think, rather meanly, that if her pain had been so bad that she had needed to leave the office, why had she then gone shopping? Surely straight home and to bed would have been the most sensible? Theresa was perfectly capable of fixing something to eat. She seemed to Alice more capable of being the parent than her feeble mother. She knew how to cook, did most of the housework and tending lovingly to a woman who claimed to be plagued by migraines. Alice had noted that they came on abruptly, usually when Theresa had plans to go out or had any friends over. Theresa was often obliged, by guilt, to cancel at the last minute or ask her friends to leave. It made Alice resentful and she wished that Theresa was free to be a child and not to have to handle any adult concerns or responsibilities. But Alice knew that the due dates for bill payments were pencilled in Theresa's diary, after a trial attempt at not reminding her mother had resulted in a house without lights or hot water and a dead phone line. After that disaster, for which Theresa had naturally been blamed, she had uncomplainingly resumed the role and it was added to her quite extensive list of jobs. Alice was always so impressed by Theresa's capacity to get things done. Alice said goodbye to Mary Wilson, wished her a speedy recovery and went unacknowledged to the door. Once there, Theresa hugged her and Alice loved her fiercely when she whispered before closing the door, "I'm here if you need to talk about any of this. Anything at all, Al. I'm here."

...

Alice lay on her bed in the gathering dusk and cried solidly for an hour and a half. She could not get the tears to dry and once she had begun to weep it was as though her grief gathered momentum and the tears became unstoppable, unstaunchable. At some point her stomach began to cramp and she really wanted to stop crying to ease the pain but found that, much to her surprise and horror, she could not. She had never realized that when you ask someone to stop crying that person may in fact wish to but be unable. Alice had

always thought it was melodrama or self-indulgence. Yet still the tears rolled and the sobs racked her body in spasms like a strange new-age dance. She pulled the covers over her head, to hide her wet face from the silent, watching room. No one there but a collection of inanimate objects and yet still she felt ashamed. She hugged a pillow and buried her gaping, yawling mouth in it, till she thought she would choke, hoping to stifle the awful sounds it was emitting. Alice was filled with humiliation at the thought that someone might hear this cacophony of distress and come to ask if she was all right. The funny thing was, she thought, that it is precisely when you are really *not* all right that you dread people asking the question. It is in the direst of times that all humans seek solitude - Too embarrassed by the uncensored self that cannot feign or show restraint. They need to weep until exhaustion bids them stop. When she finally stopped her eyes were puffy and burning, red and chafed from their thorough soaking in brine. Her stomach hurt and all her muscles felt lame and achy, as though she had bad flu coming on. Alice was exhausted. Only then did the crying die away. The sobs subsided and she lay, sniffing and blowing her nose, eyes shut tight, until her nostrils cleared and she could breathe with her mouth closed. She dabbed at the spittle that had dribbled from her out-turned lips and open mouth. She wished she could sleep but she was too tired. She had crossed the threshold between a fatigue which sleep could remedy and a deep exhaustion which defeated sleep. Eventually she got up and rinsed her face which eased her burning eyes. She took two aspirin without water, sucking the tablets like lozenges and willed the throbbing to stop. Her headache was severe.

She made herself a cup of sweet milky tea. She left the bag bobbing in the cup like a miniature brown iceberg and slurped it all down, careful not to touch the bag with her nose. The tea was scalding hot and she drank it with her lips peeled back like a chimpanzee making a face, so as not to burn them. The trick was to swallow the liquid before it could scald your tongue. Tea dispatched, Alice cast around for something 'constructive' to do. Penelope had always railed against the dangers of idleness and 'wallowing' in self-pity and suggested that the remedy for discontent was to 'do something'. "Remember, Alice, when the greatest king that ever was discovered that his great love had betrayed him with his most trusted friend, he decided that activity was his best course of action. Idleness left too much time for his mind to dwell on his pain. And what's good enough for Arthur is good enough for us, not so?"

...

Alice stopped short in the street. "Shit!" The exclamation was louder than she had intended and a mother walking with her two small children, turned to glare at her. "That lady said a bad word!" The little boy gasped. Alice felt bad. It was amazing how to a small boy she was a lady already. All grown up. She gave an apologetic smile. "Forgot something important at home," she offered by way of an explanation but the woman just turned her back on her and hurried her children away as though Alice were something obscene or potentially dangerous. "Shit, shit, *shit!*" Alice repeated over and over again under her breath as she broke into a run. How could she have forgotten her History homework? Ms. Powell would be furious. Alice ran with the wild abandon usually reserved for attempting to board buses already en route, knowing even as one gallops that the attempt is in vain. Bus drivers delight in accelerating when they spot latecomers, faces creased in desperation in their side mirrors. Alice knew she could not possibly make it home and back to school before the first bell. So, no matter which way you sliced it, she was going to be in trouble. Her homeroom teacher was, however, the lesser of two evils, being susceptible to pity. She could be incited to sympathy if Alice could spin the story straight. Ms. Powell, on the other hand, was merciless. Appealing to her heart was like asking a cliff to move. Alice rounded the corner. Her home was in sight. As she turned to race up the driveway, she stopped short. Her father's car was there. Alice knew he should be at work already. Curious, but with the dread that these days accompanied her seeing anything out of the ordinary, Alice went through the back gate and entered through the side door. Her father was seated at the dining room table. His head was in his hands. He looked up startled as he saw Alice. Both of them framed the identical question at the identical moment. It boomed in unison through the quiet house, "What are you doing here?" Her father recovered quickly, "I'm the parent. I get to ask the questions."

"I left my history homework on my desk. Ms. Powell will kill me if I don't hand it in today. I ran back to get it but now I'm going to be late for school."

"Quickly. Go get your homework and I'll drive you. Then you won't be late."

"Thanks, dad." She mumbled and charged to her room.

Driving in the car, neither said a word. Alice had so many questions. Eventually she

braved asking him why he wasn't at work. Was he sick? Alice's father said he was not unwell but had taken 'a personal day' to get some of the funeral arrangements sorted out. Alice knew he was lying, but she had no way of knowing what it meant.

He dropped her at the gate nearest her homeroom. She kissed him and jumped out.

...

Alice, seated somewhat precariously on the window sill, tugged on the cigarette with eager lips. She inhaled deeply and held the smoke in for a moment before pursing her mouth and blowing it in a controlled jet out of the bathroom window. Theresa shook her head. She knew this was a bad idea. It was so for many reasons. Alice was asthmatic, making it a poor health choice. Alice was also in school uniform and on school property, even if it was the derelict changing rooms down on the old sports fields. Alice laughed at her concerned expression.

"Relax, Resa! No one ever comes here. Besides, after the fresh batch of bad news, I really don't care anymore."

"He must have his reasons. He wouldn't be doing it if he didn't need to. You really shouldn't have checked up on him."

"I didn't. I had Caitlyn call and ask to speak to him. They said he was on 'an extended leave of absence' and that they would have to forward her on to another consultant."

"So, your dad needs time to himself. He's just lost his wife. He's grieving, just like you, Ally. He probably needs to get himself together."

"That's fine, but why didn't he tell me? Why is he lying?"

"He probably wants you to think he's coping, that he's OK and can be the parent, you know."

Alice took a final drag and crushed the butt out on the windowsill. She dropped the cigarette out of the window and into the waiting hand of Mr. Barker, the caretaker. He looked balefully up at her. Paralysed, Alice stared back at him. "You'd better come with me, missy. You've got some explaining to do." His voice was gnarled like an old tree, knotted and raspy. Alice quivered. She tried to plead with him but he just shook his head and marched in the direction of the school. He deposited her and a protesting Theresa into

the care of the other school secretary. Painfully emaciated, with a beak for a nose and lips thin as razors, she gave them a censorious look as she rang through to the inner sanctum of the school head. Alice could hear the phone ringing in the inner office. Then it went deathly quiet. Alice could only catch a few words of the secretary's explanation, whispered into the receiver, her right hand encircling her tight mouth and the mouthpiece into a sphere of privacy. Mr. Barker. Smoking. Hockey fields. Nichol and Wilson. Once in the large comfortable office, Alice and Theresa were pointed to two chairs before her vast glossy desk. Alice quickly explained that Theresa had never smoked in her life and had only been listening to Alice's troubles, like a loyal friend. She begged Ms. Stone not to involve her in this as she was innocent of any wrong doing.

The principal had sat silent for some time and allowed them both to stew. Then she'd told Theresa that even being there constituted a breach of school rules. She went on to say that perhaps she should rethink the company she kept. Headstrong girls were to be avoided. However, if Theresa was sure she had learned her lesson, she would be granted a reprieve for this one time only. Alice looked at her terrified friend. She knew that the migraine-beset mother loomed large in her mind. Alice caught her eye and nodded imperceptibly. A miserable Theresa then thanked Ms. Stone. She was excused. Alice knew Ms. Stone had never liked her and was sure that the verbal whipping she had received from Penelope was still fresh in her mind. She had probably felt belittled and now considered it to be Alice's turn. Alice noted that she seemed to take an inordinate amount of pleasure in lecturing and bullying her for the next twenty minutes. She seemed to think that smoking a Styvesant was one step from a felony. Her thirst for revenge sated, Alice watched as she switched to feigned sympathy mode and imitated a stern but kind approach. Alice was told that while the school understood the stress caused by her recent loss, rules were rules. The headmistress went on to say that she had received reports that Alice's school work was slipping dramatically and how that news had worried her greatly. And now this. She took out an official sheet of letterhead paper and began to write. She sealed the letter in an envelope and gave it to Alice.

"This is to go home to your father. This incident will go on your permanent record. Any further breaches of school policy could result in expulsion."

She said she hoped that Alice understood the gravity of the situation. Alice did.

Alice kept the letter for two days, afraid to give it to her father.

...

It was on the third day that Alice arrived home to find her father holding the letter, standing in the lounge near the front door. He had been waiting for her. He wanted an explanation. Alice was incensed. "You went through my things!"

"You're damn right I did! I received a call this morning from your headmistress, wanting to know why she had not heard from me. She said she had been expecting a response to her letter. Imagine my surprise when I had no idea what she was talking about!"

He was shouting now, his face scarlet, the flesh around his nose pulled taut and white. The skin on his bald scalp seemed to shift making his ears move into a new position, lower and further back than before. This was his expression of pure rage. Alice felt weak. She needed to sit down but she was scared to move. Rooted to the spot, she stammered, "I didn't mean to get caught. The grounds man, Mr. Barker, appeared out of nowhere."

"You think I'm angry because you got caught?" he bellowed, the tone indicating that it was the wrong assumption on her part.

"But you know I smoke. Mom and I used to smoke together." Alice was perplexed.

"Well, mom's not here anymore!"

"You think that's slipped my attention?" Alice said bitterly. She thought he was going to strike her but instead he took a deep breath and said,

"Alice! There'll be no more smoking in this house or anywhere! Go to your room. And you will stay there until I decide you can come out!"

"Why did mom have to be the one who died?" She regretted the words immediately, but they could not be unsaid. Alice saw him recoil as though from a blow. The damage was irreversible and now the ugly words hung in the air like poison gas between them.

Alice said miserably, "It's just that nothing works here without her! You don't even have a job!"

"What are you talking about?"

"I called your office. They say you've requested an extended leave of absence."

"That's confidential information. They had no right..." his voice trailed off. "I know

it's hard for you to understand any of this. I just need some time to get myself together."

"By drinking in dingy pubs in the middle of the day?"

"You've been following me! How dare you! "

"No. It was a guess." Not strictly true, not quite a lie. Her father slumped at a counter in the gloom. The picture in her mind lost focus and faded.

Her disappointment pushed him into a chair. He looked down at his hands. Alice went on. "You're the only parent I have left! I have every right to know whether you're up to the task. And you're clearly not. So how can you lecture me about how I'm choosing to cope?"

"We're not talking about this anymore, Alice. You are grounded until further notice. You are to come straight home after school every day. All extra murals are cancelled. That's final. I'm very disappointed in you."

"Ditto." The reply came soft and clear into the charged silence. Then Alice ran to her room.

...

It was not as though Alice was trying to get into trouble, but these days every time she tried to think, she panicked. Every time she tried to do her schoolwork she suffered from unavoidable slumber. She simply could not stay awake. She began to fear that she had a type of narcolepsy. During anything work-related, especially during class time, her eyelids would fatten, her head would begin to nod, her tongue thicken, threatening to loll as her neck changed into a hot piece of bendy liquorice. She wasted all her energy worrying about Derek. She donated hours of her life to trying to understand what had gone wrong. She gave him all her attention, without thinking. She scolded herself. She said to herself, "I am a dumb fool. A dumb, dumb fool." It made her feel worse but it didn't stop her mind from wondering. Alice in "wonder-land", she thought bitterly, sensing instinctively that she would never fully understand what had happened that night.

My head is full of spider webs.

"Not all those who wander are lost" was what the quote said.

But what about those who always wonder? Are they lost?

It appeared that her mind had devised a queuing system for the collection of tragedies that had arrived one on top of the other. First her unrequited love for Derek, now his betrayal and the public disgrace of the pictures. Realizing her mother was not simply away but gone for good was going to take some time. Whenever she agonized over Derek, she could hear her mother's voice, clear as a bell: *One day you will have someone love you so deeply that he will even love the very things about yourself you despise: Your pale skin, your skew lower teeth, your knobbly, unusually long toes. Even the small ringlets, the shorter hairs around your forehead form, creating a halo of fuzz. You moan about these things but he will love them all!* Alice retorted to this inner voice, "So, the man of my dreams is going to be blind, then?" *Yes. Love-blind.* came her mother's airy reply.

Alice wished her mother was there with her during her confinement to her room.

Theresa did her best to try and cheer Alice up while she was grounded. Dennis had relented after a few days and let Theresa visit Alice at home. Theresa was bent on aiding Alice's recovery from Derek. She extended their adjective game to include 'Dreadful Derek' as she called him. He became her favourite victim. Alice was ashamed that after everything he had done, she was still unable to hate him. She could barely acknowledge the truth to herself, let alone admit to Theresa that one of the reasons why she could not expose Derek was that something in her did not want him to get into trouble, did not want him to hate her. She knew it was crazy to want to protect him after how he had treated her but she was scared and nothing could change that. Alice found that, during the adjective game, her mind would, like a traitor, be producing positive descriptors for the man Theresa called a monster. She confessed this self-sabotage to her closest friend.

"Your mind is treacherous, Alice! It will have you believing all kinds of nonsense. If you keep this up, you'll soon start to believe that he hasn't done anything wrong at all! I won't have it. I'm going to help you to exorcise Demonic Derek, I promise you."

Theresa had looked so determined that Alice smiled in spite of the gravity of her situation. Theresa formulated a plan of counter-action:

"I tell you what, you give me an adjective for Derek, something you think or used to think about him, and I'll match it! The one with the last word *has* the last word on the true

nature of Derek. Ok? I'll start. Dastardly Derek."

"Dreamy Derek."

"Degenerate Derek."

"Divine."

"Devilish."

There was a slight pause, Theresa seized the opportunity.

"Dubious, dirty, dangerous, dickhead! I win."

Alice was not sure if she was laughing through her tears or crying with laughter. She felt a rush of love for her friend and a profound gratitude to her for sticking around when everyone else, even Susan-Rose, had been avoiding her and acting aloof.

...

Alice found her father asleep in the late afternoon. The last of the days light was dancing on the wall above the couch where he lay, oblivious to the sun-spangled world. He was whimpering and shaking slightly as Alice had seen the dog do when it was dreaming. His eyes shivered in their sockets and Alice knew from Biology class that it was a sign of what Mrs. Holliday called REM sleep and it indicated dreaming. Alice stood over him and observed her sire, her source, the father that was half of the reason she was here. She looked down at him and thought how much like an overgrown infant he looked. How vulnerable. We are all children in dreams. No matter how capable in the sunlit world, we are reduced to whimpering halflings wandering through night's deep shadows, victims of our towering fears. Small and very afraid, we look for our mothers in the night. Seeing her father in this reduced state was unsettling. He looked so small suddenly, his face that of an infant, his brow troubled. Alice reached out and stroked his bald head. He woke with a start and she had said quickly, "It's me, dad." His look was of complete bewilderment and Alice had quickly looked away. She was scared then. Really scared. If he could not protect her, who could?

"You were having a bad dream. I'm making coffee. Do you want some?"

He scarcely nodded and though she brought him a cup, she knew it would remain untouched, quietly forming a milky film across its surface as it cooled.

Alice thought she knew what haunted his dreams. What stayed fixed in his mind, day and night? Alice knew because it was what she saw, time and again, in her frequent nightmares. The accident. Each time the same. Different yet the same. The same subject, different details, the same journey, different responses. The same result. Perhaps he relived it many times, too? Alice imagined she could see into his sweating head. Could sit, like someone in a darkened cinema and watch the internal movie flickering through his synapses. In it he is driving and he responds differently. Gears down, takes evasive action, goes wide and deliberately limp as the car clips the back of the trailer and flips onto its roof, rolls thirty metres or so down the road. The steel on tarmac sound like nails on a chalk board amplified a thousand-fold, setting the teeth of the horrified onlookers on edge. He awakens slung in his seatbelt, still rocking slightly like a man in a hammock in an upside-down world. Every time he looks over and every time she looks all right. Sometimes, briefly, she is completely unharmed and having freed themselves from the wreckage they sit on the roadside and laugh the hysterical, blustery laughter of sheer relief. The laugh of watery bowels and shimmering eyes. Of knees that jostle together uncontrollably. But always, always he wakes again, as if from a dream within a dream and looks over once more. And every time, every time before he wakes in an icy sweat, he sees she is dead, her angelic face unblemished, her slender lovely neck limp and useless as that of a dead swan.

...

Alice never mentioned the content of her nightmares. Her father never mentioned his. They were locked in silence and Alice had scarcely spoken to him since he had grounded her four days before. He found her reading in the lounge. He stood awkwardly watching her pretend to still be reading. He ventured into unknown waters.

“Alice. You and I have to work this out. We live in the same house. so we have to at least try and get along. And you have to learn to listen to me. I’m the parent, you’re the child.”

“Am I? Really? I’m not a kid anymore. You can’t just bully me into doing it your way. Like you bullied mom, like you bullied your younger brother and sister, you’ve been

bullying people all your life! I'll make you a deal, dad: I'll start behaving more like a 'child' when you start behaving more like a 'parent', not a tyrant."

"Why do you think I'm not being a parent?"

"Are you kidding? LOOK at this place! This isn't a home, it's a sty! And you treat me like a maid! But I'm at school and I can't do everything mom used to do, yet you haven't taken on any of her jobs. You forget to buy groceries. There's no food in this house. Look!"

And with that she flung open the fridge door, revealing a tired selection: half empty fish paste bottle, foil-wrapped half onion, milk and a wilted cabbage.

"You even forget basic things; like that I need tampons and pads! So much for a kid, you forget I'm menstruating."

Her father paled and looked embarrassed.

"Yes, I know you hate to think I'm a woman and that I might need to buy a new bra sometime this century! I haven't had pocket money since a week before mom died and now you've chosen not to get paid so there's no money for anything. You need to hire a maid. I can't be the maid and you can't just lie around in your own filth! Mom's not coming back to pick up after you anymore."

"That's enough, Alice. You'll speak to me with respect, do you hear me?"

"Respect? You don't show me any respect! You hit me, if I don't obey like a dog. You rifle through my things. I have no privacy. You don't even respect yourself and now, what about respecting mom? I heard you talking on the phone to her brother about cremation. Mom didn't want to be cremated! She wanted to be buried. Can't you get anything right?"

She burst into tears. Her face streamed with a flood of brine and snot.

"Alice, how can you know that mommy wanted burial?"

"Mom and I used to talk about all kinds of stuff."

"Well, your mother and I never saved money for that. We never planned for this. Alice, she wasn't meant to die at this age. You have to book and pay for many years to get a small patch of land in a graveyard. Are you sure that's what she said she wanted?"

Alice nodded.

"I want to be cremated. No lying around in a box as worm food."

"I'll remember that, when it's *your* turn." Alice said pointedly.

“She never mentioned anything about being buried to me.” Dennis blustered.

“Maybe that’s the problem. Did you ever ask? Did you ever really talk to mom about who she was and what she wanted? Or did you just assume her wishes would be in line with yours? Like you do with me?”

He was silent, digesting the information.

“I don’t know, Alice. Maybe I was as bad a husband as I have clearly been a father.”

The bitterness and grief in his voice cut through Alice’s own pain.

“I don’t mean to be cruel, dad. It’s just there seem to be too many lies everywhere.”

“OK. So, no more lies. No more lies between you and me. We’re a team, sweetheart. We’re only going to get through this if we are honest with each other and if we work together. If we fight with each other, then we really will be doing this alone and that’ll just be too hard. We’re going to talk more openly and often, I promise. I need your help, Allie. I need you to help me go through mom’s things and sort out the final arrangements for the funeral. I can’t do it without you. And I promise I’m going to show more of an interest in your hobbies, in what you really like and who you are. Deal?” He extended his hand.

“Deal.” She took it gingerly in hers and shook it softly at first. He pulled her to him and they hugged.

“I do love you, Alice. I do.”

He pulled away, blinking back tears and said,

“So, how was the play?”

“The play?”

“Yes! Macbeth! Your favourite Shakespeare. Why do you look so puzzled? It’s your set text for finals. You were off to see the afternoon show with your classmates last week, not so? What do they call an afternoon performance, again?”

“A matinée,” Alice said hoarsely.

“So?”

“I couldn’t go.”

“Why not?”

“You forgot to sign the permission form in my diary.”

“Oh, God! Alice. I *am* a bad father.”

And he started to cry. In between sobs he asked what she had done all day.

“I helped Mrs. Pritchard re-label the call numbers.”

“What?”

“She’s the school librarian. She spent the day explaining the Dewey Decimal System to me.”

Her father groaned.

“Ok, we’ll have to fix that.”

“How?”

“I’ll take you to see Macbeth. We’ll go to an evening show and dinner afterwards! How does that sound?”

“Really?”

“Yes! We’ll dress up for the theatre and everything.”

“But, dad, you hate plays!”

“Nonsense. I just haven’t seen a good one yet. I’m sure your Macbeth will cure me. Besides, I’m meant to be working on showing an interest in your interests, remember?”

“Do you mean it? We’re really going to go?”

“I promise.”

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“I feel you understand me better than anyone else”. One second. One click. That was all it had taken to open the file. All evidence of her mother as a two-dimensional character had vanished as the screen lit up with black on white proof of her hidden complexity. The idea of Penelope as a devoted wife and mother ran aground like a stricken ship on the single sharp-edged line. Why did her mother feel this way? And, more importantly, who was the man behind cyber-identity ‘GardenGuru’ who had known her mother so well? The world reeled and buzzed as the screen expanded into a million circles of vibrating, blinding light. Alice blinked rapidly to ease the burning sensation and gazed watery-eyed at a virtual reality that had just replaced her own.

A sharp rap at the door of the study. A voice – her father’s – exhausted and taut with anxiety, “Everything OK in there, buboes?” A knee-jerk reflex, an instantaneous click which minimized the screen. Worms curled and rolled in her abdomen. A feeling her mother would have described as ‘queasiness’, using, as she often did, words no one even knew the meanings to anymore. No. Everything was most certainly not OK. But the Truth would not let her speak its name. ‘GardenGuru’ had teleported into their home to disintegrate what was left of her family. Her father persisted.

“It’s late, pumpkin. I think it’s really important we get enough sleep.”

A pause.

“Keep things as normal as possible.”

Christ! As if regular sleep patterns and a routine could erase what had happened and make everything all right again.

“Sure dad. You’re right. I’ll be out in a minute. I’m just shutting down the computer.”

She heard him shuffle away down the passage. She could see him in her mind’s eye – stooped over, head down, dressing gown gaping open because he had once again mislaid the belt. Mom had always found it on her last rounds: tidying up and putting things back in what she called, ‘their proper place’. She would quietly loop the belt back onto the gown, found in a heap like a mole-hill on the bathroom floor where he had dumped it in the morning before his shower. Then she’d hang it up on the old heavy-duty brass hook (from back in the days they still made things to last – her father’s stern voice) on the inside of the door.

Dad would have to find his own belt from now on, Alice realized, as she depressed the switch on the rusty cream desk lamp, circa 1974, its switch shaped like the back of a “click-Bick” pen. As the PC’s screen dipped to darkness, Alice struck off the light by the door as if the switch was a face she had been compelled to slap. A face that looked, for a second, remarkably like her mother’s.

...

“Come on poppet! New day, rise and shine!” The door battered open as if it had yielded to a lengthy assault and the curtains were ripped apart to let in the early pinkish sunlight. The dawn revealed a mauve velvet-pile carpet, greyed with dust and covered with almost the entire contents of the fitted cupboards. What had seemed merely untidy in the dim light seemed catastrophic in the sunshine. Opening one bleary eye from beneath the safety of her blankets, Alice peered out at her father dashing around the room in a flurry of pointless activity. From her vantage point, it appeared all he had succeeded in doing was opening the two sets of curtains and almost copping it by tripping over her tog bag. In fairness her hockey stick was still protruding from it at a lethal angle, its curved bulldog head eager to grab hold of something.

A groan. Hers. “Not interested, dad!” He ripped the bedclothes off with a flourish, shouting, “Olé!” The duvet and sheet, briefly airborne, then settled in a heap by the overflowing laundry basket, lid balancing precariously on top of a load that extended well beyond the rim. Alice squinted up at the beaming face. As she looked at him, thoughts

flashed through her mind: A face of false mirth. Keeping up appearances. Putting on a brave face. "Stop, it, dad. I'm up, OK! I'm up!" Alice sloped through to the bright orange kitchen, the decorative copper pots still held a dull gleam. She wondered, briefly, who would polish them now. She rooted around in the cupboard and located the remains of the cornflakes, now stale. "I hate cornflakes" she muttered, confiding in Jake, the Jack Russell who'd pattered in with a rapid click-click of overly long toenails striking the tiles. "Great, Jake. You need to go to the vet to have those trimmed." Another thing mom usually handled.

And all of a sudden she was struck with a sense of utter doom. A dark void stretched before her. A space with nothing but the memory of her mother. A time filled with innumerable chores and her social life devoured by her and her father's mutual despair. She gagged and spat the mouthful directly into the bin. She went to wash her hands in the sink but stopped as she surveyed the scene: a cockroach bobbed upside down in the half-filled sink like a miniature capsized wooden boat, its legs like oars, sculling the surface of the scummy dishwater. She closed her eyes as she reached in and tugged free the slimy plug. Then she half-kicked Jake from out under her feet, where he was, as usual, waiting for a titbit or some affection, although the former was infinitely preferable.

Alice ran hot water and suds into the sink and was peering closely at something strange in the bottom of a pan on the draining board when her father came in and put the kettle on for tea. As her eyes focussed she realized that it was a congregation of fiercely black ants. A shiny, glossy mass, they seemed part of the black pan save a telltale shifting, a gentle synchronized wave of motion that rippled through the thousand individuals as though through a single body. They were stripping the remnants of the scrambled eggs from its surface. She shuddered in revulsion and dipped the pan beneath the foamy water: A mass murderer in an instant. And she didn't care. "Dad!" she wailed. "Could you not at least have soaked the pan? The whole kitchen will be overrun with ants within weeks if we carry on like this."

But she realized she was talking to herself. The return of pests to the kitchen was the least of her father's concerns.

He did not even register that she had spoken.

...

Fourteen-days passed between Penelope's death and her funeral. Alice's mother, in spite of all her modern inclinations, had been unable to shake off her childhood indoctrination and, being Catholic, had requested burial. Alice's conviction that her mother desired this had been confirmed when the dour executor of the will read out the details to the party of two. Alice glanced at her father. He opened his mouth as if to protest but said nothing. He sat; gaping like a dead fish, until the lawyer coughed pointedly and the 'Ahem' made him shut it.

After this Alice's father had been busy with the morbid task of coffin and gravesite 'shopping'. He had asked his daughter to accompany him and help him choose, needing, perhaps, a female's opinion. "Yea, that sounds like great fun!" she'd replied, voice dripping with sarcasm. She had expected he would get angry. That was his usual response to things. What she had not expected was the sad, low voice that said, "I just don't want to do it alone, Alice. I need it to be right and I don't know what to choose." The remorse hit her like a wall of hot air that waits outside prefab classrooms in the middle of African summers to suck the breath out of children as they exit on their way to break, leaving them winded. All she could mumble was, "Sure. I can help, I guess." But then she had had to run to her room, tears, hot and wet, scorching the backs of her eyes. More bad news was to follow.

Penelope, it would seem, had defaulted on the insurance payments. It was unbelievable to think she could have made such a mistake as she had always been so organised. Alice could tell her father wondered how such a thing could have slipped his wife's mind. Alice thought bitterly how it was probably all the endless shagging with GardenGuru that had addled Penelope's brain. After initially hiding behind the small print which declared the Volkswagen not covered at the time of the accident, the insurers had paid out a reduced amount they termed "compassionate compensation" and Dennis had been made to sign a waiver against any future claims for the same accident. The amount was so pitiful, that the value of the car that had proved to be her death-box was insufficient to afford her a wooden one. Alice could not believe the cost of coffins. But she knew the coffin was the least of her father's worries. It was the actual burial site, the small patch of church land where her

mother's body would lie that proved too costly and put paid to Penelope's final wish.

Alice feared that her father had always felt like a poor provider. While they had always had their needs met, there had never been enough money to go on holidays to other cities or buy luxury items. Whenever Penelope had expressed a wish to leave the sedate provincialism of their hometown behind and go somewhere exotic, Alice had seen her father's face crumple with sorrow at his inability to say, "Yes, lets! How does Greece sound?" He had once suggesting camping but, although Alice had jumped up and down excitedly, a single look from her mother had made the eager smile on her father's face wither. They had never gone. Alice was sure he thought his beautiful wife deserved a sultan.

It was true that Penelope had had countless suitors. She told Alice of the wealthy property developer and of a handsome Cypriot with a chain of department stores. There had even been an actual nobleman, an Earl, if memory served. Her eyes always sparkled when she told these stories. Her face always sobered when she said, "But I chose your dad." and there was a hint, just a hint of regret. Or had Alice imagined it? Dennis, his timing for arrival, as usual, unfortunate, had overheard the last few lines. "Yes, she could have married a king." he'd said without irony. "Hitched her lot to the wrong wagon," he had muttered, leaving the room, his head bowed. Alice knew he had loved Penelope too much not to claim her and, paging through the family albums, she saw their beaming faces and thought how hopes and happiness had run high in the blood until well after she was born. The smiles in more recent pictures seemed lack lustre. They no longer stood as close and her arms were no longer wrapped around him. Alice remembered that the few arguments they'd had in front of her, had always started over money and ending with her father shouting, "Nothing's ever good enough, is it, Pen?" and storming out. Inevitably crashes and banging would emanate from the workshop and Alice would be dispatched, in due course, with a plate of egg-salad sandwiches and a glass mug of icy beer.

At sixteen, and with her own part-time job, Alice now knew a bit more about rising costs and salaries that did not. She remembered the tension that had peaked three years before when her mother, without consulting anyone, had taken part-time employment. Alice knew now that it must have been an attempt to ease the financial strain of living on one income in a depressed economy with soaring inflation. But it had done little to reduce

the emotional tension in the house. Alice could see that her father felt betrayed. Her mother's job brought with it a whiff of recrimination. And now this. Alice watched her father tugging at the roots of what little hair still remained on his head. He had been unable to fulfil her desires when she was alive. Now, it seemed, even in death, she was to go unsatisfied.

Alice knew he simply could not afford to bury her. As he rubbed his head as though it ached, Alice wondered if in his mind a new substratum of poverty and lowliness had revealed itself: too poor to bury his own dead. She wondered if his thoughts turned ink-black and whether he secretly wished that he was the one lying in the morgue. Alice banished the thought as base and vile. Alice had known before he told her what the outcome had been. She knew he dreaded telling her but there was no choice. Penelope would be cremated. Preparing the body, hearse hire, the funeral service, cremation, urn and food for the reception would obliterate their measly savings. There was still the legal expenses of settling her estate to be paid. "Who knew dying could be so expensive," he had said bitterly, thinking out loud. Alice felt her face crumple when he confirmed what she knew in her heart already. Looking back at him, she realised too late that her distraught face had killed his last shred of pride. A daughter's disappointment was, perhaps, even more devastating than a spouse's. Desperate to reassure her, he had promised to return to work the next week. He had promised to get them back on their feet. But Alice, though she tried, could say nothing.

...

Alice sat in the front pew. She could feel hundreds of eyes fixed on her. Her head felt as if it might burst into flames and explode under all the scrutiny. She was sure she could smell her hair starting to smoulder and imagined she saw a fine thread of grey smoke wind around her neck before wafting away like a serpent that had lost interest in its quarry. And the hushed whispers, the well-meaning tut-tuts, the half-finished sentences sliced into her brain: "So young. Poor Dennis. A terrible time, yes. A good woman."

Good woman? Presumably they meant her mother. And then the interminable eulogy done by a priest who hadn't glimpsed Penelope in his church in more than twenty years

(not counting the one time Alice had persuaded her mother to take her to evening mass, when, aged fourteen, she had decided she was in crisis and felt the pull of needing a faith). Alice's mother wasn't simply an absentee Catholic, lapsed, they call it, like a membership one fails to renew but still has the card for. She was much further down the road than lapsed. Alice thought of her mother with her meditation classes and Buddhist readings. Her strange greeting of "Namaste!" which meant 'I greet the Divine in you.' and how she loved to exclaim, "Jai Gura Dev!" which meant, 'Victory to the Great Mind'. Every time she said it she would laugh the throaty chuckle that meant she was truly amused, and say, "Here's to that! Here's to rising above all the small-mindedness of people!" Alice had always known that the town they lived in was far too provincial for her mother. Now, she had to quash a smile that threatened to break over her face like a wave on a rock, as she imagined she heard her mother whisper in her ear, in response to the adulation being heaped upon her memory, *Gracious. such apotheosis! If I'd known I'd be this popular I'd have died ages ago!* Again, Alice could hear the echo of laughter in the words, like one hears the distant sea in a dry shell.

Alice thought how the last thing she had said to her mother was very unoriginal: "Don't die, please don't die." She did anyway. At the funeral, all she could think of was how the food she had eaten earlier was upsetting her stomach and as she sat there, her gut in spasms and sweat breaking in small beads along her forehead, the nausea coming in waves, it was then that it had occurred to her that had Penelope been there, sitting warm and soft in the seat beside her, Alice could have whispered her dilemma and her mother would undoubtedly have had a capsule in that oversized bag of hers to solve the problem. Coupled with one of her sympathetic looks it would have been a considerable comfort. Penelope's absence in that moment, in the cool stone church, remained, always, one of Alice's most painful memories. She would always recall how her sense of overwhelming loss in that moment had knifed through her like a cramp.

Alice wondered if it was wrong to curse her mother when she was scarcely cold. And whatever had happened to the sanity and sanctity of a burial ground; a place to tend, to visit, to place one's sorrows upon? These days burial was difficult; space was needed for the living and overcrowded cemeteries were unable to expand. Yet God, if He existed, had singled out the one soul Alice believed to be deserving of a resting place, or perhaps

that was precisely His reasoning, only he found her deserving of a different place. The same observation with an alternate conclusion. Alice felt abandoned. There would be no burial ground. She knew that a few hours later her father would be handed a tin, urn they call it, containing what little remained of her mother. Alice felt like that urn, full of ash and consummately grey. She pondered whether if she did as people in biblical times: rent her garments and smeared her face with ash as a sign of her grief, with Penelope's ash, would it be as if her mother touched her one last time? Then, Alice imagined, she would stand ashen in its fullest meaning. She had hoped there would be something else to say besides 'goodbye'. Something better, or grander even, but it would seem that as humans, goodbye is all we have.

Where did all these people come from, Alice thought. Penelope's day-to-day life had included her family and one or two close friends, yet there were dozens of people here, gorging themselves on food bought with the precious little money her dad had left. Alice had never seen most of these people in her life before. Yet here they were, like vultures eager for a free meal. A rapt audience for the spectacle of her strong father crumbling into unmanly tears. They examined Penelope's only daughter beneath a microscope, searching for her mother's beauty, seeking adequate amounts of grief to prove devotion. Alice's heart rebelled. If they wanted a spectacle they could have one. She scanned the crowd and selected from the sea of unfamiliar male faces, a handsome man with grey streaks through his dark hair. She approached him and called out brazenly, "Hello, 'GardenGuru'!" For just a split second she thought she had him but then she registered his blank confusion become concern. She retreated and made inquiries. It turned out he was only the husband of an old school friend of Penelope's.

As the day dragged on Alice leaned against a wall, observing the room. God, many of them haven't even *seen* my mother in years, let alone had a conversation! She fumed, glaring at a sadly smiling lady, face creased like a bleached prune, who was trying to push a plate of savoury snacks into her left hand and a precariously bobbing cup and saucer, brimming with milky tea, into her right. Alice clenched both hands into fists. The tea slopped into the saucer. The lady peered up at her and said, "You must---" A pause. "You should. Eat something. You'll feel better," as if food were a potent medicine, a Catholicon that could resurrect her mother, lying shattered in a box somewhere. She pushed past her

and dived out of the nearest opening – it happened to be a large window, which opened on outward swinging hinges like a door. She landed with a scrunch into some shrubbery, crushing the plants, releasing the pungent pleasant odour of green things bleeding. Crushed leaves and stalks and damp sticky soil clung to her shoes. But it was quiet in that flower bed. The chatter of the people died away to a hum of distant bees.

She crouched down, balancing expertly on her haunches, and was then hidden from view by the bushes that filled the bed. Only someone looking at an angle out of the window from inside would have been able to catch a glimpse of her. Luckily for Alice, they were all too busy comforting one another and her father to do that. She felt a momentary pang of guilt at leaving her father alone in there to endure all the comfort without her. The arm squeezes, the grave back pats and the “I’m so sorry” gazes. However, Alice felt she had endured enough. She had been the victim of countless inappropriate slobbery kisses and head strokes today. For God’s sake, she was almost seventeen! She wasn’t a little girl! Why? Why do strangers think they have the right to touch you, simply because they know your mother? Knew your mother.

They didn’t know her at all. Where were they when she got so lonely that she used the internet to reach out for affection and company? All these thoughts rolled round as Alice remembered how her mother’s group of friend’s had dwindled steadily over the years, due to disease, death and disagreement, although since 1994 the biggest cause had been emigration. Australia, New Zealand, the UK. Never to be seen again. Especially those who had been swallowed by the immensity of the largest continental island in the world. Those who had ended up Down Under seemed unable to crawl back Up Over to find old friends. Yet the church had been bursting with faces from Alice’s childhood, all teary-eyed and serious as though they’d lost something essential to their happiness. “What a joke! What a lie!” Alice wanted to scream the words out loud. It was no wonder she could still hear her mother laughing at them and calling her an atrabilious little creature. Penelope and her big words. Alice wondered how many of those gathered would still be speaking in superlatives and gushing about her mother as though she were a saint if they knew what Alice knew. The dark truth of her mother’s infidelity.

Half of these well-meaning guests didn’t even know that ten months earlier at the hospital Alice and her father had had to wait, breathless, while strange dye flowed up

through her mother's veins. Up from the seat of her, up to the heart of her, sliding slick and silent on a detective's mission to find the enemy, "Arterial Plaque" - a mean character, with a surly expression that matched his disposition. The dye aimed to sound out his location in virulent colour code. But it found nothing. The angiogram revealed she was fine; paranoia and anxiety mimicking real biological distress. Alice thought bitterly how perhaps it had been the stress of the affair that had caused her mom's collapse. She felt resentment and anger burst out of her as she remembered those long, terrified hours, waiting in a cheap diner, one of a popular chain that was decked out in bright primary colours, in keeping with their 'fun' family-friendly business ethos.

Seated in a corner booth, her sweaty legs sticking to the red faux leather plastic that covered the puffy bench seat, Alice had stared at her father's usually ruddy face turn chalky and strange, the lines on his brow and around his eyes somehow more pronounced than usual, etched deep into his face, as if they had been chipped out of his granite countenance with a chisel. Alice was struck with a fear that made the sound of the last chord on a piano. The low sound reverberated for a long time. She knew it was what her mother would call 'dread'.

Her father, for the first time, seemed to her old. Old and frail, somehow. His large hands lay on the shiny melamine tabletop like heavy workman's gloves with no hands in them. Inert and inanimate, incapable of movement. Her father seemed like a statue. Like a massive carved puppet, dropped into that booth seat by a puppeteer who had then lost interest and let go of the strings. Alice had been terrified. She had ordered for them both and sat folding her napkin into fans and concertina shapes in an effort to keep from looking into his vacant, drained face.

She had kept her hands busy till the waitress returned with the coffee and startled her father by unceremoniously dumping the tray down onto the table with a bang and a clatter of cups and milk jugs as she unpacked the load. Her father didn't even muster a glare. He barely registered the steaming mug that had been placed before him and it was Alice who had had to place the sugar sachets into his hand, pressing them into the palm firmly, before his fingers closed around them and he began to tear the top off one and pour it into his drink. He gazed transfixed at the falling granules and repeated the process with all three sachets (her father usually only took one teaspoon's worth in any hot beverage). He stirred

for an age till the sound of the spoon dragging on the bottom of the mug felt like a stone scouring her bones. Before she could stop it, a hand, hers, darted out and covered his stirring hand, arresting its motion. "It's done, dad. It's going to be OK. Everything is going to be fine, you'll see."

But, hearing her high, cracked voice she didn't believe herself, either. It was a wish more than a statement of fact. When the bill arrived, her father woke, briefly, from his torpor and reached into his back pocket, searching for his wallet but his child said, "I've got it. I got paid on Saturday." She needed to help, was desperate to do something practical and so glad, that, for once, her purse held a few notes. Alice was inordinately proud in that moment. She felt really grown up. Her part-time work at the library had afforded her this adult moment of 'picking up the tab' as her father called it. He seemed to read her mind, because he said, "You're such a big girl now, buying your daddy breakfast." but he sounded wretched and saddened by this idea of his child as grown and it squashed Alice's pride and replaced it with regret, smooth and cold as a river pebble.

And then it had turned out to be a false alarm.

They had left their barely-eaten breakfasts and trudged back out of the shopping centre and across the road to the hospital, their steps quickening with anxiety as they sighted the imposing hospital building. They were almost at a jog by the time they reached the huge rotating door that rolled them rapidly round and spilled them, like Jonah from the whale, into the cool, quiet foyer. They strode past reception and into a waiting lift. They did not speak. Not a word on the whole ride up nor on the long walk down a cream corridor and up an angled walkway that became a bridged passage, linking two separate buildings at great height. Alice paused briefly to look out of the window, down to the car park far below. The cars looked exactly like the toy metal ones she and her playmate Ryan had owned when they were kids. The doctor met the pair in the waiting area, all smiles; his face beaming and benevolent like a kind god that has decided to offer an undeserved reprieve to a mortal he's developed a soft spot for. "Well, Mr. Nichol, that's an all-clear on the arteries. Your beautiful wife is resting in the recovery room." Dr. Handel boomed. The relief that flooded her father's face rendered him, once more, recognizable to his daughter. He was ruddy. He was strong. He stood straight, shoulders back, and towered over the diminutive doctor. "So, she's all right, doctor? There's nothing wrong with her heart?" he asked in a

firm, even tone.

“Mr. Nichol, in the twenty seven years that I’ve been doing this, I have never seen such spotless arteries. I expect that you can take her home tomorrow. Now go get some sleep. Come back and see me in the morning. We’ll do a final check then and I’ll sign her release papers.”

And then when her mother did come home nothing changed. Dennis now simply added her hospitalization to his list of guilt-based instructions, issued to his sole offspring from the couch, beer in hand, “Now, don’t be difficult, Alice! Go and help your mother. Remember what happens when she gets too anxious?”

And now she was really gone. And it all fell to him. She would no longer be there to pick up the things he dropped, straighten the things he skewed, clean the things he dirtied, and wash the things he wore. ‘Reality check’ didn’t even begin to describe it, Alice decided. She saw that he was stunned to the point of paralysis. He simply froze for large portions of the day, standing stiff-legged like a wild thing facing fluorescent lights. On the porch he often stood for hours, staring, eyes locked on the white sunlight reflecting off the ocean in the mid-distance. What he thought about Alice longed to know, but he was locked in his own world and she was too afraid to knock.

...

The blow caught Vivian squarely on her left cheekbone. It was a clenched fist and not an open hand. A left jab to the solar plexus, delivered boxer-style from the shoulder, sent her to the ground. Vivian keeled over, felled like a lanky pine. Alice was on her in an instant, raining down blows in a blur of violent repetition, screaming “Bitch! Bitch!” Vivian, too, was screaming and attempting to shield her face with both arms as she flailed around on her back, pinned helpless like an insect by the full weight of her furious assailant. The whole group had fallen silent moments before when Vivian had revealed she knew about Penelope’s affair and delivered her dual insult. “Well, I don’t know why everyone feels so sorry for you, Alice. I’ve heard all about your troubles and really it is all rather shocking: mother and daughter! Maybe being a slut is genetic?”

The momentary hush had been broken by the quick forward step and the heavy thud as knuckle met bone. It was moments before anyone moved to break up the pair at all. Then Theresa was at Alice's back, tugging at her shoulders and shouting, "Enough, Alice! Enough! You'll kill her!"

Suddenly Miss Ball pushed through the clutch of white-faced girls and yanked Alice upright in a single jerk. Alice went limp but then broke free, her renewed fury lending her abnormal strength, and slapped the rising foe hard across the cheek.

"*That's* for Melinda." Alice panted. Breathing hard, her hair a halo of fuzz like a mane, she looked for all the world like an enraged lion. "You are anthropophagic! You feed on people, Vivian: you eat their misery! Vampiric Vivian!" Alice's face ran with tears.

"Alice Nichol, that's quite enough!" The Phys Ed teacher roared, seizing hold of her by the scruff of her neck. Her shoulders heaved and she shrugged Miss Ball off.

"I'm OK. I'm coming with you now." Alice's voice was calm as she pulled herself up from the waist to her full height and pushed her shoulders back.

Into the stunned silence Vivian's sobs fell like whip cracks. Miss Ball seized Alice in a shackle-like grip and said, "Come along. You, too, Vivian. Let's go. You both have some explaining to do." Amanda dusted the grass off Vivian's back and handed her a tissue. Susan-Rose ran her hands through Vivian's dishevelled hair and re-did her pony-tail. Theresa gave Alice a look that said: you're off to the gallows, friend, as she sighed and bit her lower lip. No one said anything. *She's gone and done it now.* Alice could hear Theresa's unspoken thought as though she had uttered it. Susan-Rose took Vivian by the hand and trotted alongside her as the group headed for the principal's office. Alice marched like a soldier; chin tilted upwards in defiance, her cheeks still flushed, silently alongside the teacher, who held her arm in a vice-like grip, spilling a rant that fell on deaf ears.

...

Both sets of parents had been called and asked to come in immediately. Vivian sat, her face beginning to swell, blowing her nose and sniffing. She cast wide-eyed looks at Alice as though she could still not believe what had happened. The thin-lipped secretary came in with an ice-pack which she applied to Vivian's face solicitously, speaking consolingly, as

she shot Alice venomous looks. Alice averted her eyes. She felt a stab of guilt when she saw Vivian's beautiful face all scratched and puffy. Vivian's face was sullen. Alice still felt remnants of rage but these were mingled with apprehension and fear as the gravity of the situation sank in. Her actions were serious. There was no doubt. She was in grave trouble. The secretary continued to keep a watchful eye as though Alice might, again, like some crazed beast, attempt to harm poor Vivian and when Alice caught her eye, she saw a look of stern disapproval. Alice could smell the floor polish and that cold institutional odour that one finds in all large buildings. Somewhere, the smooth blue corridors were being mopped with a bleach solution. The dark wooden panels on the Queen's staircase were being dusted. In her mind's eye, Alice could see the stained glass window which reproduced a kaleidoscope effect on the stairs. She studied the shapes and colours as she had done on many afternoons, waiting for extra-murals to start. It helped to focus her mind and keep it off the watery feeling in her bowels. Her hands were clammy and all around her brain was a layer of scratchy cotton wool that made sound filter through to her as though from far away. There was a high whining sound in her ears.

The swing doors burst open and a beautiful woman stalked in wearing lethal stilettos, her scarlet lips pursed, brunette curls bouncing. She glared at Alice with flashing almond eyes. Vivian's mother was furious. She sat down with a thump beside her daughter and said loudly, looking at the secretary, "I don't see why I need to be here? Called away from a very important meeting with a client, and for what? If some girl has attacked my child, the headmistress should simply expel her and be done with it. Why do *we* need to be here?" The secretary nodded in agreement but shrugged to say it wasn't up to her. The irate mother crossed and un-crossed her elegant legs but made no attempt to console her child or examine her face to assess the damage. She seemed to forget Vivian was seated beside her. After a few minutes she gave Vivian's arm a perfunctory pat and said "Stop that snivelling, now. It's bad enough I've had to come down here." It was then that Alice felt a pang of regret and sympathy for Vivian. Clearly her behaviour had been learnt at the knee of her mother. How could she have turned out any different, with that as her primary example?

Dennis strode into the silent waiting room. He nodded grimly at the secretary and at Vivian's mother, and then sat next to Alice. Alice saw the almond eyes widen. Vivian's mother silently appraised Dennis and found him interesting. She smiled. "I'm Cynthia

Sharpe” she announced. Alice thought she said her name like a snake might if it could speak. Dennis rose and shook the daintily proffered hand. Seconds later she threw her head back to laugh falsely and croon, “Kids, hey! Always some drama or other”. Dennis smiled back, grateful for the respite. Alice watched Cynthia fawn over her newly-widowed father and wanted to grab hold of him and run to safety. Cynthia, sensing success, came over and sat next to Alice on the bench. She cooed, “Well, I *was* going to insist on expulsion, but seeing as how Alice has just suffered such a terrible loss, I’m sure the principal can be persuaded to be lenient. She might just need some counselling.” Mrs. Sharpe twirled a glossy curl around an index finger armed with a scarlet talon. She turned and bared her teeth at Alice as if she were about to bite. It was supposed to be a forgiving smile.

“Ma!” Vivian objected, feeling betrayed.

“Show some understanding, Vivian. After all, you still have your mother.” More’s the pity, Alice thought Vivian must surely be thinking, but all her nemesis did was sit meekly in her seat, head down, picking at her nails. Alice was amazed. She’d never seen Vivian so ruthlessly silenced. She expected to feel elated. She didn’t.

“There, there,” Mrs. Sharpe was saying coolly through her grimace as she patted Alice’s arm with a clawed hand. Alice suppressed a shudder at the unwelcome contact. The well-preserved beauty of Mrs. Sharpe was a little too tight around the ears. She looked reptilian. Her smile was frozen in place. Alice’s father stooped to re-tie his shoelace. The smile fell off, as though the glue had failed. The secretary called Cynthia and Vivian in. They watched Vivian slink after her formidable mother and the door to Ms. Stone’s office shut with a heavy finality.

They sat quietly on the hard bench seat, neither of them saying a word.

“What happened, Alice? I can’t believe you struck someone. Whatever for?”

“She was being mean and saying really cruel things.”

“What things?”

“I can’t say.”

Dennis lost his cool. He grabbed her elbow. His whispered insistence that she had better tell him everything made Alice feel that she would pee in her pants. Her guts turned to water and she began to shake. She was white, her lips a deep purple as though very cold. A sudden chill through her aggravated the shivering. She folded into herself, dropping her

ribcage down to her pelvis. Shoulders hunched and tears rolled as she sucked short gasps of air. She was a picture of abject misery. But still she did not answer.

“I’m so ashamed.”

Her father’s words filled her with regret and anger that she could not explain her reasons without breaking his heart. Alice feared his anger but not as much as his grief.

...

“While we understand that Alice has been through a hard time recently, Mr. Nichol, we cannot allow this kind of behaviour. I spoke to Vivian’s mother, Mrs. Sharpe, on the phone sometime earlier and she was calling for the most stringent measures. I have now spoken to her in my office and have succeeded in calming her down.”

Alice knew that Ms. Stone had nothing to do with Mrs. Sharpe’s abrupt change of heart.

“I appreciate your efforts, Ms. Stone. I am...we are terribly sorry for what happened today.” Her father had looked pointedly at Alice when choosing the plural and now added, “Aren’t we, Alice?” He was angry. Alice felt helpless. There was no point in arguing. “Yes,” she mumbled with her head down.

“Mrs. Sharpe was calling for your daughter’s expulsion earlier. She was quite intractable. However, with much difficulty, I managed to persuade her to accept a personal apology to her daughter, an apology letter and a suspension for two weeks.”

“Is the suspension really necessary?”

“In light of the seriousness of the situation, I think so, Mr. Nichol. Alice is clearly very angry and disturbed by the recent death of her mother. I think some time to gather herself might be best for everyone.”

Alice hated being spoken about as though she were not even in the room, but there was nothing she could do or say that would not just make the situation worse.

“A full two weeks?” Her father’s tone was hopeful for a reduction.

“Yes.” The monosyllabic answer told them both the decision was final and not negotiable in any way. Ms. Stone was as implacable as her name.

“Thank you, Ms. Stone. When will this...”

“Suspension?”

“Yes, suspension. When will it start?”

“With immediate effect.”

Dennis nodded and rose with a deep sigh. Alice stood up and muttered an additional apology to her principal who made no sign that she heard her. The meeting was over. The principal, living up to her name, remained motionless, cold and silent. They turned to go. It was then that the stone spoke. “Mr. Nichol? I take it you have considered having Alice see someone.”

Her father’s grip on her hand tightened in suppressed annoyance. The shoulder blades in his half-turned back rose. Alice now understood what it meant when someone “put your back up”. He did not turn and closed his eyes. Alice was terrified he was going to lose his temper and the headmistress persisted. “A professional? It might be advisable.”

“I hadn’t thought it necessary. Alice is a very capable girl.”

This said through clenched teeth.

“But now, you will consider it?”

He nodded curtly and in a second they were through the door, out of the waiting room and moving rapidly down the wide corridor. She battled to keep pace with her father’s furious strides and his grip on her hand never loosened. Alice was scared she was going to urinate as she walked. She urgently needed the toilet.

...

Throughout the meeting with her principal, Alice had been recalcitrant. She had evaded attempts to make her admit her guilt or show remorse. She had refused to answer specific questions. Dennis, puzzled and angry, was at a loss. Alice’s stubborn silence earned her greater censure from Ms. Stone whose patience quickly evaporated. Alice and Vivian’s Homeroom teacher, Miss Nightingale, had been asked to sit in on both meetings. She did so, but sat in silence, barely visible in the corner. Ms. Stone had tried unsuccessfully to get Alice to co-operate. When it became obvious that neither threats nor enticements would make Alice say more, the meeting was terminated and Alice was sent home in disgrace.

In the car, Dennis had said ominously, “We’ll talk about this at home!” and had

turned on the radio. Joni Mitchell's plaintive voice filled the car and suddenly Alice was seated next to her mother, both of them singing along loudly, smiling and waving at strangers in the traffic. "Oh, I wish I had a river that I could skate away on..." Alice sang softly, looking miserably out the window, watching the world flash past. She heard her mother's voice, gentle in her ear: *Now, why so glum? You should stop pulling that awful face. If the wind changes, you'll be stuck with it! And then you'll never get a boyfriend and that would be tragic because you are so pretty. Especially when you smile.*

A horn blaring. The sound of brakes, her father's hand on the gear shift, working furiously. Alice felt the car swerve and steady as a lower gear engaged. Seconds, then it was all over. The drive home continued. Her father shaking his fist at the driver responsible. "Are you OK?" he asked automatically. She nodded mutely, fighting back tears. So that was how easy it was to be in an accident. That was how it had been for mom. She saw her father's hands steady on the wheel. Calm and competent, her father. If only mom had been so in control, so good with machines, Alice thought. Penelope had always been good with people but battled to screw in a light bulb. She couldn't make things work. Dennis was the inverse: terrible with people, good with things. Practical - a man you'd call in a fix.

Later, when Dennis tried to insist on the truth, Alice had maintained an infuriating silence and was sent to her room without dinner. There she had sat in abject misery, running the day's events over in her mind, hearing the reproach and disapproval of her teachers and father. He was ashamed of her. It hurt more than anything else. Making her dad proud had always been of paramount importance to Alice. Since she had been a little girl, everything she did, she did for him. The awards she won, the prizes, the excellent report cards - all the months of hard work obtaining them entailed - was done for a few lines of praise from him, for Alice was a sensible girl. Unlike Penelope, it was possible to truly please her father. So there was hope in the attempt. Unlike Penelope, he was a man of few words. This made the small number he produced almost rare. And rare things are almost always more precious, Alice knew that much. Consequently, for Alice, Penelope's speech was voluble; her father's valuable. Disappointing him mortified Alice. She wanted to defend her actions. She wanted him to understand that she was not a violent brute. She wished he knew that Vivian was so skilled in verbal warfare that Alice had felt only a physical assault could breach the walls around her heart and make her feel pain. But she

could not tell him what Vivian had said. She could not let him know the terrible truth and so she had to shoulder the blame. It seemed so unfair. Alice cried bitter tears as she washed her scratched face in the bath that afternoon. It was while under the surface, holding her breath, eyes shut, soaking away the day, that she heard her mother. She opened her eyes under the water and through the shimmering surface she could see Penelope perched on the edge of the bath, as if in a dream.

You look pretty scratched up. The harpy must have fought back.

I don't remember. I didn't feel a thing.

Well. God bless adrenalin, then. Alice, my Alice. brawling like a common street urchin.

Mom! You know why I hit her. She deserved it.

You still feel badly about Melinda, don't you?

I did nothing. I stood by while she bullied her. She made her so miserable. And Melinda wasn't the only one. Venomous Vivian has been spreading her verbal poison like airborne Sarron gas for years. She actually laughed when she heard about the blog! Can you believe it?

Well, it seems like she met her match today. Did you at least get a few good shots in?

The light laugh told her she was forgiven.

You bet. Dad's furious.

Your father thinks only men get to settle scores with fists, that's all. You're more like him than you know. Maybe you should have been a boy, so that he could be secretly proud of you today.

I can't tell him why I hit her. So he's just mad at me.

Why can't you tell him?

Coz that's your job. You were supposed to tell him.

At least tell him about Melinda and your guilt. Your father understands protecting the weak. He'll come around. Now wash your face and get some sleep.

It's the middle of the afternoon, ma!

You're never too old for an afternoon nap.

time, that it was heavy and that she must be careful not to drop it or hurt herself. She never failed to say this, right up until two weeks before her death, when she'd last sent her teenager, eyes-rolling, to collect 'The Book of Meaning and Non-sense'.

"It's just a dictionary, ma." Alice had huffed.

"We don't live in the world, Alice. We live in a world of words. There is nothing more powerful."

Reading Penelope's written words to her lover, three nights before she punched Vivian, Alice realized her mother was right. Words do have the power to change the world. They can blow things up and ruin lives. In death her mother had succeeded, by example no less (the way she always proclaimed was the best to teach properly), the violence and awesome power of words: hers. Her sweet, tender seditious love-talk with Mr. GardenGuru. Alice felt sick.

Suddenly she is back on the over-sized chocolate-coloured couch, knee to knee with her mother. The newspaper is open across both of their laps and she is listening intently as Penelope speaks. She is nine, ten at most.

"Look closer, Alice. What do you see?"

"An ad for a missing dog."

"And?"

"And what, mommy? That's all."

"No, Alice. I honestly think many things here in the classifieds should be re-classified. What kind of dog is it?"

"It's a German Shepherd."

"Yes, but what *kind* of dog is it? What is its significance? Its story?"

"I don't know. I don't understand. It doesn't have a story. It's just a dumb dog."

"Now, don't get frustrated. Perhaps that is all it is, but perhaps it is a guard dog that defends a man's small business, so he will not be robbed and so is vital to his family's survival? His family depends on the income that this animal helps to assure in order to eat. Or maybe this dog is somebody's sole companion, their only friend in the world, in which case, this ad almost belongs in the 'Missing Persons' section."

Alice's mother always dug deeper than most. She was not interested in the obvious. Alice knew now, no longer a child, that her mother's life was mundane. But her mother was

not. Penelope lived a life made bigger by her nature, wilder by her inner spark and beautiful because she believed and could make others do so, too. No wonder her father was captivated. All these years of marriage and her allure remained. He still desired his wife. Alice had realized this when she moved into puberty and started to understand erotic desire and what it is that men feel for women. It was a realization that had made her very uncomfortable. Clearly, the same could not be said of Penelope's feelings for her husband. Otherwise why did she need 'GardenGuru'? Was it really possible to desire more than one man at the same time? Perhaps even love them both? This idea hurt Alice deeply, and she could not understand why. This rejection of her father seemed a rejection of her, probably because he was part of Alice. She was only half her mother. She was the result of their desire. It was another thought that embarrassed her and even caused flickers of shame.

Alice's mother was a weaver of things. And she had patience. She would knit things together, as she did her plants, and produce a new and wondrous hybrid theory. This skill for grafting one thing onto another was what made her a stupendous gardener. She could marry two shoots together and, with love and painstaking care, have them accrete and flourish quietly in a yoghurt cup on the kitchen window sill. It was a kind of magic. A Botanical Alchemy. She did these things in spite of what was written as possible in the many dusty gardening tomes that stood in a stack in the chaotic pantry. Alice's mother, so neat in every other way, had a pantry she, herself, described as "a bit topsy-turvy". Penelope always spoke like a character from one of Enid Blyton's books. She had read them all to Alice over the years and Alice had reread them herself, many times. Her favourite was the Magic Faraway Tree. It was also Penelope's and so they'd sit curled up together, close as cats in the sun, while her voice purred through her body and Alice felt the vibrations of it come through her chest. The Land of Upside Down always made Alice laugh. Then, once they'd finished the story, they would jump on the big king-sized bed and finally flop down on their backs, inching their heads and shoulders off the edge of the bed until their crowns touched the carpet, blue as the deep Atlantic. There they would stay, pretending they were at the top of the Faraway Tree and had arrived at the Land of Topsy Turvy, the carpet the blue sky above their heads. Talking and giggling at each other's red faces, the blood booming in their ears until they began to feel strange, then they would jump up, experience the rush of light-headedness and fall back onto the bed with a thump,

pretending to faint, hand held to their foreheads, partially covering their right eyes for dramatic effect.

Once, Alice's father had come in while they were still upside down and bellowed, "What on earth are you two doing! Stop that at once! Just look at your faces! It's downright dangerous to do that! Really, Penelope, you're supposed to set an example."

Her mother had sat up slowly, smoothed her skirt and stood up quietly. Then she had turned and said, "I am." And stepped lightly out of the room. Alice's father had stared after her, abashed and Alice had darted out of the French window near the bed, landing with a scrunch in the shrubbery. She had hid in the garden all afternoon, until she'd heard her mother calling her for supper. Penny had a lovely speaking voice, musical and pleasant with perfect intonation and round, fat vowels. But she could not sing. It was just another one of the mysteries that surrounded Alice's mother like a cloud of fruit flies at the site of something sweet.

...

"May I have a word, Miss Sharpe?" The group hushed and turned to see Vivian's homeroom teacher standing straight-backed and imposing in a meticulous charcoal two-piece. The suit skirt was cut just below the knee and she wore nineteen denier ladder-resistant tights in a matching shade and round-toed court shoes with a square, sturdy heel barely six centimetres high. A cravat-type bow bubbled up from the delicate cream blouse obscuring her neck as a silk scarf might. It seemed to form a part of the blouse. The girls wondered what the design would look like when untied. Miss. Nightingale had a voice in keeping with her name. It had a melodic, mellifluous quality and whenever hymns were sung at assembly her lovely voice would take on surprising power and could be heard high and clear above the rest of the caterwauling staff. However, her voice now seemed hard and stern and her chin was tilted upwards at an angle that indicated superiority. This was not her usual demeanour – Miss. Nightingale was known for her beautiful smile which revealed rows of perfect white teeth. She was one of the few teachers the girls had ever heard laugh but her expression now was cold and her face paler than usual apart from two high points of fuchsia, one on each cheek bone. She was angry. The girls' eyes widened. None of them had ever seen her truly angry before. She was even more lovely, a terrifying kind of beauty.

Miss. Nightingale was unmarried and could not have been a day older than twenty six, yet she had to assume all the heavy authority of being an adult, especially in disciplinary situations. It was not a part of the job she enjoyed, as she still identified with the girls she taught and could remember vividly her own high school days. There was an advantage in this closeness of life experience, though. She had not forgotten how cruel young ladies can be and she knew how most things played out away from the eyes of the staff, in courtyards and fields and deserted classrooms throughout the school. She knew when something didn't smell right and at this moment she smelt a rat. A vicious cornered rat that had probably received blows she well deserved.

"A word, Miss. Nightingale? Only one?" Vivian retorted coyly, her head cocked to one side like a wild thing evaluating the danger. Her sly eyes held a hint of defiance. "In my classroom. Now," replied the lovely young English teacher, coolly. Then she turned on her heel and strode away.

All the girls gave Vivian the down-pulled mouth and rolling-eyed faces that said, "O-Oh. You're in trouble." Vivian shrugged dismissively and threw a careless wave over her shoulder to indicate she wasn't fazed, but she did not say a word and meekly followed the shapely form of her antagonist.

Once in the classroom, Miss Nightingale sat at her desk and pretended to be marking homework while she breathed deeply and gathered herself. When Vivian came in, her saunter exaggerated and a nonchalant air about her. Miss Nightingale continued to tick the work before her and instructed the girl to sit in the chair in front of her desk. Vivian plopped herself down and fidgeted with the button on her shirt cuff.

"Well, Vivian, let me just get it out straight away: I don't believe your account of what happened at first break yesterday."

Vivian opened her mouth to protest. Miss Nightingale continued,

"Nor do I believe Alice's version. You're both lying and you're going to tell me why. You're also going to tell me the whole truth about what really happened."

"It happened as we said it did."

"Rubbish! This is an all-girls' school: no-one is incited to rage by being called a bitch! That is almost a given in these types of institutions and you, madam, are a prime example."

Vivian's mouth fell open. She seemed shocked to have a teacher use such language. Miss

Nightingale went on relentlessly. "I am certain that whatever you said to Alice was a lot more inflammatory than that! She is not the kind of girl to get violent. Her mother died very recently and that most certainly has a role to play here but I think it also has something to do with what you really said to Alice on that field that morning, not so, Vivian?"

Miss Nightingale's left eyebrow arched inquiringly. Vivian shook her head. Miss Nightingale observed a tremble in her hands. Sure that she was on to something, Miss Nightingale leaned back in her chair, threaded the fingers of both hands like a net behind her head then swung her legs up, extending them straight out until the heel of her shoe rested on the edge of the desk, her legs crossed neatly at the ankles. Vivian's stared at her teacher's feet on the desktop.

"Well, Vivian, we are not going anywhere until you tell me. And I'm a very patient person."

"What about your classes after break?" Vivian stammered.

"Well, they'll simply have to stand in the hall until you've finished your confession. Or perhaps they should come in and you could tell them, too? Which would you prefer?"

Vivian's eyes darted from the door to the clock and back to her teacher's face. She seemed to be doing a calculation. After a long pause, she began to spill the entire ugly story. All the while Miss Nightingale sat immobile, keeping her face neutral and fighting her own intense feelings and a strong urge to follow Alice's woeful example and slap Vivian silly.

When Vivian had finished, Miss Nightingale said simply, "I'm disgusted in you." Vivian's head was down and tears were rolling off the tip of her nose, splashing onto her navy gymslip and disappearing immediately. "And her father doesn't know about the affair or about this nasty episode with the pictures?" Vivian shook her head imperceptibly. "Vivian?" Miss Nightingale pressed, enjoying her discomfort. "No, he doesn't." Vivian's voice was hoarse.

The young teacher leaned back in her chair. She bore the look of one who has solved a riddle. "Aah. So, she lied to protect *him*, not you. Do you have any idea of the pain Alice must be in? Well, do you?" Her voice rose. She was shouting, something she never did. The break bell had gone and already curious faces were peeping in through the circular window

in the closed classroom door. Vivian shook her head. Miss Nightingale noted the faces at the window and gave them a look and a wave of the hand that made them vanish as if by magic.

“You have done an awful thing. I hate to say it, but I’m not surprised she hit you. If I had been Alice, I’m not sure I could have restrained myself either. And now, Alice has been instructed to write *you* an apology letter! The injustice...” her voice trailed off. “You are to tell no-one about anything we have discussed. You are to impress upon your mother, without going into detail, that you ruthlessly provoked Alice and that you actually understand why she snapped. You are to ask her to forget about it and to make sure she knows you feel equally at fault for the fracas.”

Vivian darted a confused glance in her direction.

“The fight, Vivian! You feel you played an equal role in the whole event.”

“I do, Miss Nightingale. I’m sorry.”

The teacher remained unmoved and spoke briskly, “Well, it’s good to know you have some conscience. But don’t tell me, tell Alice. Perhaps you should write an apology letter of your own. If I understand the story correctly Alice will keep the letter private. You are never to discuss her family or the Derek episode again, with anyone, do you understand?”

“Yes, Miss.”

Miss Nightingale nodded in satisfaction.

“This meeting never happened. Go and clean your face and get to class. Dismissed.”

...

GardenGuru: Please answer my messages, Pen.

Penny-Lane: I can’t see you anymore.

GardenGuru: Why not?

Penny-Lane: You know why.

GardenGuru: We have to talk about what happened.

Penny-Lane: What happened can never happen again.

GardenGuru: I understand that you’re feeling guilty, but don’t I get a say in this?

Penny-Lane: You’re married.

GardenGuru: So are you.

Penny-Lane: Exactly.

GardenGuru: This feels right, though. I woke up this morning happy for the first time in years. I had this sense of anticipation, this reason to get up and get started with my day. And you were it, Penny-Lane. You were the reason.

Penny-Lane: Please. Saying all that just makes it harder.

GardenGuru: Penny Lane is in my ears and in my eyes...

Penny-Lane: Stop it.

GardenGuru: Can't.

Penny-Lane: I have to go.

GardenGuru: When will I see you?

Penny-Lane: You won't.

GardenGuru: Have to. I can still taste you; still see your beautiful naked body every time I shut my eyes...

Penny-Lane: I'm signing off.

GardenGuru: Meet me at our usual place at 15h00 tomorrow. I'll be waiting.

Alice was stupefied. How could it all just be here? Waiting to be discovered – a simple click of the mouse away! How could her mother have been so careless? Did she not know that she had saved all their correspondence, every interaction in black and white? Was it naiveté or recklessness that had made her leave it all on her PC? Had she thought that simply clicking close was enough to delete it? Or had she rested safe in the knowledge that Dennis had no idea, nor any desire to learn how computers worked. Alice remembered how she had tried, unsuccessfully, to tutor him in the basics once. Questions multiplied and swarmed over her brain, annihilating thought as locusts do wheat fields when they settle en masse.

...

Alice dropped the keys onto the counter with a clatter and walked through to the living room. Her father sat perched and alert on the edge of the sofa. His eyebrows raised; eyes expectant. His face fell as he saw her and he mumbled a hello. Alice didn't ask. She already knew who, for a garbled moment, he'd expected to see in the doorway. The key in the lock, the rustle of grocery bags being thumped onto the oversized kitchen table, the loud sigh and

keys-on-counter clatter. Before her mom died Alice had not possessed a full set of house keys. She hadn't needed to. House keys were for adults. A single side-door key on a hide thong was sufficient for teenagers. A way to get into and out of the house on the rare occasions someone wasn't there to let them in. Alice's mom had always been there. She had often opened the door as Alice reached for the bell as though she'd sensed she was walking up the driveway. Sometimes Alice would indulge a similar fantasy to her father's: she would walk up the driveway very slowly, whistling tunelessly or singing loudly. She'd mount the steps and pause. Then for just a moment, she'd imagine her mother on the other side of the door. Sometimes she'd stand, her finger millimetres from the buzzer, expecting to hear the rattle of a key inside and the door creaking open. Sometimes she'd even ring the bell and wait as though it would be answered. She would stand craning for a sound. Then the tears would start. She'd fumble in her school bag for the large bunch of keys, a heart-shaped key-ring bearing Penelope's name, which would invariably worsen the sobbing. It was a gift Alice had given her mother. She couldn't bring herself to take it off. They were Penelope's keys, after all. But now Alice looked at her father and saw hope, crushing disappointment and re-lived grief each complete their pantomime like seasoned professionals across the stage of his face. Alice could not bear to be the audience. She dived out of the room, racked by inexplicable guilt, calling over her shoulder from the safety of the passage,

"You look hungry, dad. I'm going to fix us a sandwich."

Her father did look hungry, starved, wan and worn out, but Alice knew he could not feel hunger's pangs over those of his grief. She could make the sandwich but it would go uneaten.

...

Alice stood in her flannel pyjamas on the lawn watering the garden. It was early evening and the birds were dark against a grey winter sky. A chill was already in the air. The pigeons, fat, lazy birds, were already roosting, their beaks buried in cloud-grey plumage, an eye still blinking clear of the feathers, watchful. She was not sure why she bothered. Her mother was the only one who cared about the garden and she was gone for good. But Alice

It was while she was in the shower, the steaming water rolling off her head and sprinting down her body in ever-increasing rivulets, that it occurred to Alice that her mother's lover might not know that Penelope was dead. The idea made a crackling sound in her head and she froze as the implications welled up like water and went to meet the ribbons of silver which burst from the showerhead and charged over her body's curves and into crevices en route to the tiled floor. The accident had not made the papers. In a country where trauma and loss were commonplace, a road accident was deemed insignificant. What was one dead white woman? My everything, that's what, Alice thought bitterly. Still, there had only been one small note in the obituaries and was it likely he would have seen it? What kind of a person regularly pores over the obituaries? "You'd be surprised, I guess. Mom did," Alice said out loud to herself. It was true. Alice's mother loved reading the classifieds. She always maintained it was the best part of the paper and unquestionably the most interesting. She believed that how people speak of their dead is very revealing. Alice remembered she'd disagreed and had instead suggested that people chose only to remember an idealized version of the departed. They became almost entirely fictional. Alice had made her mother promise to tell the truth about her should she die. Her mother had said then that the truth of Alice's life was stranger than fiction. Now it turned out, so was the truth of Penelope's.

Her mother had gone on to defend the latent veracity of the classifieds: "You'd be surprised what people say in obituaries, Alice. People's desire to tell the truth – their truth – is as strong as their sense of duty, as tenacious as their need to be respectful and say nice

things. Obituaries are often exceptionally nuanced. It's amazing what a single, unusual word can reveal. It jumps off the page; it's even more visible among all the humdrum stuff. It can't hide. It sings, screams, and vibrates. It glows and whispers of unknown stories. Words, Alice, are enigmas. They always hide more than they show."

It was true. And the classifieds were the most overlooked section of the paper. Her mother used to joke that the information so brazenly on display there, so easily available, should be 'classified'. She had pointed out how interesting it was merely to see how people 'classified' their lives. What they wished to sell spoke of a past and what they wanted to acquire hinted at present desires and a future. Anniversaries, Lost and Found, Birthdays, Death days, Miscellaneous – Alice's mother read them all.

Penelope, although all her friends called her Penny or Pen, was always fascinated by the hidden stories. She loved to weave them together, binding disparate details into plausible fictions. A lost item linked to an obituary which in turn related to an auction sale of the deceased's estate for example. Alice knew her mother loved mysteries, almost as much as she loved to solve them. She had missed her calling. She should have been a detective or a writer of mystery novels, not a bored housewife with an exceptionally high IQ. Alice realized now how much secret regret her mother might have had about the way things had turned out. She began to wonder whether her mother had really wanted to be merely a partner to a man and a parent to a demanding child. She wished she had asked her mother about her dreams as a young woman her own age. Penelope's hopes for her own life would now always be a mystery. If she had had selfish desires, 'GardenGuru' was the only hint of them. She had typed to him, "I feel you understand me better than anyone else." He might know what her mother had really wanted.

...

Penny always wanted to examine the definitions of things. Whenever she came across an unusual word, she would look it up immediately in her oversized King's dictionary, the cover of which was battered and scuffed with years of use, the threaded binding coming apart at the seams, the pages loosening. There were already a few loose leaves when Alice was only a small child and Penny would send her on a 'mission' to fetch her dictionary – 'The Book of Meaning and Non-sense', she called it. She would always warn Alice, every

could not allow the garden to die. She could not watch the plants withering outside as her father did inside. Perhaps it was because she could not save him that she continued, stubbornly, to water Penelope's abandoned garden. She gazed around at the slightly sparser foliage of winter but noted that, thanks to her mother's careful planning, it was still lovely. Alice's eyes took in the mass of orange clivias beneath the African plum, the purple heads of the statice and the deep red blooms on the rhododendron, like freshly spilt blood. Jake was hunting something in the lavender and his movements through it put its scent in the air. It was then that she remembered how her mother had always lamented that South Africa had no real seasons, in her opinion. No snowy winter, no budding spring breaking the black bark's bleakness with new green shoots. Each season in the northern hemisphere, Penelope had always maintained, had its own distinct beauty, its own attractions. Winter plants and summer plants, perennials – her mother had painstakingly interspersed them so that the garden was never wholly bare or patchy in appearance. As things died down, their neighbour would be shooting up, a continuous exchange of beauty. It was a floral changing of the guard, ensuring a ceaseless display of blooms. Like a botanical relay team, the jasmine passed the baton to the bougainvillea who in turn gave it to chrysanthemum then on to the camellia. Alice only now realized that it must have taken great planning to accomplish this endless show. She could hear her mother complaining that this country was too "samey" – always sunny, mostly hot. An endless summer made arid and joy-less by its excess and a case in point for absence makes the heart grow fonder. Penelope had always believed in balance and the function and role of things. A place for everything and everything in its place was a favourite saying of hers. For Penelope, summer was always a happy time and it offered a respite from the dark dampness of winter. Autumn was the slow season - a season of preparation and earnestness. Winter was like holding your breath - a waiting season that was like being underwater, all cool and quiet and totally alone. No one knows what will survive to surface in the spring. Penelope considered winter a season of deep private thoughts, when plans were still in utero, so to speak, deep in the dark womb of the earth, waiting for spring to warm them into being. The arrival of spring, she felt, was a time of germination, new plans, new ideas and a sense of achievement and having made it! All of these careful cycles were all but obliterated in the south. It was one of the few things Penelope missed about England. This loss of the seasons as she had known

them as a child was one from which she never quite recovered. She had lived in South Africa for over twenty years and yet she was bereft anew four times a year as the calendar indicated seasonal changes but the garden seemed, to her, immune. Now, looking around, Alice could not agree with her mother's impression of southern gardens as inferior.

It was all different for Alice. For no reason she could think of, spring, for her, had always been an intensely sad time, a time when she remembered all that was past. All that was no more. The new flowers in the garden, her father repairing and testing the old pool pump, grudgingly scraping out the twin sprinklers that made dual fountains into the blue waters. All this spring activity only depressed Alice in a way that was truly inexplicable. She would sit for hours in the newly warm spring sunshine gazing out at the jasmine blooming in the hedge it had invaded, winding its tendrils throughout the host's woody frame, so that each year a non-flowering myrtle hedge bloomed. Alice watched the elegant swallows swooping to skim miniscule amounts of water from the pool's surface. Willy wagtails perched in social trios on the ancient phone wires that sagged in the middle, almost touching the highest of the King Palms that grew against the front wall. They sat for ages chirping their news and wagging their famous tails up and down like horizontal metronomes, silently keeping time – a cantilevering system that made balancing on the thin, swaying wire possible.

...

It was never a good idea to lie to Penelope. She'd fix you with a cool eye, large and grey as an African sky before it rains, and say, "I see. Hmmm, yes. I see. I understand entirely." All the while nodding patiently while someone executed a master deception. Trouble was, though, she really did see. She saw straight through it. Straight through a person to the other side. Saw, not only with the two intense, smoky eyes God had given her but with a third invisible eye, the origins of which were best not guessed at. Alice, at the tender age of six, learned an important lesson when trying to blame someone else for breaking her mother's cigarettes into the basin in the guest bathroom. Her mother had found the brown, damp mess and come looking for her straight away, very annoyed. Penelope always maintained she smoked purely for pleasure and did not need to have a cigarette. She said

addiction was for the weak. However, come four o'clock every day without fail, she would put the kettle on for her tea-time, which consisted of three cups of strong, scalding tea, a sweet biscuit and five cigarettes, smoked at a trot. The day she found her tea-time pleasure crushed into fine brown mulch clogging the drain hole, Penelope had admitted two things to herself. One, that perhaps she was an addict and two, that she was a mother capable of smacking her child in a rage. The lesson Alice had learnt after trying to concoct a tale about who had destroyed the cigarettes was one of many her mother taught her over the years and it was a simple lesson. You can't tell a story to a storyteller. She had also learnt that the sole of a rubber slipper really hurt when thwacked across one's bottom.

Alice missed her. She even missed the fact that she could keep nothing from her mother. All Alice's secrets were laid bare. If not in their long conversations then when she simply watched her daughter closely without saying anything as she went about her business. Or she could simply stand in Alice's room and breathe her secrets in. The odours of a child's secrets wafting out of drawers, clothes, notebooks, pockets. Secret scents all wafting to fill her patient, loving nostrils. Alice could swear that her mother could sniff a secret out of her very pores. One big embrace, a single deep sniff of her skin, a moment of burying her face in Alice's hair and all was confessed as surely as if her child had sat in the airless, dark box at St. Mary's trying to catch a glimpse of the hawk-like profile of father McKinney through the trelliswork.

Perhaps that is why Alice was so angry with her. Maybe that was why she felt betrayed, because all along, Alice had felt that they were bound together, that they had no secrets from one another, that they were close and honest. "Tight! Tight like that!" Suzie would say about close relationships, crossing her index and middle fingers in front of her friend's face for emphasis. But all the while Penelope had read her like an open book, she, herself, was a closed one. Her mother had been inscrutable. She was like the Bible. She appeared knowable. But the Bible is not easy to grasp. It's not simple. It is filled with stories that harbour secret symbols, complex metaphors and deep, hidden meanings. It holds the mystery of the universe and it never gives up its secrets. Scholars through the ages have tried to make it speak but it has offered only the obvious and kept the profundity for itself. A dark book, the bible, Alice noted. A black-covered book holding light in its pages. Alice's mother was the inverse: All seeming lightness on the outside, her

contents far darker. Oh, false face that hid what the false heart did know!

The key to survival is knowledge. Alice's mother was a pro. She kept her business private and knew everyone else's. Penelope, the mysterious, who often said, "Qui s'excuse, s'accuse" – so she never did. She knew, too, the potential of partial revelation; enough to create trust, not enough to occasion contempt. "You teach others how to treat you, Alice", she had always said when Alice complained of being bullied or mishandled. My mother and her enigmatic slogans. Prevaricating parent that she was, Alice thought. "Prevarication" was a word she had learnt recently in English class during a discussion about the witches in Macbeth. She had run straight home and looked it up in her mother's dictionary. It really was a wonderful word. Her mother had made her use it in a sentence to show she understood it. Now she understood its complex meaning all too well, thank you. And other words, besides. Alice gazed down at the page and read out loud:

Dissemble: to conceal one's motives, talk or act hypocritically, disguise or conceal (a feeling, intention, act, etc.), simulate.

Dissembler: noun. One who dissembles.

Her mother had taught her the power of words but she had neglected to check whether Alice understood the complexity and treachery of words. Somewhere the message had become garbled and while Alice had learnt that words were powerful, she had then also believed them to be things she could trust. Her mother had not been successful in teaching Alice that words were slippery. She had expected her child to understand the inherent conflict in her name for her dictionary, her book of words, as 'The Book of Meaning and Non-sense'. But Alice had only understood the first part and, wanting her mother to think her smart, had never admitted that she didn't 'get it'.

...

2AM.

Alice lay staring up at an invisible ceiling. Darkness all around and she felt as though she could not breathe, could not catch her thoughts and gather them up into coherence.

Everything felt disjointed and she was floating above the chaos. It was as if there was a space between her and her thoughts - A small space that still seemed vast because it made full engagement with her senses impossible. Recently, she had begun to lose things. She would forget where she had put the keys, so she would search in coat pockets and struggle to remember what she had done the day before. What did I do yesterday? Alice often wondered. She thought that this must be what dementia feels like, or Alzheimer's. Her grandmother had developed that. A slow, exorable slip-sliding away of the details. Details people take for granted. Such as where one had left the keys, what one had done yesterday or eaten for breakfast on a particular morning. Alice felt the minor become major. The small destroying the great. The rose of the mind that art very sick indeed. Blake's diminutive houseguest, so harmless it had seemed. Now, it was eating away the centre of her sanity. A dark secret love, Blake called it. That, Alice was sure, was what was poisoning her mind, this knowledge of their affair: GardenGuru and Penelope's. Alice seized her diary and began to scribble in the dark.

I'm not crazy. It just hurts to breathe, sometimes.

I'm so tired. I twitch and my skin itches. Here I am, awake and exhausted at 2AM.

"Full of scorpions is my mind!"

Alice kept telling herself that the situation was not so dire that it could not be endured. But could it? And was living mere endurance? Stubborn in the face of adversity, was living an animal-like refusal to quit? She lay, eyes open to the dark, breathing shallow little breaths.

"Consider it not so deeply...these deeds must not be thought after these ways, so, it will make us mad."

"Things without remedy should be without regard: what's done is done."

Lady M. was right both times.

But here was more than regard. Here was fixation. Unhealthy, endless, unsatisfied waiting. A part of Alice kept thinking, *any minute she'll come home. Any minute now.* So her body waited, tense with anticipation, and she could not relax.

I am the waiting damned.

Alice felt like one of those doomed to wait in darkened rooms across the globe in the sad, small hours. Children of the morning. Hopefully desperate. They wait for dawn or sleep to wash them clean. Baptize them and renew their faith that everything will be all right.

sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care.

They'll wait in vain. Faith leaves them alone with their loneliness.

Just us two, an open page and an idea, an ideal, of you.

Alice, hand poised over an invisible page, pen in hand, clutching the small notebook, knew that sleep was not coming for her.

sleep will not come until you do, and you're not coming back.

She knew, too, that if sleep did ambush her obsession and take her away, she would dream the angry, frightening dreams that always made her wake with a raven-winged heart and give thanks for a griever's insomnia. It was a perverse gratitude.

So Alice lay, clutching the square black notebook like it was her salvation – one of those small flotation boards small children grip between locked elbows and stiff fingers as they learn how to kick, kick, kick the water. But Alice feared she could not stay afloat much longer. Her notebook gave her an outlet, an activity better than rolling from her left to her right side in endless agitation, but it could not solve anything. Alice saw her mother standing at the end of her bed and she strained her eyes to make out the shadowy form. It was an illusion: simply her mother's old gown hanging on the back of the door.

Time: 2:08. Eight minutes of respite.

...

Alice fell asleep every time she tried to face her school work. It was an attempt to be unconscious, so as not to have to think. She had, in recent weeks, grown to hate silence. She had to have constant noise in order to drown out her thoughts. It was in silence that her thoughts percolated, drip-dropped through the fine layers of her mind to produce a bitter beverage. The only way she could get a little peace was through noise. Silence must not be allowed to fall. Stillness was won in small parcels through frenzied movement. Stereo dial turned to its maximum, vacuum - its accomplice in discord – in one hand as she jolted her body back and forth in a motion that simultaneously ran the vacuum over the carpets whilst seeming to be a new-age dance move to the music. In her fervour she could clean the entire second floor before exhaustion would put an end to the activity and her father's yelled demand would turn the music to an ineffectual whisper.

Then the inner voices would start up again and the dark, black brew would slither through the filter of her mind, leaving a stain and an inky residue. Alice thought she would go mad. At those times, she would put on the fan, place her face up close to its two-tone powder and electric blue centre and talk into the vortex, her voice distorting to sound like an Alien transmission on the radio. "Heaven, come in. I repeat, Heaven, come in. We need to locate one of your new recruits. Heaven, come in?" But the crackled message went unanswered and the fan chilled her sweat-slicked body until it was icy and she had to turn it off.

Once her father had walked in mid-transmission and asked her what on earth she was doing kneeling before a fan after she'd been sweating over housework, chilling her body. He had warned her she would get sick and told her to turn it off immediately and put on a jersey. She had clicked the fat blue switch but remained on her knees, a supplicant before the fan: her communication device with the Great Beyond. Many times, when she was blasting music in her room, her father would enter after his knocking went unheard and tell her she was going to go deaf if she persisted in this bizarre behaviour. Alice couldn't tell him she was drowning out the voices inside. She knew he would send her back to that horrid psychologist that he'd made her visit the day after she'd been suspended, just in case the headmistress had been right and Alice really was losing her marbles, as he called them. Her marbles were rolling, rolling, endlessly round, generating spherical questions that only went in circles and had no single answers.

At these times, Alice would put down the hairbrush she had been singing dementedly into and would turn off the music. Then she would shower and re-wash her clean hair, so that she could blow-dry it with her mother's massive hairdryer. It sounded like a helicopter taking off. Alice would imagine it was a massive black and silver handgun and she'd point it at her temple and pull the trigger. The noise would erupt like a dam blown out by angry storm waters. She'd imagine that maybe this is what it felt like when you blew out your brains – a rush of hot air and a deep dark water sound. These thoughts scared her. She would keep the nozzle focused firmly on the hair around her wet ears, the hot air heating the cartilage and accosting the delicate flesh, scorching, as it turned the droplets too rapidly to steam. Her hair wilt and bristle unsure, like Alice herself, of which option to choose. Alice hated her hair. It seemed to echo her inner state. Wild and frizzy in places, dull and flat in others. It looked like she felt. Sometimes, when all else failed, Alice would put whisky in her coffee and lie in bed in the dark with her headphones on, sipping the dark, laced concoction. It allowed her to fall asleep. Ah, to sleep, perchance to dream. Of twisted steel and mangled flesh.

Alice was surprised at how easily she had convinced her father that all the time she was spending on the computer was for research purposes for projects and homework that she had to catch up on. He seemed so eager to believe her, so keen to think that his daughter, once the proposed Valedictorian of the school, had made the decision to reclaim her straight-A status and hit the books, as he termed it. He took it as a sign that Alice was making a come-back – a recovery from the confused, angry and recalcitrant stranger he had come to know over the past month and a half. He left her to it. Alice, on-line for hours, searched the chat room for any sign of ‘GardenGuru’ without success. She clicked links to related pages. Still nothing. Alice had chosen the alias ‘Pandora’ as being apposite. It reflected all too well how she felt about her new position. She was the gifted one who was wasting her gifts. She was the one fated to open a box of doom and let all its troubles loose on her world. Alice regarded the black box perched next to the monitor. This technology had unfathomed depths. It was complicated and had proved to be a complication. Now, she, like Pandora, was helpless to return the released evil to its housing. It was out there, flitting in the atmosphere on clawed wings. The truth was a bat-like thing. It was not what Alice had expected it to be. She did not feel free, as was the promise of truth. She felt shackled to it - doomed to endless thirst and hunger for more ugly truth, like the unfortunate Tantalus.

She tried a new tack. A general announcement. A ‘shout out’ to the whole chat room. “Does anyone know Penny-Lane?” It was as if she had jumped up onto a soapbox and begun to yell in the midst of a crowd at Hyde Park corner (Something Alice was to do in

later years). Hidden behind her alias, Alice felt exposed. Cyber identities were strange things. They allowed you to be someone else entirely and act in uncharacteristic ways. Perhaps that had been part of the allure for her mother. A reply. 'Yes. Who's askin?'

'Her daughter.' An utter novice, she had made a crucial error. She had told the truth to a stranger in cyber space. 'Padre' went silent just long enough for Alice to panic. She feared he had left the room. Then a message.

Padre: How old r u?

Pandora: 16.

Padre: Me 2.

Pandora: How do you know my mom?

Padre: P.L. was a regular. Everyone knew that sweetie.

Pandora: What else can you tell me?

Padre: She had a thing for a nerd called GardenGuru. They chatted all the time.

Pandora: Anyone else?

Padre: Hey, there's lots to tell about your mom.

Pandora: Go on...

Padre: Not here. We should meet.

Alice had thought it absurd. She had tried to resist and to get him to divulge all he knew then and there. She had suggested a private chat room to continue the discussion. He had suggested they meet near her school. A bell went off in the distance, right at the back of her skull. A warning jangle. Alice considered the request. She lied and told him she went to a co-ed across town. They could meet at the nearby shopping centre outside the toy shop. She would have to take a bus. But it provided a layer between them. He asked how he would recognize her. She gave a brief description.

Someone knocking at the door.

Her father with his usual message: it was late and he wanted her in bed, getting enough rest. Alice arranged an early meeting for 9AM, grateful that her father would be at work at that time, once more. At least he had kept his word and returned to the office before he lost his job. Alice had been so relieved when he had packed his briefcase three days earlier and

told her, “Stay put. I’ll be home from work by six.” He had phoned every day since to check up on her, at eleven and again at three. Alice calculated that she could meet Padre at nine and leave the area by ten to be safely home to receive her father’s call at eleven. Should he call before then, she could always claim to have overslept. Alice sent Theresa a sms update from under her duvet, the lights out. Theresa was against the entire idea. She warned that Alice knew nothing about this ‘Padre’ person. It was creepy and she should not go. She had a point, Alice knew. She should blow the meeting off and sleep in, then tackle her history assignment. Alice set her alarm for seven.

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A rusty bronze station wagon cruised around the corner and sidled up to the curb. It came to a halt with a soft squealing of brakes in need of new pads and the sun glinted off the driver’s side window. The number plates were not local.

Alice, standing nervously at the shop’s entrance, peered at the car, trying to see who was inside. She glanced at her watch. 8:50.

The window slid down a fraction and someone called out: “Hey! Pandora? Is that you?”

Alice nodded and gave a brave smile. The voice was of a grown man.

“Well, c’mon, get in. I’m as eager for an English breakfast as you are for answers about Penny, I’m sure.” The voice was jolly and effusive.

Alice hesitated. She sensed she was on a threshold. Her heart was a drum. She wanted answers. The hunger for them like a burning sensation in her stomach. Yet still she did not move towards the idling car. Something did not feel right. In the middle of a hum-drum day, with everyone going about their business, Alice felt the sharp edge of a defining moment. She ran the key chain on her bag through her fingers, link by link. Standing on the edge of the curb, wanting to step off, feeling a sense of vertigo, as though it were a precipitous drop from a cliff, she wavered. Alice knew destiny had arrived in an old car. She stood frozen, aware that any step, in any direction, would be momentous. A single footfall would constitute a decision. Alice sensed disaster. She saw the bleached bones on the shore. But she could not turn back.

Alice eased herself into a damp seat of cream velour. Her nose picked up the distinctly musty smell of mould and BO. Her eyes took in the overflowing ashtray and the cans and refuse that littered the car. She examined the driver. He was filthy. She could smell Padre's unwashed clothes from where she sat. Moths beat at the walls of her abdomen, their wings beating out a Morse-coded warning. He turned and smiled at her. It was a ragged grin; his uneven beard framed a cave of yellowed pegs.

"I know, I know, I'm not sixteen. Hell, I'm not anything 'teen'. I just figured if I told you I was really thirty-two you'd be too nervous to come and meet me to get the truth about your mother."

This man was not a day under forty, Alice was convinced. "Well, you do want to know about Penny, don'tcha?" Padre said, leaning over in her direction as he spoke. Alice was engulfed by the sour-sweet stench of smoke-impregnated skin. She shifted backwards and twisted her neck into an acute angle as though it were a hinge, trying to gain distance and holding her breath. This was uncomfortable, but the alternative was not to be considered. To her disgust he edged closer and lowered his head, bringing it to within five inches of her face. He was staring at her with beady, dark eyes. Glinting, menacing slits of onyx. A firing deep in her brain. A flash of recognition. Where had she seen those eyes before?

As he repeated the question impatiently, spittle landed on Alice's cheek. While she could do her best to avoid the unpleasant smell of his skin, when he spoke it was impossible. No angle of the neck would serve to save her. She felt as if she would gag. She wanted him to stop talking so desperately that she would have agreed to almost anything. She nodded and he leaned back. The car roared and plunged into the traffic. Alice felt better now that he was forced to be further from her in order to drive. She tried to roll down her window to get a fresh breeze; it was broken. The winder only allowed it to slide down slightly, before catching on something deep in the door frame and squeaking to a halt. Padre's flicker of alarm gave way to a satisfied smile.

"Where are we going?" Alice ventured. "To get something to eat." The reply was brisk and ominous. Alice pointed out that there were nice eateries in the centre they had just left, now regretting her foolish decision to get into a stranger's car.

“No worries, sweetheart. We’ll find somewhere soon.” he soothed. Alice had no idea where she was. This part of town was unfamiliar. She felt a growing unease as the traffic thinned and the road headed out of the city. She was scared to ask again and so tried, instead, an innocuous question. “Your alias is Padre. But what’s your real name?” He threw her a suspicious look.

“My real name is Janice. Janice Miller.” Alice proffered it like a peace offering, but it was a test.

“I’m Edward Falconer.” Then he smiled at her and patted her knee.

Now she knew that he knew nothing of her mother, not even her real last name. She was trapped. Fighting rising panic, she had to think. Think, Alice, think. She spotted an Engen garage looming up ahead. Beyond it lay miles of endless farmland. Fields and thickets and woodlands. Suddenly Alice had a picture.

“Eddie, I’m really hungry and I need to pee. Can we stop quickly at the Engen?” Alice kept her voice light and friendly. She smiled shyly when he looked her over and dropped her eyes demurely. It worked. That and the familiar use of his name. It sounded like trust.

He pulled in and said he would go in to get some food from the shop, while she used the facilities. Still Alice needed to be sure. She walked round to the toilet, waited and then went back to the car. She got in and began to search for a definitive piece of information. A proof. She rifled through the glove box and out it fell - A driver’s licence with his surly face staring back and a name. Paul Ritter. As her eyes read the words, the door clicked open and Paul leaned in holding two cokes and pies in greaseproof paper bags. His hands were full. His eyes registered her discovery as Alice made use of the last available chance. She bolted from the car, even as he dropped the food and lunged to grab her, his fingers clutching at her cardigan; Alice rolled like a seal, twisted herself out of the garment and ran screaming into the shop. Paul was left lying on his stomach across the two front seats, legs poking out of the driver’s side, a soft woollen cardigan, now missing all its buttons, in his fist.

Alice reached the shop’s entrance and the blessed sliding doors opened to receive her as if she had shouted the magic word. She looked back through the glass in time to see the bronze station wagon execute an about-turn and tear away, leaving a layer of its tyres on the forecourt. The final proof.

When Alice unlocked the front door, the phone was ringing. She flew to it and in her haste, knocked it from its cradle. She lifted it in clumsy fear-ridden hands and said as firmly as she could:

“Hello?”

“Hey, sweetheart. It’s 11:30 you know.” There was a note of gentle reproach in his voice.

“You weren’t sleeping were you?”

“No.” Alice tightened her grip on the receiver.

“Well then, why did you take so long to answer the phone? You’re supposed to be catching up on your school work.”

“I *have* been working,” Alice said defensively.

“Why do you sound so out of breath?”

“I was in the garden. Watering mom’s azaleas. They needed water desperately, so on my break, I went out to see to them. I had to run for the phone.”

Alice was surprised at how easily the lie formed. Perhaps she was more like her mother than she realised.

“Oh, OK. Study hard today, baby. I’ll be home by 5:30. We’ll get a pizza and a movie tonight, OK? It’ll be fun.”

“Sure.”

“Great! See you later, alligator.”

He sounded relieved not to have his suggestion challenged or refused and the childish parting shot was pitiful. Alice felt a stab of regret. She must have been behaving really badly recently. She was ashamed to have to consider that she was being a text-book teen – all angst and rage-tinged emotion. She bit her lip and felt the familiar sensation of guilt. She vowed to be agreeable that evening and also in future. She could hear Penelope’s take on things echoing in her exhausted brain: *Yes, Alice, that’s a good idea. Play nice! Don’t shoot everything down in flames. That tongue of yours is razor sharp.*

“Yes, mom, I know,” she murmured an admission of guilt. She promised herself to try really hard.

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Alice dialed the number from memory. Theresa answered.

“You went, didn’t you?”

Alice related what had happened. She had to admit that she had hiked home, another less than smart decision but she had at least picked an elderly lady who had stopped for petrol. Alice had told her a sob story about having been abandoned at the garage by her boyfriend after a fight. She had fibbed and said she was eighteen when the woman observed that she looked as if she should be in school. Once Alice had finished, Theresa had simply said, “I’m coming over.” When Alice opened the door, Theresa seized her by the shoulders and shook her saying, “Alice! You’re never going to know all of your mom’s life! You could have been killed! Do you understand that? Raped and murdered, Allie! What’s happening to you? I don’t know what you’re thinking anymore. It’s like you’ve shut me out.”

“Yes, Resa, but what if there are more men? What if ‘GardenGuru’ wasn’t her only lover? My mom could be a serial internet dater, a cyber-whore! Oh, God!”

“Al, you need to get a grip! So you found an on-line chat with some guy your mom had a relationship with. I think you have enough to deal with without looking for more problems, don’t you? Leave this alone. Don’t roll it around in your head till it makes you crazy! You’re thinking too much about this. Sometimes, I swear, you’re too smart for your own good.”

This was an accusation that Alice’s mother had also made many times in the past. Theresa went on. “I don’t think this was a regular thing. It was probably a one-off. She fell for this one guy, that’s all.”

“That’s all? That’s just great! So, she’s only messed around behind my father’s back once, yeah? That’s your comfort speech? I’m sure dad will be thrilled. I mean, what’s one shag in the grand scheme of eighteen years of marriage?”

Rage and sarcasm coupled in a fierce union to produce an ugly offspring. Her face was contorted with feelings that pushed at the boundaries of her body from the inside till she thought she would burst.

“Alice. Has it occurred to you that your big search for the truth has you lying to

everyone? You rant about feeling betrayed by your mom because she lied to you but when last were you honest with your dad?"

Alice knew the truth when she heard it. She felt a stab of shame as Theresa continued.

"Maybe this wasn't just some guy, Allie. Maybe he was special to your mom. It doesn't have to be so sordid."

Alice riled instantly.

"You really suck at the making me feel better bit, Theresa!"

Alice only used her full name when they were fighting. Theresa knew it wasn't a good sign. Alice went on. "You're not going to make me feel better by imagining that this wasn't just some fling but instead a meaningful relationship! I don't want to imagine she cared for this guy or shared parts of her life with him!" Alice had carefully enunciated the first part of the sentence through lips tautly white but now her voice faltered and broke as she sobbed, "Those were parts that belonged to us! To dad and me; we're her family." She folded up and collapsed like a tent which had had the poles ripped from it.

What was Theresa to do? She dropped to her knees, pulled her friend close and held her. It was not enough. It was everything.

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The bathroom was full of steam. It billowed from the running tap and filled the small space. It crowded up against the walls and hovered near all surfaces, clamouring to get out. Alice waved a hand through the conjured mist and cranked the tap closed. She slipped beneath the water, air bubbles rising as she descended. Her buttocks came to rest on the floor of the bath with a soft bounce and she exhaled and sank beneath the water where she lay staring up at the insect graveyard that was the ceiling. Countless corpses of the genus *Insecta* lay encrusted around the light. Moths of ages come to pay fatal homage to the God of Light, Helios. The bulb in a round casing like the sun to lesser things. Alice allowed one bubble at a time to escape her mouth. Each one would adhere, momentarily, to her lip, tickling, then slip free and race to death, popping itself on the surface that separated the two worlds of air and water. She glanced down and it was then that she caught sight of her breasts in the water. Lopsided. The left unusually larger than the right, though slight

variation was considered normal. Or at least those had been the school nurse's observations as she'd bent her double to prod her spine, checking for malformation. Then a quick, painful step to the scale, a jot in the chart, and back to class with another wound to one's self esteem. Her breasts bobbed like buoys, the nipples distended in the heat. She tweaked them in irritation, sat up and covered them with a facecloth. Then she pressed her shoulders onto the stubbornly cool enamel back of the bath and looked down at her body, motionless beneath the water. She noted the strange foreshortening effect: her legs appearing even shorter than they were and her feet, stubby and dwarf-like. The sight appalled her and she slipped back down and covered her face with the sodden cloth. She sucked the air through the drenched fabric and felt the claustrophobic clutch of death – a near asphyxiation. She remembered reading somewhere that this was one of the torture techniques of the Apartheid police. The wet bag. It gave the sensation of drowning without the effect, the terror without the result. Like bungee-jumping, Alice guessed. Natural fears of water and heights reworked to new and strange activities. People were funny things. Wild animals never tortured one another. They simply killed and ate the loser. Animals never turned the fear of death into a game. They were smart enough to take death seriously and to sense that if you played at death, Death could find a way of sneaking in, for real. She had invited the semblance of danger to dance today and Danger itself had arrived. Stupid Girl. She sucked in one more leaden, water-logged breath and removed the threat. She placed the cloth, now innocuous and innocent as a wet bag, onto the edge of the tub. She thought about the day and was instantly frigid, as though in arctic waters. She watched the steam rising from her hot bath water as she knew it also did from ice. The two extremes of life always roll round to kiss one another.

Alice clambered out, slopping water over the sides and onto the slippery floor in her haste. She brushed her skin to the point of chafing with a leaf-dry towel. Her skin grew pink and irritated but Alice continued to rub, trying to warm her trembling body and ignore her chattering teeth. It was the draughty bathroom's fault, Alice convinced herself. The day had turned cold, she was sure. She left the balmy room, still lying to herself, and dressed in layers like an Eskimo expecting a snowstorm. An illicit double shot of the whisky her father kept for guests proved apotropaic. Clutching the crystal glass like an amulet, Alice felt the shivering subside as the golden fluid rapidly spread its warmth.

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That evening, bundled up in blankets on the couch, Alice feigned enjoyment. She had been bleakly cheerful throughout the selection of movies and pizza types but now, shrouded in the darkness with the flickering screen the only light, Alice could let the mask slip. She was grateful for her father's hulking presence at her side, for the heat and muscled power of him. Alice cuddled up to his massive shoulders, as a small child had done many years before. She felt his surprise as he shifted to wrap a bear-like limb around her shoulder. Alice breathed in the heavy scent of him and it registered in her brain like a whip crack. She was six, watching the nature channel: a show on the grizzlies of North America. Curled up on his lap, his arms around her, she felt engulfed by the furry, fuzzy bear that was her father. Prickly, bristling beard hair next to her face. Gruff grizzly voice. Smell of hops on his breath. Her eyes on an icy beer clenched in large hands with square nails, flat as spades.

But into this safe space snuck the memory of a jagged jaw. An unkempt beard. A sour smell. Alice recoiled at the flashing whiteness of a dead body stretched out in a desolate veldt. Bugs in its hair, a dry leaf stuck to an eyeball – eyes wide to greet death. Face down in the dry red earth - an unnatural pose, negating sleep. The vision, and then relief of being safe, exhausted her.

She tried to tell herself to stop scaring herself. She didn't die. She was safe now. But she had no appetite for the thick cheese-ridden slices of Hawaiian and Tikka Chicken pizza and was relieved when the credits for the first movie rolled. She rubbed her eyes, widening her mouth to a yawn – aping tiredness – until her father noted it and she could say:

"I'm going to turn in, dad. I'm too tired to stay up anymore. But you watch the second movie. I've been studying too hard, I guess."

"That's my girl!" Dennis beamed at her.

Alice went straight to her bed without bothering to turn on the light. As she drew near, something rose out of the gloom, a form on her pillow. A purse? Her hand was stretching to grasp it when the unrecognizable coalesced and loomed suddenly visible in the darkness. She arm whipped back. She did not want to but she struck on the light. Dinah meowed

from somewhere in the room. The dead rat slept on her pillow – a gift from Di, the Huntress - its soft innards already beginning to putrefy, its last meal undigested in its belly. Stiff claws. Pink toes. Rodent teeth jutting. Alice felt she would vomit. Her revulsion complete, she ran to call her father. Rodent removed and fresh pillow found, Alice closed all the windows, put the heater on full blast and finally propped her hockey stick against the bedside table. She still felt vulnerable. It was illogical. The man had no idea who she really was or where she lived. That was the thing about fear, Alice thought. Logic had nothing to do with it.

...

Alice can see her. Up ahead through the crowd. It's a carnival and the streets are full of clowns and burlesque dancers. Now she's gone. Alice can sense her, on the periphery, just out of sight. Penelope caught on the edge of a dream, deep in the penumbral shadows. A flash but when she turns to look, Penelope is gone. Alice calls to her to come back. A dancer with the clap, her face half rotted off, gives a lipless smile, the teeth too long as the gums are gone. Mother is somewhere here. Over there! Running. Someone is chasing and shouting "Off with her head!" She sees her in the distance, her hair a beacon of light. Gone. No, there! Stretching and pushing past people who jostle and hiss. Slow motion. Reach for the stars. Tugging. Gotcha! Mother turns. An absent face; a black smudge where a face should have been. Alice screams and recoils from the dark, featureless stain.

...

Alice called Theresa to say she had given up the search. She announced that she had abandoned the quest. She had learnt her lesson from yesterday's narrow escape. Alice was spooked. The aching for answers was now outdone by a trembling anxiety that paralysed her. But this went unsaid. Theresa was relieved. She told Alice how she had seemed so out of control in recent weeks, so unlike herself. Theresa had then suggested an alternative means for Alice to exorcise the demons of her hurt and rage over the recent events in her life. She suggested that Alice write a story about it all. The idea of writing the life of her

mother sparked Alice's interest. The idea that from the safety of her room, behind the sharp-edged defence of a pen, she could narrate the story of her mother's undisclosed existence intrigued her. However, as she did not have all the facts at her disposal, she would have to imagine the rest. This posed a problem. Alice went out to the garden to think. She needed the peace, the green, the sense of things quietly getting on with the business of living. "Get busy living or get busy dying." was her favourite quote from the movie Shawshank Redemption. She stood barefoot on the chilly grass, spraying a firethorn laden with red berries with a fine mist from the hosepipe's adjustable nozzle. Suddenly a strong scent of fresh jasmine wafted past. Middle of winter. No jasmine in the hedge. Penelope's favourite smell. Her mind began the conversation.

I'm so mad at you.

Why?

For dying. For leaving me. For not being who you said you were.

I was everything I said I was. I was just also many other things besides. Things I didn't mention. Children never know all of their parents any more than parents can know their children entirely. I'm sure there are things about you that I don't know. Things you never told me.

Caitlyn's party. Alice flushed at the memory and tried to formulate an answer to the mother in her mind. Her head ached and she wondered if she split it open, whether Penelope would jump out, armed to the teeth and demanding the truth. A war-like Athene. Alice persisted: *There were things I really needed to tell you. Now you're gone and there's no one to tell them to. And I need to tell someone. I feel like that Greek who had a secret he wasn't allowed to tell and so he dug a hole and told the earth.*

The barber of King Midas. Always the tone of certainty. Penelope the oracle.

Yes. Him.

What about daddy? Couldn't you talk to him?

Are you crazy? Dad! Dad hates talking about emotions. He doesn't want to discuss his own feelings so why would he want to know about mine? Besides, dad thinks I'm just a little girl. He doesn't want to think of me as a woman! He doesn't even remember to buy me tampons, did I tell you that? How could I tell him about being in love and how the guy seduced and humiliated me? Or how you had an affair and how, most recently, I almost

died at the hands of some disgusting paedophile, trying to track down your lover! It sounds like fantasy!

I always told you that your life was stranger than fiction. So, what are you going to do?

I'm doing it. I'm standing in your garden where I can still feel you; still see you holding that old tin watering can, your dress damp from where you've slopped half its contents down yourself again. I'm standing here, talking to ghosts in my head.

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The suspension dragged on. Alice trying unsuccessfully to focus on her studies and catch up all the work she had missed since the days when daydreaming over Derek had been her biggest problem and had caused her to stop concentrating in class. Whole sections she could not recall, entire chapters that rose from the page, as though she were seeing the words for the first time. The past two months of school a blur for a multitude of unpleasant reasons. Alice felt overwhelmed. How was she supposed to catch it all up? And even if she did, the current two weeks that she was away would leave a fresh lot of work undone. It seemed so futile, so impossible. She felt like of the Danaids, trying to fill a bottomless vessel or Sisyphus with his boulder. She decided to heed the quiet voice of her mother suggesting a tea break.

She found her father paging through a fresh batch of bills, hot out of the post-box. Alice's eyes fell on one bearing the emblem of St. Ignatius hospital along with an astronomical figure. She was convinced the last few zeros must be a typing error. The key had clearly jammed. Dennis saw her see. He shuffled it to the bottom of the bill pile, fat like an A4 deck of cards. Alice protested. "It's ludicrous! They're a hospital. They're supposed to make people better. They couldn't make mommy better but they have the nerve to send you a bill for the failed attempt!" Alice realized she was ranting, her hands in her hair, tugging at the roots. Her father barely mustered a response. Time was he would have railed with her. Now he sat, quietly shuffling papers and said, "I know it's hard to understand. Leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, too, Allie. But bills are bills. They have to be paid." He looked so broken; Alice felt she had hurt him by pointing out the obvious irony of sending someone a bill connected with health treatment when the recipient was

dead. She wanted to make amends. She cast around for a peace offering.

“I’m going to make some tea. Would you like some?”

“Not for me, thanks, baby.” His answer was automatic. A rote response. His standard these days to anything she offered him. Food, drink, company, affection. Not for me, thanks, baby.

Alice could hear her mother say, *Yes, please, that would be lovely. Tea is always a good idea. Strong, hot, with plenty of milk. Solves many worries all on its own, does a good cup of tea.* How very English she was in so many ways! Her love of tea was only one example; and even in this Penelope managed to serve up a conundrum for her daughter. For how on earth is one to make tea strong yet milky? And if one succeeds in that first part of the complicated scientific equation that was for her mother the perfect cup of tea, how did one then keep the brew sufficiently hot in spite of the addition of copious amounts of milk? Alice could never get it quite right.

Her mother would observe the offering carefully, smile thinly and bring the rim of the china cup to her lips without expectation but with an air of certainty that the contents would prove disappointing. She was never wrong. Alice was starting to realize the truth of the idea that we get what we expect. She knew now that she would never have been able to give her mother tea satisfaction. She could not solve the Tea Equation, because her mother had not believed she could. This made Alice angry.

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Alice sat watching the teabag stewing. Why was she so irritable at the moment? She felt an intense irritation rise in her like a tension in all of her muscles, a twitching, agitated sensation. Tautness in the fibres beneath the skin. She wanted to scratch it off, peel away the dermis and sandpaper the muscle tissue, to alleviate the itching, ragged feeling in her body. She wanted to scream at strangers and kick trees and stray dogs. It was such an unattractive state of mind that she reeled away from this ugliness in her and instead slouched in the garden chair, focussing intently on her mug of tea. Viewed from this lower angle, the teabag resembled a red iceberg. It bobbed partially above the surface, its bulk concealed beneath the steaming water. A dark stain seeped from it in strange osmotic

patterns, dispersing through the water like a trail of blood. Steam rose continuously and Alice recalled how the water around ice also appears to steam. She imagined that somewhere a great iceberg was silently bobbing and steaming in a frigid ink-black ocean. It made her feel more desolate than ever and she shivered as she heard in her head the creak and crack of shifting ice that would be the only sound. Ice with secrets deep inside. Ice which had not been water for millennia. Ice which held only the memory of fluidity and was jealous of the water which surrounded it and devoured it at the edges. "Global warming" whispered the slowly heating waters of the world. "Ah!" sighed the ice at the end of the world, "My time is coming. Soon I will be free." And then it went back to creaking and groaning, biding its time and keeping its secrets. Like her mother had. Alice, herself, felt frozen at the core. She broke from her reverie with a jolt and regarded the mug. The russet brew had become tepid. Yet still she sat, awake enough to see the mug but not enough to reach out and touch it. She felt like a ghost, only able to view things without having any effect on them. She felt she had become a spectator of her own life. Eventually she pushed herself out of the chair as though it required great physical effort and went inside, leaving the tea untouched and alone. It reminded her of how she felt. She glanced back at the abandoned mug and her mouth twitched at the corners with something that resembled mirth but was not. *A wasted teabag!* Her mother scolded in her head. *And that ring will stain if you don't tip out that tea straight away and rinse the mug* - the warning tone that was always accompanied by a cocked head and an arched eyebrow; an expression that said, "I know better". Alice decided to leave the mug outside indefinitely.

...

First day back at school. The stares and the whispering had made Alice crave solitude. Listening to the bell for first break shrilling though the building, she decided she would seek out the relative quiet of the tennis courts. She was starting to hold the pessimistic view that perhaps Theresa was the only true friend she had in the world. But as she filed out of the room, wedged between her classmates, intent on making her escape, Susan-Rose was at her side asking how she was and confiding in her that Vivian had been warning everyone to stay away from 'Alice the Animal' with her wild temper. Susan-Rose's news never lifted

Alice's spirits. Alice wished that Theresa was not home with the flu.

Alice could not seem to shake Susan-Rose and so they ended up together at the courts. Suzie's voice held exaggerated concern. "I'm really worried about you, Alice. You need to pull yourself together." Alice registered her nasal drawl and wondered briefly how someone who had never lived in the states had developed such flat vowels. Alice lounged, eyes half-mast, head tilted back to rest on the practice wall of the sun-baked tennis court. Soaking up the fragile winter sun, languid as a lizard and nonchalant in every aspect, she remained mute.

Susan-Rose droned on. "You have to at least try and pull yourself together. You're alienating those around you who care. I'm telling you this as a *friend*. Amanda and Maddy were saying during Geography that they're not sure they want to hang out with you anymore. They say you're no fun anymore and that everyone's whispering about you all the time and making life difficult for your friends. I'll be honest, Allie, at the moment it's not easy being a buddy of yours and you're not exactly helping with that permanently sour face. I never would have thought you'd beat someone up! Did you know that poor Viv is scared to come near me if I'm with you?"

Suzie's jaws were furiously working an enormous blob of gum which she puffed out to form a grape-coloured bubble almost as big as her face. Alice wished it would pop.

"No, I didn't. I've got a question: who told Vivian about my mother's affair?"

Madeleine and Amanda, who had arrived together during Susan-Rose's lecture, shook their heads but Amanda's eyes flicked unwittingly in the direction of Susan-Rose.

Alice followed Amanda's glance to Suzie and then held her gaze until she dropped her eyes. An admission.

"It was a secret. Only our group knew. You swore you'd tell no one, Suzie. You promised me."

Susan-Rose shrugged, looking awkward.

"I don't deserve the things that have been happening in my life. I didn't do anything to cause them, Suzie, so could you stop taking so much delight in my misery?"

"I don't! But you're not just an innocent victim! You were boozing at Caitlyn's party the night you got your picture taken with Derek! You were *so* motherless! I don't know how you managed all those Vodka and cokes. This is precisely why I never drink. People

get themselves into sticky situations when they're not sober and then blame everyone else."

Alice's mind jarred on a detail.

"Wait a minute. How could you have known that I was drunk or what I was being given to drink?"

Susan-Rose's face of prudish superiority dissolved. She made a skew expression. Guilt.

"Oh, my God. You knew. You were involved!"

"No, I only saw him fixing your drink in the kitchen and I saw him put the vodka in."

"You saw Derek spiking my drinks? And you never told me? You saw me getting increasingly pissed and you did nothing!"

"I didn't think it was such a big deal. He asked me not to say anything. You know how charming he can be. He said it was just a bit of fun."

"A bit of fun? Why couldn't you be loyal to me? I begged Caitlyn not to throw you out when you crashed the party because I'm your friend. And this is how you repay me?"

"Relax, Alice. How was I supposed to know he was gonna taken pictures of your good time!"

"Good time? Good time! He raped me! He raped me and then he distributed naked pictures of me, you cow!"

Susan-Rose fled, Madeleine in hot pursuit.

...

Amanda, watching Suzie and Madeleine race away, sensed that a line had been crossed. She knew the group was over and that things would never be the same again and felt, briefly, a stab of guilt and pity for the girl she had thought invincible, on her way to great things. Amanda knew she would have to stick with Madeleine who in turn would side with Susan-Rose. Alice, the girl voted 'Most Likely to Succeed' in the first term's Matric newspaper poll, was on her own from this moment on. Amanda remembered that Alice's smiling face had appeared right next to that of the recipient of the 'Most Popular' award, Vivian.

How the mighty are fallen, she thought. Biblical quotes were the only ones Amanda

remembered, drummed into her by her mother, Joy, whom Alice described as a religious zealot. A mother who forbade sleepovers and movies and coffee as the drink of Satan. A mother who, according to Alice, made of her name a sad joke by being an utterly joyless Joy. Mrs Misery. Alice had called her, once. Miserable Joy. Alice and her love of wordplay. Alice and her lofty philosophical ideas that left the rest of them confused. Alice with her big, bright future. Alice with her open-minded mother and her Buddhist ways.

Amanda thought now of how Alice's mother had thrown parties and taken the group on outings to fun places like outdoor theatre shows and museums to learn about the evolution of man and see monkey-like sculptures of the supposed ancestors of modern humans.

That was the last time Amanda had been allowed to go anywhere with Alice. Amanda had told her mother of the experimental theatre they had seen and the museum show and Joy had beaten her till she had been too tired to lift her hands. Her mother had screamed that evolution was a theory of the Anti-Christ and directly contradicted the truth of the creation of the universe in seven days by Jehovah. Amanda had hated Alice that day, believing that she was to blame for the pain that rippled through her body.

Now Alice's bright future was shot to hell and Alice's mother had been whoring around and then struck down like one of the fallen souls of Sodom and Gomorrah. Alice's beautiful mother: the whore of Babylon.

Amanda felt vindicated. Pulling her phone from her pocket, she stepped to the wounded giant and prepared to deliver the coup de grâce: Files on her phone which contained Alice in all her naked, sleeping glory. Amanda smirked.

She was going to enjoy this.

...

Alice stumbled into an empty classroom and shut the world out as she slammed the door. Moments before Amanda had showed her phone files of the pictures that Derek had taken of her that fateful night at Caitlyn's. Alice, confused as to why her friend would have those horrid pictures on her phone, had asked where she had found them. Her reply, spoken so coldly, still chilled Alice's heart. She had said, "Suzie sent them to me. She sent them to everyone in her address book." Then she had given her a pitying smile loaded with

malice and trotted away.

So. Not only had Susan-Rose betrayed her on the day of the party but on every day since. And Amanda and Madeleine didn't care about her either! Disorientated by multiple betrayals, she slumped into a desk and sat, staring morosely at the pattern made by the wood's grain. She inhaled the dusty scent of chalk and books and empty places of learning, the ideas still floating in the air, giving off an intangible aroma. She inhaled the stillness and was suddenly aware of the smell of yoghurt, the sound of sniffing and scraping. The rustle of paper.

The memory of Melinda rose to point a finger at her. Face pale and bloodless, Melinda moved towards her. And, suddenly it was six months earlier and the ghost of a midsummer heat caused her to swoon. Alice and Melinda in the classroom. Alice leaving her alone to her fate. Alice, letting those girls taunt and jeer endlessly month after month, year after year. It was not just that one day in that one classroom; it was every day in countless classrooms over five years since Melinda had arrived as a painfully thin adolescent with braces. Five years. Five long years of saying nothing. Of letting Melinda ghost through her classes and her life, without once extending a helping hand, without one act of kindness, without one word of friendship. Scared, so scared to be uncool, to be associated with a pariah. For this Alice knew she deserved to be punished. For this Alice was content to suffer. She had betrayed another human being. Alice with all her high ideals had not joined in the tormenting but had done nothing to stop it either. Hers was the sin of silence. Hers the guilt of omission. She wished fervently she could go back to that final point of contact. That final chance for redemption with a small, lonely girl in a classroom six months ago in the height of an African summer. She would do things differently. And God help anyone who tried to stop her. She would gladly beat a dozen Vivian's for the chance, just the small threadlike glimmer of a chance, fine as a spider's web, to change the outcome. That day. That fateful day. She had left her all alone. For the last time. The very last time.

...

Three days later Melinda was dead. She had been found hanging in the family bathroom of her shabby home by her little brother who had screamed the place down and brought the

whole household running. She'd used her school pantyhose. The nylon leggings had been neatly knotted (They had learnt slip-knots and bow-ties that month in gym class) and tied to a steel bracket that supported a heavy terracotta pot, in which a limp fern struggled to survive. She'd carefully removed the plant and placed it onto the toilet seat. The plant had sat on its throne and had borne silent witness to her death. She had not wanted to overtax the strength of the bracket by leaving the plant in place as her only fear had been that the bracket would rip out of the wall and she would fall to the floor, unscathed, her attempt unsuccessful. She had used the pine three-legged stool, painted olive green some years back, to stand on. The stool usually held a selection of dirty magazines that were reading material to help pass the time for those who, like her father, suffered from constipation. The magazines had been found neatly stacked on the floor next to the toilet. Melinda had obviously trusted her father's thorough nature a great deal. She had placed a lot of faith in the strength of a simple pot-holder bracketed to the wall. But Melinda knew her father. He was a thorough man. The bracket was not simply glued on or loosely attached with standard screws imported from the People's Republic of China. He had double-bolted it to the wall with the help of a heavy-duty drill and industrial-strength screws.

So, when Melinda had executed a perfect star-jump (she was a whiz in gym class) off the three-legged stool, done so that her splayed legs would come down on either side of it, her father's workmanship had passed the test with flying colours. The bracket had wrenched loose from its top screw, but both the middle and the bottom ones had held their ground stubbornly and did not budge. Instead, Melinda's soft pale neck had been made to yield. It obliged with a loud click like somebody using both hands to snap their fingers simultaneously. The plant had witnessed how her legs had twitched and swung like twin pendulums in perfect sync. The plant had seen all, but it kept its secrets.

It was only when her baby brother, desperate to pee, had disobeyed the house rules and burst into the bathroom when his frantic knocking went unanswered, that Melinda's body had been discovered. Melinda's parents rarely noticed the whereabouts of Melinda. Her home life had mirrored her school life: she had been invisible or the object of derision in both. They had no recollection of her going to the bathroom and searched their collective memory in vain for when exactly they had last seen her. The policeman taking notes may

have been shocked, but his face was like someone after Botox. Not a muscle moved. He popped a long stick of gum into his mouth, chewed furiously for a few moments, and asked the next question. It was only when the autopsy came back a few weeks later that the police were able to tell Melinda's parents that she had died between 10PM and midnight, at least three hours after they had eaten dinner together, off their laps, in front of the TV. By that time Melinda's father had repaired the bracket and the recalcitrant plant was again hanging glumly from it.

...

Penelope's warning in her ear. It came through the layers of memory, like a fine mist wandering through a dense thicket. *Ah, my sweet, be thee of good cheer! Try not to take everything so to heart. You are too sensitive. Remember. 'Laugh and the world laughs with you...'*

"Cry and you cry alone." Alice spoke into the silent room.

Her mother loved that saying. She felt it vindicated her grimly optimistic outlook. Laughter was the only way to survive. Theresa and Alice, in their time at the severe single-sex institution, had found that to be true. Humour as a means to survive the brutal onslaught of puberty. Humour as a means to fend off words like daggers and looks sharp as razor wire. Humour to cry for. But now, without Penelope, without Theresa, what hope had Alice of survival? She thought of her and Theresa, escaping the battleground so many times in the past, seemingly unscathed, dodging the slings and arrows of misfortune, ducking the barbed comments hurled in their direction. Alice and Theresa. Theresa and Alice. Arm in arm, swaying down the passageway singing "B-I-T-C-H, B-I-T-C-H, B-I-T-C-H and BITCH was her Name-O" to the tune of Bingo until laughter dissolved the pain, drew the poison from the wounds and left them whole once more. But now, all alone, the poison seeped into her bloodstream, the pain sang in her veins, beating out her doom with every pulse of a weary heart. Alice, alone and miserable, picked up a pen, snatched a scrap of crumpled paper from the dusty ground and began to write.

I think memories are terrible things. They remind us of a time spent and a life we

no longer have. People we no longer know, a person we no longer are and a smile we no longer give to the world with quite the same guileless mirth. The future lies as yet undreamed so all we have is a cold, solitary piece of present. Call me greedy, but it just doesn't feel like enough. Memories are treacherous and even the good ones break us up, like a water-logged ship in bad weather, the constant onslaught reducing us to so much flotsam and jetsam.

The pieces of our lives float in the dark briny waters of our subconscious. Recollections that sink, fashioning a brief necklace of bubbles as they descend but each fresh mind-storm, each unguarded brainstorm, results in a fresh collection of debris, rising once more from the murky depths to the choppy surface.

My mind is an over-crowded ocean.

Nothing is ever thrown away, nothing destroyed or forgotten, never obliterated.

Only temporarily submerged.

I hate memories, a flotilla of flotsam that surfaces forcefully, diverting whatever new craft is being paddled towards the shallows, back out to the depths.

One must survive the memory of one's mistakes and resist being ravaged by each remembering which threatens to dismember the one who remembers.

Recollection threatens to scatter the collection of fragments that make up self. How do you stop the past from swallowing the present whole and licking its lips, gazing, ever-ravenous, at the future?

...

Why did she feel this way? Where did this rage come from? No excuses, her life, no more difficult than that of anyone else. Yet she was angry at how poor she felt. Financially scruffy, since her mother's death had left them with big debts and one income. Angry at her father for his unpaid leave of absence. The money flow from her parent's savings had rapidly slowed to a desperate trickle and then ceased. Alice threw off her tatty, dated lace-ups. Day in and day out in the same shoes will inevitably lead to a shoe with a permanent odour of foot and old sweat. Alice wrinkled her nose in disgust and, stripping hurriedly, stepped into the shower. She stood a long time under the hot spray, washing the past away with the soap and steaming water. But the past would not be so easily dislodged. It

refused. It clung to her skin like invisible hook worms that crawled and squirmed on its surface until she began to scrub her body relentlessly with a loofah, turning her skin an angry red in her self-loathing and fear. After rinsing for a long time, the shower was cooling but Alice still felt dirty and disgruntled. What to do? What on God's green earth to do, if a long, hot shower could not restore one to good humour and a feeling of mild redemption? Always, Alice sought water in times of distress. Always, she had found in it a liquid miracle. She loved to swim in it, wallow in it, roll and twist and undulate like a mermaid through it. Or like a long strip of ocean kelp, that rolls and twists and dives in the frothing surf, and by virtue of its yielding nature, seldom breaks. Now Alice felt as though she had gone rigid and brittle in the face of the ongoing onslaught of waves of undesirable change. She knew that in this inflexible state it was only a matter of time before she would have to yield and, being incapable of bending, would be made to break.

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The dark shimmered and danced behind her closed eyelids. The effect was disorientation and a feeling of motion sickness. Unwillingly, she forced her eyes to open to the quivering night and the sight of her mother conceived in points of light. She was a vision executed in pointillism, a million tiny circles of self that never touched one another. They stood distinct and apart yet seemed to form a cohesive, recognizable whole. But now Alice knew the truth: that there were holes between the holes in her. Holes in the whole of her and none of them coalesced. Grasping at her was like trying to string beads of wet tapioca into a necklace one could wear, like trying to grip the night's soft darkness and fling it from her, an unwanted blanket on a steamy night. She was pins of light that held fast the fabric of her self and Alice sought but one loose thread on which to tug, but only to prove that she was there and not as a means to unravel the garment of her. It was, rather, a wishful attempt to disrobe her, all the better to see her.

Seated in the dark study in the middle of the night, Alice could not shake the dream. She stared dully at the flickering cursor. Five days earlier she had found the scrap. Just a scrap. A small piece of card on which appeared an email address with a username written neatly beneath. It was in Penelope's bold rolling hand and it was the first proof that she had used an online mail address, besides the desktop-based Outlook Express. It was a hotmail account. Alice had decided to leave it alone. She had hidden it again, at the very back of the third drawer where she had found it, while sorting papers. She was not snooping. She had been asked to do this filing activity by her father. She had a pile for bills, a pile for receipts, a pile for letters and cards and a pile for oddments. This was definitely an oddment,

emphasis on odd. There it had lain, out of sight but never out of mind, for five agonizing days. She told Theresa about the address. Theresa sensed trouble. She had mouthed off one of her own favourite idioms: Curiosity killed the cat, Alice! Dinah had sided with her friend, a choice she indicated by jumping onto Theresa's lap with a decisive meow and settling herself into a ball like an olden day muff, from which Theresa had just pulled her delicate hands. Theresa had recoiled from the fluffy lap adornment out of horror, not heat. She did not like animals and cats in particular made her nervous. Alice smiled. As a cat lover she knew that the easiest way to have a cat select you was to ignore it and not desire its company. Cats were perverse. Alice could have told her that. She revelled in her discomfort for a few moments. "So, if it's curiosity that kills the cat, what is it that the cat kills?" Theresa had looked confused. "Mice. Dinah brought me a massive rat as a gift last week, didn't you Dinah?" Dinah opened one yellow eye at the mention of her name, instantly lost interest and catnapped on her unwilling perch. Theresa shrank back in disgust, gingerly examining the paws she now thought to be filthy.

But Alice had been unable to forget the glowing shred of evidence and a luminous dream of her mother had woken her to the resolution to continue on her quest. She had tiptoed through the silent house, careful not to wake the dog, and slipped unseen into the study. The PC had hummed to life and the search for a password had commenced. She had tried all the obvious options. Her name. Variations thereof. Her birthday. Anniversary date. Alice's name. Her father's name. Nicknames. But now she felt thwarted.

She had been about to quit when she realized a possible solution had been staring her in the face the entire time. 'Forgot your password?' Alice clicked the button. See hint question? Yes. 'Who is the child of the light, yet the queen of the dark?' trust Penelope not to select a standard question to which Alice would know the answer, like 'What is your father's name?' Alice stared at the riddle. Her mother in her head rustled Sphinx-like wings, a smug smile on her lips. I'll show you, Alice vowed.

Ok. It had to be mythological. Alice had contracted her love of the ancients like a virulent bacterium passed on from her mother. And, like her mother, she had preferred the Greeks to the Romans. Alice had also liked the relative late-comers, the Aztecs and the Incas. Although Penelope disagreed that they were as advanced and pointed to their strange and scary artworks as proof of heightened barbarism and inferiority to the Greeks. The

difference, she held, was in the lack of beauty. Idealized, angelic beauty was resplendent in the art of the Greeks, Penelope maintained. But Alice had clung to her southern tribes, fascinated by their bloodthirsty rituals and the tales of gods in the form of jaguars and secret cities of gold. Alice knew it had to be Greek.

The following morning she trawled the bookshelves and pulled out a tome on Graeco-Roman civilization. She ran the relevant finger down the index and searched for associated references. What if Penelope meant the forces of darkness? If so, who was the Queen of Darkness? Hades was the ruler of the underworld. Did he have a queen? Yes! Persephone. Alice looked up her name and found it was thought to mean either 'she who destroys the light' (hence queen of darkness) or 'dazzling brilliance' (hence daughter of light). Confident she had solved the riddle, Alice punched in the code eagerly. Nothing. She tried again, carefully striking the keys, watching her spelling. The red error code popped up. Alice gave a howl of frustration and struck the monitor. She read more of the story of Persephone. Her name had many spellings. Proserpina, Persephoneia, Phersephone, Persephassa, Phersephatta. Alice tried them all. But she was called something else when she was Demeter's companion, not so? Kore. Still no luck. It was impossible. She could spend an eternity and never crack it. The smell of spring sunshine was in the study.

Alice was suddenly six and lying in her mother's arms on the carpet beneath the long narrow window, the slanting sunlight slowly warming their bones. She was listening intently to the exciting story of the abduction of the beautiful Persephone and how Zeus was complicit in the deed and had allowed his own daughter to be stolen as a deal between him and his brother, Hades. "Women have always been the bartering chips of men. Swopped and traded like baseball cards." Penelope's voice held a thread of bitterness, faint as a vein of ore through a cross-section of rock. "But they had not taken into account a mother's grief or what a woman is capable of" Her voice lifted with morbid glee at the idea of a goddess on the rampage. "She sent famine, dried up the land and caused the plants to wither. Proud Zeus was forced to relent and renege on his deal with Hades. But Hades had enticed Persephone to eat of the marital fruit, the pomegranate. Only a few *pips* had passed her *lips*..." She said the line as if it was a verse. She was a master story-teller, aware of the sound of spoken language. A natural orator. "It was enough. Those few seeds meant that she could not return to earth permanently, only visit. Half her life in shadow and half in

light.”

A bit like Penelope herself, Alice thought and then she realised that her mother would have a clue that was the key to another word: a word that led to a word. Endless recession of meaning, a code like a dictionary, always leading you on to other places. An endless voyage. Alice the Argonaut.

OK. So I'll give myself three chances to guess where her mind went, Alice reasoned. It is not the name of the goddess. Her mother? Demeter. Denied. Her captor: Hades. Denied. Too obvious. In an instant the symbol of the final tragedy ripened in her mind: the pomegranate. Alice was sure.

The luminous inbox appeared. Alice sat silent and still, processing the magnitude of her victory. Here it was. All the answers she was looking for were in this space. Her eyes took in the list of e-mails and the sender. There was only one. The same name repeated, line by line: 'GardenGuru'. So Penelope had used this e-mail address for one correspondent only. It was not a good sign. It meant that this address was secret.

Alice flexed in her chair as her eyes spotted three recent emails, unopened. Their dates were after that fateful Friday. Alice took a breath and clicked on the oldest message.

From: <gardenguru@yahoo.com >

Date: 16 July 1999 21:16:00 PM

To: pennylane@hotmail.com

Subject: What happened?

What happened? Where were you? I waited for three hours but you never came. I tried your mobile but it was off.

Call me when you get this.

Love,

Rob

Alice swallowed. Her mouth felt dirty, as if she needed to brush her teeth. Her tongue felt thick and furry. She clicked again.

From: <gardenguru@yahoo.com >

Date: 25 July 1999 5:00:23 AM

To: pennylane@hotmail.com

Subject: Talk to me!

What is going on, Penny? I haven't heard from you in over a week. We need to talk. It can't end like this, surely?

I've tried calling your phone but no luck.

Please, Pen. I need to see you.

I love you.

Alice thought of the phone, crushed to metal dust by a vast steel beast. Her mother's phone had probably been vapourized by the impact. It had never been found. It was probably compacted deep in the heart of a small, red cube by now, down at the scrap yard.

Click.

From: <gardenguru@yahoo.com >

Date: 12 August 1999 13:00:44 PM

To: pennylane@hotmail.com

Subject: Why?

I don't deserve this.

I tried to call the house. I know you told me never to do so but you left me no choice. He answered both times.

What was I to do, Pen? I'm no hero. I hung up.

I know you love me. So, why are you being so cruel?

Love, your Robert.

Alice clicked "reply" and began to type.

Rob.

This is for the best. I don't think we can go on like this. I need time to think. Please don't call again. I'll be in touch. I promise.

Penny

She had clicked send without thinking. She needed him to stay away. Robert calling her home was a horrid thought. Her father must never find out. It would kill him.

It felt so wrong to pretend to be a dead person and the thought that he would read it as if Penelope had written it and was still living, quietly breathing and going about her business somewhere across town was monstrously strange! Oh, God. This kind of dishonesty was new. It was enabled by a technology of distance. Alice's mind darted to Padre and the scary lies he had told. She felt sickened by what she had done. But it also felt oddly comforting to imagine someone thinking Penelope was alive. It made her live for an instant in her daughter's besieged brain, too. For just a moment it was as if she was alive somewhere, resurrected by the belief of a man still extant in the real world. Enough. Alice had to escape virtual non-reality. She signed out and shut down the PC.

And so began a period of pointless delay. She went for walks. She watered the lawn. Frustrated, she visited Theresa. They sat in silence for a while, letting the weight of the worries settle into the furniture.

"So, Al, are you really not going to see that psychologist guy again?"

"Dr. Kline? No way! Never again. He's horrid!"

"Oh, Alice! He can't be that bad."

"Are you kidding? He's a freak! I swear he's more messed up than any of his patients!"

"Really?"

"That man puts the 'PSYCHO' back in psychologist!"

Theresa laughed.

"He had the cheek to tell me that I had Obsessive Compulsive Disorder because I

straightened the magazines on his coffee table! I know I have tendencies in that direction but you should have seen this guy's office! Everything was lined up in rows like infantry! I just kept thinking, 'Remove the log from your own eye first!'

Alice wrinkled her nose as she often did before asking a 'corker' as her mother called her difficult questions.

"Do you ever speak to people in your head, Resa? People who aren't around anymore?"

"Sometimes I imagine chatting to my dad."

"Do you remember him at all?"

"I'm not sure. Sometimes I think I have a memory but then I think that maybe I made it up. You, know? Imagined it."

"Does your mom ever talk about him?"

"Nah. I asked once. She said he was a bum. An alcoholic. She said we were better off without him. I don't even know if he's still alive."

On the walk home Alice told herself sternly that she should be grateful for her life and leave things well enough alone.

But the computer kept calling. It would not let her be. She had eaten the forbidden fruit and now she had access to knowledge. All the information that she desired was pulsating through the wires. The study seemed to throb.

For now I am bent to know, by the worst means, the worst...stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er.

The door ajar, an invitation she could not refuse. She had found the key and now she had to use it.

...

Name. She needed his full name. Inspiration. She clicked to Google and typed in 'Garden Guru'. It was the recognized name of the sender. A website exploded in a hundred shades of green. So. Mom had found her Emerald Isle in SA after all, Alice thought bitterly. She tried to focus. She navigated the site and checked in the forum, reading languidly. Boring stuff. Membership of over three thousand gardening enthusiasts. Her eyes were

avoiding the fine print. But there it was: Website Moderator – Robert Foley.

Now what? It was a reflex action that made her pick up the phone book and page to F. Alice felt silly as she did so. It would not be so simple. Could not be so easy. So mundane. She would have to do some sleuthing, surely?

Staring down at his name, Alice felt a wave of disappointment. Her quest had ended in this: a phone-book entry. It was anticlimactic. He was meant to be exotic. An international man of mystery. Someone exceptional, so that it would make sense that her mother had chosen him. Had risked it all. Thrown caution and her family, to the wind and been unable to resist his animal magnetism.

He was listed as living at 219 Primrose Way. The path to darkness. How apposite. As she glanced over the list of Foleys she spied an Advocate C B Foley with a P O Box address, two telephone numbers and a fax number. The home phone number jumped off the page. It was the same as Robert's. So this was the wife. Alice did not know why she was so surprised at the separate listing. She was a lawyer. Alice peered carefully at the entries, searching for clues. She wondered how a telephone book ranked in relation to the classifieds in her mother's estimation of latent meaning.

Read carefully, Alice. See how her separate listing says something about her?

Yes, mom, and about the nature of their marriage, too. They're separate; distinct and perhaps, distant. Estranged?

Clever girl. - Her mom's quiet praise.

Out of a strange curiosity she did what few people ever do; she paged through to her own family name and examined the listing. Mr. & Mrs. D J Nichol. One telephone number, one address and Penelope's identity subsumed by his initials. Dennis John. Her mother swallowed up by the marriage - lost inside it, lost to it.

...

Armed with an address, the next phase was easy. Alice had to see where the enemy slept. She had her father drop her at Theresa's and left as soon as he had pulled away, without ever going in. She dawdled on the damp stairwell until his blue car disappeared around the corner and then she stepped back onto the street. She felt powerful. A woman

on a mission. Seek and destroy. So, her mother had been on her way to meet Robert the day she died. It explained a lot. It explained why she was on that road, in a part of town unrelated to her life. She had no business being there. Alice had seen how the location of the accident perplexed her father. She had seen the confusion and pain on his face. Penelope, off for an afternoon tryst with her Guru. Off to lose herself in the arms of her lover, deep in a garden somewhere. Maybe they planned to do it in the botanical gardens on a picnic blanket. Maybe he planned to show her a special flower in bloom.

The plans of mice and men.

Alice had mapped a route carefully. She was able to take a bus but the walk from the stop would be substantial. Alice took a chance, just one more chance, and hitched a ride from the bus station to within a few blocks of the address. She tried to walk sedately but she could not keep the urgency from her limbs, which, sensing the tension, moved at a trot. She was there sooner than she had intended. She had not considered what she would do when she got there. The destination had been all. Now, she felt unprepared and foolish to have come all this way with no plan for after her arrival.

Alice was skulking on the wide grassy verge, craning for a view of the house, wondering if Robert was home, when she heard someone clear his throat pointedly, just left of her shoulder. Alice spun to meet chocolate eyes. A young man, an inquiring expression on his face, was looking her up and down.

“Can I help you?”

“Uh,” – Alice tried to engage her brain but it was as if someone had unplugged her. No power, no processes. She could not think of a thing to say.

“Well, you’ve been staring at my house for the last ten minutes. I was just wondering if you needed anything.”

“The garden.”

“Sorry?”

“I love the garden. It’s really beautiful. Your dad must be really proud of it.”

“How do you know that it’s my dad who’s the green-fingers?”

Shit! Alice scabbled around in her mind - empty for the first time in her life – for a plausible excuse. Nothing. It was like someone had donated her brain to science without her consent.

“Well, you’re right. My dad loves to garden. My mom’s not really into that sort of thing.” Alice stood staring. “She doesn’t like the outdoors. Too many bugs.” The last sentence was said in a conspiratorial whisper as though he were sharing a state secret.

“Oh. My mom likes to garden,” Alice mumbled.

“My mom likes to win. She’s a lawyer.”

“So, what are you doing out here?” Alice asked.

“Hey! You stole my question!” He said in mock seriousness but he was smiling. Alice felt a warm glow. He went on:

“I was working on my bike in the driveway over there when I spotted a Peeping Tammy.”

Alice flushed.

“I’m Alice.”

“Adam. I’d shake your hand but...”

He held up grease-smearred palms by way of explanation.

Alice craned her neck to see through the thick hedge that separated the driveway from the main garden and led up to a double garage.

“You wanna see?”

Alice nodded. Adam smiled. She liked it when he smiled. It made her feel good.

It was not a bicycle. Not that boring kind of bike. It was a motorbike. A large silver and chrome Yamaha. Tools lay strewn about. Alice caught her breath. It was beautiful.

“Almost done. You’re not from around here, are you?”

“No. I was visiting a friend.” Finally. A plausible lie. She was plugged back in.

They chatted for a while, both unwilling to break the conversation. They kept thinking of things to say. Adam told her he was taking a gap year but intended to study classics the following year.

“That’s great! I’m matriculating this year. I would love to study the classics! I’ve been mad about mythology since I was a little girl.”

Adam shook his head, grimacing. His voice, when he next spoke, was disconsolate.

“My mom wants me to study law. She says an Arts degree is impractical. She wants me to be like her. A powerful attorney in a shark-grey suit. Always so sure, so right. But I don’t want to be married to the office.”

“My mom’s dead.”

She spoke without thinking. It just popped out. Alice flushed.

“I’m sorry,” said Adam, looking as if he really was.

“That’s OK. I’m not sure how thrilled my dad will be about me wanting to do a BA. Bugger all, he calls it.”

“You mean like everyone does?” He teased. “You wanna go for coffee, Alice?”

The question was unexpected and welcome.

They talked for what seemed like hours. He painted verbal pictures for Alice’s mind. He did not seem to find her interest strange. His smug mother, lean and elegant, never home. His father, Robert, a sweet professor of Botany at the university, who had never wanted a ‘career’. He liked to grow things and was fond of jazz music. He loved to dance but Carla, Adam’s mother, had no sense of rhythm. She had stepped all over Robert’s feet the few times she had tried to dance with him and gave up almost immediately, unwilling to work hard at something. Accustomed to acquiring skills with ease, she detested anything she found difficult and declared pointless anything she could not understand. It was only one weak point, amidst a host of skills but Carla’s was a pride that would not bend and she now refused to dance with her husband. Adam seemed relieved that she was rarely at home. He said that he felt sorry for his dad because he was alone most of the time and, whichever flowers he brought his wife, they were never the ones she liked. Robert had tried to teach her their Latin names once and her disinterest had hurt him deeply. Adam, often an unwilling witness to their fights, would flee on his bike, riding till he ran out of fuel.

It was only when it began to get dark that Alice panicked. She explained that she had to be home or her father would be angry. She omitted to tell Adam that her father had no idea where she was. He offered to drop her home. Hurtling down the roads, leaning into corners, her head lolling with the weight of the bulbous crash helmet. Alice felt a tingle of exhilaration that seemed a lot like happiness.

...

Alice had Adam drop her a few houses down. She waved goodbye and he called out, “Don’t forget! Three o’clock next Saturday, OK?” as he pulled away in a burst of noise

and smoke. She smiled and turned to see her father standing on the sidewalk. Her feet dragged as she crossed the short distance that separated them.

“Where have you been?”

“At Theresa’s. Why are you standing out here in the street?”

“I’ll ask the questions, Alice!” he roared.

“You were *not* at Theresa’s! She called looking for you. Now, where were you?”

“Just hanging out at a coffee shop.”

“With that boy?”

“Yes.”

“Who is he?”

“Just a friend.”

“Lying to me about where you are! Running around behind my back with some older boy on a motorbike, doing heaven knows what!” At this he seized hold of her arm, twisting it violently. “How many times have I forbidden you to ever get on one of those? They’re death-traps!”

“But you used to ride them! You used to race them! You owned three!”

“Yes, and your mother very sensibly made me give them up! You will do as I tell you!”

“Jesus taught by example,” Alice whispered.

“I’m not bloody Jesus!” He struck her hard with the flat of his hand. Alice heard a sound like a clap in her head. She was blinded by tears and the scene seemed murky. She stood, trembling, and felt the hot urine run down her legs and dribble over her socks.

They stood in silence for what seemed like an age. Then he tried to hug her. She shrugged her shoulders and twisted away, screaming, “No! I hate you!” and ran inside.

She stripped off and showered. He waited outside but when she walked passed him she lowered her eyes and said nothing.

“Alice?”

She shut her door with a firmness shy of a slam but it made a sound of finality. A sound that said, ‘No entry’.

He knocked later and came in when there was no reply. Alice lay in bed with the covers over her head. She pretended to be asleep. Alice was sure that he knew she was awake but she did not move. Dennis began.

“I didn’t mean to get so angry. I don’t know why I did that. It’s just; I worry so much about you. And now...with your mother...gone.” Long silence. “You’re all I have left. I can’t afford to lose you. I have to know where you are and who you’re with.” He sounded miserable. Alice stayed silent. He eased himself off the bed and the springs creaked back into position. Alice heard him sniff. Then the door shut quietly.

...

The garden was dying. Alice kept watering it but it seemed to make no difference. The plants knew Penelope was gone. Alice stood in the wet, contemplating this new and frustrating twist. Robert had a family. Adam was lovely. Robert himself, as described by his son, seemed a most unlikely villain. He sounded nice. Lonely in his marriage. He was a lover of gardens and dancing, her own mother’s two favourite things. Now what? What to do? Alice’s anger had seemed to fizzle away like the spluttering of a sparkler. She had thought she carried a torch. A growling, hissing flame of righteous rage, a bright beacon to light her way as she rushed to mete out her revenge. To confront and shame him, demanding restitution. But what restitution for a dead mother? What recompense? It was an unfillable void. No punishment would suffice. No amends could be made. It was an impossible plight. A quandary. Now she stood limply, arms at her side, watching the sprinkler drench the flowerbeds.

Dennis calling from the *stoep*.

“What are you doing? Alice?”

“Watering.”

“What’s the point?”

Inside she screamed: *You don’t condemn other things to die just because you can’t be bothered with living! Right now, there’s more life in these drooping camellias than inside our house. I’m not watering them for mom’s sake. I’m watering them for mine!*

She said flatly, “It makes me feel better.”

Her father stood, saying nothing. Then he went inside.

...

“That’s very sweet, Robert, but next time, could you just get me roses?” Carla gave a tight smile. “Of course, dear.” Robert regarded his wife and thought how much he hated the rose. It was a treacherous plant, the alluring blooms and virulent foliage inciting the urge to touch but rewarding those who reached out to its satin beauty with a stab from sharp thorns hidden beneath the leaves. Roses were beautiful, cruel things. No wonder they were his wife’s favourite. They were a floral personification of her. How he longed to stroke her cheek, soft with fine down, like a peach.

He tried to embrace her but she turned her shoulder abruptly and as his graceful embrace degenerated into a clumsy grapple, she stiffened in his arms and said, “Not now, Robert. I had a very long day at court. I just want a hot bath and an early night.” He had let her slip away.

Then he went into the downstairs bathroom and had a long, scalding shower. It was then that he began to become aware of how being methodical was one of the ways in which he stayed sane. These small, measured behaviours gave back to him a modicum of control over a life that was surely plunging into chaos. Carla felt miles away, irretrievably lost to him. They had not been intimate in word or deed for more than seven months when he first met Penelope. ‘Met’ of course is a less concise term in the 21st century than it had previously been. Robert did not, in fact, truly meet Penelope for a further three months, but by then, it was as though they had stood face to face for aeons.

Robert finished his shower and could still not face Carla for fear of strangling her. He went, instead, to his study and paced the blood-red Persian carpet unsure of what to do. He needed something to occupy his mind. He stared sightlessly at the rows of neatly-arranged books. Floor to ceiling, wall to wall, custom-built shelves surrounded him. Stacked silently were worlds of knowledge, waiting patiently to be tugged from a neat shelf. He stepped closer and examined the spines of a series of books on the Plant Kingdom, arranged in order, volumes one to thirty-two. Running his hand absent-mindedly along the gold-lettering, the raised surfaces like Braille beneath his fingertips, he half-closed his eyes and breathed in the smell of paper, ink, leather and time. He had always loved the smell of books. As a boy he had willingly spent large portions of his summer holidays prowling the

dark, secret aisles of his city's many libraries.

He knew his mother worried about his solitary pursuits. She feared he would not make friends or bond and would be lonely. She had not been entirely mistaken. Robert had been a loner at school and had made few friends either there or at university in later years. And now he admitted he was very much alone and, for the first time, lonely, too. He thought now how he had scorned the rowdy macho bonding of boys on the playgrounds and in the corridors of school, how he had skirted around similar practices of the young men during his undergraduate years, how the tenuous attempts of more social students to include him had ceased over time as he failed to reciprocate. And as the years went by, he had moved on to postgraduate research in that most nerdy of fields: Botany. Then he spent all his days roaming remote natural spots in search of rare biomes in which he spent months searching for, sketching and writing-up rare species. He received no mail, save a yearly birthday card from his mother. He drank beer on a Friday, alone in front of the TV, turned louder than necessary to fill up the space.

He had always thought himself happy. He did not regret his library-filled youth. He had known then that it would lead him to his future. He was unsurprised to find that he would spend his life surrounded by books. When he accepted his first post at the university, at age twenty-four, he had known he would never leave. Meeting Carla had been an accident. How pleasantly surprised he had been at her attentions! He had always wondered how he was to find a wife. And then she had found him and made it all easy. It was Carla who had decided where they would have their first date. Carla who had decided, after ten months, it was time to declare their relationship serious and make his intentions clear. He had dutifully put down the deposit for a ring she had selected and paid off the handsome sum in monthly instalments until six months later he was able to bring it home. Over dinner at her favourite restaurant, he had simply taken her hand and slipped the ring on her finger. She had raised an eyebrow and he had hurriedly added, "Please marry me, Carla". She had nodded and they had eaten their prawn cocktail starter in silence.

Now, more than twenty years later, he stood in a dimly-lit study and accepted that his mother had been right to worry. Tonight he felt very much like the company of men. He wanted the rowdy noise of a group of cronies. He wanted someone to slap him on the back and say, "Women! Can't live with them; can't get a licence to shoot them!" He wanted to

drink too much and be carried home, draped over the shoulders of two strong friends, larger and less intelligent than himself but fiercely loyal and who regarded him as a brother. He wanted all of this so keenly that it caused him actual physical pain. Somewhere in his chest there was a throbbing, pulsating ache, like a dislocated tension headache. He wheeled around in sudden agitation and took in the room.

The high sheen of the massive mahogany desk glistened in the green-yellow glow cast by the desk lamp. A bay window of composite cottage-pane, the heavy curtains not yet drawn, reflected the room and his dark form in glittering obsidian fragments. He observed two easy chairs in which no-one had ever taken it easy. He gazed at the red-brick fireplace which had never been used. It was his best-loved feature in this, his sanctuary, his study. It lay chilly and perfect with not a trace of ash or soot. A pile of tinder-dry wood stood ready, as it had done for more than fifteen years. Carla forbade fires in the fireplace. Too much mess, she claimed. And dangerous too. He had tried unsuccessfully to explain to her that that was why they called it a 'fire-place' – it was designed to be safe for fire. It was the place where fire could be. Should be. For God's sake, even the woodpile was carefully dusted! The maid was under strict instructions. Carla was an unforgiving 'madam'. But why then no fire, if it wasn't even Carla who had to deal with the resultant mess? He felt a wave of resentment and resistance form a clot like a damp rag in his throat. It makes the whole place smell for days afterwards. He could hear her absolutely-not tone. His shoulders hunched automatically in brute rage. The hair on his forearms and back lifted.

He crossed the room to the mantelpiece in two strides and flipped open the solid silver pipe box bearing his great-grandfather's initials etched into the surface in bold cursive lettering. He examined the contents of its wood-lined interior: An antique pipe, pipe cleaners, an unopened pouch of cherry tobacco and a brass Zippo lighter. These last two items had been given to him by an associate professor, who had mistaken his admiration for his pipe and the scent of his tobacco for a sign that Robert himself smoked. Robert considered the contents. Quietly he removed the lighter. He dropped to his haunches and took a few logs from the neat woodpile. He laid them in a criss-cross formation in the grate, stretched for a newspaper lying on a side table and tore it into broad strips which he scrunched into balls and positioned among the logs. He carefully lit the newspaper balls with the Zippo, fanned the flames with the Journal for Plant Sciences and rose only when

the sharp crackling sounds told him that the wood had caught. Next he went to the round stinkwood table where his limited supply of spirits and cut crystal tumblers stood on a silver tray. He poured three fingers of single malt the colour of pale straw which had come all the way from an icy Ireland. He returned to the fire, placed his drink on the side table, took the silver box from the mantelpiece with both hands, at the edges, so as not to leave oily fingerprint smudges on its polished surfaces and sank into an easy chair. The fire had warmed the room and was burning a cheerful orange. It gave him the first instant of pleasure he had had all day. Perhaps, even, the first truly pure instant in months.

Robert stared into the copper light and carefully, methodically cleaned the pipe. When he was satisfied, broke the seal on the pouch and clawed out a small amount of fragrant dark tobacco. He placed it into the bowl and tamped it down, then clicked the remnants of the slightly sticky tobacco from his fingers and held them up to his nose, inhaling the pleasant aroma it had left behind. Then he placed the pipe into unaccustomed lips and lit it. He puffed and sucked until the bowl glowed with red sparks and the smoke billowed around his head. He felt vaguely dizzy, as though his brain was encased in newly-made jelly: the wobble not yet quite firm. It was, for all that, not an unpleasant sensation. He coughed deeply like a man with consumption and waved the air directly in front of him clear. He eased deeper into the wing-back chair and sighed. Puffing thoughtfully on his illicit pipe before his illegal fire he decided that things would have to change.

Later that evening, feeling calmer and somehow more manly he decided that helping others would further improve his outlook. He decided to do some work. He sat down at the impressive desk, switched on his computer and logged on to the website he both developed and managed called "Garden Guru". It provided information and technical support to amateur gardeners, specializing in gardening in Southern Africa.

It was on this very night that he had decided that his life must change, that he had received his first e-mail from a woman who was to alter his existence forever. Scanning through the e-mails from desperate gardeners everywhere, her subject line had jumped out: I Hate Roses! Is it criminal to pull them out and start fresh? He opened it immediately.

From: <pennylane@hotmail.com>

Date: 14 December 1998 15:06:03 PM

To: gardenguru@yahoo.com

Subject: I HATE ROSES! Is it criminal to pull them out and start fresh?

'Dear Garden Guru,

I am so hoping that you could help me. I love to garden but I admit I am a rank amateur and kill as often as cure my plants. In spite of this, I have enjoyed moderate success. Friends do tell me that my garden is the best in the neighbourhood, but friends are always kind, are they not?

I do have a lovely bed of giant scarlet sage which I am told are not as easy to find as they once were and, though they will endure much, it takes special care to make them thrive (as mine do). I have had great success with clivias and hydrangeas but the one flower that has never given me any joy is the rose! It's not for lack of trying. Every year some well-meaning fool will buy me a bush. I will dutifully plant it and water it and spray it with all manner of expensive sprays and without fail, it will develop some stem rot or other or produce lack-lustre blooms infested with a range of bugs!

I have given up. I simply find roses unrewarding! I am looking, I suppose, for absolution. As the garden 'guru' I was hoping you might ease my guilt and tell me that it's quite all right to pull up the remaining bushes that have not yet withered completely and opt for a more friendly flower?

Something robust with large, colourful blooms that don't need expert handling. I know it's a tall order, but any recommendations would be much appreciated. I guess I simply have grown tired of lavishing so much effort and attention on these cruel flowers that are only beautiful in someone else's garden and never mine!

Help!

Regards,

Revolted-by-Roses

Robert gazed at the e-mail. He read it again. Then he realized he was smiling and his heart was thumping in a most peculiar way. He felt dizzy again, though the smoke had long since cleared from the room. What was it about this simple e-mail that so enchanted him? Before he could think another thought he clicked "reply" and was belting out a response.

...

That first night, smoking his pipe once more and watching the fire, Robert had had a stirring, a deep, instinctive sense that this woman was important and that he must meet her. She was part of his destiny. Robert had never believed in destiny until that very moment. Now, over three months later, listening to the April rains pattering on the roof, the conviction struck him again like an unexpected blow to the face. He had been reading her latest email which held news of the recent adventures of her daughter Alice, details of a novel she was reading and a rather nostalgic comment on loneliness and getting older. The next few lines read: *I love reading your emails. You seem to understand me in a way that is inexplicable, as we have never even met! I can't tell you how you make me feel. Perhaps we should meet?*

His mind reeled, he flushed as blood pulsed to his brain, white dots accumulated and trembled behind his eyes and he felt the first wave of confusion and excitement bristle over his skin, setting it a tingle. He realized he wasn't breathing. Apnoea is a common mistake when under attack, Robert knew but why did he feel he was in a fight for which he had not prepared? He felt slow on his feet and soft at the middle, carrying extra weight. And everything, he felt sure, depended on how well he handled this new twist of events.

He sucked a desperate lungful of air, before diving down again, into the dark knowledge that they had yet to meet but she had already changed his life forever, and that he was helpless to stop this interaction from intensifying. They had set it in motion, quite innocently. It was an adventitious contact and it had rooted itself rapidly in the fertile soil of their mutual marital discontent. Penelope was the hope of spring. Penelope, skipping carefree through the fallow field of his heart, carelessly, wildly flinging handfuls of her loveliness, like seeds, with abandon to the left and right. How was he not to fall? How naïve it was to believe that none of her sweet words would seed themselves in his brain and grow into a monstrous bloom, a voracious plant that devoured all the nutrients, air and water, until it alone survived, having choked out the competition. Love had come to town and made his mind a Venus flytrap.

Statuesque and still, she stood at the twilight edges of his dreams, sending out tendrils in the dark. She had wrapped him up completely, like an opportunistic creeper. She ran amok

through his veins, till his blood drummed out her name. Penelope! The Symbol of a life he never knew he wanted. He reached for her in the dark and woke cold and painfully aroused, his erection more pronounced than he could ever remember it being, even in the days of his hot pubescent fantasies. His sense of loss was immediate. He clung to the pillow, ramming it into his mouth to stifle the frustrated sobs. Weeping in the dark, while his cool, delicate wife slept on oblivious, for a woman he had never seen, for things he had never felt before! He rolled over and observed Carla's immobile form. He tried unsuccessfully to make out her face in the gloom. He could touch her and yet she was beyond his reach. Always distant. Robert admitted then that he had been alone for years. He could no longer bear it. He was beyond yearning. He must find a way to end his solitude or he would have to end his life. He lay awake till dawn, then fell into a dreamless sleep that seemed to last forever but when the alarm screamed for them to return to reality, had endured only forty-five minutes. He felt exhausted but his wife was already pushing her feet into her slippers and dragging on her nightgown. Her expressionless voice announcing: "I'll put the kettle on, don't forget to call the plumber about the guest bathroom sink today. I won't be back till after six."

...

Alice had been reading all day. She was furious. She had waded through countless emails that outlined the development of Penelope and Robert's relationship. The first contacts had been completely innocent. A mutual interest had drawn them inexorably together. Her mother had been innocently flexing her wings. Excited by the new-found freedom. She had used Alice's computer instruction as a springboard to making her own discoveries. Alice's mother should have been allowed to go to university. She was a true scholar. She had a mind greedy for knowledge and an intellect sharp enough for independent study and original application. Penelope could take the basics and work them into something new. She could take her own learning in hand and advance to the next level. A pity that Alice's grandfather had thought it pointless to educate a woman to waste it in marriage. A tertiary education was not mandatory for the successful changing of nappies or cooking of dinner. Penelope's father had felt his money would be wasted. Three no-good sons and still

unwilling to gamble on a girl, no matter how smart her principal, eager on the phone, extolled her to be.

Now Alice saw how her mother had used Google with the appropriate keywords to find things that interested her. She had used the internet to connect with like-minded people and for research: the internet's purest objectives, seldom realized. Alice could imagine how Penelope, fearful of her husband's disapproval or restraint, had established a separate e-mail address from which to launch her inquiries and explore her new cyber world in peace and without comment or judgement. How innocently it had all started! It made Alice angry that she could trace the gullible path to sin her mother had skipped merrily along. For wide is the gate and broad the way. Penelope with her kind heart and her good intentions and her mind alert and open to new ideas should never have lived in the Age of Information. She had gorged herself on it. Glutted and sated, she had learnt too much and the slope to debauchery was as slippery as Amanda's crazy mother had always maintained. Alice hated the idea of that crazy bitch having any legitimate point. But there it was. Alice felt miserable. Faced with the truth and armed with information, she was still reluctant to accept her findings, for they were not simple. Her findings were not black and white.

Alice, at a loss for what to do but needing to do something, went to her mother's cupboard and wrenched out all the clothes. She spilled the cupboard's guts, hauling the stockings out like entrails. Shoes, like organs, littered the floor. Hangers clattered as they were stripped and left to hang like ribs in the belly of the wardrobe. Alice committing murder. The room was a mess: strewn with materials and claddings of every colour and kind. Alice briefly left the chaos in search of boxes. She returned triumphant, sure of victory. She would pack her mother away this very evening. She would box her up and throw her out and be done with all the misery and mystery, the lies and deception. She knew the truth. Now she could forget it. She threw open a box and began to fling stuff in. As she tired, she began to fold the clothes neatly and to sort them into piles according to type, colour, and condition. The main split was between summer and winter attire. Pants together, skirts together, blouses together. Arranged from pastel to bold, from small to large. From white to black. This ordering calmed her mind. Into the roiling brain, her mother's voice, unrelenting. *I kept waiting for my life to start, Alice. I kept hanging on, getting by, thinking maybe next week, maybe next year. When that truck hit me I thought,*

'Oh, so this is it? This was my life? Not a prelude. Not a preview. This. This messy, flawed, beautiful, disaster-ridden existence is everything?' It was my allocation. The body I had never liked, never made peace with, was the same body mangled by that truck. I was never going to have a supermodel figure, a fat bank balance or the perfect life. But no-one does. We all get pieces. All our lives are kaleidoscopes. Spectrums of light, some pretty, others dark and unpleasant. It really depends on which side you view it through and on which colours you allow your eye to linger. Alice, if I had only stopped daydreaming I might have been able to enjoy it all so much more. Even the mundane or ugly bits! I could have savoured them as valuable pieces of the whole puzzle of my life. And now I see you doing it, too. Saying to yourself, 'Tomorrow I'll be happy. When I'm thin I will deserve a boyfriend who loves me. When I have all the answers, I'll have peace. Once I know everything, then I can forgive. Once I am worthy, I'll start living.' Please don't do that. Don't make my mistakes. Be happy now. Leave the answers for another day. Try to forgive all those you know and love, now, while there's time.

"But I'm so angry with you," Alice whispered into the silent room.

Then the voice came again, from inside her head, as though her mother, now the size of a faerie, stood in her ear canal and whispered directly to the drum: I know. And I deserve it. But does being angry with me make you feel better. Ally? If it does, keep feeling that anger. If it makes all of this one iota easier for you, my baby, then you stay mad. Hate me all you want. But if it doesn't make you feel better, then how is it serving you?

The urn stood on the mantelpiece next to the old grandfather clock. It had not been a conscious decision to place her mother above the fireplace. There just seemed no where else to put the gloomy ash-filled vase. The mantelpiece, resembling an altar, seemed sufficiently austere. Nestled in an alcove with a recessed shelf, a high arch surmounting the whole, it had an imposing design. They could hardly stuff Penelope's remains in a kitchen cupboard and keeping it in any of the bedrooms was too creepy. Alice could still remember exactly how her father had looked on the day of the funeral, when the last guests had gone. He had been standing aimlessly, the urn held in the crook of his arm, frozen in the hallway and patently unsure of what his next move ought to be. Alice, sensing disaster, had eased the heavy vessel from his flexed arm and carried her mother away. She had positioned it carefully on the mantelpiece. Her father, having shuffled after her, like a zombie in a computer game, his arms slightly raised like Frankenstein in pursuit, had seen her suggestion and nodded agreement. It was meant to be temporary. Alice's mind now flitted like a moth and alighted on the urn. She thought of it, still resting quietly on the mantelpiece next to the faulty clock, awaiting a decision on its final resting place. Dust gathering dust.

Alice went through to the lounge and approached the fireplace with a strange trepidation. She placed her hands on the cool lid. On a whim she lifted it and gazed in at the powdery contents. So this was where we all ended up. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The words were strangely soothing, like a chant or a mantra. They had an elegiac resonance. A beauty. The idea of man forged from clay struck her: I have only feet of clay – a saying to

indicate fallibility. Alice loved words.

A loud tick, an explosion of sound as the grandfather clock burst into song. The urn lid clattered down, the vessel tottered and Alice seized it in a white-knuckled grip. The chiming was a surprise as the clock had always been faulty and had been silent for ages. The sound reverberating through the wooden shelf seemed so incongruous, so out of place in Africa. It seemed so awfully British, a relic of her mother's past life. In a moment of anamnesis Alice could hear its mournful cry tolling out across the African bush in early colonial days, so lost and out of place, like a clarion call to the faithful to cease and desist, pack up their essentials and return to the security of the hub, to hearth and home, to Blake's green and pleasant land: England.

Strange, then, how for Alice that very sound was a wrenching reminder of a childhood spent in Africa. It called to her, whispering of grasslands and skies as deep and vast as an upside down ocean. Its jangling cry, its metallic clang, recalled Africa to Alice as surely as the tsik-tsik of cicadas and the strange discordant cries of the African ha-dee-daas.

Penelope had owned two such clocks, but the one in her bedroom, with the pendulum shaped like a peacock feather, had never chimed. As Alice stared at the less ornate clock, it looked back, its inner dials like eyes, from where it held pride of place on the broad wooden mantelpiece her father had made. Alice had always believed it had a personality. It tick-tocked merrily for fifteen years above the fireplace and only ever told the correct time twice a day, by accident. It was silent for long periods and then, abruptly, would burst into life, usually when Alice's mother had finally succeeded in dozing off for a rare afternoon nap. It was at these times that the clock's continued residence was hotly debated and Penelope threatened to throw it onto the verge personally. On these occasions, when she was seething, the clock, wisely, stayed mute. It would remain so for weeks at a time until it next felt the irrepressible urge to sing. Owing to the irregularity of its chiming, it was always a little startling when one heard the first strike, like a softly-spoken person who takes it upon himself to shout. Without warning, it would give a loud click, like the sound a loaded gun makes when it's cocked, and the noise that followed would ambush the afternoon and send the pigeons on the wall, a dozing dozen, skywards in a flurry of cloud-grey wings.

Alice's reverie was interrupted by a peculiar sound, a snuffling, breathy noise, like an animal trying to get in at the door. Alice released the urn, her fingers stiff from holding it so tightly for so long. She did not know how long she had been standing there, daydreaming but she felt as though she had travelled a long way, as if she had just returned from a journey. She went in search of the snuffling animal, following the noise down the passage until she stood at the entrance to her parents' bedroom. The door was ajar. She pushed it open to find her father crouched in a heap on the floor. He was before the boxes of clothes Alice had so neatly packed. The lid of one of them was open and he had dragged out a few items. He was clutching a soft red sweater in his hands, stroking it with his thumbs. It was close to his nose and he was smelling the fabric, in search of a scent of the past. On the floor, an open bill from Edgars.

"Daddy?"

"Daddy, are you OK?"

Alice bit the tongue that had formed a stupid question. He looked up, pale eyes bloodshot, the rims a bright pink, like a white rat's. He was wearing a crumpled brown cardigan which had egg stains down the front. He was barefoot and his old work pants hung like curtains on his withered frame. He looked thin and frail. Two things he had never been before. He did not answer her, nor did not stop crying, but said, "Why have you packed away her things?"

"I'm sorry daddy. I... I..." Alice could not tell him she needed peace. She had packed Penelope's things away to get a little quiet inside. She had hurt him in doing that. It was never her intention. For not the first time this year, Alice realized that good intentions aren't enough.

The road to hell... she heard her mother.

Is paved with good intentions. Alice completed the sage observation in her mind, finally understanding it.

She went over and put her arms around him. He began to shake.

"A bill for her clothes. Her clothes! Hardly worn. New clothes that she'll never wear."

It was becoming difficult to understand him through the heaving sobs.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." Alice said it over and over again because there was nothing else to say.

"I don't know if I can do this, Alice. I don't know if I can...get better. Be your dad. Be OK, again."

"Daddy?"

Alice heard the bell-like sound that truth always made in her head and felt her panic rise. Her heart thought it would tear and gush blood down the interior walls of her chest.

"Daddy, what choice do you have?"

He pulled her from him and looked at her, holding her at arms length. Pulling himself together.

"You're right, my girl. We'll just have to do our best. But I've been worried about you. So scared for you lately. You seem..." Dennis searched for a word. "Gone...gone somewhere deep in your brain. I don't know what's going on inside your head. And you used to tell me everything. Remember?"

Alice's mind replied silently. *Oh, yes dad. Yes. When everything was colouring- in books and Barbie and silly secrets, such as my favourite food and colour. Everything when my everything was simple. When you could handle it.*

"My everything is complicated now. And ugly. I'm scared you couldn't handle it anymore."

"I can still handle it."

"Really? Coz I'm not a little girl anymore. I'm almost seventeen. I'm almost a woman, like mommy was. A grown lady. Next year I am in the world and I could go and work or travel. Dad. You need to understand that my 'everything' could be unpalatable for you."

Alice thought about how the girls at school had tormented Melinda. She thought of her guilt over Melinda's death. Her unrequited passion for Derek. Her guilt and shame at what had happened between them. And the pictures. Alice remembered the pictures. She relived her guilt at teaching her mother how to use the internet and how that had led to her affair. The affair. So much to tell. So much pain and ugly adult events. Suicide, sex, pornographic pictures, letters, betrayal, adultery. Where could she begin? Alice believed that he would wish, secretly, that he had not asked her to divulge the dark secrets of her soul. His little Alice. His Pandora with her box of misery enough to blow the world apart.

"Let's go and do something. Let's get our hands busy. That always helps." Alice

proposed her mother's solution.

"Ok. I've got something that needs doing."

They sat on the steps of the porch, staring out at the garden silhouetted against the early evening sky. The world was suffused with a pink light, soft and fine as chiffon on skin.

The street lamps flickered and came on: a timer switch had engaged somewhere in a municipal building. Alice watched her father thread two needles with heavy white cotton. He handed her the threaded needles to hold while he draped a large bed sheet over their knees. Wordlessly they began to darn an extensive tear, jagged as rocks on a sea shore, jagged as a mouth Alice could not forget, that ran almost the entire length of the sheet. They sat in companionable silence, looking up from time to time to watch the afternoon leaving the garden, the evening slipping in. An indecipherable process, for who can say the precise moment that the day ends and the night begins?

Alice was the first to speak. She started with the less shocking news. She told him of Melinda and felt him bristle in rage against those who had caused her pain and go limp with the news of her death.

"Silly girl. Nothing is ever so bad."

"Isn't it, dad? Is everything survivable? Do you really feel that way?"

He remained silent. Alice caught his thought.

"No, dad. I don't think I'd ever do that. But I have thought about it. Everyone has."

She silenced the protesting lie he sought to form with grey eyes that saw through him. A picture flashed in her mind.

"If they're honest." Alice said evenly.

For once, no booming lecture. Encouraged, Alice continued. She told him she had been in love with a boy. He blustered that she was too young for boys. Alice clammed up and sewed angrily, puncturing her fingers with the needle, the sharp pain a release. It was then that it occurred to her that perhaps her mother had not always felt free to discuss her needs with her husband. That maybe the violence of playing the role of dutiful wife had exhausted her as much as the role of 'daddy's little girl' had begun to wear on Alice. There were, perhaps, many reasons why Penelope had chosen the company of another man. So much for clear-cut villains and victims, she thought. Life, it would seem, is lived in the grey

spaces. It was then that Dennis noticed blood drops on the linen.

“I’m sorry Alice. Of course you’re interested in boys.”

So hard. So hard to find the words to burst his bubble. To crush the image of her as an innocent into shards. To say she had desired this boy, this man, with an adult intensity. That she had wanted him. It felt impossible but the words came. Dennis kept his eyes on his work, darning at a furious pace. She told it all. It started to pour out. She finished telling him about the night of the party and then the pictures. His face was unreadable. A book in which nothing is writ. He had stopped mending the sheet. Alice suddenly angry. Angry at his need for her to be a little girl, to be perfect. Angry at his dominance and his views that women should always be lady-like. Furious at how he cringed every time she put sanitary products in the trolley or complained of period pain. Women’s troubles. The thought always made his nose crinkle. His intense embarrassment was palpable. His judgement ever-ready. And this from a man who would not bow his knee in church or apologize to anyone. He needed her to be simple. A two-dimensional Disney character. She was meant to be amorphous. Asexual. Her body frozen. But Alice had needs too. Alice needed him to be a grown up. She needed him to understand her adult urges and her development into a rounded, complex person. And he was her parent. It was his job. He was the only parent she had left, god dammit. So he was going to have to deal with it.

Alice flung the sheet from her and shouted, “Yes, I know you’re disappointed in me. I know I let you down. I’m not your angelic little girl. I’m all fucked up and dirty. I’m not a model daughter! But you aren’t a model dad either. I needed you. And you let me down because you were too scared and selfish to let me tell you all the truth, my truth – not what you needed to hear. And you’re the parent. I miss mom, not because she was perfect but because she wasn’t. And she didn’t claim to be, either. But she still knew that *she* was the parent. I was allowed to fall, with ma. I was allowed to be foolish. I haven’t told you all this time because I couldn’t fall with you. You would’ve loved me less. But now there’s no choice. If I don’t tell, I’ll burst. So, hate me if you must.”

“No, Alice. Never.”

“I felt like you would judge me and would be disappointed. In me. In my choices. I was scared you wouldn’t feel the same way about your “little girl” if she got big or behaved like a woman. I’m not a girl anymore, dad. Look at me! I need you to love me, no matter what. I

need you to love me like mom loved me – always and forever, no matter what.”

Dennis was nodding gravely.

“There’s more.”

Bushy eyebrows shot up.

“Ok. I’m listening. Tell me.”

So she did. She told him about Robert. But Alice was not the only one with shocking news. Her dad told her that he had suspected Penelope had someone else for a while. There had been a bag in what had once been the boot of the red Volkswagen. What was left of it had been returned to Dennis. In it had been a toothbrush, toiletries, a change of clothes and a negligee. A negligee in the afternoon. Dennis had known then why she was on that road. It had become clear. No, he didn’t want to see the e-mails. Alice should have told him straight away and not pried further. Dennis felt badly that she had carried the burden all alone. Alice felt guilty for snooping. She told him that the relationship had started innocently over a shared interest in gardening. She wanted her father to know that Penelope had not sought to betray him. It was just something that had happened. She promised to delete everything. The intensity was too much. Dennis went inside and came back with two cold beers. They sat sipping the icy lager, close together, her hand on his forearm. She could feel the springy soft hair that covered his arms in a golden mat. She could smell his salty, pungent skin, like an olive grove. He stared out at the horizon and sighed. He whistled through his teeth. She read his mind. He was right. It was a lot to take in. “Hectic”, Susan-Rose would have said. “Hectic, man. Super-doooper Hectic!” Alice saw a realization pass over his face like a sudden cloud. He opened his mouth and said, sure of its truth.

“So, that’s why you *donnered* that girl at school? You hit her because of something she did or said to do with all this?”

Alice’s silence was an affirmation.

“And you were trying to protect me by not telling?”

He put his arm around her and squeezed her shoulder.

“So? What did she say that made you snap?”

“She called me and mommy whores.”

“What! Jesus. I hope you gave her a *snot-klap*.”

“Yes, dad. I hit her hard. I threw my punch just like you taught me to - straight from the shoulder.”

“Like a boxer! With your fist?”

“Yes. And then I followed it up with an upper cut straight in the stomach. Knocked the air clean out of her. It felt good. She had also been really mean to Melinda, the meanest of everyone. I gave her one for Melinda, too.”

Her father sat back and sipped his beer, a look of illicit satisfaction on his face. He could not tell her that he was proud of her for striking someone. But right or wrong, proud was how they both felt.

The sun slipped away and it got cold fast.

“We should go in.” Dennis said.

“There’s just one more thing.” Her father’s look was of disbelief. “Dad, did you mean it when you said that you didn’t want any more lies between us? Remember, that time we fought about mommy’s funeral?”

“Yes, I meant it. I want us to be honest with each other.”

“That guy on the motorbike. I like him, dad. He’s sweet. I just wanted to tell you that I’m going to see him again. I don’t want to have to hide it like a dirty secret. Adam doesn’t deserve that.”

“Adam.” The silence expanded and Alice, wanting his acceptance but determined to stand by her decision, wished fervently into the night that was falling all around them, *Please let him say it’s OK.*

“I don’t know, Alice.”

“I’m going to see him, dad.” He bristled, wanting to forbid her but something made him stop and he simply said, “Come, I’ll make us dinner.”

“Nah. That’s OK dad. I’ll cook us something.”

“Hey! Are you saying my Fish Dish Surprise is no good?”

“Dad. It’s pickled fish, straight out of a can. You heat it in the frying pan and crumble toast into the mix.”

“Yummy!”

“Ugh!”

“Ok, you cook.”

“Hey dad? What happened to the sheet? Where did that big rip come from?”

“I hung it out to dry and bad weather came out of nowhere. The wind made it billow like a sail. Then the cloth made a loud pop. I went to bring it in and saw that the wind had ripped it!”

“Sounds like my life.”

“Mine, too.”

“That’s a pretty big tear. Maybe we should throw it away and get another one.”

“Nope. Just because something’s damaged doesn’t mean you have to throw it away. If you love something, you take the time to mend it.”

“Is that supposed to be a metaphor?”

“What’s a metaphor?”

“It’s kinda like when you compare things by calling one thing another because of a similarity. Sometimes the idea is something more abstract, so you use a physical thing to make your comparison. “

“Ok. Yes, it’s a metaphor.”

“So, I’m the sail? And life’s damaged me a bit. But I can mend?”

“Close enough. We are both sails that have been damaged by bad weather but, we can survive the storm and help fix each other, with our love.”

“God, that’s cheesy!”

“I know. I’m not as good at this as your mom.”

“You suck at this!”

But she was hugging him tightly like she used to when she was little.

...

Telling him the truth was going to be difficult. But now that Alice had told her father everything, telling a stranger would be easier. Her father had been the one person she could never have imagined telling the truth. She had dreaded it, but had found a way. That was the true definition of bravery. Being fearless did not make you brave. Mastering your fear and doing the thing that frightened you in spite of it – that was bravery. Alice felt confident that she could resolve any situation life could present to her now. She had come this far. It

was time to break with the past and move forward. She did not want to be unhappy forever. It had been a complicated decision which she had debated over and over in her mind, weighing up both positions. But no matter how logical her arguments, no matter her filial obligations or her desire to be loyal to her father, the quiet sense of what was right, refused to shift. Doing what her conscience dictated was the only way she could be loyal to anyone. She had to start with being loyal to herself. She knew that Robert had loved her mother. He deserved to know.

...

Alice had needed to work off the anxiety caused by the big decision she had made. She needed to move her body. She had decided to jog at a sedate pace over a lengthy circuit which skirted her entire suburb. Alice had jogged most of the route, however, when she was closer to home, she felt the urge to stretch herself and sprint as fast as she could.

She was running hard when she rounded the corner and slammed straight into her best friend. "I was just on my way to see you," Theresa gasped, holding on to Alice to steady herself. Alice, wheezing heavily, clung back.

Once inside, Alice poured large glasses of mango juice and they went and sat in the garden. Alice told her friend how she had gone to Robert's home and found that he was a family man who lived in a face brick home in suburbia and had a lovely son who spoke well of him. Apparently he was a sweet man, a botany professor, not at all the god-like creature with rippling muscles and a phoney smile that Alice had conjured. He wore glasses and liked jazz. Theresa took hold of Alice's hands across the small stone table, shook them gently and said,

"What did you expect, Alice? Did you think he'd have horns? Were you waiting on a monster?"

"No, of course not. I mean. It's just. He's so..."

"Normal?"

"Yes. I guess that's it. Oh, God! I wanted to scream at him and now I'm mad coz he's not awful. Why couldn't he have made this easier by being awful?"

"Coz people don't exist to make your life easier, Al. They're just living their way as

best they can.”

“I’m going to tell Robert that mom’s gone. I’m not looking forward to it.”

“It’s the right thing to do.”

“Why couldn’t this be easier?”

“It’s not easy but it will help you to put this all behind you.”

“I know. I just never thought I’d behave badly. Really badly. And I realize I have been. Going through my mother’s private things and sending e-mails pretending to be her. Lying to my father. Messing up in school and I’ve not been a good friend to you. When you told me about your uncle agreeing to send you to university, I was jealous. I thought, ‘Why can’t this good thing be happening to me?’ I’m so sorry Resa! I’ve made such a mess of everything and I thought I was the one on a righteous quest for the truth!”

“Ally, everyone, even you, is just doing the best they can. You’ve made mistakes but you’re trying to fix them. That’s noble. You don’t have to be perfect and if you try to be you’ll always fail...but I also have a confession. I went to check Derek’s blog.” Alice banged her glass down, annoyed. Theresa held her hand up in defence. “I was going to hack the blog and remove the pictures. I wanted to leave a nasty message on it. I had to try and do something!”

Alice gave her friend a grateful smile. Theresa, always looking out for her, always trying to help. Her friend’s eyes were wide as she whispered, “You’ll never guess what I found. You were nowhere to be seen, but there were *new* naked photos! Comparison pics of our very own Vivian and Tracy Newman, the Deputy Head Girl of Union High! You have to see this!”

Alice followed Theresa inside and they sat together in the study and stared in amazement at the blog. Graphic colour pictures of two sprawling beauties with parts of themselves at angles they’d probably never seen. The photographs were entitled Viv the Vixen and Trashy Tracy. Beneath the photographs in bold was written, “RATE MY LUSCIOUS LADIES!” and a flashing icon posed the question, “HOT or NOT?” Theresa was in transports. “Should we vote? There’s a poll!” Gales of laughter shook her body. “It’s *her* turn now! It’s her turn to know how it feels to be used!” Theresa said with breathless triumph. She had desperately wanted to avenge Alice, who had been too broken to defend herself and now, Derek had done some of the work for her. Vaginal Vivian, Alice thought

numbly. She was surprised that the sight of her nemesis prostrate and exposed did not give her any satisfaction.

...

Alice walked down the deserted corridor. It only took minutes for the school to empty out on a Friday, everyone always in a mad rush to start the weekend. Alice remembered her dad's opinion of the reckless mood which pervaded Fridays. 'Everyone drives like lunatics,' he used to add darkly in the days before Alice's mother had been killed on a Friday during that same maniacal traffic. Alice found it strange how healing was ultimately a private journey and epiphany an interior moment. For reasons she could only partly understand, Alice was beginning to feel like herself again. It was a cliché but Alice no longer felt derailed, she was sure she had turned a corner.

As she rounded an actual corner she ran straight into Susan-Rose fawning over Vivian. The gorgeous brunette recoiled in mock horror and said, "Oh no! It's Alice, the Animal!" Susan-Rose sniggered. Vivian, never one to miss an opportunity to be vindictive, especially with an adoring audience, crooned, "Well, Alice, this year certainly has brought you down a peg or two! But, maybe you needed it." Alice looked at the girl she had once considered an anathema to everything she believed in. Now she just felt sorry for her. Vivian had widened her eyes and was insincerely gushing, "Oh, I'm sorry! That didn't come out right."

"That's OK. Nothing you say ever does." Alice retorted. Susan-Rose rushed to defend the viper.

"Alice, you have to understand, Vivian's not trying to be nasty, it's just, you know...?"

"It comes naturally?" Alice was on a roll.

"Not as naturally as looking like a total whore on Derek's blog comes to you! Whose idea do you think it was, anyway?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You know Alice, there's so much you don't know. I was the first to see your porn debut, because the day after Caitlyn's party was the day that Derek asked me out and we've been the perfect couple ever since," she said smugly. "Boy, did we laugh at you! It was *my* idea to put the pictures on his blog. They say a good picture is worth a thousand

words!” Alice had had no intention of telling anyone what she had recently discovered on Derek’s blog. She had always loathed gossip but now she felt something snap.

“Well Vivian, as it turns out, Derek has no new *ideas*, but he has put up some new *pictures*. You’re famous, too! You really ought to check it out.”

“What?” Vivian’s voice was immediately agitated.

“But don’t worry Vivian, you’re not alone. His other girlfriend also makes an appearance. What’s her name again? Toni? Tammy?”

“Tracy Newman!” Susan-Rose blurted out.

“That’s it! Yes, she’s the daughter of Derek’s headmaster. She goes to Union, I think?”

“I *know* her!” Vivian hissed.

“So does Derek. And pretty much the whole town by now, I suppose.”

Vivian turned on Susan-Rose. “How did you know it was Tracy Newman?” Susan-Rose was ashen.

“Ah, Vivian, Susan-Rose has always been a *special* kind of friend. Knowing Suzie like I do, she’s probably already seen the pictures and sent the info to everyone in her address book.”

Looking at Vitriolic Vivian and the treacherous Susan-Rose, she thought how they were well-suited as friends. They deserved one another.

Vapid, vacuous, vaporised, vanquished Vivian. In an instant Alice felt unburdened and she turned and walked away. Looking back over her shoulder, she saw Vivian lift the heavy receiver of the blue pay-phone mounted on the corridor wall. Alice knew who she was calling. Derek believed himself to be invulnerable, Alice thought. But she knew that if you play with snakes, sooner or later, you get bit. She could hear Vivian in her head, as clearly as if she was standing behind her at the phone, saying, “Hello, Tracy? It’s Vivian. We need to talk.”

...

Then slowly, almost imperceptibly, things began to shift. Dennis finally kept his promise and took Alice to see Macbeth. They went to an evening show and they dressed for the occasion. Her father even wore a tie. The biggest surprise of the night, though, was

that Alice's father had sat, riveted, as the action unfolded. He had muttered about the manipulations of Lady Macbeth, saying, "Never trust a woman!" and had rooted for Macduff in the final fight. No one was more surprised at his enjoyment than Dennis himself. He was a changed man. His eyes glowed at interval while they sat munching chocolate-covered peanuts and slurped boxes of pear Liquifruit.

...

Alice had tried her best to catch up the missing work in time for her trial exams and had almost succeeded. She had needed just a little more time, just a few more weeks. But she had not had any more time and so had made the best of it. Alice knew that she had done badly in Art History and Afrikaans. She felt disappointed and knew that Kelly Anderson would probably edge ahead of her aggregate and be declared Valedictorian. But there was nothing to be done about that now. Instead, she decided she would concentrate on studying for the last paper of the trial exams, blessedly her best subject: English. Alice remembered the stern admonishment of her Biology teacher when she'd said to a protesting Alice, "And since when was anything less than an A acceptable to you?" She decided that she would work even harder to restore her work to her own standard. Alice vowed to get straight A-s in finals.

...

Please create a sentence that makes use of alliteration.

Alice waggled her pen in tired fingers. Her hand ached. The English language paper was longer than she had expected and, although it was going well, Alice wanted it to be over. She pressed the nib to the lined page. It was a special paper then smelt of exams and had a sleeker surface than conventional foolscap. The pen danced.

The student, who had been writing for hours, paused to flex her flagging fingers.

A week later and Alice was seated before Miss Nightingale's desk. She was puzzled as to why her favourite teacher had requested she stay behind after class. She had received the "I'm so sorry for you" faces that were by now familiar from the other scholars as they filed out.

"Your exams are always a treat to mark, Alice. You never do the bare minimum; always an embellishment or a clever extra bit to display your skill. You're a bit of a show-off." Miss Nightingale's voice was light, teasing and filled with laughter.

"Well, why not? If you have a talent, there's no point in hiding it. Don't put your light under a bushel, my mom always tells me. Told me."

Alice smiled bravely

"Well, it's good to have the old Alice back. You had me worried for a bit. Especially after that oral from last month."

"Yes, I know. But I've been working hard to catch up."

"Yes, and it's an appreciable improvement. I especially enjoyed the poem you wrote for your creative piece in Paper One. I think we should submit it for publication in the school magazine. Would you like that?"

"Very much. Thank you. I should go, miss. My dad will be waiting."

"Yes, of course. Study hard for finals. I know you'll do well. You're very bright. Soon, you'll be off to university, to a place which will love your endless questions and provide you with more information than you can possibly absorb!"

"No way! Really? More than I can take in?" Alice replied in disbelief.

"Yes. The world is opening up for you, Alice. Go and seize it!"

She's right: carpe diem! Penelope added. Alice and Miss Nightingale smiled at each other for what they knew was one of the last times.

"Thank you, Miss Nightingale," Alice said, suddenly serious. "For everything."

Her sincerity moved the young teacher.

"You're very welcome, Alice. You'll do fine. Be happy and don't let anyone treat you as if you're anything less than special. Because you are. Very special."

As Alice rose to leave, Miss Nightingale stood up and said,

"Oh, and Alice, don't you worry any more about a certain young man from Alexander Boys' High. It's all sorted out. And she winked.

The sad little statue stared up at Alice. Her ringlets tossed on an eternal wind, holding them airborne forever. Her little stone plate was brimming with rainwater turned a rusty brown by the dead leaves trapped at the bottom. The petite yesterday-today- and-tomorrow at her side was covered in perfect purple and white flowers. The pungent fragrance of a Frangipani was coming from somewhere in the garden. It wafted past her nose, reminiscent of an expensive French fragrance her mother used to wear. She was about to stroke the little statuette's round cheeks. Hard cheeks that looked soft. Nothing is ever as it seems, Alice thought. At that precise moment an unmistakable voice called her name in soft, round, enunciated tones. Only one person spoke like that. Alice turned slowly, seeking the hazel eyes, the delicate face.

"Hello Alice." Caitlyn looked at her and looked away, her eyes darting back and forth, nervous to alight too long.

"Hello Caitlyn."

"I had to come and tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"Haven't you heard? Derek's been expelled! He was dealing drugs! Someone told the headmaster where he hides his stash at school! It was under a loose floorboard in one of the old storerooms and Derek had a key for the room, so now the janitor's in trouble, too. They found coke and speed and even Rohepnol, the date-rape drug!"

Suddenly it all made sense to Alice. Why she had been so weak and unable to move her limbs. Why she couldn't remember much of that night. Why it had been possible to pose Vivian and Tracy in such a graphic manner for their internet blog debut. Normal sleep would not have allowed for such manhandling. The words continued to pour out of Caitlyn. "My parents flew in on a midnight flight from Barbados! But it gets worse! The governing body offered him a deal. If he co-operated and provided the headmaster with his client list, no criminal charges would be brought against him by the school."

"What did he do?"

"My parents told him to take the deal and he sang like a canary! Now, half the first team rugby guys have been suspended for drug-use and they're going to have to take the B-

squad to inter-schools! They're gonna get creamed by St. Joseph's! Everyone hates Derek. Somebody came by the house and egged his car in the night. They wrote all over the body work with permanent markers and the things they wrote were *really* bad."

"What kind of things?" Alice asked, still reeling.

"Derek the Date Rapist! Nark! Rat! A whole bunch of F words and stuff. Oh, yes, and 'squealer'! They drew a pig on the bonnet! Then the neighbours complained about the language on the car and my parents had to send it for a complete re-spray! Now no one in our street will talk to us!" Caitlyn looked delighted. Alice stood nodding, trying to take it all in. Caitlyn went on gleefully, "My parents are furious at him! Then the whole blog story came out and Vivian's mother and Tracy's dad are threatening to sue for damages! Derek's really down, dragging himself round the house. No jokes at my expense, no lummies. I used to hate those hard punches! They made my whole shoulder numb for ages and he used to think it was a big joke. He's what you would call, um..."

Alice stared back blankly.

"Crestfallen?" she threw Caitlyn a line.

"Yes! That's an Alice word." Pause. "I'm proud of you, Alice. For telling about the blog."

"I didn't."

"You must have! My parents had to attend a disciplinary meeting and the blog was on the agenda. It was all very hush-hush. You sure you didn't say anything?"

"Not a word."

Alice was perplexed.

"Well, they've have been on his case ever since they got back. They've really been laying down the law. I have to be in bed by eleven. Derek's computer had become the family computer and is now in the kitchen, in full view of the living room. You can see it from a zillion angles. No more private surfing. My parents had the hard drive wiped and installed kiddie-lock! I'm not allowed to go out on week nights and I have to help my mom on Tuesdays with the washing!"

It sounded draconian by her usual standards of living, her endless freedoms. Alice examined the face of her erstwhile friend for signs of distress. Caitlyn looked thrilled. There was a glow about her that Alice had never seen before. Alice wondered how long they

would stay in town this time. She hoped it was a genuine change of heart and that they were back for good. For Caitlyn's sake.

"I'm really sorry Alice. I should have stuck by you. Oh, I almost forgot."

Caitlyn dug in her inner blazer pocket and fished out an envelope.

"It's an apology letter from Derek. I think my parents made him write it. But, here it is. For what it's worth."

Alice took the letter and put in her pocket straight away.

"I wanted to stick by you, Ally. I swear I did. But I couldn't."

"I understand. He's your brother."

"That's not it. He's not my brother in any real way. I don't know why I should feel responsible for protecting the family name but there was no one else to do it. No one in my family takes responsibility for anything! I mean, my parents have never behaved like parents and my brother never accepts that his actions have consequences. He just darts away, blameless. I thought it was me they'd blame."

"That doesn't make any sense. How could it be your fault?"

"Everything's my fault in my family. You're *my* friend. It happened at *my* party. You were meant to be sleeping in *my* room. In their minds none of this would have happened if not for me."

"That's crazy."

Caitlyn shrugged and gave a resigned look.

"Our family couldn't afford a scandal."

"So you lied. To preserve your family name you let them destroy my reputation."

"You don't understand. How could you?"

Alice shook her head.

"You've always had the family. The real deal. I've never had that. I've only ever had the name. The family name was all I had and now that's gone, too!"

It was the saddest thing Alice had ever heard. To have the shadow and not the substance, to have the family name but not the family. How could she not forgive her?

Caitlyn, stick-like and pale; life would crush her, grind her down as water does rock, year by year, Alice knew with a certainty that left her winded and low. She gazed down the dark tunnel of the years to come and saw a flash: a picture at the window of her mind. She

embraced her friend who had begun to cry and held her tightly saying, “It’s OK. I understand. I forgive you. I’m not cross anymore. Don’t feel bad, Catie. Please don’t feel bad, anymore.”

University of Cape Town

“Let fall thy blade sword on vulnerable crests! I bear a charmed life; which must not yield to one of woman born!” Dennis roared, brandishing the mop, a fine mist of sweat on his brow.

“Despair thy charm; and let the Angel, whom thou still hast serv’d, tell thee, Macduff was from his mother’s womb untimely ripp’d.” And with that Alice accosted her father with the broom. He parried. She twisted and slipped in the fatal thrust.

Dennis threw back his head and gave an awful cry. He blew the air from his lungs and huffed and puffed as he staggered around the kitchen that was a medieval castle. He clutched at the stony walls of the melamine kitchen cupboards and took a long time to die. He let his sword clatter to the floor, fell to his knees and keeled over, where he lay, his eyes rolled back – wide open – his tongue lolling like a dehydrated dog.

Alice flourished her mop and made as if to sheath it. Dennis lay still. He refused to rise and it was only when Alice pounced on him - squealing “Over-acting! Get up! Drama Queen!” – that he sat up and corrected her in mock serious tones. “King. Drama King.”

Laughing breathlessly, Alice saw her father with new eyes. It seemed a good time to broach a tricky subject: Penelope’s ashes.

“Daddy? Don’t you think we should find mommy a proper resting place?”

Dennis shut his face like a book - the hard cover binding him up inside. Alice pressed gently.

“She can’t stay on the mantelpiece forever.”

“No. I suppose not.”

“Let’s think of somewhere beautiful to put mommy! Any ideas?”

“What about at sea?”

“Dad, is that what you think mommy would like or what you would want for yourself?”

“The sea is beautiful. Lots of people chose the ocean.”

“Mom was afraid of water, dad. She couldn’t swim, remember? She found the sea, with all its vast blue, terrifying. Think, dad. Where would *mom* have wanted to be?”

Dennis smiled sadly and replied, “Somewhere green. With a view.”

“Yes. That feels right. So we’ll find such a place.”

...

Three days later the answer presented itself to Alice. It was perfect. A spot that was quiet and majestic with masses of trees and endless views of hills and, far in the distance, the ocean. Problem was it was also a national park. Alice wasn’t sure if such things were allowed.

It is easier to ask forgiveness than permission. Penelope’s laughing contribution decided Alice. She laid out the plan for her father.

“It’s sacrilege! It’s disrespectful to the dead! The very thought of it is...is...”

“Repugnant? Maybe so. But I know mom would think it funny. It would tickle her to break the rules one last time. And mom never gave a fig for religion. You know that. Procedures and appropriateness were not things mommy cared about.”

“A lunchbox! I can’t believe I’m going to agree to this.”

Dennis had relented. Penelope’s remains had been smuggled into the park, posing as lunch. They had walked for over an hour. Higher and higher they climbed till the spring pollen and thin air made Alice need to take a break.

Yes, dear. No need to kill yourself to get me to the church on time. I’m not going anywhere. I just hope you don’t get hungry on this little voyage. A high cackle resounded in Alice’s ears.

“Shut up, ma.” Alice muttered but she was smiling as they pushed on up the hill. They reached the deserted lookout point, the sun high overhead. Alice loved this place. It was

wild and windswept. It was desolate and the wind keened through the trees whispering of a far away island with its hundred shades of virulent green. The place felt foreign. It felt like home. Alice loved the ambivalence of the mountain. It did not care where you came from; it did not care where you were going. It had stood guard over this ancient land for millennia and watched the lives of men like ants at its feet. It no more felt their presence than passing clouds. It was a severe place. Solemn and grand. It was worthy. Suddenly a lone hiker, with a stave and a large water bottle, tramped past. He nodded a greeting and was gone.

“Quick dad, lets do it now!”

“Where?”

“Over there, right next to the wall.”

Alice walked over and indicated her chosen spot: a small alcove, an indentation in the low stone wall that formed a semi circle surmounted by a patch of moss, cold and soft as a snout on some velvety mythical creature. It was mound-shaped, the moss like a green cap. When Alice was little such patches of ground had always reminded her of hidden faerie abodes. Magical places, sprouting deep green moss: tiny delicate grass, for tiny feet to dance upon. These circular mounds had probably been formed by moles or rocks lying just beneath the surface. But for Alice they held the homes of magic folk, the dark caves of the Little People. Sometimes she thought a particularly bulbous mound was the treasure trove of a Leprechaun and housed a crock of gold. She had always been a fanciful child. But this place, even as she stood on the cusp of womanhood, still seemed strangely enchanted.

“I’ll keep a look-out and will call to you should anyone come along.”

With that she handed him the small trowel she had stowed in her bag and walked someway down the trail. She hoped no-one would come from the other direction. She prayed her father would be quick. She dreaded being caught. *The attempt and not the deed confounds us!* Penelope quipped, mocking the severity of her daughter’s fear.

Soon he whistled to her and she ran to the wall. He had dug a hole the size of a bucket. He was breathing hard from exertion and nervousness. Alice glanced around and quickly pulled the large plastic lunchbox from her backpack. She deftly removed the lid and poured the ashes into the dank ground, giving up its earthy smell. She gripped a handful of dirt and gave her father a meaningful look. He followed suit. She slowly dribbled it into the hole.

“Ashes to Ashes. Dust to dust. I love you, mom.”

Her father let his tears fall with the dirt.

Then with their hands they scooped the earth over and patted it down.

Deep Peace of the running wave to you...

Deep peace of the shining stars to you...

Alice's mind sent the Gaelic blessing silently up to the vast, still sky.

Alice's father, needing something to do, strode alongside the wall, searching.

He found a loose boulder that had fallen from the wall and he carried it close to his chest, his face straining with exertion. He placed the boulder on top of the freshly-turned earth. Alice packed away the evidence. The trowel and the now empty lunchbox disappeared into the backpack. Dennis pulled out his Swiss army knife and scratched his wife's initials and the year at the very bottom of the wall, where it would not be noticeable.

Alice smiled. Her father, breaking the rules. Her father, defacing public property. She had never loved him more.

They stayed all day, watching the sky change.

"So, mom got to be buried after all." Dennis noted.

"Yes, in splendid isolation, away from all the crowds and breaking the rules. She's happy with this. I feel it. We did good, dad. Real good."

Her father seemed more at ease that Alice could remember seeing him in a long time. It was as if he had been carrying a coffin around on his shoulders for months. A lone pallbearer. Now he had put it down.

"P R N. What's the R for?" Alice asked.

"Mommy's second name was Rebecca."

"I never knew that. She never said."

...

Alice stepped into the lounge and saw the front door ajar. Panic seized her. Adam was due to collect her any second. Why was the door standing open? Where was her father? She heard voices in the driveway. She ran back to the kitchen and seized her coat and bag, then charged to the entrance. She had to rescue Adam. But as she rushed out into the sunshine, she froze.

Her father was seated on the silver and white Yamaha. He had a look of boyish glee on his face and he was examining the dials and holding the handles, revving the engine. Above the noise she heard him shout, "She sounds a little ragged! You might want to check out her settings." Adam was nodding in agreement. Dennis cut the engine, kicked down the stand and dismounted. He clapped Adam on the shoulder in the universal male language for camaraderie but hard enough that Adam could feel his immense strength: an acceptance and a warning in one. It was a gesture that said, "Ok, kid. One chance. But don't mess it up." Alice could not believe her eyes. At that moment they both turned and saw her there in her favourite jeans, hearts embroidered on each buttock, and they both smiled. Alice didn't know who she wanted to hug more. She felt a loop of joy roll through her and she ran to them. *Nice-looking boy. Allie. I approve.* Penelope's voice was mischievous. Alice smiled. Adam handed her a helmet. Dennis helped her adjust the chin-strap. He checked it twice. Then he nodded. He was satisfied that it was secure enough. "It's a good helmet, Mr. Nichol. Brand new and top of the range. I bought it for Alice." Her father almost managed a smile. Adam swung a leg over the bike and it roared to life. Alice clambered up behind him and, aware of her father's eyes, perched awkwardly. She wanted to wait for him to leave before putting her arms around Adam. "Alice, you can't sit like that. You're not secure. Hold onto the driver." Dennis instructed. Alice grinned and seized hold of Adam. Dennis continued, "I have three requirements for you to leave here with my daughter." "Yes, sir?" "Helmet at all times. Speed limit at all times. Home before dark. At least for now." Dennis had counted the terms out on his fingers. They were non-negotiable, Adam knew. "Yes, sir. You have my word."

...

Somewhere over the high wall a gardener was humming and whistling intermittently. The sound annoyed Alice. She was trying to study for finals and higher grade Biology was proving particularly tedious. It required intensive and prolonged concentration. She tried to breathe out, blend his sound into those of a distant lawnmower and some children screaming in the playground of a junior school two blocks away. A small dog of the terrier

type began to yap next door and an unknown, large lonely creature took up the call and began to howl. Frustration set in. What was the point of giving matric students study leave to prepare for finals if the world at home was noisier than school? A bell rang and the shouts and calls died away as children trudged back indoors to glare at demotivated teachers. Alice, cross-legged on the floor, her books spread before her like a fan, glanced out of the window, clicking her pen to a rhythm of stress. Then something caught her eye and she was mesmerized.

The rotating sprinkler spun resolutely round, phitt-phitting measured bursts of water in a broad circle across the lawn. The trajectory of the water was interrupted by a circular bed, artfully planted with agapanthus, Crane flowers and bright orange spear-like blooms on a plant Alice thought might be an Aloe. She remembered the bed had once been home to a sad collection of diseased roses. The jet-stream of droplets fought bravely through the thick foliage's resistance, throwing rainbows in transient bursts as the early morning sunlight exploded into its full seven-colour spectrum - a momentary rainbow reflected in the airborne droplets. A truly magical sight caught in the mundane. Such beauty spotted accidentally in a small, generally unobserved, everyday activity. Who watches a sprinkler do its job, Alice pondered. Who takes the time to stop and stare at the beauty of the water's arc, its slapping, pattering sound as it encounters leaves of a greater density than grass? Alice went outside. Sitting on the back step, the concrete's coolness seeping through her jeans, she was enchanted by what she saw. She was glad she had stopped and given the scene a few moments' careful observation. For here was a sprinkler producing puffs of liquid light. Droplet clouds of colours that vanished almost as they become visible. So fleeting, so ethereal, so much like life itself, she thought. A sprinkler playing magician, casting rainbows out of flower beds.

It was then, seated in the early morning sun, watching the dazzling display of unexpected beauty that Alice's mind turned to what was really bothering her. A niggling sense of the violence of assumptions, the treachery of words too absolutely applied. Language sought always to make of something either this or that, never both. Alice let her mind come to new conclusions. She thought of Adam and Robert; Derek and Caitlyn; Dennis and Penelope. She thought:

We always simplify people. We render them as an artist would a line sketch. We attempt

to grasp at their essence but, like that self same line sketch; we capture only a single gesture, a lone moment of movement. An expression which only partially reveals them. Mona Lisa and her enigmatic smile. If one of the greatest artists of all time could not reveal her but only hint at and heighten her intractable nature then how can we hope to do any better in our renderings of people? We are all creating artistic impressions of people as we meet them. We create them in language and in pictures in our minds, neither of which is a simple reflection of their extant existence. Only our perceptions, our narrow view through a chink in the wall. People are complex. They are a million shades. We cannot even grasp the whole of ourselves, cannot know ourselves totally, so how then could we know another? And if we are to commit to people, if we are to feel strongly about them, then we must, of necessity, simplify them into recognizably villainous or virtuous forms. We must subdue them. We must deny that we all exist moment by moment and are neither good nor evil but, by turns, both. Alice ran in and snatched up her pen. She scrawled: People are opaque. We can never see them clearly. We delve with questions, we pry with observations but we barely skim the surface. Everyone is a stranger to us as we are a stranger to ourselves.

MY CREATION

I'm doing it again -
Turning you into what you're not
Twisting you, turning you over in my mind
Until I redefine you, scour away the edges I think rough
I re-incise you: mark you with my teeth, nails and lips.
I re-design you
Till you no longer resemble the person I knew
Till you become a semblance of yourself
An image in a fractured mirror
And I threw the rock
I threw the stone that left you distorted and irrevocably shattered
I have made you
I have ruined you

What point would there be in telling Robert's family about Penelope? What pure intention could she claim? The truth? The truth was that it would simply spread the misery and chaos of her own life these past few months into more innocent lives. The truth was it would cause pain to Adam, who Alice did not want to hurt for anything. The truth was that the only person who had a right to speak of it was Robert himself. Alice had no business interfering. If she did, it would be only to punish a man for daring to love her mother. And Alice knew how easy she had been to love. Sometimes, truth is in a silence. The small silences, tiny ellipses in the marriage of Robert and Carla. Who was to say his wife had not already deciphered the meaning of small absences? The white space before the black dot, essential to the code. Robert and Carla would weave their truth from the fabric of daily life. They did not need an outsider. Alice decided not to do the work of other's for them ever again. But she did have one more task. One more piece of work for which she was responsible.

...

A man was pacing nervously in the car park when Alice walked up to the main gate of the gardens. It was 3:15. "Robert?" The man spun round at the familiar voice. His eyes registered confusion when he saw a girl standing before him. He had thought he was meeting Penelope but it was the only way Alice could be sure he would come. And she needed to see him. She did not understand her need to meet the other man her mother had loved. But she was certain that she had to give him the news, face to face.

He was exactly as Adam had described him and not at all as Alice had first imagined he would be. He was sweet-looking with glasses and a grey cardigan. Alice stared hard at the man she was supposed to hate. The man responsible for the death of her mother who would never have died if she not been on that road on her way to his arms. But Alice could not feel angry anymore. The rage was dissipated and she felt anaesthetized and removed, as though she watched herself from a great distance. She had expected to rage, to shout and demand justice. Now she just felt numb. The realization that nothing would ever bring her mother back, like a stone in her stomach and this man no more to blame than Alice herself. Her mother's choices were, after all, her mother's.

So she told him the news. That Penny was gone, that Alice had read all their

correspondence, had pretended to be her mother and that, although her father knew of the affair, he did not want details and did not know that Alice was here, meeting his rival for Penelope's affections. Robert's bewildered expression had lasted for the entire tale of woe. "Dead? Dead?" was all he seemed capable of saying. He looked so awfully sad, like someone had pushed him out of his own life and shut the door. Alice, unable to witness any more grief, simply told him to follow her as she would now take him to her mother's resting place.

They entered the deep green of the gardens, Alice moving at a gruelling pace. Neither spoke. Soon they were breathing hard as the ascent began. Talking was now impossible, which suited them both. In a mere twenty minutes they reached the plateau. The ground levelled out and the lookout point was in sight.

The low wall. The endless beyond. No sound, save the bracken underfoot and the rustling of branches as forest creatures fled their approach. Alice sat down on the bench a few yards from the wall. Uncertain, Robert stood fidgeting. "I am going to tell my family, Alice." Alice nodded.

"It's over there. By the wall. Beneath the boulder."

Robert gave her a grateful look. "Thank you." was all he said. Alice, eyes closed, heard his footfalls crunch on the gravel. Then silence. Alice knew the time would come when she, too, would have to tell Adam the things she'd left unsaid.

Then Alice could hear him, talking clearly to Penelope, as though Alice were the ghost. "Hello, my love. What a windswept dusty spot you're in. But it does have an amazing view. I'll have to bring an arenaceous plant to put here, if it's to survive."

"What's arenaceous?" The question sprung from her lips before she could stifle it.

He started, the sound of Alice's voice held the echo of another. He spoke to her over his shoulder, without turning. "It means it will grow in poor conditions. Put it in sand and it will survive. It's tough, a bit like you, Alice. You're going to be all right, I can tell. You have Penny's tenacity. I wish I could plant an amaranthus here."

"What sort of plant is that?"

"It is a mythical flower that is thought to never fade. It blooms eternally. Like Penny in my mind. A beautiful flower." He was drifting off again, forgetting Alice. He sighed. "I really hope there is a Garden of Eden, Pen. You wandering in a lovely garden seems a

perfect fit.” Alice swallowed and blinked back tears. At that moment Robert turned to look straight at her. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

“You loved her, too.” Words Alice never thought she would say with such acceptance.

“I miss her every day.” Robert’s voice was gravelly, his throat constricted.

“Me too.”

And Alice felt strangely comforted that another missed her mother with such intensity. It made her feel less alone. It made her mother’s memory shine again. She raised her hand in farewell and set off down the path, leaving him to his memories and his grief. As she descended she turned to look back before the slope of the hill swallowed him. He was standing gazing out at the bay and he was rocking back and forth from the waist. His mouth pulled wide, like the opening to a letterbox. Alice thought she heard him keening - A high animal wail that jarred the bones and put her teeth on edge. Perhaps it was just the wind.

...

Alice stood staring down at the shiny pages of the annual school magazine. Her name stared back in bold lettering beneath a poem in the Creative Section. She also had a painting featured: the strange still-life with all the back angles. It seemed that the more difficult position, though challenging, had resulted in an unusual and arresting painting, quite unlike its bland counterparts. The Art teacher had said it was almost as if she had been in another place, painting something else entirely. Alice in the land of Topsy Turvy, she had thought, smiling to herself. Now she read her poem and thought how pleased her father would be. How proud of her. But first she would go and read it to Penelope.

Tea for Two

Sometimes I make tea for you.

I boil the kettle, brew a pot for two

I set out two cups

Do you think me strange?

In my head you say you’d love a cup

And we sit and listen to the rain.

I put out the sugar though I don't take any

I settle down on the couch

I stir the tea three times too many

I wish as I stir, one, two, three

I could wish you into the chair nearest me.

I hold my cup up and blow off the steam

I tell you yours is going cold as you sit and daydream.

In my heart you slurp a sip and let out a satisfied sigh

Before logic makes me pour your cup down the drain and

Reality forces my goodbye.

By Alice Nichol

...

Alice shut the battered diary. It had been an interesting journey. She smiled when she realized she barely recognized the girl in the beginning. Who was that naïve, difficult child with all her harsh certainties? Who was that lovesick little girl, tearing herself to pieces? It all seemed as if it had happened to someone else a very long time ago. She re-read the cringing love poetry, the obsessive angst, and felt relief not to be that girl, any longer, that Alice – Lost in Wonderland. She felt, as Susan-Rose would say, “So over it!” and was glad.

Finals had gone very well and Alice had achieved almost straight As. She guessed she would have to live with the one B marring the line-up. Her father had promised her that, money troubles or not, she would be going to university the following year. He had sat up with her before each exam, quietly reading in the next room, like Penelope used to do, because it made Alice feel less alone and scared as she tried to cram a year’s worth of facts into one head in one night. Dennis brought her countless cups of tea but the most memorable moment for Alice had been when she had heard a knock on the door the night

before her first exam and opened it to find a tray on the floor. On it were a mug of tea, a sandwich and a saucer on which rested a single cigarette and a box of kitchen matches. A note underneath read simply, “No biggie. Knock ‘em dead.”

...

The future shone out from the glittering sheet of white paper Alice stood reading next to the post-box in the early spring sunshine. She had not waited to run inside. She had ripped the letter from the envelope bearing the official stamp and read the news right there, blinking in the glare cast up from its pale surface. The coat of arms, the Latin motto, the university emblem stark against the white background. We are pleased to inform you...

Yes. Yes yes yes.

Alice felt blest. She felt this blessing touch her sweetly like a falling leaf and allowed its silent magic to steal over her. She had forgotten it could be this way. She thought she saw a path emerge and relished her new-found happiness that was all the more intense because it had been a long time coming. Her own space no longer frightened her. There was peace in the silence and room for all her thoughts and dreams. She felt alive again. Her mother had been right: youth was often wasted on the young.

...

Running through the house, searching for her father, Alice caught the heady scent of jasmine. She halted and looked outside. *Jasminum polyanthum*, her mother murmured. She could see a few white blooms scrambling up the side garden wall. The Japanese Cherry Blossom tree had tiny pink buds and the ‘Apple Blossom’ hibiscus had young flowers, still twisted closed, like folded umbrellas. Snowdrops pushed past the azaleas and Alice thought she spied a delicate white flower which she recognised as a narcissus, poking up from the bed. *Spring has Sprung!* Penelope crowed in her head.

Suddenly, Alice is nine and is swimming naked in the chilly water. She wraps her body in a towel and runs, hair dripping, down the side path to the back door. She is hungry. She bangs the bottom of the stable door closed and flings the latch. She rushes for the table

where her lunch is already waiting but her mother, pointing at the large puddle of water pooling at her feet, says, “Oh no you don’t! Go and change first and put a towel on that head.” She came back from the memory groggy, as though from a long journey.

Spring always made Alice nostalgic. She wondered who would trim the hedge this year. Dad was still so tired and Alice still found him crying sometimes, body limp like a rag doll. It would probably be left to grow wild. Neglected. Like the house which was in urgent need of painting. A noise. The odd sound was coming from the front garden, a huffing, puffing sound like the little engine that could. Alice walked through the kitchen in search of the source. She crossed the lounge and pulled aside the drapes to see the garden. What she saw made of her a believer, made of her a little girl again.

...

Alice is eight. She can smell chlorine. She can sense the coming summer’s heat and the laughter it will bring. But first, always, she smells the jasmine blooming too early in the hedge her father hates to trim. A hedge he secretly wishes would one year miraculously expire or, better still, vanish without a trace, leaving only gaping holes in the sandy soil where its roots had once so insistently burrowed in a vain hunt for water. But every year the jasmine blooms and every year her father hacks furiously at the myrtle hedge and the hedge retaliates, sending wiry branches whipping back to exact painful revenge on the forearms and head of its attacker, who, with an enraged roar, redoubles his annihilating efforts. And so every year, Alice is forced to tiptoe unwillingly outside bearing a tray on which trembles a large mug of Castle beer and a plate completely hidden by an impressive pile of egg-salad sandwiches.

She finds him enraged and wounded. The lashings dealt by the hedge have opened up crimson stripes on his powerful forearms and gouged his bald pate. Fury and exertion have made him red in the face. Perhaps the hedge is winning this round? The shining perspiration is standing out in millions of tiny balls, just waiting to burst the fragile hold of the skin’s circular pores and cascade down his face in rivulets onto an already seal-slick neck. He is gritting his teeth really hard and the muscles in his neck bulge, accenting the throb of his jugular – knotted, gnarled and fiercely alive – the branch of a virile bonsai. Alice can hear his

breath labouring in his chest. He is so engrossed and angry that Alice stands awestruck, uncertain of what to do. For a few moments silence seems the safest choice. Maybe he will see her without any action on her part. The heavy tray, however, has other ideas. The beer begins to shake and tremble in the mug, threatening to slop all over the food. A vision of her mother's delicious sandwiches sodden with ale prompts a new decision.

"Daddy?" She whispers.

He dismembers a limb and Alice feels genuine pity for the hedge. Wincing she almost lose her grip on the smooth circular tin tray.

"Daddy." Spoken louder and with slightly less trepidation.

"What?" he hisses, swinging a massive head on a bullish neck. This is instantly mitigated upon seeing the offering the loyal convert has brought the wrathful god. Relieved that no one wants anything from him he says, "Thanks, buboes, put it over there by the wheelbarrow, I'll be down in a minute."

Alice does as she is told and beats a hasty retreat indoors where she pauses to watch the God descend from on high. He lumbers down the ladder, its old wooden steps creaking, flings the shears down and sits on the upturned wheelbarrow. He wears a look of grim determination. The expression is one of intense severity. He does not intend to lose this battle with the Evil Hedge. Alice watches him bend stiffly to scoop up the plate, but not before carefully removing the beer mug with his other hand. The heavily creased brow unfurrows as he seems to inhale rather than swallow a long draught of ice-cold lager. He releases a loud burp, mops his brow and sighs into his first sandwich – hedge forgotten. His jaws work grimly through three halves before pausing. He is hungry. Then the next third of the beer is poured in. Alice watches this process of re-fuelling the machine that is her father with keen interest. Seeing him satisfied by such basics as food and drink makes him less intimidating, more human. Alice starts as she hears her mother's voice directly behind her.

"What are you doing, skulking behind the curtain?"

"Nothing, ma." Alice mumbles. "Just watching daddy eating his lunch."

"He's a grumpy old sod, isn't he?" she breezes, but behind the unkind words there is laughter in her voice. She loves this 'miserable bastard' a great deal. Alice realizes this even at the tender age of eight. Penelope flings open a window and calls encouragingly, "You're making wonderful progress, Dennis! Say not the struggle naught availeth!"

...

Alice returned. She was still holding back the curtain, staring sightlessly. A new picture. Through the window, Alice watched her father, suddenly older and grey, tackling the unassailable hedge, hacking off branches with heroic ferocity, swinging his axe like a once-mighty warrior. The colossal hedge loomed above him, casting deep shadow. Her father, legs braced, struck another limb, like Hercules fighting the Hydra. He lopped off another branch but for each one he severed another rose in its place.

The Hydraic Hedge. Alice, watching him from behind the curtain, felt her eyelashes dampen with tears. She could see the blood high in his wild face and feared to know the booming of his heart in his head. Drenched in sweat and smeared in blood from a gaping wound on his crown, he was lashing out at the hedge, storming it from new angles, gripping its long, wiry arms with grim determination. The hedge would not throw him this time. He was howling and cursing. He was enraged. He was weeping. This was not an ordinary day. This was not an ordinary pruning. The whole event took on a terrifying aspect. Here was revenge. Here was a struggle for survival. Here was a prayer, shouted to the gods, for victory. For redemption.

REFERENCES

The Bible and Greek Mythology are pronounced intertexts. Idiomatic and proverbial English is commonplace and is used deliberately in connection with the character of Penelope. "Alice in Wonderland" by Lewis Carroll is alluded to, stated within the text and is a source of inspiration. The works of Shakespeare, most specifically "Macbeth" and, to a lesser extent "Hamlet", have thematic links to this story and a list of both quotes and allusions to the texts follows.

General references:

p.23 - "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us."

- "A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles"
by Marianne Williamson

p.79 - alludes to "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned" - William Congreve "The Mourning Bride" (1697)

p.87 - "Not all those who wander are lost" – J R R Tolkien (1954) The Lord of the Rings.

p.109 - "River" – by Joni Mitchell (1971)

p.115 – "The Magic Faraway Tree" by Enid Blyton (1939)

p.119 - "Penny Lane is in my ears and in my eyes." - "Penny Lane" by The Beatles (1967)

p.124 - William Blake's "The Sick Rose" (1794) is alluded to by Alice.

Oh Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
in the howling storm

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy.
And with his dark secret love,
does thy life destroy.

William Blake (1757 – 1827)

p.126 - A cynical echo of Kahlil Gibran's contemplation on love from "The Prophet" (1923). "To wake at dawn with a winged heart and give thanks for another day of loving."

p.132 - An allusion to "Open Sesame!" – the magic words used to open the treasure trove in the adventure tale of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, part of The Book of One Thousand Nights (Arabian Nights), written down in Egypt between the 11th and 14th centuries.

p.137 - "Off with her head" – from Chapter VIII, The Queen's Croquet-Ground, in Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" (1865)

p.138 - "Get busy living, or get busy dying." – "The Shawshank Redemption" (1994)

p.146 - "Laugh and the world laughs with you; weep, and you weep alone." "Solitude" in "Poems of Passion" (1883) by Ella Wheeler Wilcox

p.156 - "The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry." The saying is adapted from a line in "To a Mouse," by Robert Burns (1759-1796): "The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft a-gley."

p.170 - An allusion to William Blake's "Jerusalem" (1804)

p.187 - "It's easier to ask forgiveness than it is to get permission" is often attributed to Grace Murray Hopper (1906-1992)

p.187 - "Get me to the church on time" comes from a song of the same name which appears in "My Fair Lady" (1964) by Alan Jay Lerner.

p.188 - Extracts from a Celtic Blessing:

Deep peace of the running wave to you.

Deep peace of the flowing air to you.

Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.

Deep peace of the shining stars to you.

Deep peace of the infinite peace to you.

p.197 - Reference is made to "The Little Engine that Could" (1930) by Watty Piper (a pseudonym). The true originator of the story is not known, however, Mary C Jacobs is said to have authored a similar earlier work entitled, "The Pony Engine" in 1910.

p.199 - "Say not the Struggle Naught Avaieth" - Arthur Hugh Clough (1819-1861)

"Hamlet" (1599-1601) – William Shakespeare

p.22 & p.127 - allusion to "To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub; for in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause" - Hamlet Act 3 Sc. 1

p.147 - An allusion is made to "Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" Hamlet Act 3 Sc.1

p.160 - An allusion to "May sweep to my revenge" – Hamlet Act 1 Sc.5

"Macbeth" (1606) - by William Shakespeare:

p.27 - "Why did you bring these daggers from the place? They must lie there: go carry them: and smear the sleepy grooms with blood." – Act 2 Sc.2

p.27 - "You have displac'd the mirth, broke the good meeting with most admir'd disorder." - Act 3 Sc.4

p.79 & 125 - "Things without all remedy should be without regard: what's done is done." - Act 3 Sc.2

p.123 - "False face must hide what the false heart doth know." - Act 1 Sc.7

p.125 - "O, full of scorpions is my mind" - Act 3 Sc.2

p.125 - "Consider it not so deeply... These deeds must not be thought after these ways; so, it will make us mad." – Act 2 Sc.2

p.125 - "innocent sleep, sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care, the death of each day's life, sore labour's bath, balm of hurt minds" - Act 2 Sc. 2.

p.155 - Alice's comment about Robert's address, alludes to "go the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire." Act 2 Sc.3

p.156 - "For now I am bent to know, by the worst means, the worst... Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er." – Act 3 Sc. 4

p.186 - "Let fall thy blade on vulnerable crests; I bear a charmed life, which must not yield to one of woman born. Despair thy charm, and let the angel whom thou still hast served tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripp'd." Act 5 Sc.8

p.188 - "The attempt and not the deed confounds us." Act 2 Sc.2

"The Bible", King James translation (1611):

p. 144 - "How are the mighty fallen" - Samuel II 1:25

p. 145 - Reference is made to the whore of Babylon and to the biblical cities of Sodom and

Gomorrah.

p.155 - "Why do you see the speck in your brother's eye but fail to notice the beam in your own eye?" - Matthew 7:3

p.156 - Reference to the forbidden fruit of the tree of Knowledge is made.

p.168 - "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat" - Matthew 7:13

p.170 - "feet of clay" – Daniel 2:33

p.183 - "Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house." - Matthew 5:15

pp. 170 & 189 - "Ashes to ashes and dust to dust." - From the English Burial Service.

Adapted from the Biblical text, Genesis 3:19 "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

p.195 - Mention of the Garden of Eden.

Proverbs and Idiomatic English

p.39 - "The cat that got the cream"

p.79 - "It never rains, but it pours."

p.94 - "Putting on a brave face"

p.108 - "Put your back up"

p.121 - "Absence makes the heart grow fonder."

p.121 - "A place for everything and everything in its place."

p.123-124 - "Qui s'excuse, s'accuse." - He who excuses himself, accuses himself.

p.149 - "How on God's green earth"

p.151 - "Curiosity killed the cat."

p.168 - "Slippery slope"

p.172 - "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

p.183 - Originally from by Horace's Ode I-XI "Carpe Diem!" (36 B.C.), which loosely translated means, "Seize the day!"